Difficulties in Translation from English into French

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to investigate in detail the main difficulties encountered when translating from English into French. The article intends to explore the principal problems that arise in the translation of texts from English to French, centralizing on grammatical divergences, lexical differences, idiomatic expressions, cultural words and stylistic difficulties. More specifically, the following issues will be discussed: structural and grammatical deviations, lexical categories and particularly the so-called "false friends", idiomatic language, cultural references, stylistic restrictions as well as translation examples from the pratique of translation. Through this analysis, the essay leads to the conclusion that quality translation requires not only bilingual competence but also bicultural knowledge and, above all, a significant consideration of context in the translation process.

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INTRODUCTION

The translation phenomenon has been a central issue of both Linguistics and Cultural Studies for many decades. Far from being a simple transfer of linguistic signs between languages, translation makes up a complex procedure of negotiation of meaning, message, form and cultural context. Translation is far more than a linguistic operation; it is a cross-cultural act that requires the development on the translator's linguistic and cultural competence.

English and French, despite sharing common lexical roots since they both belong to the Indo-European language family, have important divergences that make up a real challenge for the professional translator. Thus, the translation process between these two languages bears not only linguistic difficulties but also cultural, political, and ideological challenges. In particular, these two languages differ significantly in grammar, vocabulary, and stylistic conventions. Consequently, translating between the two is not a simple process of word replacement but rather a complicated negotiation of meaning, form and cultural reality.

Catford (1965) and Nida (1964) lay emphasis on the concept of "equivalence", a concept that still remains the most challenging aspect of translation. As Catford (1965) observes, translation involves the replacement of textual material in one language (the source language) with equivalent material in another (the target language). However, the concept of equivalence is quite problematic: there are many types of equivalence such as formal, functional, semantic, or cultural, and in many cases, there is total lack of equivalence. Nida (1964) makes the distinction between formal equivalence, which focuses on the form and content of the original text, and dynamic equivalence, which lays emphasis on the effect on the target audience. When translating from English into French, this tension becomes striking, as translators must constantly try to achieve both fidelity to the source text and naturalness in the target language.

Structural and Grammatical Differences

Although both English and French follow a Subject–Verb–Object order, the French language demonstrates stricter rules of agreement. Adjectives must agree with nouns in gender and number (un homme intéressant vs. une nouvelle intéressante), while past participles may call for agreement depending on auxiliary verbs (les cartes qu'il a écrites). On the contrary, the English language does not have such constraints, which means that translators must restructure sentences from English into French in order to produce a text that will respect the rules of French grammar.

Verb tense and aspect make up another area of deviation. The English tense system incorporates simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive aspects. On the other hand, French does not possess a progressive aspect. The English progressive aspect (I am reading) does not correspond to a direct equivalent in French. In many contexts, translators prefer the simple present (Je lis), while in others, they choose the expression "être en train de" (Je suis en train de lire) depending on the context (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958).

The English present perfect tense presents also some problems. For instance, "I have lived here for ten years" translates into French as "J'habite ici depuis dix ans" where the verb tense differs: English makes use of the present perfect, whereas French uses the present tense. In such cases, the use of the literal translation technique can result in grammatically correct, yet, stylistically improper sentences, obliging translators to choose contextual usage over strict equivalence.

Another area that entails a significant challenge regards the use of English modals (can, may, must, should, might) which do not transfer directly into French equivalents. The English "must" may correspond to "devoir" "falloir" or to periphrastic expressions depending on context. Similarly, the modal "can" might translate into "pouvoir" or into other constructions expressing either permission or ability. The translator must make the right choice of modal in translating from English to French by prioritizing naturalness in French rather than achieving literal equivalence.

Lexical Choices and the case of False Friends

One of the most problematic areas in English-French translation lies in the phenomenon of false friends. While English and French share a significant number of lexical items that have the same form due to centuries of contact, many of these words have differences in meaning. The lexical category of false friends can lead to the errors of mistranslation and eventually can mislead the target reader. Some examples of false friends include:

- Actual (English: "real") vs. actuel (French: "current").

- Library (English: "bibliothèque") vs. librairie (French: "bookshop").

- Assist (English: "help") vs. assister à (French: "to attend").

- Sensible (English: logical") vs. sensible (French: "sensitive")

Another lexical challenge comes from the dynamic development of vocabulary in English in domains such as technology, business and popular culture, for which there are not equivalent terms in French. Terms such as software, smartphone or marketing are translated into French either through the technique of direct borrowing (le marketing) or through official neologisms ("logiciel" for "software"). The French academy often resists to the use of Anglicisms, yet in the practice of translation many English terms have become naturalized. Translators face the dilemma between fidelity to source terminology and adherence to French linguistic norms, a choice that depends on political and cultural factors, as well (Baker, 2011).

The use of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions make up another obstacle to accurate translation. Idioms are highly connected to the cultural and metaphorical use of language and rarely have direct equivalents. For example, the English phrase "It's raining cats and dogs" cannot be translated literally into French without producing nonsense. Instead, the idiomatic equivalent is Il pleut des cordes. This problem is closely related to Nida's (1964) distinction between formal equivalence, which preserves linguistic form, and dynamic equivalence, which aims at reproducing meaning and effect in the target language. In translating idiomatic expressions, dynamic equivalence is often the only possible solution.

