

# B.A.S.

British and American Studies



2020  
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# DIGITAL METHODS IN TRANSLATION STUDIES: USING CORPUS DATA TO ASSESS TRAINEE TRANSLATIONS

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***Abstract:** Student translator training has benefited greatly from the latest developments in digital research methods, mostly in the framework of corpus-based translation studies (CBTS). In the present paper, we will highlight the general usefulness of corpus-based processing tools (wordlists and concordancers) in assessing translation patterns emerging in the target texts produced by translation trainees. To that end, we focus on a synchronic monolingual corpus (TRAIN-EN) consisting of 46 Romanian-into-English translations (approx. 31.000 words) produced by third-year Romanian students enrolled in a BA translation-oriented program. The data interpretation integrates pedagogical considerations on the usefulness of digital methods to support the translation process and to decide upon research-based teaching interventions.*

***Keywords:** corpus-based translation studies (CBTS), digital translation tools, Romanian-English translation corpus*

## 1. Introduction

Translation trainees are presented with a double competence-building task: mastering the languages into / from which they have to translate and navigating between linguistic resources that can assist them during the translation process. Both challenges may be addressed by actively and purposely resorting to digital technologies. It might seem redundant to draw attention on digital tools in an educational environment that has been adopting digitalisation at multiple levels (administration, research, teaching, evaluation, etc.). However, if the more and more poignant presence of such tools in this environment is unquestionable, their usefulness should not be taken for granted. The overwhelming amount of online resources can lead to an ineffective selection of helpful tools, applications and platforms to serve specific purposes, in well-defined contexts, translation included.

[...] one wonders how deep the understanding of the different tools and, above all, their impact on the translation process really can be [...] to students of varying degrees of linguistic, technological, and translational competence, and more or less removed from translation practice and theory classes. (Austermuehl 2013: 330)

However, research can play a significant role in deciding upon the relevance of digital translation tools, especially now that “the working practices of translators have been changed beyond recognition in terms of the access to many different kinds of knowledge that are afforded by the infrastructure of the internet” (Cronin 2013: 8).

## **2. Corpus-based translation studies**

### **2.1. Intersecting digital domains**

The increase in number and diversity of digital tools has been taken advantage of in corpus linguistics (CL) studies that have flourished in the last decade of this century, with more and more cross-overs towards popular research areas, such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL), digital linguistics (DL), digital humanities (DH) and information and communication technology (ICT) for education. Nevertheless, translation studies (TS) seems to be one of the language-related disciplines where corpus linguistics has not yet reached its full potential. As Olohan (2004: 13) points out, most CL studies cover the following “topics within linguistics: lexical studies, grammar, semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, stylistics and text linguistics, historical linguistics, dialectology and variation studies and psycholinguistics”, while the TS field has not been given a similar amount of attention, possibly on the grounds that translations “are not considered to represent language use, in English-speaking contexts, at least” (ibid.).

Corpus-based translation studies (CBTS) is the area of linguistics that has embraced the methodology of corpus linguistics for the investigation of phenomena involved in and resulting from the translation process. The recurrent form of corpus design used in CBTS is represented by parallel corpora, i.e. linguistic databases consisting of source texts and their corresponding target texts.

Corpus-based translation research emerged in the late 1990s as a new area of research in the discipline of translation studies. It is informed by a specific area of linguistics known as corpus linguistics which involves the analysis of large corpora of authentic running text by means of computer software. Within linguistics, this methodology has revolutionised lexicographic practices and methods of language teaching. In translation studies, this kind of research involves using computerised corpora to study translation as a variety of language behaviour that merits attention in its own right. (Kruger 2002: 70)

Though the usefulness of corpus-based translation research has, at times, been associated with simplistic perceptions of translations as rigid transfers of texts from one language into another, numerous researchers have acknowledged the potential of looking beyond the linguistic parallelism between source and target texts in order to assess the degree of translation naturalness (Johansson 1998) or, on the contrary, the often dysfunctional discrepancies (Simard et al. 2000) between source and target versions.

