

EFFECTS OF ENGLISH–FRENCH MORPHOSYNTACTIC AND LEXICAL VARIABILITY ON TRANSLATION QUALITY: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

By

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Abstract

The systematic differences between English and French morphosyntax and lexis can create problems during translation and ultimately affect the translation quality, especially when translators always assume a one-to-one mapping between the two linguistic systems. This paper examines how English–French morphosyntactic and lexical variability influences translation quality. Drawing on contrastive analysis, it treats translation as a process of re-encoding meaning across distinct systems that organise grammar and vocabulary differently. The analysis compares parallel divergences in agreement, word order, verb morphology, and collocation, and assesses how these divergences affect accuracy, fluency, and idiomaticity in the target text. Findings demonstrate that literal transfer often produces acceptable results for simple structures, but leads to awkward or unnatural phrasing where language-specific constraints operate. The study thus links empirical observations primarily from a corpus of six English–French translation manuals to theoretical concepts of equivalence and non-equivalence, offering practical criteria for managing variability while situating the results within current debates in Translation Studies (TS). Findings in this study can significantly contribute to translation theory by demonstrating that systematic interlingual variability constitutes a core determinant of translation difficulty, problem, and quality.

Keywords: *English–French translation, morphosyntactic variability, lexical variability, systemic choices, contrastive analysis.*

Introduction¹

Translation quality is compromised when translators assume a one-to-one correspondence between languages in all translation situations (Chantale, 2011; Chuquet, 1998; Delisle, 2013; Larson, 1998). This is because every language seems to have unique ways of packaging grammar, meaning, and style. To achieve effective translation, it is essential to analyse the source text (ST) and reconstruct its semantic components for the target text (TT) to convey equivalent meaning. Translators must continuously reference the ST to capture its intended message accurately because there is always a systematic interlingual variability in the language pair involved in a given translation performance. Ignoring the interlingual variability can lead to literal translations that, while grammatically correct, may come across as unnatural or misleading in the target language.

Investigating translator trainees' error patterns, translation problems, and problem-solving decisions, Gyuse (2025) argues that for translations involving the English–French language pair, various problems arise primarily due to systematic linguistic differences between the two languages (i.e., differences in vocabulary and syntax). Hurtado Albir and Rodríguez-Inés (2023) contend that all linguistic hurdles in translation are fundamentally lexical and morphosyntactic, arising directly from the linguistic code. These problems often trigger interference due to systematic interlingual variability—the natural structural deviations between the source and target languages.

Translation scholars, including Ballard (2006), Chuquet and Paillard (2017), Delisle (2013), Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde (2021), Hiernard (2003), and Wecksteen-Quinio et al. (2020), emphasise that translating between languages such as English and French is complex, as languages are not mere sets of names for universal concepts. They argue that linguistic variability leads to different articulations of concepts, which can complicate translation efforts. Problems typically arise when translators do not identify necessary adaptations that might fit a specific context. This is why the linguistic contrasts between English and French present significant challenges, particularly for those still developing translation proficiency. This paper explores how structural differences in morphosyntax and lexis between English and French create translation issues and impact the final translation output.

¹ This paper is partly inspired from my PhD thesis entitled *English–French Translation in Nigeria: A Mixed-methods Evaluation of Bachelor's Students' Translation Problems, Strategies and Products*. Thesis submitted and published in 2025 for the degree of Doctor of Translation Studies at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. See DOI: 10.63028/10067/2192380151162165141 and full text <https://repository.uantwerpen.be/docstore/d:irua:32523>

Differences in English–French linguistic systems: Positions of select TS scholars

Many Translation Studies (TS) scholars affirm that there are huge differences between English and French that can negatively impact the translation quality when one works from or into either of the two languages. While doing a contrastive analysis of the grammatical structure of English and French, Hiernard (2003, p.33) states that grammatical elements of the two languages are used in quite distinct manners. Therefore, despite the fact that in simple structures, literal translation can be suitable and even inevitable, in complex structures, it would be very awkward or illogical to always attempt to translate from English into French or vice versa by faithfully following the syntactical order of the ST to apply in the TT. Similarly, Ballard (2006, p.111) affirms that both within a language and in the transition from one language to another, it is possible to make paraphrases whose formal difference is at the level of parts of speech, but there is usually a problem that manifests itself in the morphosyntactic variability of the linguistic sign.

On his part, Delisle (2013, p.415) states that French and English linguistic systems are quite different, but when it comes to pragmatic texts, it does not generally matter much whether the syntactic mould into which the translated ideas are cast is the same as that of the original text. The need to channel ideas differently often leads to the original structures being rejected. However, this syntactic reorganisation presupposes a good command of the language; otherwise, there are traps for those who do not have a good knowledge of the two languages.

Chuquet and Paillard (2017, p.41) also affirm that due to the differences in the linguistic systems of English and French, there are certain shifts in verbal constructions between the two languages that are often a source of difficulties in translation, while Wecksteen-Quinio, et al. (2020, p.95) argue that the linguistic difference in French and English could come into play, whether in terms of the language, equivalence and translators' subjectivity. On their part, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde (2021, p.4) affirm that linguistic systems organise the world into diverse conceptual categories and this contributes to making translation a difficult task. For them, due to the marked differences between English and French, the search for a perfect equivalence for translators rather betrays the outcome of the translation since there is no absolute or perfect equivalence between the two languages.

Looking at the insights above, it is evident that TS scholars who deal with English–French translation agree that the two languages do not share the same linguistic systems. This demonstrates that any attempt to mimic the English structure into French or vice versa during translation can upset the logical links between elements in the language. In the following sections, specific problems that English–French translators encounter when translating due to the differences in the language

structure will be carefully examined with elaborate illustrations, focusing mainly on the works of the above-mentioned TS scholars.

