TACKLING NOMINAL CHAINS
IN A SPECIALIZED TRANSLATION CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Nominal chains are regarded as a feature of specialized discourse in English and their disambiguation as a challenge for translators and translation trainees. They occur in all types of specialized discourse and include legal terms, technical terms or institutional terms. In Czech the relations between the constituents need to be expressed more explicitly. The chapter draws on an experiment aiming to test how well translation trainees can decipher the relations between individual constituents of nominal chains and identify types of nominal chains most susceptible to wrong interpretation. Based on these results, this chapter discusses how the analysis of nominal chains may be supported in a specialized translation classroom and proposes a series of specific activities to the effect.

Keywords: nominal chains, specialized discourse, translation training, English, Czech

1. Introduction

It is a well-acknowledged fact that nominal chains (cf. Rogers 2015: 57; Gile 1995: 93; Knittlová 2010: 45–47) are an important feature of English specialized texts and discourse. In fact, Biber and Gray (2010: 17) have found that "virtually every sentence in a present-day written academic text illustrates the use of complex noun phrase constructions." The same is true for legal texts since "lawyers love noun chains" (Ward 2005: 74). Given such context, it is not surprising that our experience suggests that nominal chains pose substantial interpretation problems to specialized translation trainees. In fact, similar observations are made also in relation to other fields and language pairs, e.g. the language of medicine in

English-Polish comparison (cf. Pietrzak and Witkowski 2024: 336). Extracts from a translation assignment used by us in an economic translation class show just a few of the nominal chains that are a recurring challenge for trainees whenever the respective source text is assigned:

- In year 2008, Acer once again achieved *record-breaking revenue and profit figures*.
- According to *leading IT research firm, Gartner*, Acer ranked No. 3 for Total PCs …
- In 2009, we expect to boost our *notebook market share* by 2~3% from the previous year with netbooks playing a key role, and to maintain *healthy revenue and profit growths*.
- Acer, Gateway, eMachines and Packard Bell each have clear brand positioning by geography and customer segment, and with *differentiated product line design*.

Since we believe that prevention is better than cure, it is argued for a systematic introduction of specialized translation trainees to the structure and interpretation of nominal chains.

2. Nominal chains

Linguistically speaking, what is referred to as a nominal chain (a noun chain, a noun string, a noun group) is a type of a complex noun phrase (NP) with heavy premodification. According to Biber et al. (1999: 588), four structural types of premodification in English include general adjectives, *ed*-participial modifiers, *ing*-participial modifiers and nouns. For the purposes of this study, nominal chains will include series of three or more consecutive nouns, with all but the last functioning as adjectives as well as nominal chains where some of the premodifying components include adjectives. In fact, not all such nominal chains are equal in their nature. Linguists make a distinction between compounds vs. free noun-noun combinations, which is admittedly rather a cline than a dichotomy (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 589), quoting criteria such as stress or orthography as indications of category. Since this chapter adopts a more-translation oriented approach, the distinction will not be further pursued here. To describe the structure of the nominal chains in this study, we have opted for a simplified description (see Table 3). The description uses A for adjectives, N for nouns or noun phrases, the plus sign (+) for coordination and brackets () for complex modification of the nominal chain head.

The reason for the challenging interpretation of nominal chains is the variety of logical relations they may express. A detailed overview is given by Biber et al.

(1999: 590–591) with the types identified including, without limitation, composition (*metal seat*), purpose (*safety device*), content (*market report*), source (*Pentagon proposals*) or specialization (*Education Secretary*). It is necessary that translation trainees be aware of the variety of logical relations available when interpreting such nominal chains.

