

# THE RELEVANCE OF VAGUENESS FOR TRANSLATION: EXAMPLES FROM ENGLISH TO PORTUGUESE

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ABSTRACT: In the present paper, the concept of vagueness will be taken up in detail, in order to make it more precise and to pin down its relevance for translation.

In addition to view (some) translation choices as contrastive vagueness, I will argue that grammar too has to be contrasted, introducing the concepts of grammatical vagueness and contrastive grammatical vagueness.

The problems these phenomena pose for translation are illustrated in the realm of tense and aspect with real translation pairs from (American) English to (European) Portuguese.

KEYWORDS: translation; contrastive studies; tense; aspect; Portuguese; English.

## Introduction

It is common to read that, if there is no corresponding vague term in the target language, the translator has a problem, or, at least, s/he may have to choose a particular translation on grounds which are not objective. This idea is connected to the classical explanation that different languages cut different pieces of reality (see, for example, Lyons (1968:9.4.6) or Bassnett-McGuire (1980:30-31)). Often, however, the examples are restricted to exotic cases involving reference to camels or snow, which are of little practical importance in the world of today.

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Here, I intend to present another kind of vagueness – which I call, for lack of a better term, *grammatical vagueness* – and show that it results in considerable difficulty for translation. First, I want to emphasize that vagueness is an essential property of any natural language – not an accidental difference between two languages. And, second, that when two different vague systems are put in contrast, a lot more differences between two languages become apparent.

This paper tries to summarise and give some theoretical basis for the most important finding in my dissertation on the contrast of the tense and aspect systems of English and Portuguese (Santos, 1996). There, I analysed a large number of translation pairs and painfully realised that the finer the analyses of each language, the more contrastive differences emerged – which, in most cases, were attributable to vagueness of some sort.

### **What do I mean by vagueness?**

A central task of this paper will be to clarify what I mean by vagueness, which, as most general terms in linguistics, is vaguely understood but used differently by almost everyone who deals with it. One other such concept, incidentally, is “aspect”, from whose domain my examples will be drawn.

Vagueness can be thought of as the opposite of precision or well-delimited definition, but as such it can encompass at least underspecification, imprecision, and ambiguity, and perhaps also redundancy.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the vagueness I am interested in (or, alternatively, the way I want to define vagueness as a concept for linguistic research) does not include all kinds of underspecification (only the relevant one) or imprecision (only the systematic one); and it contrasts with ambiguity. Furthermore, as far as redundancy is concerned, no matter whether it hinders a precise definition or not, it is not related to my vagueness at all.

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(1) In fact, one can attribute this wide range of possible interpretations again to the the vagueness of the “opposite” concept itself – see e.g. Lyons (1968:10.4.1; 1977:9.1-2) on the many (linguistically relevant) phenomena concerning opposition and contrast.

Vagueness is an attribute of a classification (system). An object (a linguistic object, for instance) can be vague regarding as many classifications as it is subject to. Our first definition of vague is thus: When a linguistic object can be classified as more than one thing in one particular classification scheme, then it is vague with regard to the distinction presupposed by the two values.<sup>2</sup> Such a linguistic object can thus be used as a member of either category, and it can be taken to represent both. In addition, *a speaker can remain indifferent between alternatives a and b and still meaningfully [use it]*, as Keenan (1978, p. 173) put it.

In the next section, I apply this abstract definition to several concrete classifications used in linguistics in order to illustrate the ubiquity of vagueness.

### Several cases of vagueness

One of the most discussed cases of vagueness occurs when classification is made in terms of an objective, physical quantity (as is the case in the pairs *bald/not bald*, *fleuve/rivière*). If one wants to classify a “mid-sized” river in French or a person with little hair, one has – in some cases, at least – the possibility to classify the river as both *fleuve* and *rivière* and the man as both *bald* or *not bald*. The words themselves are clear and precise enough to be understood and used by speakers without miscommunication, but there is not a well-delimited definition for these concepts in terms of the real world. If one looks at the (common) procedure in semantics of defining (some part of) the meaning of a word as the set of objects it can refer to, there is a fair set of objects that are (or can be) shared by the pairs above. One could thus talk, as Kempson (1977, p. 124) does, about “referential vagueness” in that many would-be referents are vague between either word (either classification).<sup>3</sup>

(2) For simplicity's sake, let me suppose in the following that the object has two classifications, and not more. But this is simply for ease of exposition; a word or sentence can be vague between three or more interpretations, for example.

(3) Note that, in my definition, the words themselves are not vague, they simply have partially overlapping denotations. The vagueness

Another related case is what Lyons (1977: 9.1), following Sapir (1944), calls *gradable opposites*, in which definition a comparison is implicit, such as *good/bad*, *big/small*, *friendly/unfriendly*. Since in their definition no precise delimitation in terms of the norm is given, many subjects of the classification may be vague between e.g. *big* and *not big*.

Now, it should be noted that referential vagueness in language is a must: as Keenan puts it, *human language must be imprecise in order to permit efficient communication* (Keenan, 1978, p.160).<sup>4</sup> Obviously, if other languages happen to have a different sort of imprecision, i.e., if they partition reality in different ways, then, in the absence of the referent to which the source language word corresponds, this may complicate the process of translation, because the translator must make a guess. No matter how much this is discussed in translation books, however, it fails to be one of the most relevant problems that vagueness poses for translation: there are arguably few texts where precision as regards physical identification criteria is essential for accurate communication; such cases, furthermore, can be straightforwardly "solved" by translators' footnotes/comments.