Translation problems due to differences in the arrangement of elements within the sentence

Defective formations in the use of tenses, prepositions, articles, and the wrong use of plural morphemes and parts of speech are considered syntactic errors (Keshavarz, 1997, p.45), and can be due to structural variability of the language pair in a given translation task. While examining the structural differences of French and English sentences, Hiernard (2003, p.33) argues that if one analyses the way in which English and French arrange the elements within sentences, one would realise that there is always a huge difference in the way sentences are constructed in the two languages. These differences can sometimes create a lot of problems, especially for translator trainees. One of the many linguistic translation problems arises because French does not usually follow the straightforward applicable manner of rendering its sentences as English. Rather, it follows the anteposition order (i.e., placing lexical elements in front of others by way of inversion) as opposed to English, which follows the orthodox and basic subject + verb + complement (SVC) order of sentence construction. What this means is that since English prefers neither to separate the verb from its complement nor break the unity of a phrase, translators who are not well-grounded in the two languages may likely have problems with rendering the structures successfully into French. The following are a few examples of the various structural differences:

- a) English (SVC order): Dick Thomson, **a young 25-year-old farmer**, has given up all hope.
French (anteposition): *Jeune agriculteur gallois de 25 ans, Dick Thomson a abandonné tout espoir.*
- b) English (SVC order):
 - i. She would often read his love letters, **sitting by the window**.
 - ii. Mrs Dawson went jogging every morning **in spite of her old age and arthritis**.French (incised):
 - i. *Elle lisait souvent, assise près de la fenêtre, ses lettres d'amour.*
 - ii. *Mme Dawson, malgré son grand âge et l'arthrite, faisait son jogging tous les matins.*
- c) English (SVC order): "There's no reason why I should apologise", **she answered**.

French (inversion) : « *Je n'ai aucune raison de m'excuser* », **répondit-elle.**²
(Hiernard, 2003, p.33).

The illustration above demonstrates the seeming contrast between English and French syntax that can impede the translation task of one who is not well-versed in the art and craft involved in English–French translation. It then means that translators must take actions to prevent the errors from occurring. Indeed, Hiernard (2003) argues that problems also arise during the English–French translation when translators fail to understand that English usually places new information at the initial position of the sentence, while French prefers to present what is already known before adding new information. For example, “**Ginger** was his enemy and arch rival in love → *Son ennemi et grand rival en amour : le Rouquin* (new information)” (p.34). Obviously, those with an English-speaking background who are probably unaware of the linguistic realities as presented above may end up having problems with successfully rendering the English text into French.

Moreover, French leaves its information often implicit, contrary to English, which prefers to remain explicit. For example, “Ben was drilling holes **while** Paul and David were knocking in nails → *Ben perçait des trous, Paul et David enforçaient des clous.*” (Hiernard, 2003, p.34). Here, English uses a conjunctive adverb ‘while’ to state precisely what Paul and David were doing at the moment Ben was drilling holes. The French version, on the contrary, leaves this information implicit. Therefore, it appears unclear whether or not the activities of the trio were being carried out concurrently. Hiernard, however, notes that the sentence above could also be rendered differently in French as “*Ben perçait des trous pendant que Paul et David enforçaient des clous.*” For Hiernard, French has many other possibilities to render ‘while’, such as *durant que/tandis que/alors que/cependant que*, but these can sometimes lead to misinterpretation of the source message. The example above entails that English–French translator trainees who are more familiar with the English grammatical rules and who are probably not fully aware of the role of ‘while’ in the sentence may tend to treat it as a word expressing contrast. This would certainly lead to mistranslation of the message.

On his part, while discussing the relationship between meaning, morphosyntax and enunciation, Ballard (2006, p.15) demonstrates how the problem of equivalence comes from the fact that words in two languages, such as English and French have no similar conceptual surface. For Ballard, an utterance is governed by the morphosyntactic potential of the terms and by the dynamics that result from such utterance. He cites an example of “to walk” and “school”, arguing that even if these two words appear out of context, they may not give any comprehension problem as

² The original version of this citation is a translation from French to English, presented in a tabular form. It is rather adapted to suit the English–French order to conform with the directionality emphasised in this paper.

they will be rendered using the equivalence ‘*marcher*’ and ‘*école*’. However, there will be a problem where the statement “As I walk to school every morning” is contained in the ST, since the utterance “*quand je marche à l’école*” is grammatical, but cannot enter into a syntagmatic relationship to express its meaning, except the notion of movement will be rendered by a switching with a verb maintaining a hyperonymic relationship with ‘walking’ such as ‘*aller*’ (to go) and developing the meaning of ‘walk’ as in *Quand je vais à l’école à pied* (p.16).

Ballard’s argument above underscores the relevance of context and meaning in rendering the ST correctly into the TT. Of course, the primary aim of translation is conveying the intended meaning from the ST to the target audience. Therefore, translators must understand that word meaning depends on the situational context of a text. From experience and an empirical study conducted in the past³, it is clear that translator trainees are unaware of this fact since their translations are usually characterised by suboptimal options. They are probably not fully aware of the linguistic differences between English and French that create problems in conveying meaning. This is why Ballard’s (2006) position about meaning and context can be apt in the context of translation pedagogy.

Contributing to the debate about English–French structural difference, Delisle (2013) explores translation problems caused by nominal and verbal expressions. For him, while English commonly uses verbal structures, French is fond of nominal structures (e.g., Paul Fisher reports. → *le reportage de Jean-François Lépine* and ‘While you were out’. → *Pendant votre absence*) (p.511). While this structural feature is common in the two languages, there could be different forms of recategorisation that would make French accept some verb forms where nominal forms are used. Therefore, until proven to the contrary, it would be wrong if translators believe that the ‘nominal style’ is one of the fundamental characteristics of the French language (Delisle, 2013, p.514). Delisle argues that it is advisable not to abuse the nominal style in French, because it can result into ambiguity and cumbersome expressions such as **L’inscription à l’ordre du jour de l’Assemblée générale de la crise du Proche-Orient est probable*. One can note here that with the abusive style of using the nominal form in French, the expression above seems ambiguous or vague. However, if one uses a verb, the sentence would be lightened and it would also facilitate comprehension. This is why Delisle proposes the following alternative *‘Il est probable qu’on inscrira la crise du Proche-Orient à l’ordre du jour de l’Assemblée Générale’* (p.514).