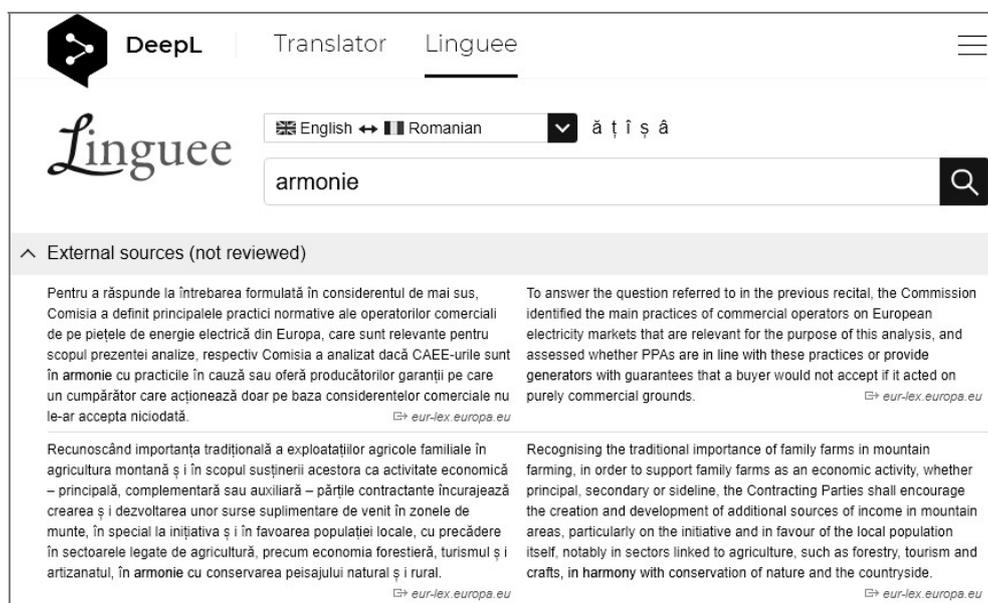
### **2.2. CBTS applicability**

The collection of large sets of linguistic data for computer-processed analyses can be beneficial to the TS research community in multiple ways. The applicability of CBTS ranges from sampling text translation phenomena in translation trainee groups to designing and applying complex artificial intelligence (AI) translation-predictive algorithms. While it is generally agreed that translation involves an array of skills that are not necessarily linguistic, among which cultural awareness and creative writing competences are frequently mentioned by the

literature in the field (e.g., Baker 1996, Willcox 2017), language competence is essential to a successful translator.

Considering that linguistic resources are now available at a click distance, it would be a mistake not to take advantage of them. In fact, TS professionals and researchers do make use of the web 2.0 potential – to which the concept of corpus is now central – in creative, personalized and service-based ways. Primarily, for translation purposes, corpora are used as:

a) support tools for online dictionaries. The functionality of numerous online dictionaries is based on corpora. For example, the interface of *Linguee* (<https://www.linguee.com/>, an extension of *Linguee.de* <https://www.linguee.de/>), a linguistic search engine, operates as a multi-option parallel corpus databank, with source - target text sentence alignments based on a dynamic corpus (see Fig. 1 below).



**Figure 1.** Source - target text alignment in *Linguee.com* (screenshot), for the Romanian search term *armonie* [harmony], language pair Romanian-English

The list of online tools (dictionaries, synonym finders, etc.) that use corpora for parallel concordances is currently expanding (for example, a list of online resources for multiple languages can be found at <https://www.101languages.net/dictionaries/>). For the English - Romanian pair of languages, *Glosbe.com*, *Linguee.com* and *WordReference.com*, all multilingual databanks, are among the reliable sources of their kind that translators may successfully resort to.

b) resources for Machine Translation (MT). Major preoccupations of both technology and research experts include the creation of tools that can assist

professional translators and common users to cope with the ever increasing amount of translations that require not only rapid task completion, but also precise terminology use.

In a world where work processes have to run almost automatically, the translation field must adapt and be dynamic and innovative. Google grasped the importance of developing an application for translation support and started investing in Google Translate. Compared to its beginnings, in 2006, when random translations delivered humorous results, this machine translator is now a first choice for both novice and more advanced translators at least for the creation of a translation draft. “Parallel corpora are the fuel that Google Translate feed on, and ‘statistical machine translation’, of which Google Translate is the highest-profile example, is a great success story of language technology and the use of corpora” (Kilgarriff 2013: 91). Although the tool is perfectible, at least for the Romanian - English language pair (see two random examples: the English equivalent that Google Translate suggests for the Romanian *un metru de autostradă* [a meter of highway] is *\*a highway metro*, and that given for *fix două luni* [exactly two months] is *\*fixed two months*), its existence has opened the way for many MT projects and applications (Sin-wai 2015; Wang 2019).