What is often done in contrastive and translation studies (although generally not under this name) is a classification of source language words or expressions in terms of another language (which can be viewed as a classification scheme).<sup>5</sup> There, we have another kind of vagueness which could be called *contrastive vagueness*. In fact, translation out of context (such as the one displayed in a bilingual dictionary) is a classification

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is in the classification of the physical entities. This is parallel to *die* and *kick the bucket*; they are not vague, but have partially overlapping appropriateness contexts.

- (4) No one would claim that a better natural language would define baldness in terms of the number of hairs, or river identification in terms of rivers' exact breadth. However, these would qualify as perfectly precise and well delimited-definitions.
- (5) Recently, Dyvik (1997) has recast this as a programme for linguistic semantics, proposing to (re-)define ambiguity and vagueness relative to another language.

where often there is more than one candidate – one-to-one entries are very infrequent for most language pairs. And the same is also plainly true for grammars, as pointed out by Nida (1959) and has been brought to the fore in the machine translation quarters by Kameyama *et al.* (1991) under the infelicitous name of *translation mismatches*.<sup>6</sup>

In itself, this vagueness is not necessarily a problem, however, if in every context it is evident for the user of the dictionary (or translator) which one of the classifications (translations) to use. The degree of overlapping *in context* of the possible candidates is here the touchstone. (And, in fact, as I will discuss below, if they do not overlap at all the source word is not vague, but simply ambiguous). The further apart they are, the easier it is to decide (it is difficult to conceive of hesitation between *terrorize* and *land* as translations (classifications) of the Portuguese verb *aterrar*). The examples in Table 1, from Portuguese to English or German, illustrate cases where it may be more difficult to choose, precisely because there is some commonality (made apparent in the third column) that could justify the use of the word in the source text without requiring a conscious choice:

Table 1

conhecer	know meet	<i>be acquainted with</i> <i>get acquainted with</i>
comer	essen fressen	<i>(people) ingest food</i> <i>(animals) ingest food</i>
céu	heaven sky	<i>spiritually above earth</i> <i>physically above earth</i>
deixar	leave let	<i>abandon place</i> <i>abandon control</i>
ficar	get remain	<i>new result state</i> <i>continuing result state</i>
lago	pond lake	<i>small-sized</i> <i>large-sized</i>
retirar	remove retreat, leave	<i>move things out of a place</i> <i>move self out of a place</i>

(6) For a critical review of the use of this term, see Santos (1996:3.3).

enganar	cheat fail, be wrong	<i>induce others in error</i> <i>induce self in error</i>
oferecer	give offer	<i>unconditional transfer</i> <i>conditional transfer</i>
passar	spend cross, go by	<i>leave behind in time</i> <i>leave behind in space</i>

No claim is being made that the choice between the two alternative translations for these words would not be straightforward in some, possibly many, cases; I simply suggest that it can cause problems in some contexts.

The main contention of this paper, however, is not relative to (contrastively vague) lexemes. Rather, they were presented first to allow pointing the similarities with yet another kind of vagueness, concerning classification in terms of the language's own categories,<sup>7</sup> and which I call *grammatical vagueness* for lack of a better term. Such vagueness can have a serious impact for translation, and so does the corresponding (grammatical) contrastive vagueness.

Let me begin by clarifying what monolingual grammatical vagueness consists of.

The claim that grammatical categories are neither well-delimited nor have a precise definition is not new (see again Lyons (1977:11.1)). That there is a parallel between grammatical categorisation and the categorisation of the world that natural language embodies has also been argued at full length by Taylor (1989) in his book *Linguistic categorisation*.

Here, I am interested in looking at the state of affairs illustrated by Taylor from the "converse" point of view; namely, that the polysemy (or family resemblance) of grammatical categories goes on a par with the fact that different categories have overlapping members. In other words, to some words or expressions more than one classification can be attributed. This converse point of view has been noted by Dahl (1985), who uses the term *multidimensional impreciseness* to describe prototypical

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(7) By categories here I mean grammatical categories in the sense of "all distinctions that are reflected in the linguistic system".

categories defined in terms of a **set** of independent criteria. Elements obeying only some and not all criteria would thus be vague. (Incidentally, an interesting rephrasing of this would be having, in the definition of such categories, the connective *and* itself vague between logical conjunction and set union, as Kempson (1977:8.1) suggests for *or*.)

Let me illustrate grammatical vagueness with Portuguese “basic grammar”<sup>8</sup> (and my renderings in English):

- Part-of-speech: *ele é amigo do Pedro* (he is a friend of Pedro’s): is *amigo* adjective or noun?<sup>9</sup> Note that one can modify it by *muito* (‘very’) as is the rule with adjectives; it is, on the other hand, analogous to *ele é tio do Pedro* (he is Pedro’s uncle), where *tio* is a noun.
- Which copula? *ser, estar* – ‘passionate’, ‘be in love’: *apaixonado, recusou o convite* (does this mean, because he was in love, or because he is a passionate person, he refused the invitation?)
- Adjective or past participle?: *o muro pintado de branco tem de ser deitado abaixo* (‘the white painted wall has to be destroyed’: that is white or that has just been painted white?)
- Passive or inergative<sup>10</sup> *se?*: *o barco afundou-se* (‘we drowned the boat’, colloquial, or ‘the boat sank’?)
- Reciprocal or reflexive *se?*: *Eles encontraram-se na praia* (‘they met at the beach’ or ‘they found themselves at the beach’?)
- Inceptive or stative?: *Conhecer pessoas como ele é uma aventura* (‘To know (or to meet?) people like him is fascinating’)

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(8) Examples drawn from my Portuguese grammar class to Mellomfag students at the Department of Classical and Romance Languages at the University of Oslo, in 1996 and 1997.