Furthermore, discussing translation problems due to the differences in syntactic arrangement between English and French, Chuquet and Paillard (2017, p.135) first

³ See Gyuse, G. (2025). *English–French Translation in Nigeria: A Mixed-methods Evaluation of Bachelor’s Students’ Translation Problems, Strategies and Products*. DOI : 10.63028/10067/2192380151162165141

argue that syntactic arrangement (*agencement syntaxique*), which deals with the syntactic transformations from English to French is not just a question of stylistic variants, but, more fundamentally, of each language's own strategy for orientating the utterance as a whole. To them, syntactic arrangement involves respect for the dominant patterns at the level of utterance, even before the details of lexical or grammatical choices that give a translation an authentic nature in the target language.

In the first instance, Chuquet and Paillard (2017, p.204) highlight the syntactic problems caused by the English phrasal verbs, demonstrating how translation problems triggered by phrasal verbs, especially those linked to the compound status of these verbs, manifest themselves in two ways on the semantic level: a semantic load distributed over two poles and a double polysemy. For them, because of translating the meaning of the two elements of phrasal verbs, translators tend to translate the verbs using the crossover (*chassé-croisé*) technique as in 'A krestel **veered back**' → *un faucon s'éloigna en arc de cercle*. Chuquet and Paillard argue that since the semantic load is distributed over the two poles of the phrasal verbs, translators are either required to focus on the adverbial part or the verb part (e.g., "he walked **out** → *il sortit*" and "he **shut** the book **up** → *il ferma le livre*") (p.205).

Moreover, Chuquet and Paillard (2017, p.206) highlight that associating the usual monosyllabic verbs with very broad meanings such as 'get', 'set', 'put', 'take' and adverbials whose semantic content is also very general is susceptible to shifts in use, which can result in a polysemy of the phrasal verbs. To them, even if translators can attribute to certain adverbials a central value, which is found in more or less metaphorical uses (e.g., 'across' where the spatial notion of crossing is found in use of phrasal verbs such as 'come across' → *rencontrer par hasard* or 'put across' → *transmettre/faire passer*), it is not the same with adverbial properties like 'out' or 'up' which, through successive shifts, clearly move away from their primary values of exteriority or altitude. To Chuquet and Paillard (2017), 'make up' is one of the English polysemic phrasal verbs that can pose problems to translators. For example;

Let's **make up** and be friends → *Réconcillions-nous*.

It takes her ages to **make up** → *Elle met des heures à se maquiller*.

He **made up** the whole story → *Il a tout inventé* (p.207)

Depending on contexts, the polysemous nature of the phrasal verb 'make up' appears to be misleading. Thus, translator trainees who may not have adequate knowledge of the contextual intricacies of rendering the verb may translate it into French using the same structure in all cases, thereby producing infelicitous translation. Indeed, Chuquet and Paillard (2017) amply demonstrate that English and French syntactic arrangement or linguistic structures greatly vary and these variations can be a source of problems in English–French translation especially to translators who tend to render English structures into French in a manner that betrays the real intention of the ST. Their explanations of syntactical/grammatical

translation problems with ample examples provide a comprehensive guide to linguistic approaches to English–French translation.

On their part, exploring the differences in English and French syntactic structures that cause problems to translators, Wecksteen-Quinio et al. (2020) compare and contrast the two languages, highlighting that due to the different ways of considering the same situation in the two languages, it is impossible to mimic the English syntactic structure in French. To many student-translators, this is where the problem lies, because they have strong tendencies of mimicking the ST language structures in the TT. This is probably why their translations are characterised by shocking incongruities. To Wecksteen-Quinio et al. (2020), most often, French usually reverts to crossover (*chassé-croisé*) to produce a structure that carries the semantic load with the English structure as in the following example; “They were crouching in the shadows when the elevator door **clattered open**” → *Ils venaient de s'accroupir dans l'ombre lorsque la parole de l'ascenseur s'ouvrit bruyamment* (p.18).

In the example above, the relationship of the subject and its predicate revolve around the verb ‘clatter’ as in “the elevator door – clattered”, while in the French structure, the relationship of the predicate and its subject reverberates on the change of condition of the subject as in “the elevator door – be open”. To Wecksteen-Quinio et al. (2020), because French usually reverts to crossover (*chassé-croisé*) to produce a structure that carries the same meaning with the English structure, the French translation above uses the verb ‘*s'ouvrir*’ to render the result of the action of the subject (i.e., open), then the adverb ‘*bruyamment*’ to express the manner. Such linguistic nuances seem to have the tendency of posing some problems to English–French translators who may not be conversant with the crossover translation technique. Clearly, Wecksteen-Quinio et al. (2020) provide a comprehensive guide to English–French translation principles and practices, highlighting key differences in sentence structures and word order, which can constitute linguistic translation problems if not properly handled.

Although there are structural differences in English and French that cause problems during translation, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde (2021) argue that the differences may not be always terribly disadvantageous to translators. For them, since in linguistic typology, the classification of languages depends largely on the order of appearance of the three basic components of a declarative sentence, English and French belong to the same category, because they both follow the same subject-verb-object pattern and “the types of constructions that are used in interrogative, imperative and exclamative sentences do show many similarities” (p.59).

It must, however, be noted that the similarities mentioned above are based on the linguistic typology. At the morphosyntactic level, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde assert that the syntax of the two languages is significantly and incommensurably different. Thus, the sentences in either language cannot always be rendered using

equivalent structures, as doing so might often result in sentences without the same connotations. In the example “that bread is really nice” → *il est bon, ce pain!*, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde (2021) argue that while it is common in French to have ‘dislocational’ constructions, it is quite rare to find such sentence structures in English. Therefore, a reverse translation of “*il est bon, ce pain!*” cannot be rendered as “it is good, that bread” but “that bread is really nice”. As a result of the intrinsic differences in the way sentences are constructed in the two languages, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde state that the English–French translator has to almost always “introduce structural changes at the syntactical level” (p.55) to be able to convey the SL message into the TL with the same connotation. This implies that the translator’s inability to introduce the structural changes required when working into French can lead to a TT that is inadequate.