Since nominal chains can be "indefinitely complex" as argued by Quirk et al. (1985: 1238), they may also vary in their complexity. As observed by Biber et al. (1999: 598), "the number of possible logical relations dramatically increases with each additional premodifier." The aspects challenging for specialized translation trainees and thus relevant for this study include nominal chains with an embedded noun phrase, which may be marked by hyphenation (*annual soil-assessment competition*) or not (*United Nations Environment Programme)*. In the latter case, the addressee must resort to one of the interpretation techniques discussed below to arrive at the correct meaning. Another challenging category are coordinated premodifiers (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 600) such as *Health and safety arrangements*, *Labour and Liberal Democrats councillors*, *Tissue and cell culture technology*, where the scope of the coordinated components must be established.

3. Precision vs. concision dilemma

This dilemma involves the conflict between precision and concision, with precision and economy of expression being one of the reasons for stringing nouns. As Hyland and Jiang (2021: 256) note with respect to academic writing, noun strings "allow authors both to pack information into fewer words, and more importantly, to linguistically recognize everyday experience into new categories that can be further discussed and elaborated." If a great deal of information can be bundled into a single unit, it can be used as a subject or object in a sentence to say more about it. Williams (1990: 42) also mentions that the frequency of the term in the text is a factor to consider. He goes on to give an example arguing that repeating *medication maintenance level evaluation procedures* may be marginally better than repeating *procedures to evaluate ways to maintain levels of medication*. It is not surprising then that nominal chains are widely present in legal texts where they denote legal concepts or institutions, in technical texts for naming complex technical or scientific concepts and methods, and as convenient names for institutions.

Many good writing and plain language proponents suggest, rather strictly, that any unnecessary prepositional phrases be eliminated (e.g. Garner 2014: 165). Ironically though, Ward (2005: 74) notes that sometimes "we carry that good advice to an unhealthy extreme and attempt to "improve" a piece of writing by deleting all prepositions and converting the objects of prepositional phrases into

noun-adjectives." In other words, nominal chains are often a result of our attempt at being concise. It is undoubtedly true that the use of a nominal chain, possibly combined with other means of condensation, makes an expression more concise. For example, *Agreement to Open an Account for Customers of the Online Shop of Electrolux* may be expressed as *Electrolux E-Customer Account Agreement*, thus reducing the number of words from 13 to 4. The question remains, however, whether such an expression is also more precise, or whether the precision is possibly put at stake. Biber et al. (1999: 588) admit that "re-phrasing of noun premodifiers is not at all straightforward because noun+noun sequences can represent many different meanings with no overt indication of which meaning is intended in any given case." Gile (1995: 93) uses the example of a nominal chain *query and error handling* to show the number of interpretations the chain may have (*queries and handling of errors, handling of queries and handling of errors, handling of queries + errors*). That is why the issue of nominal chains is widely addressed by proponents of plain language. For example, Wydick (2005: 71) coins the term "noun chain reader strangulation problems" which describes the phenomenon when reader thinks that he or she has hit a noun while still dealing with adjectives (Garner 2003: 557). Others refer to noun plague (Ward 2005) or noun fatigue (Guthrie 2017). Yet another argument against their use is the higher processing effort they require to decode (Biber and Gray 2013) since the reader needs to mentally convert each noun into an adjective until the final noun is reached, which makes the comprehension process slower. Therefore, almost all plain language handbooks recommend removing or at least reducing noun chains as shown in the following examples (see Table 1), but, whenever possible, not only by means of prepositional phrases, but also including a variety of verb forms. It is obvious at first sight that the recommended phrasing is indeed less concise.

Table 1. Non-recommended vs. recommended formulations

Don't say	Say
Underground mine worker safety protection procedures development	Developing procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines
Draft laboratory animal rights protection regulations	Draft regulations to protect the rights of laboratory animals
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's automobile seat belt interlock rule	The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's interlock rule applies to automotive seat belts

When it comes to the interpretation of nominal chains, we distinguish three layers: structural interpretation, semantic interpretation and interpretation which requires extralinguistic knowledge. Each layer is illustrated below.

− Structural interpretation: *basketball game ticket price increase*. The example is a rather straightforward nominal chain with the head at the final position and gradual modification of the components: [[[[*basketball game*] *ticket*] *price*] *increase*].