(9) I use the words *nome* and *adjectivo* to name the Portuguese part-of-speech categories that roughly correspond to noun and adjective in English. Along the discussion in the present paper it will hopefully become apparent that contrastive grammar is as necessary as contrastive lexicography/lexicology.

(10) These naming conventions are drawn from Mateus et al. (1989).

- Temporal or causal gerundive?: *Uma vez, passando por casa dela, lembrei-me do irmão* ('I recalled her brother once, going by her home': at that moment, or because?)
- Consequential or temporal gerundive?: *Fechei a porta da cozinha, deixando-a nos seus domínios* ('I closed the kitchen door, leaving her in her domains': as a consequence, or at the same time?)

And the examples could be multiplied at will. What is important to note, is that these examples illustrate only the diversity of possible grammatical vagueness. They are not presented as particular problems for the understanding of the sentences. Often, the questions posed do not matter for the language user: in most cases the most natural answer would be "Both". They may matter for the translator, though!

The case for grammatical vagueness can also be based on (aside) remarks in the computational linguistics literature. An interesting case is prepositional phrase attachment: depending on how to count their data, from 8.7% up to 21.7% of Hindle & Rooth's prepositional phrase examples were vague between attaching to the object noun or to the verb, given *that an attachment is semantically indeterminate if situations that verify the meaning associated with one attachment also make the meaning associated with the other attachment true* (1993, p. 113). Likewise, as far as anaphoric reference is concerned, Sampson (1987) argues that in a significant number of cases it is not trivial to decide the antecedent of the pronoun *it* – again due to the vagueness of the text. Finally, the task of corpus annotation was claimed to be difficult because tokens are often vague between several categories; cf. Leech (1993, p.280): *experience with corpora suggests that uncertainties of category assignment are quite frequent [...] because of the prototypical, or fuzzy, nature of most linguistic categories.*

In fact, if one pauses to think that most distinctions relevant in (a particular) language (and which have therefore been categorised by linguists) can be neutralised in some contexts – and are often actually neutralised in language use –, grammatical vagueness can be seen to deserve more attention. This neutralisation can be paraphrased by saying that language



expressions are vague regarding the two (or more) characteristics the classification was about.<sup>11</sup>

Now, my aim is to draw attention to the consequences of all this to translation. The fact that grammar is pervasively vague, and that grammars of different languages differ, multiplies the choices that must be made for every single utterance one translates: Not only the words and expressions that are translated require a choice, but also every classification the source utterance can be meaningfully<sup>12</sup> subjected to, such as grammatical categories, grammatical operators, style markers, reference to particular objects, and so on, can be (and are, most of the time) contrastively vague. And they may, as just illustrated, also be monolingually vague.

Consequently, in a more explicit way: as soon as there is no equivalent grammatical operator, style marker, or even part-of-speech, the translator must choose which parts of the meaning conveyed should be preserved; as soon as some of the markers are contrastively vague, the translator has to choose which part of the meaning should be rendered; as soon as there is grammatical vagueness in the source language that cannot be preserved, the translator must choose which interpretation to translate. Consequently, even a small and apparently trivial sentence can pose (or result in) more problems than one would expect if only lexical contrastive vagueness, or referential vagueness, were at stake.

In the remainder of this paper, I will be presenting examples that show the magnitude of this problem in real translation. But, first, I want to go back to the definition of vagueness and sharpen

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(11) In structuralist terms, we can say that unmarkedness entails vagueness: if an expression is unmarked relative to, say, gender, we can say it is vague between all possible genders. Unmarkedness cannot be equated with my definition of vagueness, however; only subsumed by it. In fact, an expression can be vague between denoting A or B without neither A nor B being expressible on a markedness scale, i.e., A and B are not required to be in privative nor equipollent opposition for an expression to be vague between them.

(12) Meaningful in terms of the source language grammar.

it in two important respects: the contrast with ambiguity, and the selection of relevant underspecification as opposed to all underspecification.

### **Refining the definition of vagueness**

Not all underspecification can be counted as vagueness: only pieces of information that are related to the classification should be taken into consideration. I.e., a word can be vague regarding gender in a classification of gender in a language where words can be marked for gender, but it cannot be vague regarding whether it is snowing or not concerning gender, even though it is obviously underspecified about the weather.

In fact, vagueness (the way I use it) is related to a system; it is systematic and a pervasive property of language. On the other hand, I see ambiguity as unsystematic and accidental (though also pervasive).<sup>13</sup>

Both vagueness and ambiguity can be loosely characterised as “one linguistic expression has more than one interpretation/classification”. However, the two interpretations are mutually exclusive in ambiguity, not in vagueness. Furthermore, I want to argue that vagueness is present in natural language both in competence and in performance, while ambiguity is a property of only the latter.

In fact, I require that for an expression to be vague between A and B, there must be a non-null intersection, or shareable content between A and B; so that it is easy – and economical – to have the same linguistic object doing double duty. This at once discards the cases of “either A or not A” as instances of vagueness. Being a property of the linguistic system, the knowledge to use it is part and parcel of a native speaker’s competence – and so, it is also automatically reflected in his or her performance. On the contrary, most ambiguities produced by speakers are unnoticed and irrelevant

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(13) By “unsystematic” I mean that ambiguity at a particular level tends to be reduced (disambiguated) at a higher level (with more context); while vagueness can be preserved or enforced at all levels.

from a communicative point of view, therefore causing no problems for a translator.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, a very important difference between ambiguity and vagueness is that choosing one of the alternatives is information preserving in ambiguity (if one chooses the right one) – barring the case discussed in the previous footnote; while choice in vagueness always implies a loss. This was noted a.o. by Kaplan *et al.* (1989).

