The Use of Dictionaries in Translation Examinations

Abstract

A look at the performance of two cohorts of students in a translation examination (F⇒E and E⇒F): one used no dictionary at all, the other a monolingual French dictionary. The consequences of using such a dictionary are considered.

Introduction

In June 1998 Raphael Salkie of the University of Brighton kindly put on the AFLS mailbase news bulletin the results of his e-mail survey on dictionary use in examinations. Discussion focused on two main groups of students : (1) non-native speakers of English (NNSE) who were not language students, and (2) language students, whether NNSE or not. The former group provoked the bulk of the discussion, which led to the majority view that the use of dictionaries in examinations had more disadvantages than advantages. There were fewer responses regarding the second group, but it transpired that only 3 (out of 17) universities never allowed dictionaries, and 14 either always or sometimes allowed them. There were five comments, all of which can be interpreted as saying, "Why not use dictionaries?" Although it is never stated, I believe the respondents were talking about bilingual dictionaries.

Birkbeck College has a policy of not allowing dictionaries of English into examinations for the reasons eloquently expounded by Raphael Salkie's respondents with regard to NNSE who are not language students. When, therefore, the teachers of a course in French translation (from and into) wished to allow their students to use dictionaries in the examination, they were obliged to specify that these would be monolingual French ones. This article does not attempt to question College policy regarding dictionaries in examinations, but to evaluate the pros and cons of using monolingual French dictionaries.

Background information

The course taken by the students includes sessions on various aspects of translation theory, and has the specific feature that each translation undertaken goes through a phase of draft, which is where the bulk of the interactive work is done. Students also complete a 1000-word translation and commentary as a project in term 2. All coursework contributes to the final result. We have, however, kept the traditional examination format of a 3-hour unseen paper with a 250-word text to be translated into English and a similar-length text to be translated into French. Text-types are limited to contemporary fiction and quality newspaper articles of general interest. The reasons for retaining the traditional type of examination (and not assessing purely on coursework, say) are as follows:

1. The examination gives a focal point to the course.

2. In terms of procedure, it is fair to everyone, as everyone is working under the same conditions.

3. It is a fair test of the ability to apply strategies and techniques practised and discussed throughout the year.

4. It is highly convenient and economical as a testing device.

5. It produces results we can trust (and which sometimes act as a counter-balance to unexpected high coursework grades).

6. All the above weigh more heavily than any argument about simulating real-life situations and allowing more time and free-access to reference books. (The course is only 1/11 of a BA degree at Birkbeck, and does not warrant the investment in time needed to organise a more complicated procedure.)

Readers may find some, even all, of the above reasons debatable, but it is not the purpose of this article to enter that debate.

The French Department at Birkbeck College teaches mature students exclusively in the evenings. Its intake is extremely diverse: ages range from 21 to 70+, backgrounds include native French, native English (the majority) and students of many other nationalities. There is also a wide range of abilities in any one class.

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Comparison of performance

This study does not in any sense constitute a piece of experimental research. Rather, it is a post-hoc examination of how the two groups of students fared. There was, inevitably, some difficulty in matching students from each group after the event, and my attempts to do this led to a reduction in the numbers of performances that could be considered. The following is a description of the selection process and of the groups finally retained.

The 96–97 translation cohort comprised 27 students. Let us call this group "cohort A". They were not allowed any dictionary in the examination. The 97–98 cohort comprised 16 students. They form "cohort B". Cohort B translated the same texts as cohort A but under "mock examination" conditions, and using monolingual French dictionaries.

Each translation produced will be called a "script", and each student produced two scripts, one E⇒F and one F⇒E. All the scripts of each cohort had been marked by two examiners who had agreed a percentage grade for each script.

The method used for matching scripts across the two cohorts was to choose scripts from cohort A which matched most closely those of cohort B in terms of the percentage grades awarded to the scripts by the examiners.

The first issue to be addressed was the presence of French L1 speakers in each of the cohorts. Since this group could not be compared directly with English L1 speakers, it was necessary to separate them out. I found that for each translation, 3 scripts in cohort A could be matched with scripts from cohort B. I discarded the scripts which could not be matched. That meant I was examining 12 French L1 scripts (cohort A: 3 x E⇒F + 3 x F⇒E; cohort B: 3 x E⇒F + 3 x F⇒E).

Once the French L1 speakers had been separated out from the two cohorts, there remained 24 students in cohort A and 11 students in cohort B. Using cohort B as a base, I selected scripts from cohort A which matched the most closely those in cohort B in terms of percentage grades awarded. For each translation, 11 English L1 scripts in each cohort were matched. That meant I was examining 44 English L1 scripts (cohort A: 11 x E⇒F + 11 x F⇒E; cohort B: 11 x E⇒F + 11 x F⇒E).

Table 1: Numbers of scripts

Cohort A	3 French L1 speakers	6 scripts	6 scripts retained
Cohort B	5 French L1 speakers	10 scripts	6 scripts retained
Cohort A	24 English L1 speakers	48 scripts	22 scripts retained
Cohort B	11 English L1 speakers	22 scripts	22 scripts retained

The texts used are to be found in the Appendix. They are:

French to English: an extract from Camus' *La femme adultère*, 1957.