In the final analysis, it is clear that TT scholars who deal with English–French translation amply demonstrate that there is a wide difference between English and French linguistic systems that can trigger grammatical and syntactical problems during translation. Although they do not follow the same approach in describing the various translation problems – Hiernard (2003) and Wecksteen-Quinio, et al. (2020) seem to have combined methodological and linguistic approaches by describing the steps in translation, while not losing sight of the linguistic differences or similarities of English and French; Ballard (2006) combines comparative and analytic approaches, while Delisle (2013) adopts the interpretive theory and differential linguistics approach (i.e., comparative method) – they clearly establish that English and French are structurally different and care must be taken when translating from and into either of the languages.

Other interlingual structural variabilities that trigger many grammatical problems in translation

TS scholars such as Delisle (2013) demonstrate how the structural differences between English and French can cause some grammatical or syntactic problems to translators. For Delisle, although there are three levels of qualifying adjective in French, such as; the positive (e.g., *agréable*), the comparative of equality, inferiority and superiority (e.g., *aussi, moins, plus agréable*) and the superlative, which can be relative (e.g., *le plus agréable*) or absolute (e.g., *très agréable*), translating the English comparative adjectives into French usually takes a different structure, which can trigger problems, especially to translator trainees. In the following examples, “**the weaker** sex” → *le sexe faible*, “higher education” → *l’enseignement supérieur* (Delisle, 2013, p.417), while the English comparative is rendered by a positive in French, there are instances where the comparative in English is rendered with a different structure in French (e.g., “**Lower** Canada” → *le Bas-Canada*). For Delisle, the elliptical comparative, which is often used in English is, indeed, a ‘false comparative’ in French and not always appropriate when rendered the same way as

in English. The implication of this assertion is that, if translator trainees follow the English structure too faithfully, this can only lead them to mistranslation in French.

Furthermore, while discussing ordinal structures, Delisle (2013, p.425) states that although English syntax allows the relative superlatives of superiority to precede an ordinal adjective (i.e., second largest country or fourth largest producer of gold etc.), French syntax does not admit this structure, since superlative already indicates that what is being referred to has no other comparison. For example, *La Chine est le pays le plus peuplé* is correct, but once one attempts to render this as *la Chine est le deuxième pays le plus peuplé du monde*, the structure will lose its elegance and naturalness. However, Delisle (2013) affirms that in French too, there is a way of rendering the English ordinal structure concisely, and to specify the position of an element in a set such as *le Québec est la province la plus peuplée du Canada, après l'Ontario* (p.425). Looking at the analysis above, it is evident that the structural differences in English and French can sometimes cause translators to render messages in ways that are not just unnatural, but bizarre.

Delisle (2013) also highlights the problems encountered when translating the phrase “on the basis of...” (p.429). To him, when translators become fixated on the calqued structure ‘*sur la base de...* or *sur une base de...*’, the translation tends to lose its elegance in many contexts. Although the translation ‘*sur la base de...*’ is correct, in some contexts, it may require other forms such as *à la lumière de...*, *à l’aune de...*, *à raison de...*, *d’après...*, *en fonction de...*, *en se fondant sur...*, *selon...*, *suivant...*, *sur la foi de...*, *sur le modèle de...* (Delisle, 2013, p.430). This takes us to the issue of context and meaning. Although synonymous expressions exist, they are context-specific and once used arbitrarily interchangeably in all contexts, one risks producing awkward TT. This is why Delisle argues that instead of translating ‘on the basis of experience’ as ‘*sur la base de l’expérience*’, it would be preferable to say ‘*à la lumière de l’expérience*’ or ‘*fort de l’expérience acquise*’ (p.430). Furthermore, Delisle (2013) states that when (in English) ‘on’ is followed by an adjective before ‘basis’, such as; ‘on an irregular basis’, certain translators tend to render it as ‘*sur une base irrégulière*’, which appears to be vague. French has different ways of rendering such formulations such as, “the programme will be funded **on an annual basis**” → *Le programme recevra une subvention **annuelle***. These illustrations suggest that attempting to calque the English structure would lead to linguistic impropriety.

Similarly, Delisle (2013, p.435) highlights the problem with the translation of ‘as’. For him, although ‘as’ does not present any difficulty when used as a synonym of ‘like’ as in ‘poor as a church rat → *pauvre comme Job*, it is strictly translated into French depending on the logic of the contexts. When ‘as’ is used in relation to time, it is better rendered as ‘*au moment où*’, but in a context depicting simultaneity, it is rendered as ‘*alors que*’. Other main logical relationships expressed by ‘as’ include: condition : *dans la mesure où, aussitôt que, quand, à mesure que* ; finality : *pour* ;

causality : *puisque* ; explication : *car*⁴. For Delisle (2013, p.443), the explanation above also applies to the translation of ‘while’. This is because, while ‘while’ is very common in English texts and translators may use the phrase ‘*alors que*’ in French TT, there are different ways of translating it into French.

Like ‘as’, ‘while’ is also translated into French based on the context and type of the adverbial clause it is joining. If it is for adverbial clause of time, ‘*en, pendant que, tant que, tout en*’ may be used as in, “Let’s be happy **while** we are young → *Soyons heureux pendant que nous sommes jeunes*”; “He died **while** eating his dinner → *Il est mort en dinnant*” (i.e., a form of *chassé-croisé*). In the context of adverbial clause of concession, ‘while’ is rendered into French as ‘*bien que, malgré, même si, quoique, si*’ (Delisle, 2013, p.443). For example, “**While** I sympathise with you, I am afraid there is little I can do → *Malgré ma sympathie à votre égard, je crains de ne pouvoir faire grand-chose pour vous*”. ‘While’ in contexts of opposition is rendered as ‘*alors que, mais, quant à, tandis que*’, whereas in an explicative context, it is rendered as ‘*car*’. In all these differences in renditions, which must take into account the situational contexts, one can infer that these transfer conditions can pose serious problems of reformulation to translators, especially those still undergoing training.

