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Review of the book

Maradan, Mélanie. 2021. *Uncertainty in Deliberate Lexical Interventions. Exploring Esperanto Speakers' Opinions through Corpora*. Berlin: Frank & Timme.

Book and appendices available in open access:

https://www.frank-timme.de/de/programm/produkt/uncertainty_in_deliberate_lexical_interventions

This book is about neology, with a focus not on the products of lexical creation (neologisms, word coinages etc.), but rather on the opinions expressed by language users about potential new word forms / meanings. The key innovation of the study is that it analyses a representative corpus of written contributions from five different discussion forums in Esperanto (including opinions on competing technical terms, problematic dictionary entries, etc.). As stated by the author – Mélanie Maradan – the purpose of the study is to facilitate the work of “language managers,” that is to say those (often self-appointed) language experts who have taken upon themselves the task of maintaining the norms and standards of Esperanto. Throughout the book Maradan prefers this term to “language planner.” It strikes this reviewer that this is an attempt to appropriate the theory and practices of marketing studies, since the analogy of commercial business and ‘human resource management’ are a leitmotif that permeates many other sections of this work.

Chapter 1 presents the core concept of this study: “deliberate lexical intervention” (DLI), defined as “an intervention in the lexicon of a group of speakers made with the final objective of bringing about language use (full lexical implantation) for specific lexical items” (p. 25). Chapter 2 sets out the different types of DLI. Maradan discusses the relative success of any attempt to plan lexical innovation as “interventions’ [sic] effectiveness”. The criteria for “lexical success” are seen as relative: they can range from highly ambitious (such as reaching a threshold frequency in a representative corpus or gaining an entry in a norm-providing dictionary) to more modest (being cited by at least one language user in a non-definitional context). In one useful discussion, Maradan proposes a model of neological innovation

(based on Martin 1992, 1994), which follows the same graduated steps as the marketing of a commercial product or brand:

- (1) speaker is unaware of the lexical intervention = lexical ignorance
- (2) speaker is aware of lexical intervention = lexical knowledge
- (3) speaker has a positive attitude towards lexical intervention = lexical opinion
- (4) speaker uses the lexical intervention = lexical replication (pp. 66-67, p. 84).

This is clearly a very original way of framing the role of a “language manager.” However, Maradan often presents such lists and typologies uncritically, without much attempt to test or deconstruct them. For example, can language users not at times skip from step 2 to 4, without developing any explicit opinion?

Chapter 3 goes into more detail about “lexical knowledge” and presents an extensive literature review of lexicographic studies, mostly based on questionnaires, elicitation and self-reporting. Towards the end of this chapter, Maradan makes a convincing case for a more embedded approach, involving corpus analysis and active engagement with the language community. Following on from this, Chapter 4 presents some background about Esperantophones as a language community. Chapter 5 presents more original material, involving notably a discussion of “electronic networks of practice” (ENP). Here, Maradan describes the five principal ENPs whose written discussions provide the raw material for her corpus analysis:

- (1) *Astronomia Terminaro* (corpus = 332 000 words, as described on p. 221)
- (2) *Esperanto-tradukistoj* (832 000 words)
- (3) *Lingva Konsultejo* (897 000 words)
- (4) *Retpoŝta rondo por redaktantoj* (167 000 words)
- (5) *Vivo-Vikio* (forum for contributors to the Esperanto Wiktionary, 2,000 words)

Maradan then provides the details of a survey, which she conducts with the members of each group in the form of an on-line (written) dialogue. There are lots of impressive details, but the findings will not be of much surprise to Esperanto specialists: the respondents report having a high level of formal education; they have strong (sometimes quite negative) opinions about authoritative sources (e.g. the *Plena Ilustrita Vortaro*, Waringhien, Duc Goninaz and Roux 1970/2020).

Having set out the social background, Maradan examines the survey data in Chapter 6. The aim here is to establish what linguistic resources

are consulted by forum members. The results (p.195 onwards) make for some very eloquent and interesting reading. In the first instance, it appears that dictionary consultation is a last resort “Instead of looking for external information, participants reported using what translation studies might call functional equivalences” (p. 195), that is, metaphors, paraphrases, borrowing lexical items from another language, etc. When faced with difficult lexical choices, the respondents report a marked preference for lexical creativity, including productive use of compounds (also noted by others such as Gobbo 2017). There is also a tendency for users to prefer “alternative sources” such as Google, rather than looking-up in authoritative dictionaries. This is the first point in the book that Maradan provides some lengthy quotes from the corpora. Frustratingly, she has chosen not to present the the original Esperanto text for most extracts.

Chapter 7 introduces, among other things, the concept of “autonymy”: the self-referential mention of a word or phrase. This is obviously a key concept when looking at discussion forums about language. For example: “I never used the word ‘brodkasti’ because, to me, it sounds like an Anglicism that should be avoided” (p. 213). This leads to an interesting discussion of how explicit evaluation is expressed grammatically and lexically in Esperanto. However, all of this turns out to be a long-winded way of getting to the main point of the chapter, which is to create “a seed list of opinion-bearing lexical items” (p. 241).