Neither of these remarks can, however, provide a clear-cut criterion to distinguish between ambiguity or vagueness in every case, for cases remain where we would need to be inside the author's mind to know whether s/he was indifferent or, rather, meant one of two possibly opposing interpretations (and, in the latter case, whether s/he was conscious of the ambiguity). One should in any case keep in mind that tests and definitions are different things, as Gillon (1990) stresses.

### **Examples of vagueness in the English - Portuguese pair**

The first example of a case of linguistic vagueness which I found to cause quite a few problems for translation into Portuguese is an English aspectual class whose elements I coined "acquisitions", defined as those expressions which are vague between denoting a state or the inception of such a state. I will provide detailed evidence for the existence of this class.

In order to illustrate the great diversity of the cases found and covered in Santos (1996), I will briefly introduce some other examples of contrastive grammatical vagueness as well.

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(14) Barring, of course, the cases where the ambiguity is intentional, or perceived (see Poesio, 1995) – such as puns, or, according to Rydning (this volume), some political discourse –, and it is functionally relevant in the sense of Catford (1967). In those cases one may be confronted with an untranslatable language exchange. This is not relevant to my purpose here (although, again, this sort of problem is much more discussed in the literature): they are clear cases of ambiguity, not vagueness, according to my definition.

## The translation of English acquisitions into Portuguese

There is ample evidence in the literature on English tense and aspect, reviewed in Santos (1996:7.1.2), for the existence of verbs and expressions that are vague between a state and the event of its inception.

In order to show how this can pose problems for the translation into Portuguese, the best exemplar of an acquisition is *be*, because the corresponding translations (the standard translations, in Gellerstam's (1986) terms), *ser* and *estar*, can never denote an inception. But the passive, the position verbs and even the perception verbs<sup>15</sup> were also found to display this fundamental vagueness, or, more precisely, acquisitional behaviour.

How can a translation corpus produce evidence for vagueness? In what follows, I will show that there are genuinely vague instances in the source text by posing the relevant questions; then, I will present evidence that such vague instances constituted a (possibly unnoticed) problem for the translator by displaying non-ideal translations – or, at least, equally acceptable alternative translations; also, I will point out possible vagueness-preserving translations; finally, I will present some quantitative data.<sup>16</sup>

Let me begin by two examples involving two verbs which, according to traditional wisdom, are prototypically stative, namely *be* and *have*, and which have been translated by undeniably event sentences in Portuguese:

- (1) *And she **was** silent, for his voice was command.*  
Ela **calou-se**, porque a voz dele era uma ordem.  
'She stopped talking, because his voice was an order.'
- (2) *Then, snarling, Kino **had** it, had it in his fingers, rubbing it to a paste in his hands.*

(15) On perception verbs see Santos (forthcoming,b).

(16) The source for the examples is *The Pearl*, by John Steinbeck, Bantam Books, 1975 (first edition, 1945), translated into (European) Portuguese by Mário Dionísio as: John Steinbeck, *A pérola*, Publicações Europa-América, 1977. The examples are presented with an additional "back-translation" into English inside single quotes to emphasize the possible differences. In addition, in some cases an alternative translation (possibly also back-translated) is suggested, identified by "ALT:".

Então Kino soltou um grito e **agarrou-o**, agarrou-o com os dedos, esborrachou-o nas mãos.

'Then Kino gave a shout and caught it, caught it with his fingers, rubbed it in the hands.'

The next example features a body position verb. Uncontroversially, these verbs can mean either "action that gives rise to position" or "state of position": in fact, they are simply vague between the two.

- (3) *After a while they **lay** down together on the sleeping mat.*

Momentos depois, **estavam estendidos**, lado a lado, na esteira.

'Moments after, they were lying, side by side, on the mat.'

What is interesting about example (3) is that everyone I have shown it to considers it a mistranslation. Nevertheless, the fact that the translator made this mistake (?) indicates precisely that in his competence as translator he had a choice – and that he made the wrong choice. His choice was not unrelated or random.

It is not my purpose here to decide about the quality of particular translations; it suffices to show that there are alternative translations for the sentences in question that would render other choices in the interpretation, and which seem equally appropriate in the particular context. The following examples display the published translations and the alternative translations (again with no attempt at translation criticism).

- (4) *and any children who showed a tendency to scuffle, to scream, to cry out, to steal hats and rumple hair, **were hissed** to silence by the elders.*

Se qualquer criança tentava brigar, gritar, chorar, roubar chapéus ou puxar os cabelos, logo os irmãos mais velhos a **obrigavam** a estar quieta.

'If some child tried to fight, ... at once the elders forced it to be still.'

ALT: *As crianças que mostrassem agitação (...) eram mantidas em silêncio pelos assobios dos mais velhos.*

('Children who showed excitement were kept silent by the hisses of the elders.')

- (5) *but having set it up, other forces **were set up** to destroy it.*  
mas mal o construía, logo outras forças se **formavam** para o destruir.

'but as soon as he built it, at once other forces formed to destroy it.'

ALT: *mas, tendo-o construído, outras forças intentavam na sua destruição.* ('having built it, other forces intended its destruction.')