− Semantic interpretation: *superfluous hair remover* and *efficient hair remover*. While structure-wise, the adjectives could premodify either *hair* or *remover* in both phrases, semantically the following interpretations are the only ones available:
  remover of superfluous hair
  efficient remover of hair.

− Last but not least, in some cases the knowledge of the structure and semantics does not suffice to correctly decipher a nominal chain: *European Community agriculture and trade ministers*. In this nominal chain, it is necessary to know whether agriculture and trade are combined in one ministry in individual EC countries, or whether each area has its own ministry. In practical terms, it makes a difference whether a meeting room is needed for fifteen or thirty people, or a number in between.

4. Research

In order to gain more insight into the sources of difficulties trainee translators face when translating nominal chains, we prepared an assignment for students enrolled in two one-semester specialized translation courses. In both courses, students translate predominantly from English (L2) into Czech (L1). One of the courses deals with translating texts from the fields of economy, law, and humanities, the other focuses on technical texts in the narrow sense (electronics, IT, automotive, power generation). The courses are primarily aimed at students of the English for Translators and Interpreters programme at the Department of English of American Studies, Palacký University Olomouc, but also students of English Philology programme of the same department may enrol. Both programmes include linguistic courses of morphology and syntax, which will be also reflected on in the discussion below. Altogether, 50 students of the two translation courses participated in the research on a voluntary basis in compliance with the institutional research ethics policies.

The assignment consisted of 18 nominal chains manually selected by the authors from authentic sources to account for different topic groups as well as structures (see Table 3). The selected groups of nominal chains are consistent with the content of the translation courses. Admittedly, the selection was not an easy task as we wanted to achieve a diversity of contexts within each topic group and at the same time a reasonable level of subject-matter complexity for an undergraduate student.

Each nominal chain was presented to the students in a sentential context to allow a better grasp of its meaning. The assignment consisted of two tasks: a) to reformulate each nominal chain structurally to show the relations of its individual components by means of prepositional phrases and/or dependent clauses, and b) to translate the nominal chain into Czech. Since the goal of the tasks was to provide evidence whether the students analysed individual nominal chains correctly or not, it was explicitly stated in the task description that there was no need for an extensive (dictionary- or Internet-based) research to find translation equivalents which were standardized or established in use. The assignment was completed in an in-class controlled environment with the time limit of 40 minutes. To make the tasks clear, an example nominal chain was provided to the students together with two possible reformulations and a translation equivalent (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample analysis given to the students

Reformulate and translate the nominal chain in bold	Reformulation	Translation
A team of researchers in South Korea created a passive sweat collection device that is inspired by cactus spines.	passive device for sweat collection / passive device that collects sweat	pasivní zařízení pro odvádění potu

The solutions obtained from the students were assessed jointly by the authors and the final assessment reflects the consensus between them. We paid attention primarily to the reformulation task. Each reformulation was assessed using one of the following five labels:

1. *correct* – the reformulation provides clear evidence that the student understands the relations of the individual components;
2. *partial* – the reformulation shows the relations only between some of the components leaving the others unclear (e.g. the nominal chain *Employees' Compensation Appeals Board* reformulated as *Board for Employees' Compensation Appeals* was assessed as partial since the relation among the components *Employees' Compensation Appeals* remains unformulated);
3. *incorrect* – the relations were misunderstood (e.g. the nominal chain *residual limb soft tissue* reformulated as *residual soft tissue of the limbs* was assessed as incorrect since the phrase *residual limb* was incorrectly split);
4. s*emantic error* – the reformulation suggests that the meaning of the nominal chain (or a part of it) was misinterpreted (e.g. the nominal chain *Animals in Science Committee* reformulated as *Committee of Animals in Science* was assessed as semantic error since the reformulation shifts the intended meaning);
5. *missing* – there was no reformulation provided.