Besides, there are other simple and common words that give problems to English–French beginner translators and even professionals. For Delisle (2013, p.449), one of such words is ‘when’, whose different uses present some traps for translators working into French (1) when it has a causal effect/value (p.449); (2) when it marks a continuation (p.450); (3) when it is used as a pronoun or relative adverb and (4) when it is followed by adverbs such as ‘hardly’, ‘barely’, or ‘scarcely’ (p.451). For Delisle (2013), when ‘when’ is used with causal value, some translators wrongly use ‘*quand*’ or ‘*lorsque*’ to render it into French without recourse to the cause/effect relationship with the incident. He argues that when the sentence “Two workers were injured **when** a fork-lift fell over” is rendered in French as *Deux ouvriers ont été blessés lorsque un chariot élévateur s’est renversé*, the original sense of the message will be distorted, because the cause/effect relationship is not clearly expressed with ‘*lorsque*’ (p.449).

Thus, to show that the injury of the two workers was a result or consequence of the falling off of the forklift, Delisle suggests that it is more appropriate to render the sentence as *Deux ouvriers ont été blessés par suite du renversement d’un chariot élévateur*. The illustrations above demonstrate the intricacies in English–French translation and show how literal transfer can rather upset the translation quality. Translator trainees and professionals alike who may think the linguistic systems of

⁴ Delisle (2013) amply states the various ways of rendering ‘as’, which may not be itemised one after the other here to avoid reproduction of his work. However, reference can be made in his work for more examples.

the two languages are the same, hence words or expressions should just be transferred from English to French without careful attention to the pragmatic nuances involved, must reconsider their choices when working with the two languages.

Delisle (2013, p.450) further emphasises that the use of ‘when’ also causes problems to translators when used to mark a continuation. For example, it would be shocking to see a translator render “They did not return home till nine o’clock, **when** they had a light supper” as *Ils ne rentrèrent qu’à neuf heures **lorsqu’ils** prirent une collation*. This is because, adverbial conjunctions of time ‘lorsque’ and ‘quand’ are used to express concordance or simultaneity of two actions, but it is important to state clearly how the two actions took place one after the other. Therefore, Delisle suggests that ‘et alors’ will be a better option as in *ils ne rentrèrent qu’à neuf heures **et** prirent **alors** une collation*. This example shows the extent to which literal translation can betray the intention of the ST. It also shows that translation is not just about lifting equivalent words from the ST into the TT but ensuring that the choice of words or expressions in the TT reflects exactly the intention of the ST.

Besides, Delisle (2013) argues that when ‘when’ is used as a pronoun or relative adverb, it is better rendered with ‘où’ in French. For example, “she usually comes on those days **when** I am busy” → *Elle vient habituellement les jours **où** je suis occupé*. Additionally, when it is used after some adverbs like ‘hardly’, ‘scarcely’ and ‘barely’, it is better rendered into French as *à peine...que*. For example, “She had hardly gone up **when** the telephone rang” → *Elle venait **à peine** de montrer **que** le telephone sonna* (p.451). Given the insights above, one can agree with Delisle that the structural departure of ‘when’ from ‘quand’ and ‘lorsque’ to other forms pose some problems to translator trainees and even professionals. This means not paying attention to these structural adjustments can easily betray one’s translation.

Indeed, the words ‘with/such’ also pose problems to translators (Delisle, 2013, p.456). For Delisle, while English is not so rigid with the use of ‘with’, it is not always enough in all contexts to render it into French as ‘avec’. This seems to be where students have some problems. Although the preposition can mark a causal relationship between two elements in both English and French, the causality must be clear and obvious in French (Delisle, 2013, p.455). For example, in the statement ‘*Avec mon bras cassé, je ne puis vous aider*’, the cause of the speaker’s inability to help is clearly seen (i.e., ‘*Avec son bras cassé*’). However, Delisle argues that ‘avec’ will not be quite appropriate in the following translation: “**With** the Canadian economy apparently caught in a temporary backwater, it is important to look at the consumer” → **Avec l’économie Canadienne qui semble tourner au ralenti, il importe d’observer l’attitude de consommateur*. The sentence above lacks clarity with the use of ‘avec’, because it does not bring out the time effect of the statement. Therefore, Delisle suggests that the proper translation should be ‘**À un moment où** l’économie semble tourner au ralenti, il importe d’observer l’attitude du

consommateur'. This further demonstrates why situating ST expressions in a context and thinking critically before taking translational decisions can lead to more felicitous renditions in the TT.

For Delisle (2013), '*avec*' can also lead to ambiguity if one insists on using it in French to render 'with' as in "Three Canadians **with** the American team". If this statement is translated with '*avec*' as '*Trois Canadiens avec l'équipe américaine*', it would sound as if three Canadians will accompany the American team (p.456). However, the real meaning of the statement should indicate that the three Canadians are, indeed, part of the American team. Following this logic, it would be more appropriate to replace '*avec*' with something else as in '*Trois Canadiens feront partie de l'équipe américaine*'. Therefore, Delisle concludes that 'with' should be rendered into French with some reinforcement (i.e., *étoffement*) of a full word. For example, "German cake **with** cognac" → *Gâteau allemand **parfumé** au cognac* or words such as *doté, doué, fort de, nanti, muni, qui dispose de, pétri de, rompu à*, etc., depending on the most appropriate context⁵. It must, however, be noted that all these examples can lead to a change in the syntactic structure from English to French, and not being mindful of the structural changes definitely leads to inadequate translation.