- (6) *The great pearl **was wrapped** in an old soft piece of deerskin and **placed** in a little leather bag and the leather bag was in a pocket in Kino's shirt.*

**Embrulhou** a pérola num velho pedaço de macia pele de veado, **meteu**-a num pequenino saco de couro, e o saco de couro, por sua vez, na algibeira da camisa.

'He wrapped the pearl in a old piece of soft deerskin, he put it in a small leather bag, and the leather bag, in turn, in the shirt pocket.'

ALT: *A pérola estava embrulhada numa velha peça macia de pele de veado e metida num saquinho de couro num bolso camisa de Kino.* ('the pearl lay wrapped in an old soft piece of deerskin and inside a little leather bag in a pocket of Kino's shirt')

- (7) *And, looking down, she **could** see the cigarette of the man on watch.*

*Por baixo da gruta, Juana viu o cigarro da sentinela.*

'Below the cave, Juana saw (caught a glimpse of) the watcher's cigarette.'

ALT: *Olhando para baixo, via o cigarro do homem de sentinela.*

- (8) *All of these things Kino **saw** in the lucent pearl.*

*Tudo isto Kino via na pérola cintilante.*

'All this Kino could see in the scintillating pearl'

ALT: *Todas estas coisas Kino viu na pérola reluzente.* ('all these things Kino got to see in the lucent pearl.')

In other cases, the translation tries to preserve the vagueness using correspondingly vague devices in Portuguese. The existence of such (relatively complex) translations can also be seen as empirical data supporting the vagueness of the source:

- (9) *he thought Kino might look toward the place where it was buried.*

*pensava que Kino havia de denunciar com os olhos o lugar onde a **escondera**.*

'he thought Kino would denounce with the eyes the place where he had buried it.'

- (10) *He **was shaved** close to the blue roots of his beard, and his hands were clean.*

***Barbeara**-se até às raízes azuis da barba, tinha as mãos muito limpas.*

'he had shaved up to the blue roots of the beard, had the hand very clean.'

- (11) *Kino's brother Juan Tomás and his fat wife Apolonia and their four children crowded in the door and **blocked** the entrance.*

*João Tomás, irmão de Kino, a gorda Apolónia, mulher dele, e os quatro filhos vieram das suas cabanas, amontoaram-se à porta, **barrando** a entrada.*

'Juan Tomás, Kino's brother, the fat Apolonia, his wife, and the four children came from their houses, crowded at the door, blocking the entrance.'

*Mais que perfeito* (the Portuguese pluperfect), in examples (9) and (10), making reference to both an event and its resulting state, proved to be a good way to render the English passive, which can also focus on the action or on the result. Interestingly, these examples also show that it is not necessary for the source sentences to be vague in context; the English sentence in (9), in fact, undoubtedly denotes a state. However, the action that gave rise to the state (the act of "burying") looked important enough to the translator for him to change the voice and include the agent in the translation. In example (11), simple past is translated into Gerúndio, allowing thus both interpretations of sequence and overlap between the acts of "blocking" and "crowding".

Are these examples little convincing? They can certainly be reinforced by quantitative studies, and by looking at different parts of the system. In what follows, I present evidence from a set of particular detailed unrelated studies that seem to further support the existence of the acquisition class.

- (17) More precisely, the ones which were not were: five cleft constructions; two cases of *there be* translated into *houve*; one case of a

First, looking at the translations of simple past *be* (Santos, 1996:14.2), displayed in Table 2, I noted that, in most cases of translation of *be* in the simple past which used *Perfeito*, *be* was rendered by an eventive verb in Portuguese, conveying either inchoativeness or perception.<sup>17</sup>

Table 2

be	simple past	333	Imperfeito	264
			Perfeito	27
			Mais que perfeito	11
			prep. phrase	6

Examples of such translations of *be* are:

- (12) *Her goading struck into his brain; his lips snarled and his eyes were fierce again.*

*Estas perguntas incisivas chegaram-lhe ao cérebro; os lábios entreabriram-se e os olhos de novo se **tornaram** duros.*

'These incisive questions came to his brain; the lips opened and the eyes again became hard.'

- (13) *Now the tension which had been growing in Juana boiled up to the surface and her lips were thin.*

*A angústia que tinha estado a formar-se no coração de Joana veio então à superfície e **pôs**-lhe os lábios brancos.*

'The anguish that had been forming in Juana's heart came then to the surface and put her lips white.'

- (14) *He looked then for weakness in her face, for fear or irresolution, and there was none.*

*Ele procurou então no rosto da mulher fraqueza, medo ou irresolução. Nada disso **achou**.*

'He searched then in his wife's face weakness, fear or irresolution. Nothing of that did he find.'

In the same vein, the motivation behind *be* translated by *Mais que perfeito* was definitely the latter's ability to refer both to

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complex paraphrastic construction *were long in coming*; one case modified by a *for*-adverbial, therefore standardly requiring *Perfeito*; and one case featuring an idiomatic interpretation, *and that was breakfast*, which will be discussed below under the heading "The translation of English states into Portuguese".



a change of state and to the state itself (see Santos 1996:13.2.1), as examples (15)-(16) illustrate:

(15) *He was growing very stout, and his voice **was** hoarse.*

*Tornara-se muito corpulento e **enrouquecera**.*

'He had become very corpulent and had gotten hoarse.'

(16) *He **was** quiet now.*

*Agora a criança **acalmara**.*

'Now the child had calmed down.'

Second, looking at a random sample of 50 simple past verbs (other than *be*) translated into Imperfeito and another 50 translated into Perfeito (see Santos 1996:14.4.1), I found similar additions of inchoativeness or, at least, striking cases of problems for translation – note that such problems would not appear, were the analysis monolingual.

