

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO TRANSLATING MODAL VERBS. THE CASE OF *NEED*

Introduction

Modal verbs are usually problematic, especially when teaching or translating them. Palmer (1990: 4) highlights the necessity of differentiating the English modal verbs from other verbs (from the “primary auxiliaries”) based on at least 7 criteria: inversion with the subject, their negative form, ‘code’ (*He must listen and so must you.*), emphatic affirmation, lack of ‘s’ in the third person singular, lack of non-finite forms and lack of co-occurrence of modal verbs. The first four are coined by Huddleston (1976: 333) as the ‘nice’ properties, whereas the last three of them seem to be extremely important in teaching modal verbs. Palmer also notes that in terms of negation and tense they are highly idiosyncratic, which might be worth considering when translation is involved.

Consequently, grammar books dedicate separate chapters for the English modal verbs, as they do not work in very well when the English verb system is described. Functionally, in our view (Imre 2008), we can differentiate strong verb(s) (*be, am, are, is, was, were*), auxiliary verbs (*be, am, are, is, was, were; have, has, had; to do, does, did*), modal verbs (less than 20, but they can be subdivided), and weak verbs (which do not belong to any of the aforementioned ones). However, present and past participle forms should be considered as weak verbs and *will* serves as the auxiliary verb for future tenses. When a modal verb is coupled with any other type of verb, it simply takes over their function, as it ‘stronger’ than the strong, auxiliary or weak verbs.

This kind of introduction seems necessary from the point of view of translating the modal verbs, as they are part of the English tense system, offering either an epistemic or deontic (‘root,’ cf. Recski 2002) meaning. Lyons (1977: 792) regards epistemic modality as ‘subjective’

(‘concerned with matters of knowledge or belief,’ 1977: 793), to which Palmer (1990: 7) adds that deontic modality is also subjective; Lyons (1977: 823) describes deontic modality as “concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents.” Needless to say, we are interested in both types. Epistemic modals express a judgement about the truth of propositions, while with the help of deontic modals speakers give permission or lay obligations (Palmer 1990: 10).

Need is classified as a special subset of modals (Palmer), or even quasi-modal (Greere-Zdrengea 2000: 38). Strictly speaking, it belongs to dynamic necessity, which is neither epistemic nor deontic. However, our concern is all the possible translations of the English modal verbs in a particular language (Romanian and Hungarian in this case), as we are primarily interested whether it is worth saving into a database all the possible translations of *need*. Then we would like to test the sample database with the help of a very efficient translation environment, namely *memoQ*, in order to find out whether this facilitates a faster and more reliable translation overall.

Meanings of *need*

When we are interested in the meanings of *need* from the point of view of translation, we should investigate various forms, such as affirmative, negative, interrogative, negative-interrogative, reported speech, passive constructions, and also taking into account idiomatic expressions, stock phrases as well. As for the voice, Palmer draws the conclusion that deontic modals are voice-neutral.

Therefore, we will try to summarize in short the possible functions of *need* first. Anyway, since the advent of cognitive linguistics we are quite aware of the fact that there are no clear-cut categories (cf. Rosch, Brugman, Lakoff and Johnson) and Palmer also warns us that “the meanings of modals cannot be described in terms of wholly discrete categories,” as they “merge or fade into one another” (1990: 21).

Need is “only half within the modal system” (cf. Palmer 1990: 25), but the real problem is that it functions both as modal and weak verb. Based on the ‘nice’ properties, Palmer offers some samples (1990: 41):

MODAL	MAIN (WEAK)
I needn't read them in full. Nu trebuie să...(Ro) Nem kell/szükséges ... (Hu)	I don't need to read them in full. Nu trebuie să/ Nu e necesar să...(Ro) Nem kell/szükséges ... (Hu)
One need hardly ask. Nu cred că e necesar să...(Ro) Aligha szükséges...(Hu)	One needs to ask. Trebuie să... (Ro) ...kell...(Hu)

The examples above clearly show that *need* is a weak (main) verb when followed by *to* and a verb in infinitive, whereas the lack of 's' in the third person singular indicates that it is modal. *Need* is also modal when it is followed by another verb directly. To our great relief, from the point of view of translation it seems that there is no difference between weak and modal *need*, which is further supported by Palmer's sentences (1990: 128):

Need I say more? Do I need to say more?

Although there is a stylistic difference between the two sentences above, this does not appear in translation. The special meaning of *need to* – inner compulsion – is also noted by (Perkins 1983: 62, cited by Greere-Zdrengea 2000: 243).

The affirmative form of *need* is similar to *must*, although it indicates the requirements for a specific purpose or personal reasons (Palmer 1990: 129). Compared to *must*, Bădescu (1984: 427-428) observes that *need* is a convenient substitute, and she distinguishes in meaning non-modal *need* (regular) and modal *need*. The first one is translated as *e nevoie de*, *necesită*, whereas the latter is translated as *e(ste) obligat (să)*. Although this kind of differentiation may work well during language classes when different various shades of meaning are highlighted, they seem to be problematic when *trebuie* is used in translation, as this word refers to both necessity and obligation.