Relatedly, the word 'such' can also be problematic when transferring it to French. For Delisle (2013, p.459), 'such', whether used as an adjective or a pronoun, can mark similarity, as in '*Je m'étonne qu'il ait tenu de tels propos*' → 'I am surprised he said such things' or 'to run on such a record is defeatist in itself' → *Se présenter aux élections avec un tel bilan, c'est courir à l'échec*'. However, in the latter example, the use of 'such' contains a slightly pejorative connotation. Besides, research shows '*tel*' is sometimes used in one of the meanings of 'such', which would correspond, in more traditional French, to an expression like "*de ce genre ou de ce type: de tels individus* (instead of *les individus de ce genre*). This means 'such' does not always connote a mark of similarity, but can also mean '*si grand*' in French, hence must be used accordingly (Delisle, 2013). Indeed, under the syntactic translation problems, apart from the above-stated, Delisle also includes aspects such as "exclusive disjunctions" (p.463), "juxtaposed determinants" (p.469) "precision of logical links", "sentence rules or rhythm" and "hypertrophied phrases" (p.470), "resultative structures" (p.481), "progressive verbs and verbs of outcome" (p.481), "negation" (p.487), "present participles, gerunds and logical reports" (p.497), and "passive voice" (p.505) as well as "nominal and verbal twists" (p.511). Delisle's exploration of these linguistic aspects only underscores the complexities involved in working from English to French, whose linguistic features seem quite similar, but really different in practice.

⁵ The list here is not exhaustive. Since it is not a reproduction of the original, more can be seen in Delisle (2013).

Problems related to exclusive disjunction, juxtaposed determinants, and resultative structures

On the surface, exclusive disjunction, juxtaposed determinants, and resultative structures appear unrelated, but they link up through the syntax-semantics interface and information structure. They are all ways a language forces two elements into a tight, ordered, scope-sensitive relationship. Studying one shows how languages handle binarity and hierarchy, which is exactly what corpus data on verbal units reveals.

Discussing ‘exclusive disjunction’, Delisle (2013, p.463) states that it is a proposition containing a choice with a condition. If the condition is met, option A applies, otherwise it is option B. Therefore, the choice to be made is restrictive, conditional, and exclusive. Following the manual, common disjunctions in English are formed by the pronoun ‘whichever’, by a verb and a comparative such as ‘whichever is the lower’; ‘whichever is the higher’; ‘whichever is the earlier’; ‘whichever is the later’; ‘whichever is the longer’ etc.”. Besides, one also finds ‘whichever comes first’; ‘whichever may be the later’; ‘whichever is less’, etc.

Although the expressions above seem to be frequently used in legal writings, they may also be found in general writings, albeit in a lesser quantity than they are used in legal documents. However, these English structures, which seem not to have any literal equivalent in French may present a translation pitfall from the structural point of view. Thus, Delisle affirms that, almost always, when translators try to render these structures into French, the structures are usually mistranslated or rendered in an awkward and cumbersome manner.

Indeed, the ambiguity caused by exclusive disjunction in certain contexts can lead to confusion or misrepresentation. In the case of English–French translation, it is clear the two languages express exclusive disjunction in distinct ways, and this can make it challenging to translate accurately. Therefore, it is pertinent for translator trainees to strive for linguistic expertise in both English and French to enhance their linguistic performance when translating aspects like exclusive disjunction.

As for problems with juxtaposed determinants, Delisle (2013, p.469) explores this aspect by arguing that one of the most characteristic features of English is its ability to accumulate before a noun, a long series of modifying determiners, by simple juxtaposition. Although this kind of syntactic structure can be quite incongruous in French, Delisle states that in English, there is no limit to the number of anteposed determiners that form a syntagmatically complex unit with the noun, thus making its translation complicated. For example, in the translation:

“The Walkyrie is a rigid-wing single-surface tailless mono-plane hang-glider → *Le Walkyrie est un deltaplane monoplace et monocoque à voilure fixe et sans queue*”

Delisle (2013, p.469) highlights that although this form of composition by direct juxtaposition of a range of components also exists in French, writers only use it to create stylistic effects that are sometimes striking. Moreover, hypertrophied noun phrases of this kind are found in everyday French, but the number of juxtaposed and postposed determiners rarely exceeds three: '*eau minérale naturelle gazéifiée*' (i.e., carbonated natural mineral water); '*concert de musique vocale polyphonique française*' (i.e., concert of French polyphonic vocal music) and '*la dépopulation agricole active masculine*' (i.e., the active male agricultural population). Delisle argues that in specialist language too, these constructions can be found and there may be four or even five such as in Information Technology (IT) – '*code décimal codé binaire étendu*' (i.e., extended binary coded decimal code); Artistic skating – '*Hamil Camel est une pirouette sautée allongée passée assise*' (i.e., Hamil Camel is an extending jumping pirouette in a seated position).

Looking at the examples above, one can agree with Delisle that juxtaposed determiners are problematic in French, and that accumulation of such a large number of juxtaposed determiners is exceptional in French because it runs counter to the analytical nature of the language and sometimes impairs the clarity and intelligibility of statements. Delisle (2013) attributes this to the imprecise relationship between the determiners and the determinates. Indeed, French rather seems to express syntactic relationships explicitly by means of tool words such as conjunctions and prepositions or relative pronouns to allow the reader to establish the logical links between the constituent units of the construction.

Concerning resultative structures, Delisle (2013, p.475) states that English differs from French in this respect and the translation technique known as *chassé-croisé* (crossover or interchange) is particularly useful when it comes to restoring resultative structures. He considers resultative structures English syntactic constructions that first specify the mode of carrying out an action before the result such action produces such as 'to crawl out' and 'to tiptoe down the stairs'. There is a problem here because, contrary to the English structure where mode of action is specified before the result it produces, in French, the result is specified before the action. For example, 'He tiptoed down the stairs' will be more natural in French if rendered as '*Il descendit l'escalier sur la pointe des pieds*'.