Parallel corpora are cornerstones of translation memories which computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools other than Google Translate also rely on. With the impulse given by Google to the translation industry, a range of CAT tools have been offered to both freelance and translation companies in-house professionals so that they can now choose from SDL Trados Studio, MemoQ, Memosource, WordFast Pro, Smart CAT, Omega T, etc.

c) research instruments for translation training assessment and intervention. The result of a translation process is most often a written text, which can easily be included in a corpus to be used as an instrument for the assessment of future translations quality. What corpora can also do is to capture the amount of linguistic diversity and translation preferences in a larger group of translated versions. This way, not only may corpora aid in making highest-ranked translation options (also useful for probabilistic inferences in MT processes), but they may also be used to identify linguistic fluctuations signaling cultural shifts. In university training, the investigation of parallel texts corpora represents a simple and effective way of understanding the challenges that a certain group of students faces when dealing with a particular translation task, a fact that we attempt to offer proof for here.

### 3. Research method

In our study, we have used a corpus driven approach (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 85): we compiled a corpus of target texts produced by translation trainees with the aim of focusing on the equivalence variants chosen both quantitatively (by performing a frequency analysis) and qualitatively (by performing a Romanian-English contrastive analysis). The identification, description and interpretation of these translation variants are illustrative of the patterns that Romanian translation students used in the case of a journalistic-genre translation task, but they may also cast light on Romanian-English translation challenges in a broader context.

In order to verify whether the translation patterns identified have prominent frequencies, we used the WordList and Concordance functions of the corpus search and analysis tools WordSmith (Scott 2012), LancsBox (Brezina et al. 2018) and

AntConc (Anthony 2019). The functions are integrated into software programs (licence-based for WordSmith, freely downloadable and available online for LancsBox AntConc) that can sustain searches within uploaded corpora. For word lists, the programs deliver frequency lists of individual words or lemmas (i.e. root forms), where highly frequent words and their percentages of use have been processed. Word lists can also be viewed alphabetically when target words need to be identified and their use patterns assessed. Concordance functions offer search options with different filters: simple item search, complex item search (using software-specific search query) as well as contextual patterns at the right (R) or left (L) position of the type/token.

### 3.1. Translation trainees' profile

The 46 students included in the study were enrolled, at the time of data collection (spring 2019), in the Applied Modern Languages BA program, at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology of the West University of Timișoara, Romania. They were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study (their last before graduation). Their professional experience had been gained mainly at the university (no student of the group had ever been employed as a translator), via theoretical courses and applied seminars in the methodology of translation, during which emphasis had been placed particularly on non-literary texts (in the field of medicine, law, business, technology, etc).

### 3.2. Task assignment

The students were asked to translate, from Romanian into English, a 707 word long newspaper article entitled *Încălzirea globală aduce noi fenomene meteo în România* [Global warming brings new weather phenomena to Romania], whose opening paragraph, offered here as a sample, reads:

Valurile de căldură, atunci când temperaturile vor depăși 37 de grade pentru mai mult de două zile consecutiv, vor deveni fenomene care se vor repeta din ce în ce mai des pe durata unei veri, în România, până la jumătatea acestui secol, arată studiile efectuate de meteorologii români. Încălzirea globală a dus deja la schimbarea tiparelor de climă, în special iarna și vara, în țara noastră, un fenomen care se va accentua. Pe lângă temperaturi, va fi afectat și modelul de precipitații. Adaptarea la noua climă va costa statul român miliarde de euro.

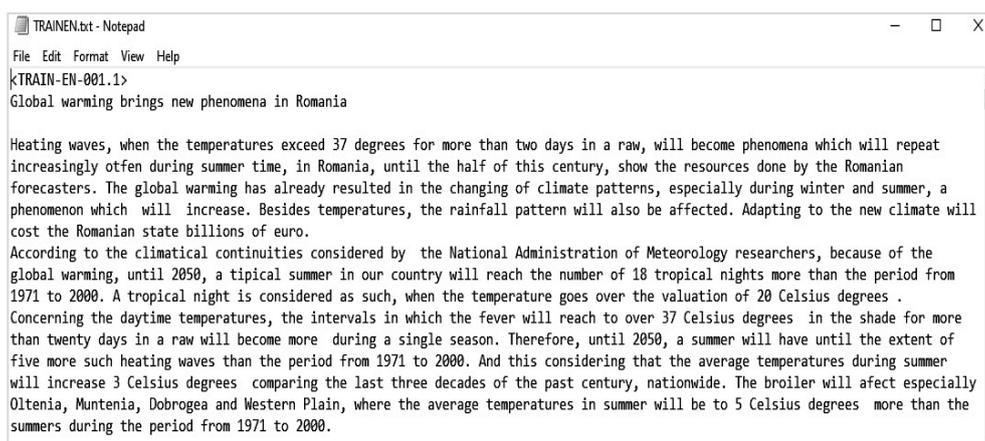
(<https://jurnalul.antena3.ro/stiri/observator/>)