As for the translation tasks, we examined only equivalents for those nominal chains that had been assessed as reformulated correctly in the previous task. The rationale behind this decision, which deliberately ignores nominal chains that may have been translated correctly but their reformulation was defective, is that the correct translation is most likely a matter of intuition or coincidence rather than a proof of understanding the nominal chain in terms of its structure and meaning. For the assessment of translations, the following five labels were used:

1. *correct* – the translation clearly reflects the relations of the components;
2. *partial* – the translation covers only some component relations while others are not reflected;
3. *simplified* – the translation does not contain all the components of the original nominal chain;
4. *semantic error* – the translation was a case of meaning misinterpretation;
5. *missing* – there was no translation provided.

Table 3 lists all the nominal chains in their respective topic groups together with their simplified syntactic analyses designed for the purpose of this chapter.

Table 3. List of nominal chains used in the assignment

Topic group	Multi-word term	Analysis
Technical	universal gas supply unit	A(N)N
	residual limb soft tissue	(N)N
	domestic oil and gas production	A(N+N)N
	coronavirus contact tracing apps plan	(N(N(N(N)))
	available soil water holding capacity	A(N)N
	center of gravity measurement technique	(N)N
Legal	joint custody parental arrangements	(N)N
	university-level appeals and institutional disciplinary processes	N+N
	statutory redundancy notice period	A(N)N
	general housing benefit entitlement check	A(N)N
	framework customer service subcontractor agreement	N(N)N
	proceeds of crime confiscation order	(N)N
Institutional	Water Services Regulation Authority	(N)N
	Employees Compensation Appeals Board	(N)N
	Financial Markets Regulatory Agency	(N)N
	Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency	(N+N)N
	Animals in Science Committee	(N)N
	International Food Protection Training Institute	A(N)N

5. Results

The overall performance of the students can be seen in Figure 1. Correct analyses of at least half of the nominal chains (i.e. at least 9, the boundary is marked by the vertical dashed line in the graph) were provided by 24 students while 26 students analysed correctly less than half of the nominal chains. None of the students analysed correctly all the nominal chains with the best result being 14 correctly analysed nominal chains provided by 5 students. These overall results support the claims and earlier observations concerning the difficulties connected with deciphering nominal chains in general.

As for the individual topics (technical, legal, and institutional), there were 300 student analyses assessed in each topic group (6 nominal chains were analysed by 50 students). The most challenging proved the legal nominal chains (altogether only 97 correct analyses) followed by technical and institutional nominal chains (174 and 176 correct analyses respectively).
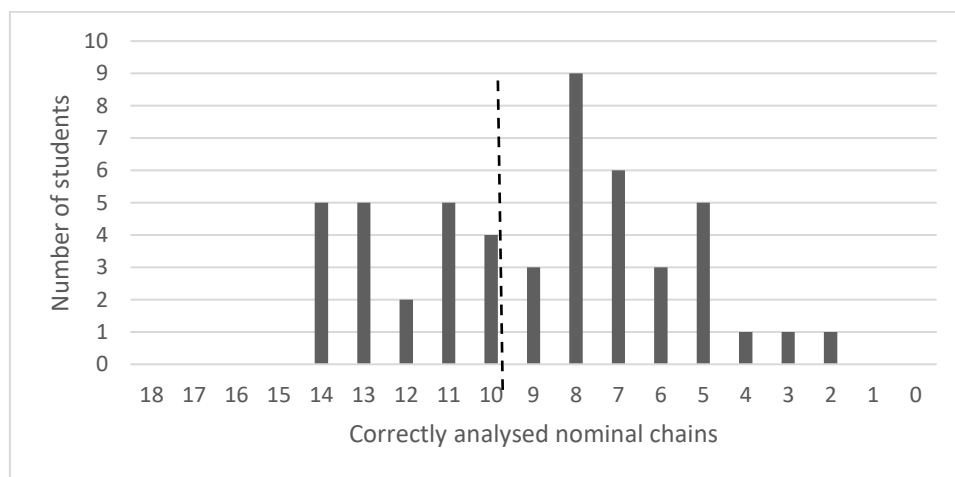

