

The Use of Italics as Stylistic Devices Marking Information Focus in English Translations

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Abstract

Truss (2003: 147), in her ‘Zero Tolerance’ guide to punctuation warns readers that italics are “a confession of stylistic failure”. I would like to argue here that in English italics have a communicative function that is rather more complex and specific than Truss suggests: the typographical salience of a word may signal its informational salience; in other words, italics, can be used to reproduce in written form the focal stress that is conveyed prosodically in spoken English. Because they take the place of the tonic accent, their effect is reminiscent of spoken language and they are associated with a more informal and involved tone of language. The evidence supporting this hypothesis comes from a corpus of English translations by Margaret Jull Costa and Peter Bush and the varying frequency of italics in the texts suggests that their use is related to narrative style as well as to the stylistic preferences of each translator.

The corpus includes translations from two different languages: Spanish and Portuguese. In order to test whether the use of italics to mark information focus in the English translations is triggered by focus marking devices in the source texts, a parallel corpus consisting of the corresponding source texts is used. In Spanish and Portuguese, unlike in English, the preferred method for marking information focus is not tonic accent but constituent order (see, for example, Martínez-Caro 1999). The findings show that although the italics in English are, in many cases, compensating for marked constituent order in Spanish and Portuguese, this is not the only factor guiding the translator’s choice; which reinforces the previous hypothesis according to which the translator’s own stylistic preferences play an important role in the recreation of narrative style.

References

- Martínez Caro, Elena (1999) *Gramática del Discurso: Foco y Énfasis en Inglés y en Español*, Barcelona: PPU.
- Truss, Lynne (2003) *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, London: Profile Books.

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