Idiomatic language traditionally resists to literal translation. Idioms are culture-bound, have metaphorical meaning and cannot be understood through the analysis of their component words. For instance:

- It's raining cats and dogs → Il pleut des cordes.

- Kick the bucket → Passer l'arme à gauche.

- To call it a day → Arrêter pour aujourd'hui.

The translation of idiomatic language requires not only knowledge of equivalent expressions but mainly the ability to transfer function and effect. Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence (1964) is very useful in translating idiomatic language: the translator must prioritize the communicative effect on the target readership rather than adhere to structural fidelity. Additionally, idioms often shift registers between English and French. While the expression "spill the beans" is colloquial in English, the French equivalent expression "vendre la mèche" bears slightly different connotations and such fine differences require careful contextual consideration.

Cultural References

Translation is not limited to transferring a language, it also entails the transfer of culture. English texts contain cultural references such as humor, historical events or social practices that do not comply with French audiences. For example, references to American sports such as baseball or to British institutions such as the "House of Commons" require translation techniques such as adaptation, explanation, or even substitution in order to maintain intelligibility in French. In addition, translators must choose between the methods of "foreignization" which means actually retaining the cultural references of the source text to the target text and "domestication" which means adapting the cultural references of the source text to the cultural references of the target language.

Humor, in particular, presents significant challenges as it contains elements such as wordplay, irony, or cultural words that may not be easily translatable. In such cases, translators must either find a creative equivalent expression, rewrite the joke or even provide explanatory notes. Generally, translators must decide whether to preserve the foreignness of the source text or to domesticate it for the French target reader (Bassnett, 2014).

Cultural words referring to organizations, institutions, traditions or historical facts entail additional difficulties. Translators must

choose between the techniques of retention (foreignization), adaptation (domestication) or the technique of explanatory paraphrase.

English and French differ also in politeness regularities. The English pronoun "you" bears no distinction of degree of formality, while French makes the crucial distinction between "tu" (informal) and "vous" (formal). The tu/vous distinction calls for careful contextual interpretation. For instance, in customer service contexts, the use of "vous" is standard, while in dialogues between friends, "tu" is appropriate. The error of mistranslation may cause negative connotations of disrespect toward the target culture or exceed formality.

Stylistic and Pragmatic Considerations

English prose has the tendency to prefer brevity and clarity, particularly in academic and journalistic discourse and, thus, sentences are often short and to the point. French, on the other hand, favors a more complicated phrase construction, by using longer sentences and rhetorical devices. Consequently, translators must reorganize English texts in order to meet French stylistic conventions without changing meaning and without causing misunderstanding. In translating Ernest Hemingway's minimalist prose into French, the translator will face difficulties. In English, his short sentences and plain language create a sense of immediacy but when translated into French this approach appears to be oversimplistic.

The style also creates difficulties to the translator. The casual, colloquial style prevailing in English media and advertising campaigns may seem too informal in French translation. Similarly, the formal French style may seem strict to English readers. Translators must therefore try to achieve balance regarding stylistic norms in order to produce a text that resonates with the target audience. The translator needs to interpret appropriately the relationship among speakers in order to make the right choice, a decision that will significantly influence tone and meaning, as well. For instance, a New York Times article translated into Le Monde newspaper may need to undergo into important adaptation since Anglophone journalism often employs short headlines, whereas French headlines usually are longer and more explanatory.

Technical manuals also present many challenges in translation. English technical writing employs imperative structures ("Press the button"), while French uses infinitives ("Appuyer sur le bouton"). Thus, the translator must adapt not only linguistic units but also textual norms and conventions used to a specific technical domain.

Conclusions and Discussion

The translation of texts from English to French entails certain difficulties that arise from grammatical, lexical, idiomatic, cultural and stylistic differences between the two languages. These challenges show that translation does not make up a mechanical act but rather a form of intercultural act that calls for interpretative abilities, cultural literacy, and, above all, stylistic awareness. According to translation theorists, fidelity to meaning must be in accordance with readability and naturalness in the target language. Similarly, the translator's role is not simply to transfer words but mostly to negotiate between cultures in order to produce a reasonable text.

The translation of texts from English to French requires the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural and stylistic competences that demonstrate the translator's flair. Structural differences in tense and aspect, lexical categories such "as false friends" and the translation of idiomatic expressions, the specificity of cultural words and the differences in style, they all contribute to making literal equivalence difficult or even impossible. Instead, translators must develop their interpretative judgment, cultural knowledge and creativity to produce texts that are both faithful to the source text and idiomatic in the target language.

The development of machine translation tools shows that literal correspondence can be automated, however, quality translation necessitates human expertise. The translator's role is not simply linguistic but mostly cultural: he is actually a cultural mediator who negotiates meaning across borders. Future research in the field

of Translation Studies must investigate how translators can balance between fidelity and readability, foreignization and domestication, accuracy and creativity. Actually, successful translations between any language pairs and, especially, between English and French still remains both an art and a science.

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