[When temperatures are higher than 37 C for more than two consecutive days, the heat waves will be more and more often recurrent during one summer season in Romania, by the mid of this century, studies by Romanian meteorologists reveal. Global warming has already led to a climate pattern change, especially in winter and summer in our country; this is a phenomenon which will become more and more acute. Besides temperatures, the rain patterns will also be affected. The adaptation to the new climate will cost the Romanian state billions of euros.]

They were allowed to do the task at home, to use whatever translation aids they felt useful (printed and online bilingual dictionaries, monolingual dictionaries, contextual dictionaries, samples of similar texts in English, etc.) and to spend as much time as they needed to edit their translations.

### 3.3. Corpus data and design

Several processing steps have been taken to compile the corpus: the creation of a repository of the 46 translation variants in their original format (.doc or .pdf), turning each of these variants into machine-readable texts (in our case, .txt), text code assignment and manual correction of text formatting errors. A sample of a text prepared for inclusion in the corpus is given in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.** Sample of text format to be included in the TRAIN-EN corpus

The Corpus of Trainee Translations from Romanian into English (TRAIN-EN) amounts to a total of 31.146 words. All target-text versions have been aggregated in one single document where frequency analyses and free searches can be performed.

For example, one can get a quick overview of the solutions suggested by the students for the translation of the title:

- Global warming brings new phenomena in Romania (TRAIN-EN-001.1)
- Global warming brings new weather phenomena in Romania (TRAIN-EN-002.1)
- The global warming brings new phenomenons in Romania (TRAIN-EN-003.1)
- Global warming brings new meteorological phenomena to Romania (TRAIN-EN-007.1)

The corpus design also allows for a quick statistical assessment of successful translations. We do not take “successful” to have a very strict meaning here, rather, we take it to cover a wide variety of features that characterize a “good” translation, such as ‘accuracy’, ‘equivalence’ or ‘fidelity’ (Robinson 2012). We also deem the novice level of the student translators a relevant variable in our case study, which means that grammatical correctness and lexical accuracy are the main criteria considered for assessment, whereas linguistic refinement is, in our case, a desirable but not necessarily compulsory feature of the student translations.

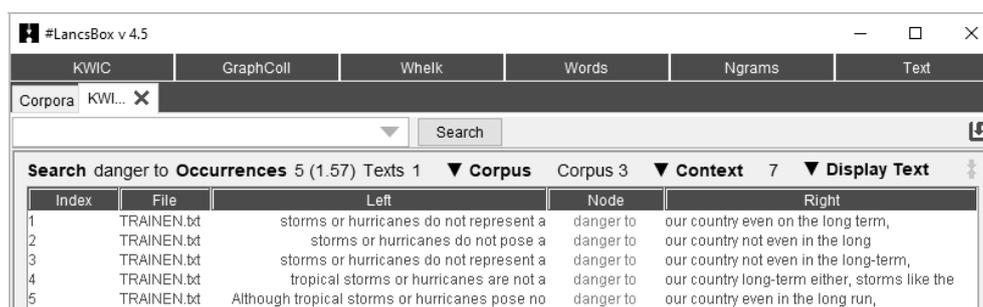
#### 4. Analysis. Translation difficulties demonstrated by the students

The analysis of the TRAIN-EN corpus has enabled us to draw data-supported conclusions on the trainee translation process. We performed our searches progressively, by looking at individual sentences and browsing through the translation solutions identified by the students, as extracted from the corpus. As the source text was informative, written in a rather neutral register, style did not constitute a translation problem. However, grammar and vocabulary did.

