

## THE RELEVANCE OF GRAMMAR TO TRANSLATION: ILLUSTRATION OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH LANGUAGES

CHINWE BLESSING WILSON-OJUKWU & CHISOMGA AMARACHUKWU  
EMEKA-EZE

Department of French  
Alvan Ikoku federal College of Education, Owerri

### Abstract

In the world today, there are several languages. Considerable evidence suggests that the capacity for language is a species-specific, biological innate trait of human beings. Every human language has its grammar. Anybody who speaks or writes acceptable sentences in a language knows its grammar. Grammar is said to operate between phonology and semantics. Grammar studies the way in which words/morphemes join to form meaningful sentences. Translation on the other hand comes from a Latin word “translates” which means “carried over”. Translation entails the transfer of information coded in one language to another language without compromising meaning. Although linguists recognize the fact that there is a Universal Grammar, it does not rule out the fact that every language has its own unique grammar. This study x rays the relevance of the knowledge of grammar to the Translation activity. The five fundamental units of grammatical structure are looked at and the need for every translator to be conversant with such knowledge is buttressed. French and English are our working languages.

**Keywords:** Translation, Grammar, French, English

### Introduction

The possession of language more than any other attribute distinguishes humans from other animals. In the world today, there are several languages. Considerable evidence suggests that the capacity for language is a species-specific, biological innate trait of human beings. According to Bescherelle 3, *La Grammaire pour tous*, « la langue est un outil grâce auquel on peut parler, écrire à d'autres personnes pour leur donner des informations sur des sujets très différent (184).” *Le Dictionnaire Universel* defines language as; « l'ensemble de signes linguistiques et de règles de combinaison de ces signes entre eux, qui constitue l'instrument de communication d'une communauté donnée (680). » Robins, cited by Syal and Jindal (2010), defined language as “a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions... infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of speakers”. This system is purely arbitrary as there is no one to one correspondence between the structure of a word and the thing it stands for. Every human language has its grammar. Anybody who speaks or writes acceptable sentences in a language knows its grammar. Grammar is said to operate between phonology and semantics. Grammar studies the way in which words/morphemes join to form meaningful sentences.

### Translation

The term Translation comes from a Latin word “translates” which means “carried over”. The ancient Greek term for translation is “metaphraisis”, which means speaking across. In the context of metaphraisis, some concepts are of much importance in translation; these concepts are fidelity and transparency. Flamand (1983), defines translation as; “ rendre le message du texte de départ avec exactitude en langue d'arrivée authentique et adaptée au sujet de la destination.” For Nida (1969), translation is “the act of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message; first in terms of meaning and

next in terms of style. Skinner, cited in Njemanze (2004) defined translation as “a verbal stimulus that has the same effect as the original or as much of the same effect as possible on a different verbal community. Wikipedia (2010) defines translation as “le fait de comprendre et de faire passer un texte original rédigé dans une autre langue tout en maintenant le même sens.” Translation therefore entails the transfer of information coded in one language to another language without compromising meaning. Translation is different from an activity like contrastive analysis, which is concerned with relating two languages as abstract systems. It rather deals with the relationship between texts as actual uses of language.

Although linguists recognize the fact that there is a Universal Grammar, it does not rule out the fact that every language has its own unique grammar. This study x rays the relevance of grammar to Translation studies. French and English are our working languages. In translating a text from French to English or vice versa, a sound knowledge of the grammar of both languages is a pre-requisite. Akakuru (2005) observed that;

Translation is not always a literal easy-to-do exercise involving only grammars across languages but often turns out to be a pondered complex, intelligent activity requiring multi-layered knowledge...this knowledge will imply not only the ability to make linguistic and pragmatic decisions, but also deontological/ethical ones.

No wonder there are various techniques of translation notably; Word for Word, Modulation, Equivalence, Transposition, Calque etc. All these techniques are relevant in translation but the translator must always judge their suitability before using them in any context. For instance, the sentence;

–“The boy is handsome” in French is “Le garçon est beau.” In this sentence the word for word translation is used, therefore the word order in both languages is same in this case. The sentence; “Je m’appelle Ngozi” if rendered word for word in English will be, “I call myself Ngozi.” However in Translation, the message is translated taking into consideration what is acceptable in the target language. A translator must consider what is appropriate in his target language, so that the message will have the pragmatic effect on the target language audience. In translating “Je m’appelle Ngozi” appropriately therefore, the translator has to resort to the technique of Transposition where a word in the source text belonging to a particular part of speech could be rendered to the target text using a different part of speech. The best translation for “Je m’appelle Ngozi” is “My name is Ngozi” instead of the word for word “I call myself Ngozi.” From the foregoing it can be deduced that knowing the grammar of the source text language and target text languages is very vital for any effective and efficient translation exercise. Since the study of grammar involves the study of five fundamental units of grammatical structure namely; Morpheme, Word, phrase, Clause and Sentence, we will look at all these areas and x ray how a sound knowledge of these units in English and French is relevant to Translation studies.

Traditionally, grammar is made up of morphology and syntax. Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words, while syntax is the study of how words combine with one another to form phrases, clauses and sentences. The interface between morphology and syntax is called morphosyntax.