In the next two examples, the alternative interpretation (and thus translation) would be at least as natural.

(17) *And the morning of this day the canoes **lay** lined up on the beach;*

*Na manhã daquele dia os barcos **ficaram** na areia.*

'On the morning of that day the boats remained ashore.'

ALT: *Na manhã desse dia as canoas estavam alinhadas na praia (podiam ver-se as canoas alinhadas na praia).*

(18) *Each of the three **knew** the pearl was valueless.*

*Qualquer dos três **achou** que a pérola não valia nada.*

'Any of the three considered that the pearl was worth nothing.'

ALT: *Os três sabiam que a pérola não valia nada.*

Also, while studying this random sample, it became apparent that the vagueness regarding the sequencing (or overlapping) of actions could not be maintained. While the English text leaves open the question of which temporal relationship holds between the two actions described,<sup>18</sup> the two possible translations into Portuguese convey a different ordering (the alternative is using the verb in Perfeito, thus substituting in the next examples *ergueu* and *fugiram* for *erguia* and *fugiam*, respectively).

(19) *"I am sorry, my friend", he said, and his shoulders **rose** a little to indicate that the misfortune was no fault of his.*

*– Lamento muito, meu amigo – disse ele. **E erguia** um pouco*

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(18) Because it can be interpreted as either an event – and thus following – or a state – consequently overlapping.

*os ombros para mostrar bem que não tinha culpa nenhuma daquela contrariedade.*

‘“I am very sorry, my friend” said he. And he raised (Imperf., at the same time) a little the shoulders to show well that he had no fault whatsoever in that annoyance.’

- (20) *The hot sun beat on the earth so that Kino and Juana moved into the lacy shade of the brush, and small gray birds **scampered** on the ground in the shade.*

*O sol ardente causticava tanto a terra que Kino e Joana tiveram de procurar a sombra rendilhada dos arbustos, donde pássaros **fugiam** apressados.*

‘The burning sun cauterised so much the earth that Kino and Juana had to look for the lacy shadow of the bushes, from where birds escaped (Imperf., at the same time) hastily.’

Third, by studying the translation of simple past into *Mais que perfeito* (see Santos, 1996:13.2.1 for details), the majority of the 39 cases was found to be English acquisitions which the translator had to deal with, choosing a formulation that described at once the event and the state or position:

- (21) *only a few small barnacles **adhered** to the shell*

*só algumas pequenas lapas se lhe **tinham agarrado***

‘only some few limpets had stuck to it’

- (22) *who **squatted** on Kino’s right hand*

*que se **agachara** à direita de Kino*

‘who had squatted to the right of Kino’

- (23) *The little hole was slightly enlarged and its edges whitened from the sucking, but the red swelling **extended** farther around it*

*a pequenina mancha aumentara um pouco, o contorno desinflamara-se com a sucção, mas toda a bolha vermelha se **alargara***

‘the little spot increased a little, the contour disinflamed with the sucking, but the whole red bubble had enlarged’

Fourth, the same situation is shown in the translation pattern of passives to *Mais que perfeito* (Santos, 1996:13.2.2):

- (24) *for the hundreds of years of subjugation **were cut** deep in him. Porque centenas de anos de escravidão **tinham cavado** fundo nele.*

- 'Because hundreds of years of slavery had dug deep in him.'  
 (25) *the torn flesh of the knuckles **was turned** grayish white by the sea water*

ao contacto da água salgada, em volta dos nós dos dedos se **acinzentara**

'in contact with the salty water, around the knuckles had become grey'

Finally, by looking at Portuguese translations only (see Santos (forthcoming,a)), I was able to detect translationese<sup>19</sup> precisely in those cases where an English acquisition in its full force (representing both the state and the event that brought about the state) was employed in the source text. Some examples follow (two with an event and one with a state rendering), with my re-constructed original text after the indication "REC":

- (26) *Esta resposta provocou grande excitação entre os animais e, assim que o elefante **ficou** suficientemente longe para não os ouvir, logo ali combinaram fazer um concurso, a ver quem conseguia que o elefante desse um salto.*

REC: 'This answer caused great excitement among the animals and, as soon as the elephant **was** far enough not to hear them, at once arranged a competition to see who would make the elephant jump'

(*Os elefantes nunca saltam*, translation by Carlos Grifo Babo of Violet Easton's *Elephants never jump*)

- (27) *E todos tiveram de se pôr em fila e deitar uma moeda para um capacete dos polícias. Este **ficou** muito pesado quando caiu lá dentro a última moeda!*

REC: 'And all must stand in a queue and throw a coin to a policeman helmet. This **was** very heavy when the last coin entered it!'

(*Viva o Nodi*, translation by Maria da Graça Moctezuma of Enid Blyton's *Hurrah for little Noddy!*)

- (28) *O chefe da polícia deixou o Nodi guiar o autocarro como recompensa, e ele **estava** tão entusiasmado que é difícil descrever*

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(19) "Translationese" is here meant as target language deviation in a translated text due to the (unintentional) interference of the source language grammar or lexicon (see Gellerstam, 1986; Santos, 1995). In the particular case at hand, the Portuguese sentences use lexical items that do not sound fully idiomatic in their contexts.

REC: 'The police chief let Noddy drive the bus as a reward, and he **was** so excited that it is difficult to describe'

The gist of these examples is that they sound somewhat odd because the translator did not find a form of expressing the two parts of the acquisition.

Summing up, it seems clear that the pervasive acquisitional character of English (which is, incidentally, preserved by the simple past) produces a myriad of small problems for translation into Portuguese. This is but one of the very many cases where contrastive vagueness is involved, however, as the next sections will show, albeit less thoroughly.