##### 4.1. Grammatical difficulties

This type of difficulties arose in the area of both morphology and syntax. Those in the former category became evident starting with the very title of the article – the rate of translation accuracy in its case was around 70 percent: of the total of 46 translation variants: we assessed 32 as accurate (we excluded translations that were grammatically incorrect, omitted important information or used inaccurate lexical items).

The title brought to light a highly frequent challenge for the Romanian trainee translator: the use of the correct preposition after verbs (“to bring”, in TRAIN-EN). It has been demonstrated in previous research that prepositions are among the most problematic grammar areas for the Romanian learners of English (eg. Chitez 2014, Pârlog 2009, 2010, Pungă and Pârlog 2015, Pungă 2017), together with the definite article, phrasal verbs, and the genitives, so this observation was not of particular novelty. Our findings show that students oscillated between “to Romania” (16 occurrences) and “in Romania” (16 occurrences) in their translations of the article title. *In* (1 occurrence) and *into* (7 occurrences) were the two choices made alternatively for the translation of “luate în calcul de cercetători” [taken *into* consideration by researchers]. Similarly, when investigating the translation versions of the Romanian phrase “un pericol *pentru* țara noastră” [a danger *for* our country], we could, again, notice that the students’ choices alternated between *to* (5 occurrences) and *for* (14 occurrences), as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4 below:



The screenshot shows the LancsBox v 4.5 interface with a search for the preposition 'to'. The search results are displayed in a table with columns for Index, File, Left, Node, and Right. The results show five occurrences of the preposition 'to' in the context of translating the Romanian phrase 'un pericol pentru țara noastră'.

Index	File	Left	Node	Right
1	TRAINEN.bt	storms or hurricanes do not represent a	danger to	our country even on the long term,
2	TRAINEN.bt	storms or hurricanes do not pose a	danger to	our country not even in the long
3	TRAINEN.bt	storms or hurricanes do not represent a	danger to	our country not even in the long-term,
4	TRAINEN.bt	tropical storms or hurricanes are not a	danger to	our country long-term either, storms like the
5	TRAINEN.bt	Although tropical storms or hurricanes pose no	danger to	our country even in the long run,

Figure 3. The preposition *to* as the equivalent of the Romanian preposition *pentru* in “un pericol *pentru* țara noastră” (capture from LancsBox)

Concordance Plot File View Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List

Concordance Hits 23

Hit	KWIC
1	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country, nor for a long term,
2	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country, not even for a long
3	hurricanes are neither a long-term danger for our country, the storms of Mediterranean cyclones
4	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country for long term, storms as
5	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country on long-term, the cyclonic
6	storms or hurricanes do not represent danger for our country on a long term either,
7	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country neither for long-term, mediteranean
8	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country for long term, storms as
9	or hurricanes do not represent a danger for our country, not event on a long
10	do not represent a long term danger for our country, storms like Mediterranean cyclones will
11	hurricanes don't represent a danger for our country neither on the long term,
12	or the hurricanes are not a danger for our country not even on the longer
13	even on a long term, a danger for our country, the storms of the type
14	orms or hurricanes cannot be considered dangerous for our country even on long term, Mediterranean
15	the aims of reducing recommended gas emissions for 2050, our country should invest until that date,
16	meet the target of recommended gas emissions for 2050, our country should invest by that time
17	goal in reducing the emissions as recomanded for 2050, our country shoud invest until that date,

Search Term  Words  Case  Regex  Search Window Size 50

for our country Advanced

Start Stop Sort Show Every Nth Row 1

Kwic Sort  Level 1 1L  Level 2 1R  Level 3 0

**Figure 4.** The preposition *for* as the equivalent of the Romanian preposition *pentru* in “un pericol *pentru* țara noastră” (capture from AntConc)

Apart from prepositions, in less numerous cases however, articles also pose difficulties to the translation trainees involved in our study: “*an* tropical night” for “*o* noapte tropicală” and “*an* usual summer” for “*o* vară tipică” stand proof for such difficulties. The employment of the English indefinite article in the form it specifically takes before words whose first sound is a vowel (which is not the case in the two examples above) may have been a problem experienced individually, rather than one shared by a group of students, since both mistakes were made by the same translator (the quantitative approach that can easily and quickly be taken by using a corpus analysis software clarifies the difference).

As far as syntax is concerned, we noticed, in one case, the incorrect use of a double subject – the noun filling the subject slot and its corresponding personal pronoun: “*an* tropical *night it* is considered [...]” was one student’s translation choice for “*o* noapte tropicală este considerată [...]” [a tropical night is considered [...]].