Figure 1. Overall performance of the students – the number of students who correctly analysed a given number of nominal chains

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Table 4 below gives a more detailed picture of individual nominal chains which proved most challenging together with their topic group and simplified syntactic structure. The horizontal dashed line in the table marks the boundary above which at least half of the students had difficulties with analysing individual

nominal chains (i.e. less than 25 correct analyses) which yields ten nominal chains (numbered (1)–(10) for further reference). All six legal nominal chains can be found in this list. As for the remaining two topic groups, there are two technical and two institutional nominal chains, one of them being the most challenging of all. More detailed presentations of these nominal chains are given below.

Table 4. Nominal chains sorted by the number of correct analyses in the ascending order. The dashed line in the table marks the boundary above which less than half of the students provided correct analyses.

Nominal chain	Structure	Correct	Partial	Incorrect	Semantic Error	Missing
(1) Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency	(N+N)N	5	13	32	0	0
(2) framework customer service subcontractor agreement	N(N)N	6	13	24	1	6
(3) available soil water holding capacity	A(N)N	9	11	28	0	2
(4) general housing benefit entitlement check	A(N)N	14	7	26	3	0
(5) statutory redundancy notice period	A(N)N	14	10	20	4	2
(6) university-level appeals and institutional disciplinary processes	N+N	18	7	19	3	3
(7) Employees' Compensation Appeals Board	(N)N	18	21	10	0	1
(8) residual limb soft tissue	(N)N	21	0	28	0	1
(9) proceeds of crime confiscation order	(N)N	21	3	12	9	5
(10) joint custody parental arrangements	(N)N	24	2	17	5	2
coronavirus contact tracing apps plan	(N(N(N(N))))	25	19	3	3	0
International Food Protection Training Institute	A(N)N	29	8	10	2	1
center of gravity measurement technique	(N)N	37	3	9	0	1
universal gas supply unit	A(N)N	40	4	5	1	0

Animals in Science Committee	(N)N	40	0	3	7	0
Water Services Regulation Authority	(N)N	41	4	5	0	0
domestic oil and gas production	A(N+N)N	42	0	7	0	1
Financial Markets Regulatory Agency	(N)N	43	1	6	0	0

The most challenging nominal chain in the research was (1) *Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency*. The typical error rested in considering both *Driver* and *Vehicle* as premodifiers of *Standards*, as shown in this example reformulation: *Agency for Standards of Drivers and Vehicles*. Nevertheless, as the description of the Agency on the website of the UK government suggests, there are in reality no standards imposed on drivers, only on vehicles.[1] Therefore, a correct reformulation should read: *Agency for Drivers and Standards of Vehicles*. The nominal chain cannot be interpreted correctly without this piece of extralinguistic knowledge.

The following four nominal chains require not only proper structural, but mainly semantic analyses to identify individual components and reflect on them in the reformulations:

(2) framework customer service subcontractor agreement – *framework agreement + customer service + subcontractor – framework agreement on subcontracting services for customers*

(3) available soil water holding capacity – *available capacity + soil + water + hold – available capacity of soil to hold water*

(4) general housing benefit entitlement check – *general check + housing benefit + entitlement – general check of entitlement to housing benefit*

(5) statutory redundancy notice period – *statutory + redundancy + notice period – notice period defined by statute in case of redundancy*

Majority of incorrect or partial reformulations in nominal chains (2)–(5) did not reflect on the "enveloping" components *framework agreement*, *available capacity*, and *general check* and attributed the premodifiers *framework*, *available*, and *general* to other components. Furthermore, in (3), some students considered *soil water* as a component since it does exist as an independent term in the same way as *customer service* in (2) and *housing benefit* in (4). In this case, however, the semantics of the whole nominal chain restricts such interpretation since there would be no specification of what actually holds soil water. Nominal chain (5) is slightly different because the "envelope" consists of the adjective *statutory* and the component *notice period*. Some students attributed the adjective *statutory*

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[1]   https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/driver-and-vehicle-standards-agency/about

incorrectly to *redundancy* and reformulated the nominal chain as *notice period of statutory redundancy*.