### **The translation of English activities into Portuguese**

A parallel kind of vagueness (between the inception of an activity and the activity itself) can also be found when translating English activities. Actually, some of the examples presented above (namely, (21) and (23), involving the verbs adhere and extend) could already have been interpreted this way;<sup>20</sup> other obvious cases are:

(29) *And as Kino raised his right hand to the iron ring knocker in the gate, rage **swelled** in him, and the pounding music of the enemy **beat** in his ears, and his lips **drew** tight against his teeth.*

*Quando Kino levou a mão direita ao batente de bronze do portão, a raiva **creceu** dentro dele, a música barulhenta do inimigo **encheu-lhe** os ouvidos, os lábios **apertaram-se-lhe** contra os dentes.*

'When Kino raised the right hand to the iron ring knocker in the gate, rage raised in him, the noisy music of the enemy filled his ears, and the lips tightened against the teeth.'

But this far from exhausts the problems encountered with activities: in fact, activities constitute one of the most complex puzzles for translation into Portuguese in general, not because they are vague in English (grammatically vague), but because

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(20) This shows that some expressions in English are vague between a state and an activity (something which is hardly surprising giving the pervasiveness of grammatical vagueness).

there is no corresponding class in Portuguese (see Santos, 1996:7.1.3). This entails that most of their instances are contrastively vague without necessarily being monolingually so.

Such a situation can be shown by the particular choices made by the translator when dealing with activities. Examples (30), (31) and (32) depict, respectively, a resultative, a habitual, and a semelfactive event in the Portuguese translation, while one might as well have chosen a plural event, a semelfactive one, and a state, respectively, as the alternative translations display:

(30) *The neighbours were **tumbling** from their houses now.*

*Os vizinhos tinham **acorrído**.*

'The neighbours had (quickly) come.'

ALT: *Os vizinhos vinham aos tropeções.*

(31) *And the rhythm of the family song was the grinding stone where Juana **worked** the corn for the morning cakes.*

*o ritmo dessa música familiar vinha da mó com que Joana **preparava** o milho para a refeição da manhã.*

'the rhythm of that family song came from the grinding stone with which Juana prepared the corn for the morning meal'

ALT: *O ritmo dessa música familiar vinha da mó com que Joana estava a preparar o milho para a refeição da manhã.*

(32) *It stopped, and its tail rose up over its back in little jerks and the curved thorn on the tail's end **glistened**.*

*Imobilizou-se. Em pequenas sacudidelas, foi erguendo a cauda no ar, e, no extremo dela, o ferrão curvo **brilhou**.*

'It stopped. In little jerks, it gradually raised the tail in the air, and, in its extreme, the curved thorn started to glisten/glistened instantly.'

ALT: *Parou e a cauda ergueu-se em pequenas sacudidelas. O ferrão curvo na ponta brilhava.*

The examples thus show that the English texts may be vague regarding result, habituality, and inception, respectively; but this may only be relevant when translating into Portuguese, because a Portuguese native speaker must make such decisions to translate them.<sup>21</sup>

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(21) In fact, these three examples may well illustrate different situations altogether: The English sentence in (30), by using the progressive, makes the utterance unmarked relative to result, even if one

## The translation of English states into Portuguese

An especially interesting issue in the contrast of the two languages is the relevance given in Portuguese to the distinction between permanent states (properties) and temporary ones (states proper), which is often actualised in an habitual interpretation versus a semelfactive one, when the (lexical) verb is an event. English is mostly vague regarding this distinction,<sup>22</sup> so in a large number of cases the translator translating into Portuguese must decide.

The following examples illustrate different choices (my alternative translation is meant to make the difference clear):

- (33) *On his lap was a silver tray with a silver chocolate pot and a tiny cup of eggshell china, so delicate that it **looked** silly when he **lifted** it with his big hand, lifted it with the tips of thumb and forefinger and spread the other three fingers wide to get them out of the way.*

Tinha um tabuleiro de prata no colo, com uma chocolateira também de prata e uma finíssima chávena de porcelana da china tão delicada que **ficava** deslocada quando ele a **levantava** na mão enorme, segurando-a nas pontas do polegar e do indicador de modo que os outros três dedos estendidos lhe não tocassem.

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wanted to claim that result, as well as manner, were present in the lexical item *tumble*. The translator discarded manner and expressed the plausible result in Portuguese. One could thus contend that we have here simply an addition of content which was not present in the English sentence. In (31), it might be argued that English does not distinguish between habitual and semelfactive interpretation (see next section), in which case the text is only contrastively vague. Finally, (32) illustrates a genuine grammatical vagueness in English between inception or development of the activity. (One can confidently assert it is monolingually vague because English has the possibility to indicate development: the progressive, and inception: with the aspectualizer *begin*). In any case, the examples illustrate the difficulty of rendering activities in Portuguese.

- (22) I discuss in Santos (1996:6.2.1) at some length the possibility that English simply does not make such a distinction at all, in which case this would be a case of purely contrastive vagueness.

'he had a silver tray in his lap, with a chocolate pot also in silver and a very fine china cup so delicate that it became out of place whenever he lifted it in the huge hand, holding it with the tips of the thumb and the forefinger so that the other three stretched fingers would not touch it'

ALT: *tinha um tabuleiro de prata no colo (...) com uma chávena tão frágil que pareceu deslocada quando ele a levantou na sua mão grossa, (...)*

- (34) *Beside him on a table **was** a small Oriental gong and a bowl of cigarettes.*

Ao lado, na banca de cabeceira, **havia** um pequeno tantã oriental e um maço de cigarros.