Word order was also in the category of syntax-related problems on which the students sometimes stumbled. On two occasions, they disregarded the fact that there are exceptions to the rule concerning the position of English attributes before their head nouns and that “degrees Celsius” is one such exception. As a consequence, the translation they offered for “grade Celsius” was “Celsius degrees” (35 occurrences; a clear case of overgeneralization). Another example is the position of the adverbial *also* within the word string “will affect also” (5 occurrences) instead of the correct form “will also affect” (29 occurrences) as solutions for the source string “*va afecta și*”.

## 4.2. Lexical difficulties

Lexical difficulties had to do with the choice of the appropriate English equivalents for certain Romanian words.

For example, the combination of the noun “phenomena” with various adjectives in order to render the Romanian word “meteo” into English was a source of relevant information about the problems the students faced in the translation process at the vocabulary level. The lexical versatility of the trainees was put at a test especially considering the fact that dictionaries, online or traditional, do not seem to offer refined contextual synonyms. Four different English equivalents were employed (of which three were appropriate, but one – “unusual” – has nothing in common with “meteo”) and there were as many as four cases of omission (a rather extreme solution to one’s hesitation in choosing an equivalent):

new [weather] phenomena (31 texts)  
 new [meteorological] phenomena (9 texts)  
 new [0] phenomena (4 texts)  
 new [natural] phenomena (1 text)  
 [unusual] phenomena (1 text)

If “weather” and “meteorological” are interchangeable (partial) synonyms that may be employed as equivalents of “meteo”, there were cases in our corpus when the inappropriate element in a (partial) synonymic series was employed: for example, though “în plus” may be translated as both “in addition” and “more”, in “18 nopți tropicale în plus față de intervalul 1971 – 2000” [18 tropical nights more as compared to the 1971 – 2000 time span], the appropriate choice here is “more”, underlining the idea of a comparative superiority, and not, as one student suggested, “in addition”, which may work in a context where the idea of accumulation is highlighted.

The instance of “unusual” as the equivalent of “meteo” quoted above, i.e. an English word with no connection to its Romanian counterpart, was not an isolated one. Making the same kind of error, one of the students considered “continuities” to be an equivalent for “scenarii” [scenarios], while another one used “normal” for “ca atare” [as such].

Word-for-word translations (calques) of Romanian phrases in cases where these were not acceptable in English were also errors that our corpus analysis pointed out in the area of vocabulary: e.g., “18 nopți tropicale *în plus*” was translated by one of the students as “18 tropical nights *in plus*”.

Words whose form was approximated most probably as a result of some but insufficient knowledge of the actual lexical items to be used also appeared as translation choices in our corpus: “valuation” was employed instead of “value” for “valoare” in “peste valoarea de 20 de grade Celsius” [above the 20 degrees Celsius value].

## 5. Conclusion and further considerations

Though it has offered only some examples of the difficulties that Romanian translation trainees may encounter when translating non-literary texts from Romanian into English, our analysis has hopefully demonstrated the usefulness of using CBTS methods in translator training: a clearer diagnosis of the challenges faced by the students may be reached and practical exercises may be designed to

address these challenges. In the present case study, by looking at the frequency of the equivalence choices that the group of translation trainees made, practical recommendations may be made regarding, for example, collocation options – at the lexical level, or the use of prepositions – at the grammatical level.

Using corpus methods to assess the quality of student translations can be correlated with further digital instruments useful to both teachers and researchers active in the TS field. First, what teachers can implement in their courses is offering access to or proposing digital resources for translation: digital linguistic databases (online corpora), online dictionaries based on parallel corpora, or machine translation platforms, whose functionality is supported by large linguistic databases. The motivational potential for using these instruments, on the students' side, is quite high, as in all cases when educational methods intersect with real-life interests (e.g., compare Google translation with classroom target texts corpus). They can also be of substantial help in the students' self-assessment of their work and of the progress they make, in that they play a role in supporting the learning process and improving the quality of the translation products. Another didactic strategy would be to integrate CBTS exercises in (especially) team work teaching scenarios. However, in this case, it is advisable that the students should have had previous minimum exposure to corpus linguistics (e.g. an introductory course, training sessions).

#### Acknowledgements

The corpus was processed with the help of the project ROGER team. ROGER is a corpus linguistics research project in progress at the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures of the West University of Timișoara, Romania, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (the PROMYS program).

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