English to French: *Secrets of the Seat* (a piece from a major newspaper about the ending of the TV show *Mastermind)*, 1996.

Since this study is of dictionary use, I scanned all retained scripts, looking at translations of lexical items. Inevitably, it was the items that caused problems which attracted my attention and among those, I selected the ones which could have been helped by the use of dictionaries.

For each text, I made a list of the lexical items which produced errors I had reason to think could be avoided by use of a dictionary, either bilingual or monolingual. The list gives the number of lexical items producing errors. I then wrote down all the errors made on those items in all the scripts retained. This enabled me to count (a) how many different errors were made for any one item, and (b) the total number of errors made for the item. For example, English L1 speakers in cohort B produced for the English word "contestants" the following errors: *« contestataires »*, *« contestants »* (3 scripts), *« compétiteurs »* (2 scripts). Thus, the number of different errors produced was 3, and the total number of errors produced was 6.

I propose to briefly consider the case of the French L1 speakers first, before concentrating on the performances of the English L1 speakers. Cohort A contained 3 French L1 speakers. I matched the percentage grades awarded to the 6 French L1 scripts in cohort A (2 scripts per student) with the 6 closest scripts in cohort B. The following is a summary of my findings for French L1 scripts.

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Table 2: French L1 scripts
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French to English *La femme adultère*

Corpus of errors	Cohort A	Cohort B
Number of lexical items producing errors	8	7
Number of different errors produced	12	8
Total number of errors	14	16

English to French *Secrets of the Seat*

Corpus of errors	Cohort A	Cohort B
Number of lexical items producing errors	13	7
Number of different errors produced	19	10
Total number of errors	20	10

Since only 3 scripts for each translation were involved in each cohort, it is clear that no conclusion can be drawn from this comparison. However, it is perhaps interesting to observe that for the F⇒E passage differences between the cohorts are minimal, whereas for the E⇒F passage cohort B shows lower error figures that cohort A. Could it be that the use of a monolingual French dictionary has helped the students concerned as they translate into their L1?

Let us turn now to the scripts produced by English L1 speakers. 11 scripts were retained for each translation in each cohort, making a total of 44 scripts considered. The following is a summary of my findings for the English L1 scripts.

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Table 3: English L1 scripts
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French to English *La femme adultère*

Corpus of errors	Cohort A	Cohort B
Number of lexical items producing errors	12	12
Number of different errors produced	46	32 (−30%)
Total number of errors	61	48 (−21%)

English to French *Secrets of the Seat*

Corpus of errors	Cohort A	Cohort B
Number of lexical items producing errors	20	18 (−1%)
Number of different errors produced	62	57 (−0.08%)
Total number of errors	97	99 (+0.02%)

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Discussion
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I am not claiming any statistical significance in these figures, especially as this study was not deliberately set up as an experiment and attempts at matching the variables were post-hoc. It should also be borne in mind that cohort B was the first cohort to use a monolingual French dictionary, and, although this fact was often discussed in class, no formal training in the use of such a dictionary was offered.

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The translation from French to English
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I am considering here only the English L1 scripts.

Although the number of lexical items producing errors was the same for both cohorts, cohort B showed lower figures both for the number of different errors (46 to 32, a drop of 14, or 30%), and for the total number of errors (61 to 48, a drop of 13, or 21%). It could well be that the use of a monolingual French dictionary was a factor in producing these results.

Not only was the number of errors reduced, but one did not find amongst the cohort B scripts any of the odder renderings the cohort A scripts exhibited, e.g.

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Table 4

Source text	Sample of errors produced (cohort A)
mallette d'échantillons	basket of mushrooms, emergency hammer
étudiant en droit	loyal disciple
(rire) avide	wry, gruff, barking
(yeux) saillants	watery, distant, sultry.

Having checked all the error-producing items in *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, I suggest that the English L1 speakers were in a position to produce an error-free version, since *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* entries give explanations and paraphrases which can disambiguate the source text. However, that suggestion does not take into account (a) the students' ability in English or (b) the time it takes to look words up.

It would be fair to say, therefore, that use of a monolingual French dictionary is potentially helpful to English L1 speakers translating from French into English. It could be that the more familiar they are with the lay-out and methods of the dictionary, the more efficient they will be in their use of it.

The translation from English into French

I am considering here only the English L1 scripts.

Of what help might a monolingual French dictionary be to an English L1 speaker translating from English into French? The following seem plausible:

1. One can check spellings and genders.

2. One can make a guess at a word (e.g. *« émergence »* for "emergency") and see (a) if it exists and (b) whether it means what one would like it to mean in the circumstances.

3. Faced with a lexical gap, one can think of a related word in French and see if the entry leads one any nearer to the word sought, e.g. look up *« interroger »* for "to grill". I would call this a technique of word association or "lateral thinking".

4. If one systematically checked the French words one wished to use, one could eliminate such calqued items as *« en aide de »* for "in aid of", or French *« location »* for English "location".