Chapter 8 takes the “opinionated autonyms” identified semi-automatically in Chapter 7 and presents a sample of different justifications used by forum contributors when discussing these items. Here Maradan finds 11 main categories of “argument”: (1) internationality, (2) clarity, (3) preciseness, (4) subjective qualities, (5) “Esperantic nature”, (6) pronunciation, (7) length, (8) grammatical acceptability, (9) neological character, (10) official status, and (11) frequency (p. 262). Strangely, Maradan does not explain how she arrived at the ordering of these categories (at least, not clearly enough for this reviewer). It seems that the first categories in the list tend to correspond closely to the overt lexical markers identified in Chapter 7 (for example “komprenebla / intelligible” = category 2, “preciza / precise” = category 3 etc.). The categories at the end of the list tend to be harder to identify, often involving more open-ended discussion (“grupo” [“group”] already indicates that there are several people involved = category 8, [Ligilo](#) [hyperlink] appears more than 20,000 times = category 11, etc.). Each of the categories mentioned above only receives a paragraph or two of discussion, with just one or two brief (and largely unexplored) extracts.

Having encountered some tantalising glimpses in the previous section, the reader may be disappointed to find that Chapter 9 skips giving any more

linguistic detail and simply presents a series of recommendations for the select group of “language managers”. In sum, Maradan argues that language managers should continuously monitor language use in order to better inform their decisions. This common-sense advice is cloaked in the discourse of business management: “The proposed solution is [...] to gather feedback and monitoring information directly from the marketplace” (p. 290). Sensibly, Maradan presents a practical example of how the decision-making process might work in the case of one proposed neologism (*lumeco*, *lumpotenco*, *lumintenseco*, *lumintenso*, all candidate equivalents for “luminosity”, the amount of energy emitted by a star). Predictably, language users appear to prefer the shortest form. The conclusions set out in Chapter 10 are similarly unsurprising: “The main contribution of this work is the conclusion that the success of a deliberate lexical intervention cannot necessarily be known in advance” (p. 307).

Overall this book clearly represents a huge effort of data collation on an original and important subject, with some very attractive prospects for future research. Unfortunately, the text is plagued by unnecessary methodological excursions, *ex cathedra* pronouncements and typos of the kind that one often finds in unpublished PhD theses. Although the book is dated 2021, the text is based on the author’s 2019 thesis, and Maradan refers to her work as “this thesis” throughout the text. But perhaps more importantly – at least from the present reviewer’s standpoint – the book is undermined by a simple analytical oversight: although Maradan often pays lip-service to the role of “speakers” in the development of the underlying language system, she does not in fact analyse much “speech” (i.e. unselfconscious language use or “discourse”). Thus while Maradan’s corpus analysis concentrates on the explicit expression of opinions, there is no account of how language users actually make use of any of the neologisms or the other objects of discussion in actual discourse (i.e. in non-metalinguistic contexts). It is significant that Maradan briefly cites the work of John Sinclair. As any student of Sinclair’s contextualist approach will point out, the lexicographer must “trust the text,” basing their definitions and observations not on their own or on users’ opinions or introspections, but rather on the regular, routine patterns of phraseology that can be found in the discourses that users actually encounter and employ. In this perspective, it would be interesting for Maradan (and other analysts) to look at some of the neologisms which have attracted comment in this study in a more general corpus of Esperanto usage: the 10-million word *Tekstaro* corpus (Wennergren 2021) would suit this purpose perfectly. Of course, regardless of these reservations, Maradan’s book will certainly provide her and other linguists with much material for further work in the future.

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About the reviewer

Christopher Gledhill is Professor of English Linguistics at Université Paris-Cité, where he teaches specialist translation, interlinguistics and comparative phraseology. He has recently written about the effects of neural translation on specialised translation courses, linguistic diversity in Britain after Brexit, and the development of complex prepositions and composite prepositions in Esperanto.

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Pri la recenzanto

Christopher Gledhill estas Profesoro pri angla lingvistiko en pariza universitato (Université Paris-Cité), kie li instruas fakan tradukadon, interlingvistikon kaj komparan frazeologion. Li lastatempe verkis pri efikoj de neŭra tradukado sur kursoj pri faka tradukado, lingva diverseco en Britio post Briteliro, kaj la disvolviĝo de kompleksaj prepozicioj kaj prepoziciaĵoj en Esperanto.

Sur l'auteur

Christopher Gledhill est professeur de linguistique anglaise à l'Université Paris-Cité, où il enseigne la traduction spécialisée, l'interlinguistique et la phraséologie comparée. Ses travaux récents portent sur les effets de la traduction neuronale sur l'enseignement de la traduction spécialisée, la diversité linguistique en Grande-Bretagne après le Brexit, et l'évolution des prépositions complexes et des prépositions composites en espéranto.