One of the longest terms in the research, (6) *university-level appeals and institutional disciplinary processes*, is actually composed of two coordinated nominal phrases which is signalled by the plural of both *appeals* and *processes*. Also, as the texts concerning this topic on the websites of several universities show,[2] there are typically some disciplinary procedures and sanctions described as the first stage and the possibility to appeal in case of challenge as a separate (following) stage. Students frequently attributed the premodifier *university-level* to both *appeals* and *disciplinary processes*: *appeals and institutional disciplinary processes on university-level*. A more fitting reformulation should be: *appeals at the level of the university and disciplinary processes of institutions*.

The remaining four nominal chains under focus share the structure of a two-word component premodified by another two-word component:

(7) Employees' Compensation Appeals Board – *Employees' Compensation + Appeals Board – board of appeals concerning compensation of employees*
(8) residual limb soft tissue – *residual limb + soft tissue – soft tissue of residual limb*
(9) proceeds of crime confiscation order – *proceeds of crime + confiscation order – order for confiscation of proceeds from a crime*
(10) joint custody parental arrangements – *joint custody + parental arrangements – parental arrangements between parents on joint custody*

As for nominal chain (7), students frequently provided only partial reformulations (21 cases) while in fact only 10 more were assessed as incorrect. A typical example of such partial reformulation is this: *board for compensation appeals of employees* which does not show the role of the word *compensation*. The phrase *compensation appeals* does not constitute a component of its own. In nominal chain (8) most students recognized *soft tissue* as a component, but in some cases attributed the adjective *residual* to it (*residual soft tissues of a limb*) instead of treating is as a part of another component *residual limb*. The correct analysis can be based on skimming through abstracts of relevant medical articles where the two components of the nominal chain are used separately (e.g. "the soft tissues of residual limbs following lower-limb amputation are vulnerable to damage"[3]).

The nominal chain in (9) is specific as it contains a preposition which might have led the students to treat the component *proceeds* separately from the rest

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providing reformulations such as: *proceeds of order for crime confiscation*. In addition, the analyses of this nominal chain were assessed as showing semantic misinterpretation in the largest number of cases of all the nominal chains used in the research. The students misinterpreted the word *proceeds* as *proceedings* perhaps because of the "interfering" term *criminal proceedings* which again shows that structural and semantic interpretation must be accompanied by extralinguistic knowledge. The final nominal chain (10) presented here is similar to (8) in having a separate component *joint custody* which is accompanied by a more loosely connected phrase *parental agreements*. In some cases of incorrect reformulations, students did not recognize this and provided solutions like *arrangement of joint parental custody*.

For translator training purposes, the study primarily aimed to find out what contributes to the difficulties in nominal chain interpretation. In addition, we wanted to exploit the fact that our translation programme is embedded within the Department of English and American Studies, i.e. a language and literature department, our students are introduced to the study of their structure and the various functions of the components in the more theoretically-oriented linguistic courses on morphology and syntax. Therefore, the secondary aim of the study was to investigate whether attending such courses contributes to the students´ ability to tackle nominal chains successfully. Incidentally, this was possible due to nearly equal representation of students who self-reported to have attended at least one such course (28 out of the 50 students taking part in our research) and those who have not (22 students). For the purpose of the following statistical analyses, the former group of students is referred to as the experimental group and the latter group served as the control group. The hypothesis to test was that students who had attended morphology and/or syntax courses would perform overall better, i.e. the number of correctly analysed nominal chains referred to as the score would be significantly higher for the experimental group when compared to the control group.