The problem here is that students may tend to either over translate the English text in French or engage in extra-discursive assumptions, thereby distorting the original message. Besides, translators may tend to commit errors because they may sometimes see two units of meaning where there is only one, such as: 'She shrugged away the thought' which should ordinarily be rendered in French as '*Elle écarta cette pensée*' will be overtranslated with additional elements like '*Elle écarta cette pensée avec un haussement d'épaules*'. This is because the phrase 'to shrug away' is fixed and it simply means 'to push away carelessly' – an idea that is well-captured by the French verb '*écarter*'.

Translation problems due to differences in progressive verbs and verbs of outcome

While progressive verbs are typically atelic, meaning they have no built-in end point (e.g., She was running.), verbs of outcome are telic, which implies they have a natural endpoint (e.g., She ran to the store). Progressive verbs shift focus away from the result/outcome. (Filip, 1999; Laca, 2005; Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995; Smith, 1991). While Smith (1991) compares English progressive versus French *imparfait*, Laca (2005) shows how French *Il lisait le livre* can be progressive or habitual, while English 'He was reading the book' is only progressive. This can definitely affect how verbs of outcome are translated from English into French or vice versa.

Discussing problems that arise with progressive verbs and verbs of outcome during translation, Delisle (2013, p.481) notes that although it is not important to draw a distinction between these verbs in English, it is in French. This is because, in English, it is the preposition or adverb accompanying the verb that marks the progression or outcome, while in French, prepositions are empty words and have almost no semantic value, which is why they cannot fulfil the function that is performed⁶. Delisle notes that in French, verbs of progression are progressive and gradual. They give the measure of change; the extent of variation and they are followed by the preposition 'de'. For example, (Increase – *Hausse*) *accroître, augmenter, faire un bond, grimper, hausser, majorer, montrer, monter, progresser and relever*. (Decrease – *Baisse*) *abaisser, accuser une baisse, baisser, chuter, fléchir, diminuer, décliner, reculer, réduire, régresser and subir une baisse* (p.482).

With regards to verbs of outcome, Delisle (2013) states that they are terminative and specific. They specify the goal achieved and the result of the numerical change. They are followed by the preposition 'à' and are less numerous than the previous ones. For example, (Increase – *Hausse*) *passer, porter, se fixer, se situer, s'établir, s'inscrire*. (Decrease – *Baisse*) *chuter, ramener, revenir, se fixer, s'établir, tomber* (p.482), while verbs with dual function can be considered both progressive and terminative and are usually followed by either the preposition 'de' or 'à' such as: (Increase – *Hausse*) *élever* and *monter*. (Decrease – *Baisse*) *chuter, descendre, réduire and tomber* (p.482).

Indeed, while English writers may have the choice of simply changing a preposition to specify the value of a numerical variation (increased **by** 50%) and sometimes the result of this variation (increased **to** \$20,000), French writers do not have this possibility and have to resort to choosing a progressive verb in the first case and a verb of outcome in the second case. Delisle argues that whether through carelessness or a desire for brevity, some translators or journalists allow themselves

⁶ Examples abound in Specific objective 58 of Delisle's (2013) manual.

ellipses of the following: “*la production s’est accrue de 8% à 150 millions de tonnes*” or “*le salaire de Paul a augmenté de 20 000\$ à 23 000\$*”. This second example implies a substantial increase in Paul’s salary. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that his salary has risen from \$20,000 to \$23,000 because, being strictly a progressive verb, ‘*augmenter*’ cannot express an idea of the end result. This is definitely a pitfall English–French translators must avoid.

Problems triggered by variability of negation-related structures

Discussing linguistic translation problems that are triggered by negation, which is considered an act of translating positive structures from ST with negative structures into the TT, Delisle (2013, p.487) argues that in certain communicative situations, French shows a predilection for negation. He demonstrates this using David Bello’s (2009) comparison of the title of American romantic comedy ‘It’s Complicated’, whose French version is simply put as ‘*Pas si simple*’. Indeed, this example shows how French has a propensity to use negative constructions.

Besides, Delisle affirms that French texts contain a greater number of grammatically negative expressions than English texts, and this is why there are always English–French translations such as “**Hold** the line, please. → *Ne quittez pas, s’il vous plait*” and “**Remember** to lock the door → *N’oubliez pas de verrouiller la porte* (p.488). Indeed, for the sake of accuracy and naturalness, it seems literal translation of certain affirmative forms from English into French may rather produce substantial interference and expressions that may be wrong. It is crucial to note that stating the condition of negation in French above should not mean there are no cases of English negative expressions that can be rendered into French in positive forms. For example; “Please, do not litter. → *Respectez l’environnement*” and “I don’t mind. → *Ça m’est égal*” (Delisle, 2013, p.490). Looking at the examples above suggests that in many cases, negation of discourse is the natural approach of French, but the reverse can sometimes be true. However, abusing the use of negation in certain documents such as in administrative documents can have negative translation consequence. This further demonstrates that it is rather risky to always prescribe rigid and intangible rules to guide the learning of translation, especially when it concerns translation difficulty that are triggered by negative forms. Rather, translators can identify trends and show what is being done and what is being written.

Anacoluthia and interferences resulting from the misinterpretation of logical relationships

Certain English–French translated structures are flawed, probably because of translators’ misunderstanding of the systemic choices of the two languages, and their misrepresentation of the logical relationships. Discussing the present participles, gerunds and logical relationships, Delisle (2013, p.497) highlights that although participial clauses are frequently used in English, the present participle and

gerund in English lead to syntactic errors or criticisms (i.e., anacoluthia and solecisms) or interference resulting from misinterpretation of the logical relationships linking a present participle or gerund to the main clause. This suggests that translators working into French from English must handle present participles and gerunds carefully to avoid source language intrusion (SLI). This appears to be quite prevalent in many translations produced by translator trainees with limited translation competence.