## The Morpheme and the Word

Radford (1997), defined morphology as “the study of how words are formed out of smaller units (traditionally called morphemes...)”. According to Fromklin et al (2007), “knowing a language means knowing the morphemes of that language, which are elemental units that comprise words”. Morphology is therefore the study of the rules that govern the formation of words in a language. There are two branches of Morphology- inflectional morphology and derivational morphology. Inflectional morphology deals with the grammatical processes involved in the formation of plural, present, past participles, superlative and comparative degrees, while derivational morphology is concerned with word formation. A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit of language. It is the most elemental unit of grammatical form. Words like dirty- sale, table- table, chair- chaise, car-voiture contain only one morpheme. Some words contain more than one morpheme –standing- stand+ing (2 morphemes), unhappiness- un+happy+ness (3 morphemes). Some morphemes are said to be “free” while some are said to be “bound”. Free morphemes are morphemes that can stand on their own as words and make sense. Bound morphemes on the other hand must be attached to free morphemes to form meaningful units. The plural morpheme-‘s’ for instance cannot stand alone but must be attached to nouns.

A word can be defined as a minimal free form which has a degree of independence from other words in a sentence in the sense that it can be separated from them. The term, “word” can be used in three senses namely; lexeme, word form and grammatical word. Mathews (1987) defined lexeme as “a lexical unit which is entered in dictionaries as the fundamental element in the lexicon of a language”. Examples of lexemes are ‘boy’, ‘free’, ‘plate’, ‘kill’ etc. These words have separate entries in the dictionary. Word form on the other hand refers to the physical realization of spoken and written form. These are words formed by obeying the rules of word formation in a language. For instance, the lexeme, “kill” has ‘kill’, ‘kills’, ‘killed’, and ‘killing’ as its word forms. Finally, grammatical word has to do with homonymous lexemes. Word in this sense is seen as the representation of a lexeme that is associated with certain morpho-syntactic properties such as noun, adjective, verb, tense, gender, number etc. Words fall into two general classes: simple and complex. Adrian et al (2008) defined simple words as “single free morphemes that cannot be broken down further” while “complex words consist of two or more morphemes in combination”.

Since translation entails, transferring a message from a source language to a target language without compromising meaning, having a good grasp of the morphology of the two languages in question is very vital. The morpheme has been defined as the smallest meaningful unit in a language. It therefore goes without saying that the slightest change in any of the morphemes that make up a word must be taken into cognizance for any successful translation venture.

The morphological changes that verbs in English and French undergo depending on the tense, mood and aspect will now be x-rayed. Its relevance to translation will also be highlighted. The verb ‘manger’ will be considered

Je mange –I eat,	Nous mangeons- We eat
Tu manges- You eat	Vous mangez- You eat
Il mange- He/it eats	Ils mangent- They eat
Elle mange- She/it eats	Elles mangent- They eat

This is the present indicative of the verb ‘manger’. From the foregoing it can be noticed that while ‘manger’ changes from one subject pronoun to another in French language, it remains constant in English- ‘eat’. It should be noted that apart from “I eat”, “Je mange” can equally be translated “I am eating” or “I do eat” depending on the context. The translator therefore has to decide which expression to use by looking at the neighbouring words. The sentences below explain this.

Je mange chaque jour - I eat everyday

Je mange maintenant - I am eating now.

Je mange du riz - I do eat rice/ I am eating rice

Also in translating the past tense of verbs especially pronominal verbs a sound knowledge of English and French Grammar is necessary.

Ada est venue hier - Ada came yesterday

Obi est venu hier. - Obi came yesterday

Je me suis levé - I stood up.

J’ai dansé hier - I danced yesterday.

In the above sentences, it can be seen that while the English language past tense is a simple verb, the French past tense is complex. There is the auxiliary verb and the main verb. Anyone who is not conversant with the grammar of both languages might translate ‘Obi est venu hier’ as ‘Obi is come yesterday’ It must be noted that in French, verbs that show displacement are conjugated in the past tense with the auxiliary ‘Être’.

### Gender

Gender refers to the distribution of sex. It is not equally distributed in all languages. Another area of grammar that is very relevant to translation studies is the notion of gender. The French language is very gender sensitive. In fact, even inanimate objects can be masculine or feminine. So we say;

#### MASCULINE

Un cahier -des cahiers

Le cahier -les cahiers

Mon cahier - mes cahiers

Ce cahier - ces cahiers

#### FEMININE

une table -des tables

la table - les tables

ma table -mes tables

cette table - ces tables

Cahier is masculine in gender and so all the determiners : ‘un’, ‘le’, ‘mon’, and ‘ce’ are masculine. In the same vein ‘table’ is feminine in gender, so all the determiners are feminine too. Such knowledge is very vital in translation.

The boy is holding a book - Le garçon tient un cahier.

The girl is sitting on my chair - La fille s’assied sur ma chaise.