The statistical analyses were performed in R (R Core Team 2022; Wickham 2016). Recall that the scores could range between 0 and 18 (see Table 3) and were always whole numbers. Figure 2 displays a dot plot of the raw counts of the students' scores split by group. It can be seen that the distributions of scores overlap considerably between groups. To assess whether the scores differed reliably as a function of group, the data were fitted to a Poisson regression model. Figure 3 shows the predicted values. The analyses revealed that whereas the control group scores (modelled as the intercept) were reliably higher than 0 (log estimate: 2.232, $SE = 0.070$, $z = 31.957$, $p < 0.0001$), the scores of the experimental group were not found to be reliably different from those of the control group (log difference: -0.075, $SE = 0.095$, $z = -0.792$, $p = 0.428$). To conclude, we did not find any reliable difference between the resulting scores

of the students who had attended morphology and/or syntax courses and the students who had not attended any of these courses. However, it should be noted that given the number of students in each of the groups, the results are not generalizable.
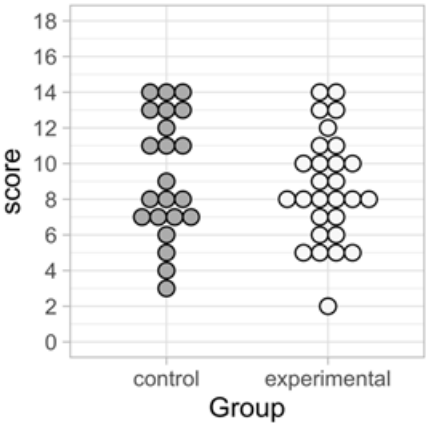

Figure 2. A dot plot showing the counts of students' scores split by Group
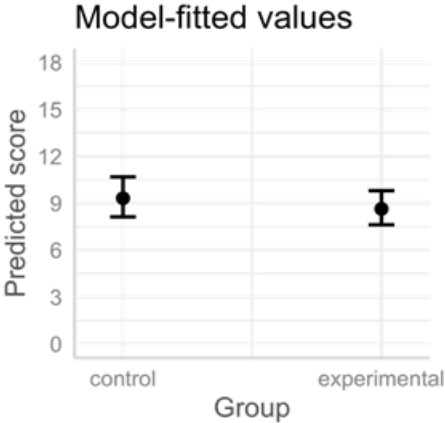
Figure 3. Model-predicted values of score for each group. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

6. Classroom application

The study has shown that nominal chains do constitute a challenge for translation trainees, which warrants their inclusion in a specialized translation curriculum. Therefore, this section will present a number of exercises that may be employed in a specialized translation classroom to raise trainees' awareness of the issue. In addition to the exercises presented below, the nominal chains used in the research also lend themselves to classroom exploitation thanks to their teaching potential, and trainers are encouraged to develop activities that will fit their specific training contexts.

Table 5. Exercise 1: Odd one out

Go over the following contract titles in the form of nominal chains and choose the odd one out. Give reasons for your decision.
– Master Services Agreement – Master Sale of Good Agreement – Master License and Software Agreement – Master Ownership Agreement – Master Recording Split Agreement

Exercise 1 (Table 5) is designed specifically for a legal translation classroom to make trainees aware of the interpretative challenges involved in general adjectives used as the initial constituent of a nominal chain. In four of the contract titles in this exercise, *master* is to premodify *agreement*. In the odd one out, it is a part of a terminological unit *master recording*. The exercise may also be exploited to discuss the content of such agreements. The expectations are that whenever trainees see similar nominal chains in the future, possibly with other adjectives (*general, framework*), they will not automatically opt for the "enveloped" interpretation, but rather test, and eliminate, as the case may be, other options.

Table 6: Exercise 2: Gap-fill

Complete the sentences below with the following words. What is the difference between the phrases?
football, drinking, court, landlord
− The effect of a domestic _____ banning order is to prohibit entry to any premises for the purpose of attending any prescribed football match.
− Laura was the first person to be given a nationwide _____ Banning Order after 27 convictions for alcohol-related offences.
− Information about a person's ban (either a police banning notice, a _____ banning order or a special bail condition) will be linked into ID scanners in licensed venues to enhance enforcement.
− Camden Council has obtained London's first rogue _____ banning order against a man who repeatedly placed tenants' lives at risk through letting unsafe housing.