For Delisle (2013, p.497), using the same form that ends in *-ing*, English expresses a variety of logical relationships that French does not always render with the same means. Rather, French requires the translator to clearly specify the syntactic relationships between the main clause and the participial proposition ending in *-ing*. This implies that insisting on mimicking the English structure into French can lead to anacoluthia (i.e., an error involving a syntactic construction in which an element is followed by another that does not agree properly). This is a SLI that seems to be common among translator trainees. Delisle (2013, p.497) affirms that anacoluthia is quite common in the closing forms of business correspondence (e.g., “**Espérant** une prompte réponse de votre part, veuillez agréer, Madame, l’expression...””). This is incorrect, because any sentence that begins with ‘*Espérant*’ ought to continue with ‘*je vous prie d’agréer...*’. The reason is that the participle ‘*Espérant*’ relates to the subject ‘*je*’. Thus, this is a classic example of a syntactic break.

Indeed, Delisle (2013) affirms that there are some avoidable errors that are still very common in pragmatic texts. These errors arise because writers misuse present participles as prepositions or prepositional phrases. They erroneously render ‘depending on...’ as ‘*dépendant de...*’ into French instead of ‘*selon...*’ as in ***Dépendant de** votre décision, je partirai ou resterai. For Delisle, this would have simply been ‘**Selon** votre décision, je partirai ou resterai’. Translators also erroneously render ‘Speaking of politics...’ as ‘**Parlant de politique...**’ instead of ‘**À propos de politique...**’; ‘Concerning what you told me...’ as ‘**Concernant ce que vous m’avez dit...**’; instead of ‘**Au sujet de ce que vous m’avez dit...**’; ‘Starting 3rd May...’ as ‘**Commençant le 3 mai...**’ instead of ‘**À partir du 3 mai...**’; ‘In the event of an accident...’ as ‘**Advenant un accident...**’ instead of ‘**En cas d’accident, ...**’ (p.498). The participle ‘including’ is also a cause of anacoluthia in French. For example, ‘The actual price of the share is \$120, **including** risk premium’ → **Le prix effectif de l’action est de 120\$, **incluant** une prime de risqué*’ instead of ‘*Le prix effectif de l’action est de 120\$, prime de risqué **incluse***’ (Delisle, 2013, p.498). Although these types of error are prevalent among trainees, it is crucial to note that while ‘*incluant*’ is not an option and may only amount to anacoluthia, ‘*inclus(e)*’ is not the only option to render ‘including’. Depending on the context, Delisle affirms one can also use ‘*compris*’, ‘*y compris*’, ‘*dont*’, ‘*entre autres*’, ‘*par exemple*’ and ‘*pas même*’ (expressed following a negative form), *X est de ceux-là*, etc.

English–French variability affecting passivisation during translation

While passive forms are common in English, French prefers the active forms and tries to avoid the passive as much as possible (Delisle, 2013, p.505). Although in reality, the question of passivisation is not clear-cut, the use of passive voice is justified in the two languages by the desire to highlight the agent of an action or to give certain documents (legislative, administrative, technical) an impersonal feature. Despite this, it is apt to state that by systematically substituting the active for the passive, translators (professionals and trainees alike) risk making the wording more cumbersome or failing to respect the writing style of the translated texts.

Exploring the English–French syntactical problems associated with passivisation, Gagne and Wilton-Godberfforde (2021) highlight that since English uses more passive voice than French, there are a lot of passive structures in English that do not have canonical equivalent in French. For them, while English does not have structural change in passive voices involving both direct and indirect objects, French does, and this poses problems to students. For example,

- (1) She was listened to. → *Elle a été écoutée.*
- (2) She was spoken to. → *Elle a été parlée**

In the sentences above, while the English utterances take the same passive form without any problem, in French, “*elle a été parlée*” is inappropriate. This is because, if the infinitive verbs “*écouter*” and “*parler*” are considered, one would be clearly dealing with a direct object in the first sentence as in “*écouter quelqu’un*”, but with an indirect object in the second utterance, “*parler à quelqu’un*” (Gagne & Wilton-Godberfforde, 2021). Besides, while it is necessary for the past participle “*écoutée*” to agree with the pronoun “*elle*” in the first sentence, it is not just erroneous, but also not enough to have the past participle “*parlée*” agree with “*elle*” due to the functional differences of the pronouns in the two sentences (i.e., direct object and indirect object). In this case, the translator only needs to deal with this by adapting an alternative to the canonical passive: “she was spoken to.” → “*On lui a parlé*”. The elucidations above showing the linguistic differences between English and French can easily trigger grammatical translation problems, including the translators’ inability to reformulate adequately the English structures into French TT.

Conclusion

This paper amply discussed how translation quality diminishes when translators assume a one-to-one equivalence between languages, leading to literal translations that are grammatically correct but, in most cases, unnatural or misleading. Focusing on English–French as a typologically related yet structurally divergent pair, the paper has investigated the effect of English–French morphosyntactic and lexical variability on translation quality from a contrastive linguistic perspective. Building on the premise that languages encode grammatical relations and lexical meaning

through distinct systemic choices, the paper argued that translation quality is contingent on the translator's capacity to re-encode source-text structures into target-language equivalents that respect those systemic constraints. The paper further emphasised that the systematic differences in morphosyntax and lexis between English and French can significantly impede translation quality, especially for beginners. Indeed, Hurtado Albir and Rodríguez-Inés (2023) assert that translation challenges predominantly stem from lexical and morphosyntactic issues arising from structural differences between two languages. Therefore, the paper highlighted that in English–French translation, misunderstandings often occur with sentence structures, deceptive cognate formations, polysemous structures, exclusive disjunction, juxtaposed determiners, resultative structures etc. It also highlighted that the differences in agreement systems, word order flexibility, verb paradigms, and collocation patterns within these two languages generate points of non-equivalence that challenge direct or literal transfer. Indeed, the linguistic variability influences the dimensions of accuracy, fluency, and idiomaticity in translated output. Findings in this study can, therefore, contribute to translation theory by demonstrating that systematic interlingual variability constitutes a core determinant of translation difficulty or problem and quality, and by refining the criteria for evaluating morphosyntactic and lexical choices in English–French translation.

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