Consequently, the Romanian translation for *need* is basically *trebuie (să)*, *e nevoie să*, preserving the root of the verb in past (*a trebuit să*, *trebuia să*), future or negative (and interrogative) forms. At this point we are not interested what happens when the Romanian *trebuie* is translated into English, as *must*, *have to*, *need*, *had better* may all be correct, let alone the cases when *needn't have*, *shouldn't have*, *oughtn't have* are implied (*nu trebuia să fi*, *n-ar fi trebuit*, *nu era nevoie*, etc.). *Need* does not have

“morphologically past tense forms” (cf. Palmer 1990: 10, 44), it does not “occur in the past tense” (Greere – Zdrenghea 2000: 65), although we can express *need* in past. The past for *need* is easy in the case of non-modal, expressing ‘not necessary’, in which case is similar with *have to*:

I didn't go – I didn't need to. (Palmer 1990: 128)
 ...nu trebuia... (Ro)
 ...nem kellett... (Hu)

The modal *need* in past is similar with other modals in past (Imre 2010), followed by *have*, usually in negative form:

You needn't have done that (although you did.)
 ...n-ar fi trebuit să... (Ro)
 ...nem kellett volna... (Hu)

Quirk *et al.* (1972: 384) differentiate ‘auxiliary negation’ and ‘main verb negation.’ According to Palmer (1990: 34), “this can be misleading for formally it is the modal that is negated in both.” We support Palmer’s view, as we mentioned in the introduction that whenever a modal is combined with any other verb (except for, of course, another modal, as there is no co-occurrence), the modal takes over all the possible functions of the other verb. Palmer (1990: 38) distinguishes “negation of the modality and negation of the proposition.” *Needn't*, *don't have to* negate the modality or the lack of obligation, whereas the deontic *must* in negative (*mustn't*) negates the proposition (cf. Halliday’s ‘verbal crossing out,’ 1970: 333). Deontic *needn't* does not express permission, but “fills the gap by stating that there is no necessity” (Palmer 1990: 40). The idea of necessity expressed by *need* is expressed by all negative, interrogative and negative-interrogative forms, although the non-modal *need* is more likely to be used.

As for interrogation, Palmer clearly states that only the modality can be questioned. “Formally, interrogation has much in common with negation: not only are both ‘nice’ properties, but also, to a large extent the same modal forms are used for both” (Palmer 1990: 35, 41), but in the case of necessity modals “the situation is more complex,” as *need* in interrogation is hardly used (*Need I come tomorrow?*); Palmer states that it is more natural to ask:

Must I come tomorrow? (Palmer 1990: 78)

We do not want to discuss here all the three possibilities for *needn't* described by Palmer (1990: 119), as their translation overlap (*nu trebuie, nu e necesar* in Romanian, *nem kell, nem szükséges* in Hungarian), and Gălățeanu – Comișel (1982: 63) also highlights this lack of obligation.

According to Recski (2001: 112), *must* is more frequent in formal text types and we tend to believe that this is also the case with *need*. Thus the translatability of *need* is tested with the help of a translation environment (*MemoQ*) choosing fiction, more precisely Asimov's *Foundation*.

Our database and MemoQ

The possibility of faster and more accurate translation seems to be at hand since the appearance of translation environments. In our project we have been using *MemoQ* (version 4.5.29., cf. Imre 2010), for which detailed description can be found at www.kilgray.com. The basic idea is that if we feed its database with proper translations, we should be able to enhance productivity of translation varying from 10% (fiction) up to 70% in case of technical texts.

Being part of a larger project concerning modal verbs and the efficiency of translation environments, we have collected more than 1,000 samples of sentences containing modal verbs from Asimov's *Foundation*, available in English, Romanian and Hungarian. 40 sentences contained various forms of *need*, out of which we created a single document to be translated. We opened a new project in *MemoQ* translation environment (TE), to which this document was added. Then we have pre-translated all the major possible translations of *need* into Romanian and Hungarian and added them to the term base, trying to offer as various translations as possible.