The objective of Exercise 2 (Table 6) is to address different semantic relations between the head of the nominal chain and the premodifier. It is suggested that the exercise is used as a follow-up after discussing examples such *oil filter* and *client review*, which may have two different interpretations, and thus two translations into Czech. *Oil filter* may be interpreted either as (i) a device used to filter oil, or (ii) a device using oil to filter other substances. *Client review* may mean (i) a review provided by a client, or (ii) a review of a client. Specifically, Exercise 2 uses four cases of *banning order* premodified by different nouns, which, however, show different semantic relations. In one case (*court*), the premodifier specifies who issued the order; in another (*landlord*), it specifies the addressee of the banning other. In the remaining two cases, the premodifying constituent refers to the activity that is banned (*drinking)* or to which the ban is related (*football*). Not only does this exercise tackle the interpretative challenges, it should also make trainees aware of potential ambiguity that may be introduced by using nominal chains when translating into English.

Table 7: Exercise 3: Unscrambling

Unscramble the words to make as many meaningful legal terms as possible.
− criminal check enhanced record
− community settlement property agreement
− eviction section 21' notice
− copyright remedies infringement
− offences disqualification director
− refugee medical period eligibility extension assistance
− restriction groundwater clause use

Finally, Exercise 3 (Table 7) is slightly more playful as trainees are presented with nominal chains whose constituents are scrambled, and are asked to think of nominal chains that may be created with those words; in some cases, it may be more than one meaningful chain. The exercises are meant as a complementary activity for specialized translation training and may be used as a warm-up or even homework.

7. Conclusions

As mentioned above, nominal chains do present a challenge for specialized translation trainees. Comparatively, legal terms tend to be more difficult irrespective of their structure, which may be explained by the lack of familiarity of students with law in general, which is an issue attested by a number of authors (Way 2016; Kościałkowska-Okońska 2016). That is also why the exercises in the preceding section mostly involved legal terms. On the contrary, institutional terms were the least challenging. The reason may be that students are often able to imagine what the respective institution does, or may be familiar with its counterpart in Czech.

Structure-wise, a premodifying adjective or a coordinated structure within the nominal chain are prone to misinterpretations. It has also been found that students faced issues with assessing the termhood of individual components. In other words, they failed to recognize that a specific component constituted a term in itself and did not analyse the components as a single unit.

To conclude, it is a truism that nominal chains are encountered by (trainee) translators regularly even though their usage is not recommended by many. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of trainees and present them with various structures and solutions and the pitfalls they may entail. The more so that attending theoretical morphology and syntax classes does not seem to provide, as far as we can tell from our data, the students with much advantage when it comes to the interpretation and translation of nominal chains, and more practice is needed. In line with the step-by-step approach to (legal) translation training

promoted by Klabal (2024), it is argued that when troublesome phenomena are addressed systematically, even in isolation, students may develop transferable competences to deal with them more effectively in the future. We believe that this also applies to nominal chains.

More specifically, training should address both the reception and the production component. On the reception side, it is necessary to make trainees aware of the interpretation/disambiguation issues of some nominal chains. Thus, they will be aware of the fact that nominal chains should not be taken at face value. On the production side, trainees must be aware of the risks that using a nominal chain in translation into English may entail, especially in contexts where translation into L2 is widely used, which is the case of the Czech–English market (for the reasons see Duběda et al. 2018). Students should be introduced to alternatives to long nominal chains, e.g. the strategies for breaking them up discussed by Ward (2015: 74), as well as the pros and cons of their use, e.g. in the titles of laws and regulations or contracts, where they are typically encountered in authentic English texts, so that they are well equipped to make informed decisions.

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