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“This system develops perhaps some translator tomorrow”: a chooser-and-inquiry approach to modelling German-English interference

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The present paper is the follow-up to the paper “Teaching Nigel how to teach”, which was delivered at the 19th International Systemic-Functional Conference in July 1992. Both papers are based on an empirical study of interference-related errors in the English of student translators whose native language is German. Whereas the earlier paper reported on the methodology and possible applications of the study, in the present paper we concentrate on the systemic analysis of the errors themselves, attempting to account for them in terms of the different ‘grammaticosemantic architectures’ — or ‘context-neutral meaning potentials’ — of German and English.

The paper has a heavy computational orientation. Our model of the grammaticosemantic architecture of English is essentially an adaptation of the NIGEL grammar developed by Mann and Matthiessen, whereas the grammar taken as the basis for modelling the grammaticosemantics of German is the KOMET grammar developed by Teich, Bateman, and recently also Ramm and Steiner.

Understanding the errors made by student translators, however, involves more than just modelling differences in context-*neutral* meaning potential between source and target *languages*. The fact that the translation process starts with a source *text* means that we also need to be able to model differences in context-*specific* meaning potential, since these are an essential factor in the interference process; for this purpose we adopt (with slight adaptations) the ‘chooser and inquiry’ framework developed by Mann and Matthiessen for the PENMAN project.

In order to complement recent work by Steiner on Theme as a grammatical notion for German, we concentrate mainly on the differences between German and English in the area of THEMATIZATION and INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION systems, although brief remarks are also made concerning TENSE and MODALITY. As a first step to a genuinely systemic treatment of the ways context-specific meaning potential is differently organized in the two languages, we design sets of chooser inquiries for the relevant English systems and organize them into simple decision trees; our goal is to ensure that each traversal of a tree would compel a native speaker of German who has correctly interpreted the source text to make the contextually correct choice in the target-language grammatical system at issue. Our approach to designing the choosers is therefore deliberately biased in the direction of a comparative or contrastive linguistic perspective; this is due to our underlying concern with possible future didactic applications of computational systemic-functional text generation systems in the context of training interpreters and translators.