The list below contains the pre-translated *need* into Romanian and Hungarian. The samples are taken from Bădescu [1], Palmer [2], Greere – Zdrenghia [3] and our own [4]:

English	Romanian	Hungarian
You need never do that. [2] He doesn't need to work so hard. [3]	nu e nevoie să nu trebuie să	nem kell nem szükséges
I need tell no one about it. [2]	nu e necesar să	fölösleges szükségtelen
He needs to make a lot of money. [2]	trebuie să	kell szükséges
This needs to be thought about. [2]	trebuie gândit	meg kell gondolni
must needs [1]	trebuie neapărat	mindenképpen meg kell
I need a new suit. [3]	nevoie de	szükségem van
You needn't have done that. [4]	nu trebuia să n-ar fi trebuit să	nem kellett volna szükségtelen volt
I didn't need to write to him. [3]	nu trebuia să	nem kellett
Your hair needed cutting [3]	trebuia ar fi trebuit avea nevoie de	le kellett
Your hair needs cutting. [4]	trebuie nevoie de	le kell
He needn't work so hard. [3]	nu-i necesar să	nem kell szükségtelen
I don't need to do that. [4] I don't need any money. [4]	nu-i nevoie să nu-i nevoie de nu trebuie să	nem kell szükségtelen fölösleges
I hardly need say how much... [3]	aproape că nu e nevoie să mai că nu e nevoie să	aligha szükséges nem kell különösebben

Results

After having added our pre-translations to the term base, we compared the results with the original Romanian and Hungarian editions. We would say that the results are encouraging as shown in the table below:

	EN	RO	HU
need	13	8	8
will need	4	3	3
would need	2	2	1
needs (verb)	1	0	0
needs (noun)	2	0	0
need be done/placed	2	1	1
is needed	1	0	0
(in) need of	3	0	0
there is no need for	4	2	0
need not	2	0	1
don't need	1	0	0
needn't	3	3	1
needed	2	2	1
didn't need	1	0	0
Total	41	22 (53,65%)	16 (39,02%)

The Romanian pre-translation was 53% compatible with the original translation, and this result may be further improved. First of all, in at least two cases there was no Romanian translation for a particular sentence containing *need*, and in a few other cases *trebuie* was used instead of *nevoie*, but they may be accepted as synonyms in those cases. However, there were a few literary solutions, such as *nu aveți motive de* instead of *nu e nevoie*, or the case of *needs*, which is a complete failure. First of all, we did not add to the database as a noun (*nevoie*, *necesitate*), and its verb sense was translated originally in both the Romanian and the Hungarian version (*impune*, *kíván*).

Even if the expression *there is no need for* was not added to the database initially, the Romanian pre-translation worked well, whereas the Hungarian was not successful at all. The case of *didn't need* is interesting; although it was added to the term base, the pre-translation could not detect it, as the string was interrupted by an adverb (*really*). To sum up, in 9 cases we were faced with either the freedom of translator

(*cred că e bine să, impune, n-am vreme de, vreau să, nu aveți motive să*) or the translator ignored to translate *need*. We have high hopes that by adding some expressions to the database (*in need of – necesită; There's no need for/to – nu-i nevoie de/să*) we could further improve the success of pre-translation, to which *need* as a singular/plural noun should be also added (*nevoi, necesitate, necesități*). The specific Romanian particles for conjugation (*am, ai, a, ale, avem, aveți, au*) should not be added to the term base, as in the long run they would prove unproductive. And it is worth mentioning that *need* was translated as *nevoie* in 23 instances out of 41, whereas *trebuie* was used 4 times and *necesar* only twice.

The Hungarian pre-translation of *need* was less successful, only 39% correct hits, although in many cases was similar to the Romanian. However, in case of *there is no need for* we found no correct Hungarian translation, and even if *needn't* was 100% pre-translated correctly into Romanian, there was only one correct hit in Hungarian (33%). Generally, we could observe that the freedom of translator is greater in Hungarian, and more synonyms come into picture which should be added to the term base as they come up. Here are some examples: *szorul, kíván, kellene, szükséglet, semmi oka, nincs értelme, hiányzik, ráfért volna, igényel, semmi szükség, nélkül meglesz*. Out of 41 cases 16 were translated as derived forms of *szükség* (need, Romanian *nevoie*) and 7 were translated as *kell* (need/have to, Romanian *trebuie*).

Conclusions

To conclude with, we can say that even if there are multiple possibilities to translate *need* 'in theory,' this variety is rather reduced 'in practice' for Romanian (mainly *nevoie*), but seems more true for Hungarian.

However, the results can be further analysed in case the text is formatted. For instance, in a previous article (Imre – Keresztesi 2011) it was mentioned that *must* was highlighted in red, so *mustn't* was not recognized by *memoQ* as a single unit until we removed the formatting tag. So when we created the document with all the sentences containing *need*, we have removed all the formatting tags, which should be added back if the Romanian or Hungarian translation also needs them, requiring extra work again.

We support Recski in stating that EFL teachers should start their description of *need* with the most common grammatical structures: affirmative, negative, future and past forms and a few expressions, such as *there is no need, in need of*. And we also believe that creating a database with *need* should also start here, which can be further completed by synonymous translations.

Translation environments act like constant reminders for consistency, thus quality assurance is less problematic. And – taking into account the present day tendency – there is no need to prove the importance of CAT-tools (cf. Imre 2010), as major translation agencies already take them for granted in the translation business, even if these tools take a lot of time to be mastered.

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Source texts

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