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FEATURES OF TRANSLATING METADATA IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ELECTRONIC CATALOGUES

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When a user enters a query into the search bar of an electronic catalogue, they see a short record containing the title, author, year of publication, several keywords, and a line of annotation. This record constitutes metadata, that is, a concise description of a document that makes it possible to locate it among millions of others. In large English-language catalogues, such as WorldCat or the Library of Congress catalogue, hundreds of millions of such records are stored, and all of them are created in English. For a Ukrainian-speaking reader, access to these resources begins with translation; therefore, whether a person finds the required document often depends on the quality of that translation. Despite its obvious practical significance, the translation of metadata has not yet become a separate subject of attention in Ukrainian translation studies.

To understand the specifics of this type of translation, it is first necessary to clarify what exactly the translator works with. Metadata is not a text in the usual sense: it is neither an article, nor an annotation, nor an instruction. Rather, it is a short structured reference about a document that includes its title, author, year and place of publication, original language, keywords, and a brief description of the content. Each field is strictly limited in length and follows specific rules of completion in accordance with international bibliographic standards adopted in most libraries worldwide.

For the translator, this means a double responsibility. On the one hand, the content of each field must be conveyed accurately. On the other hand, its function must be preserved: a correctly translated record should operate in the search system in the same way as the original. If the translation is carried out without considering this function, the record will either not be found at all, or it will be found but not recognized. For this reason, the translation of metadata is a full-fledged translation task that combines linguistic accuracy with an understanding of the system in which the description functions.

Understanding this dual responsibility immediately raises a specific question: how does the language of catalogues differ from ordinary text? In fact, the differences are numerous. Descriptions in English-language catalogues have their own internal logic, which is unlike either literary language or the conventional academic style.

Document titles are often presented in reverse order: the general topic appears first, followed by clarification, for example, “History. Modern period. 20th century.” Annotations are extremely concise, often written in the passive voice and with almost no verbs. Keywords are arranged in chains where each element narrows the meaning of the previous one. Abbreviations such as ISBN, DOI, ed., rev. ed., and ill. are used as if self-explanatory and usually appear without any accompanying explanation.

Special attention should be given to the so-called “false friends” of catalogue language: words that have one meaning in everyday usage and a completely different one in a bibliographic context. The word *entry* here means not “entrance” but “record.” *Record* means not “achievement” but “a catalogue entry.” *Abstract* means not “abstract” but “a summary.” A translator who is unaware of these distinctions may make an error that appears entirely natural and therefore becomes both invisible and potentially dangerous.

Once the translator becomes aware of the specific features of catalogue language, another question arises: what should be done when there is no ready equivalent or when a literal translation produces an absurd result? Such cases are common in working with metadata, and each of them requires an individual solution.

The most acute problem concerns concepts that have no direct equivalent. For example, the expression *finding aid* refers to a detailed guide that helps users navigate an archival collection. Translating it literally as "search tool" would be meaningless, yet leaving it untranslated would make it unclear. The most appropriate solution in such cases is descriptive translation: for instance, "archival guide" or "guide to a collection," accompanied by a brief explanation at its first occurrence. This may be less convenient than a single word, but it is more accurate and more honest.

The rendering of geographical names and institutional names also requires particular attention. Official names of universities, libraries, and organizations in catalogues are presented in English, while in Ukrainian-language practice some of them have established official equivalents and others are traditionally transmitted through transliteration. For example, *Library of Congress* is translated as "Biblioteka Konhresu," whereas *British Library* in most Ukrainian-language sources remains untranslated. A translator must therefore verify each such case individually, relying on existing Ukrainian scholarly literature and the official publications of the institutions concerned.

Another issue involves replacing professional terminology with everyday vocabulary. The term *subject headings* means "subject headings," not simply "topics" or "themes." The difference may seem insignificant, but it determines whether a librarian searching by subject headings will actually find the record. In such situations, the most reliable reference point is Ukrainian bibliographic dictionaries and the catalogues of national libraries, which demonstrate how a particular term is already used in practice.

These difficulties become especially evident when examining real translations of bibliographic records in open catalogues. Analysis of existing materials provides not only grounds for criticism but also insight into what exactly goes wrong and why.

The most common error is the mechanical transfer of English structure. When a hierarchical subject heading is translated literally, word for word, the result may appear formally correct but does not function within the Ukrainian system: the record fails to correspond to the principles used to construct subject headings in domestic catalogues, and the search connection between them is lost. The text looks normal, yet the descriptive function is effectively destroyed.

Another widespread problem is terminological inconsistency. The same term in different records within the same catalogue may appear in several different translations depending on who translated it and when. For readers this creates confusion, but for library data exchange systems it becomes an even more serious issue: a computer does not recognize such records as related, duplicates them, and creates "noise" in the database that later becomes difficult to remove.

Interestingly, libraries with a developed practice of bilingual cataloguing, particularly university libraries in Canada and Switzerland where records are maintained simultaneously in several languages, have found a surprisingly simple solution. It does not involve new technology or a larger dictionary, but rather an internal agreement on how each field should be translated and the consistent adherence to this decision by everyone working with the catalogue. In this case, quality depends not so much on rules as on consistency.

This experience confirms a general conclusion: the main condition for high-quality metadata translation lies not only in knowledge of the language but also in understanding its purpose. A translation that does not take into account why the record exists and how it will be used remains merely a text and never becomes a tool.

The translation of metadata in English-language electronic catalogues therefore constitutes a distinct translation task with its own logic and its own pitfalls. The analysis shows that the main difficulties here are not linguistic but functional: the translator must not only find the correct word but also preserve the ability of the record to function within a search system. This requires an understanding of the bibliographic context, attention to established terminology, and, above all,

consistency in translation decisions. The practice of successful bilingual catalogues demonstrates that translation quality improves not through technology but through a conscious and systematic approach to the task. Further research in this area could focus on creating a practical bilingual reference guide for translators of bibliographic descriptions, which is currently lacking in Ukraine.

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