'Beside, on the bedside table, there was a small Oriental gong and a cigarette pack.'

ALT: *Numa mesa ao seu lado estava um pequeno tantã oriental e uma jarra com cigarros.*

- (35) *And he drank a little pulque and that **was** breakfast  
Bebeu um pouco de pulque. E **foi** o seu pequeno almoço.*

'he drank a little pulque. And that was what his breakfast was made of, on that day.'

ALT: *E bebeu um pouco de pulque, e isso era o seu pequeno almoço habitual.*

Although *Imperfeito* in Portuguese can also be deemed in some cases vague between these two interpretations – describing a property or a particular situation –,<sup>23</sup> the one that most readily comes to mind is the habitual / permanent one. (One way to explain this is claiming that *Imperfeito* is in privative opposition with *Imperfeito progressivo*, which has only the semelfactive, in progress, interpretation; cf. Santos (1995b).) Therefore, even though one might claim that vagueness is maintained, the following translations are problematic:

- (36) *and now she **did** a most surprising thing  
e, de repente, **saía**-se com a mais inesperada das ideias  
'and, suddenly, she would have the most unexpected idea'*
- (37) *and the thought **got** into Kino*

- (23) Note that this is precisely the case in example (31) above, involving *worked*. The interpretation of "at that particular time" is not excluded, but is not preferential.

*Era o que Kino também **pensava***

'that was Kino's opinion too'

In fact, looking only at the Portuguese text – in context –, these sentences were classified as habitual, or property assigning; and not as describing one particular event; see Santos (1996:10.2.5). This shows that it is not enough to maintain vagueness; interestingly, in some cases,<sup>24</sup> the choice of a particular interpretation and the corresponding translation of such a choice may be less misleading.

### **The translation of the English perfect into Portuguese**

The previous examples are all cases where English is vague relative to (some distinctions required for translation into) Portuguese. But problems appear in translation from English into Portuguese, too, when Portuguese is vague relative to a distinction made in English.

I chose the English present perfect because in the particular context of my corpus it has clearly yet another use in addition to the (many) ones attributed to this grammatical device: it signals old-fashioned language, and is used in the conversational exchanges between the (uneducated) people and the priest. In addition, the English present perfect may convey relevance (something Portuguese is vague about), cf. examples (38)-(39), an extended now (which is expressible in Portuguese – however only in the case of repeated occurrences), example (40), resultativeness (something which Portuguese is also vague about most of the times), example (41), and/or occurrence at an indefinite time in the past, example (42):

(38) *"This pearl **has become** my soul,"*

– *Esta pérola **tornou-se** a minha alma.*

'This pearl became my soul.'

(39) *now that you **have become** a rich man.*

– *Agora, que **és** um homem rico.*

'Now, that you are a rich man'

(40) *"If that is so, then all of us **have been** cheated all of our lives."*

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(24) Possibly in all cases where the two languages have opposite markedness.



– *Se isso é possível, quer dizer que **temos sido** roubados toda a vida.*

‘If that is possible, means that we have been stolen the whole life’

- (41) *I **have come** to see the baby*

**vim** ver o pequeno

‘I came to see the baby’

- (42) “I **have heard** him make that sermon”, said Juan Tomás.

– *Eu **ouvi-o** fazer esse sermão – disse João Tomás.*

Note that, in the case of the English present perfect, the translator must choose which of these meanings are appropriate in the context (not necessarily only one!); if not more than one can be rendered, choose which one to translate; choose the most appropriate form of translation. For instance, the following translation fails to render relevance to the present, old-fashioned language, and possibly also resultativeness,<sup>25</sup> even though it is not an easy task to find a better formulation.

- (43) “*Oh, my brother, an insult **has been** put on me that is deeper than my life*”.

– Ó meu irmão, **fizeram**-me um insulto que é mais forte do que a vida.

‘Oh my brother, someone made me an insult which is stronger than life.’

It is no wonder that very often translators give up transmitting the style connotations – as is, for example, pointed out in Gellerstam (1986) or Baker (1996). They have already a hard enough job trying to get some of the meaning across. It should come as no surprise to the reader that there is no grammatical device in Portuguese that expresses relevance, focus on the re-

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(25) The translator uses the expression *fazer um insulto* in an attempt to render resultativeness (in particular, that the insult was thrown into the speaker, stained him, is still haunting him). This was not fully successful, though, since neither the expression *fazer um insulto* is fully idiomatic in Portuguese, nor *fazer* (‘make’) is a resultative verb in itself (though its object can denote a result). So, *fazer um discurso* (‘make a speech’) or *fazer uma cena* (‘make a scene’) are non resultative, while *fazer um bolo* (‘bake a cake’) or *fazer um filme* (‘make a movie’) are resultative.

sult, locates the situation in an extended now, and moreover sounds old-fashioned! Rather, what should be retained from this case is that the most prototypical – and, therefore, best from a literary point of view – instances of the use of the present perfect in English will carry *all* this information. And so they will cause greater headaches for the translator.

## Conclusion

I hope to have shown that matters of grammar and their contrast are deeply pervaded with the property of vagueness: it is the rule rather than the exception that several (not mutually exclusive) classifications are applicable to a linguistic expression, and this constitutes one of the most delicate issues translators face.

For lack of space, many relevant examples could not be discussed, nor detailed discussions of each example presented. A review of other approaches and views of vagueness is also missing. The reader is thus advised to look for these matters in Santos (1996).

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