### Syntax.

Syntax has been defined as the study of how words are put together in a language to form grammatical sentences as well as the rules guiding such arrangements. Syntax stresses orderliness in the arrangement of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences. Words that form a sentence are not arranged haphazardly, but according to the syntactic rules of the language. French has its syntactic rules and so does English. They might be similarities in some instances but differences abound. For instance, the sentence pattern of English and French is SVO.

The children like rice

Les enfants aiment le riz.

I am washing plates

Je lave les assiettes.

The syntactic pattern of the above sentences is the same. However the presence of articles in French when they are absent in English must be noted.

The possessive construction is different in the two languages.

Peter's book

Le cahier de Peter

Mary's brother

Le frère de Mary

In the same vein while all adjectives precede the head noun in English, some adjectives in French language cannot precede the noun, e.g

The tall girl with an elegant dress - La grande fille avec une robe elegante.

In the French construction, 'elegant' comes after 'dress'. We cannot say for instance, ' la grande fille avec une élégante robe'.

In the case of object pronouns, the positions are different in both languages, e.g

I gave him a pen

Je lui ai donné un stylo.

I gave it to him

Je le lui ai donné

From the above it can be seen that while object pronouns come after the verb in the English syntactic structure, in French language they precede the verb.

Having a good knowledge of the syntactic rules of the source and target language is very relevant. Without such knowledge, grammatical blunders cannot be avoided. For a successful translation venture one must know words that collocate with others and use them appropriately.

### World view and word knowledge

The grammar of a particular language has so much to do with the Culture and World view of the people. Their world view determines what is grammatically acceptable and what is not. According to Herbert (1968), "mastery of a language implies more than a full knowledge of its vocabulary and its grammar. One must also be imbued with its spirits, familiar with its traditions, conversant with its sources both ancient and modern." For instance, in French, the word for 'morning' is 'le matin'. However to say 'Good morning' in French is not 'bon matin' rather it is 'Bonjour' which literally means 'good day'. In the same vein 'I am twelve years old,' 'I am thirsty', 'I am afraid', 'I am hungry' are all translated using the verb 'have'. In French we say 'J'ai douze ans', 'J'ai faim', 'J'ai soif'. These sentences literally mean; 'I have twelve years', 'I have hunger', 'I have thirst'. No wonder word for word translation does not work most of the time. Grammar differs in languages due to the peoples' world view.

Word knowledge is also very vital. As earlier explained knowing the grammar of a language entails being able to identify words which belong to that language. Such knowledge makes you easily identify borrowed words and foreign words in that language and how to use them. For instance to translate a sentence like;

'The French President had a tête à tête with his Nigerian counterpart. A translator should immediately recognize the fact that tête à tête is a borrowed word from French and should therefore not need to translate it. Word knowledge in both languages is also very relevant as it makes it easy to identify false cognates. Okpala, (2001) defined a false cognate as;

A word which physically resembles a word in another language, while their meanings are quite different...these words even

though they orthographically and phonetically resemble each other cannot be used in the same context in the two languages

Examples of false cognates are;

English	French	Correct Word
To bless	blessier	bénir
Assist	assister	aider
Actually	actuellement	réellement/ vraiment

These words look alike in both languages but have entirely different meanings. It should also be noted that some words like 'content', 'export' can either be noun or verb depending on their positions in sentences. In translation, such knowledge is very relevant.

### Figurative Language

The knowledge of the grammar of a language is very relevant to translation studies. Knowing the grammar of a language entails being able to identify figurative use of words. In translating from French to English, one should be able to identify idiomatic expressions, proverbs and figurative use of language such as simile, metaphor, personification etc. Though languages are governed by grammar, in figurative use of language, these rules are often flouted. Chima (2006) observed that; "un traducteur des proverbes doit avoir une connaissance approfondie de cultures impliquées dans les deux langues, dans l'opération traduisante qu'il est en train d'effectuer." No wonder the best technique of translating such expressions is known as 'Equivalence'. The translator only looks for the equivalence of such expressions in the target language especially because they are culture specific. On this, Nida opines that: "in translating a text, which represents an area of cultural specialization in a source language, the translator must frequently construct all sorts of disciplined equivalents so as to make intelligible something which is quite foreign to the receptor" Below are some English proverbs and idioms and their French equivalence.

#### ENGLISH

Call a spade a spade  
Once bitten, twice shy.  
Practice makes perfect

#### FRENCH

Appeler un chat un chat  
Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide  
C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron

The only way to translate the above expressions is through the technique of equivalence. That is why being able to identify them as such is very necessary for any successful translation exercise.

### Conclusion

The knowledge of two or more languages is not sufficient to make a translator. Of course it is a pre-requisite as are two hands for a professional boxer. But just as the fact of having two hands does not make a boxer, so the knowledge of different languages be they many or few does not make a translator. The translator should have an intimate knowledge with the languages in contact, be acquainted with the specific culture of the countries in question, and also be aware of the linguistic peculiarities of the countries in connection with pronunciation and terminologies. Every level of language is rule governed. For meaningful communication to take place the grammar of a language must be adhered to else they will be ambiguities and confusion. Since the Translator aims at conveying a message from one language- a source language to another language – the target language, without

compromising meaning, having a good grasp of the Grammar of the languages in question is not only vital, it is a pre-requisite.

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