

Christoph Gutknecht and Lutz J. Rölle. *Translating by Factors*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996. xv + 346 pp. ISBN 0-7914-2958-X (pb.) \$23.95; ISBN 0-7914-2957-1 (hc.) \$62.50. [SUNY Series in Linguistics]

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Review published in *Target* 10/2 (1998), 377-380

The title, without subtitle, is deceptive: this is basically a comparative study of English and German modal verbs which is then wedged into a general view of the translation process. As such, much of the linguistics speaks only to readers with a knowledge of both German and English. Yet the interest of the project resides in the underlying attempt to make comparative linguistic analysis compatible with wider considerations such as text norms, cultural settings and client-translator relations. The effective bridge is the description of all spheres in terms of ‘factors’, be they of variance or invariance, that bear on the translator’s decisions. Such factors are systematically described in a bottom-up way, in chapters dealing with formal elements (syntax and morphology), semantics, pragmatics, modes (written vs spoken language), translation units (types of equivalence) and the translation situation. Despite the initially restricted field of linguistic investigation, the aim would indeed appear to be a complete theory of translation.

The linguistic analyses of German and English modals rationalize a complicated field step-by-step, revealing the perils of form-based matching and finding summaries in numerous diagrams, some of which impressed my students (yes, they can be used in class!). The examples seek to illustrate all the logical possibilities of the modals, strangely eschewing the probabilistic weights of corpus work (the value of which is explicitly questioned on p. 118), even though there is heavy leaning on the corpus study carried out by Coates (1983) on the English modals. Personally I would have preferred to see an explicit corpus for German, although I admit there is also pedagogical value in the way a few key examples keep recurring at various linguistic levels throughout the study.

More worrying would seem the presence of a few slightly miscued modals in the authors’ own prose, perhaps attributable to the pleasure they obviously take in playing with language. Are we really at home with phrases like “their training of translators *had better* include treatment of...” (132, and again on 135 and 169), or “a change of word order is another *must* in English” (293, italics mine)? And my limited understanding gives way at the apparently key professorial distinction between legitimately altering source factors “for the sake of enabling understanding” but not “for the sake of facilitating understanding” (266). The co-text does little to make this a teachable

opposition (which is in any case soon overridden by factors attributed to ‘the translator’s situation’), in unhappy contrast to moves like the incorporation of Schreiber’s 1993 distinction between translation as being based “primarily on invariance demands” and adaptation as based “primarily on variance demands” (301). This latter kind of factor theory would seem to shed some light, but here it is tied into place by some occasionally obscure strands.

This is no doubt a by-product of the pleasingly inductive mode of investigation that weaves its way from level to level: a series of hypotheses is set up, questioned on the basis of examples, and modified accordingly. The main drawback is that final positions seem not to be obtained on some of the more contentious points. We might ask, for example, if the factor “client instructions” is consistently to have priority over the factor “translator’s competence”, since this is an issue on which followers of Vermeer and Holz-Mänttari often equivocate. Gutknecht and Rölle refer to “specific features that, if preferred by the client, become translation factors” (293); then, “it is the client that determines what is to be done about the text” (194); further, even more clearly, “from what we said about the client’s authority, we know that he or she is the one to make decision” (295); and just in case there was any doubt, “whether a factor is to be highlighted or not, this is the question to be decided upon by the client, not by the translator!” (296, exclamation mark in the text). The problem, of course, is that this kind of argument leaves the last chapters of the book without any way of systematically organizing pragmatic factors, since all cases are contingent upon an unpredictable human individual, the study of whom lies beyond the authors’ mandate. But then, in one of the last notes in the book, we learn that “Holz-Mänttari rightly states that only the translator as an expert will be able to fully survey all the relevant factors” (314). So the translator, not the client, is in charge of the factors after all! One is left with the impression of theorists thinking on their feet. And one might regret that prior recognition of the translator’s overall responsibility did not move the discussion of pragmatic factors into a more ethical or sociological register.

Although the authors have a great deal to say about the different textual conventions used in German and English, this remains a German book written in English. A felt need for system and hierarchy is everywhere apparent, starting up a kind of steamroller that effectively flattens parts of the more unruly linguistic terrain. But when we ask slightly more demanding questions such as the limits on the number of potentially pertinent invariance factors, or the ethical grounds for ranking one factor higher than another, or even the possibility of judging rather than conceding to a client’s decision, the steamroller would appear to totter on the edge of an abyss.

**References**

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Schreiber, Michael. 1993. *Übersetzung und Bearbeitung. Zur Differenzierung und Abgrenzung des Übersetzungsbegriffs*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

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