Such were my hypotheses, and with these hypotheses in mind, I expected a considerably lower error count in the scripts of the cohort B students than in those of the cohort A students. My findings, however, did not bear out my hypotheses. As can be seen from the figures given earlier, there was a slight drop in the number of lexical items producing errors (20 to 18, or –1%), and a slight drop in the number of different errors produced (62 to 57, or –0.08%). There was a slight increase in the total number of errors produced by cohort B (97 to 99, or +0.02%), but 2 students in cohort B omitted small parts of the text thus increasing the total error count by 6 tokens.

Both cohort A and cohort B students exhibited considerable numbers of spelling and gender errors (e.g. errors of French: *filme*, *revenge*, *exchange*, *son retraite*, *la Cambodie*).

It would seem, therefore, that cohort B students were not exploiting the monolingual French dictionary in the ways one might expect. It might be the case that with specific training, English L1 speakers might be able to use such a dictionary to reduce error-counts. However, it is not clear how far such use would be possible, given the constraints of a timed examination.

Using the dictionary

To satisfy my curiosity about the relative merits of using a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary, and in order to obtain a corpus for training purposes, I checked all 18 lexical items which had produced errors in the English L1 cohort B scripts E⇒F translation. The full source text can be found in the Appendix. My dictionary was *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* 1995.

Use of *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* could have eliminated a number of errors simply by correcting the spelling or gender in French (e.g. *le Cambodge*) or by confirming or eliminating a calque, e.g. English words: *pressure*, *emergency*, *location*, *in aid of*, *memento*, for which students could have

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looked up the "French" words they had "invented": « *pressure, émergence, location, en aide de, mémento*" to good effect. The dictionary thus gives good service on the five words mentioned, and on "Cambodia" — 6 in all. The other 12 items are more complicated.

1. **black leather <u>chair</u>**
   target text: *fauteuil de cuir noir*
   errors produced: *chaise* x 6
   comment: The trouble with *chaise* is that it would not occur to many students to look it up at all. If they did, they would see that is has a range of meanings, but alas, and surprisingly, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* does not send you to *fauteuil*, a real disappointment.

2. **<u>spotlight</u>**
   target text: *spot, projecteur*
   errors produced: *lampe directive, lampe* x 2, *phare, lumière vive* x 2, *lumière*
   comment: You would need to have an inkling that *« spot »* was a possible rendering of "spotlight" and if you did, you would find both *spot* and *projecteur*.

3. **wartime <u>interrogation</u>**
   target text: *interrogatoire*
   errors produced: *interrogation* x 10; blank
   comment: Would one look it up at all? If yes, then the entry does not send you to *interrogatoire*, though the observant might notice the word, which is the next but one item on the page.

4. **the show's <u>format</u>**
   target text: *formule*
   errors produced: *format* x 7; *forme*
   comment: *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* would eliminate *« format »*, but you are not sent to *formule*. Sad.

5. **<u>contestant</u>**
   target text: *participant*
   errors produced: *contestataire*; *contestant* x 3; *compétiteur* x 2
   comment: *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* gives the impression that, though rare, *contestant* is a possible translation. It does not send you to *participant*. Only the very observant would see that the entry for *contester* flashes a warning.

6. **<u>grill</u>**
   target text: *interroger*; *cuisiner*
   errors produced: *brûler*; *griller*; *mettre sur la sellette*
   comment: *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* would eliminate *« griller »*. Where do you go from there? Try another approach (lateral thinking) and look up *interroger*.

7. **a <u>duplicate</u> chair**
   target text: *un deuxième fauteuil*; *un fauteuil identique*
   errors produced: *une chaise duplicata*; *un siège secondaire*; *une copie de*; *une duplication*
   comment: If you noticed *dupliquer* as an entry, you would get to *double* and *copie*, but these are of little help here because of constraints of usage.

8. **<u>opening</u> <u>titles</u>**
   target text: *générique*
   errors produced: *en certaines ouvertures*; *les titres d'écran*; *les titres de commencement*; *aux premières séquences*; *la séance de l'ouverture*; *les premiers titres*; *les titres du début*
   comment: You might look up *titre*, but that is not a lot of help. Try another approach (lateral thinking again). *Film* sends you to *générique*!

9. **a small <u>ransom</u> in aid of Cambodia**
   target text: *une petite rançon en faveur du Cambodge*
   errors produced: *une petite somme* x 3; *de l'argent* x 2; blank
   comment: If you look up an imagined word *ransome* and try some variants, you might reach *rançon*, or is that making too great a claim? On the other hand, the entries for both *kidnapper* and *otage* contain the word *rançon*.

10. **<u>quizmaster</u>**
    target text: *animateur*; *meneur de jeu*
    errors produced: *questionneur*; *compère*; *maître des questions* x 2; *maître de quiz*; *interrogateur*; blank x 2
    comment: Astonishingly *quiz* is not in *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*. However, if you examine the very long entry for *jeu* you might notice *meneur de jeu*, and if you look that up, you will confirm the meaning, and be offered *animateur*.

11. **a last act of <u>revenge</u>**
    target text: *un dernier acte de vengeance*
    errors produced: *une dernière revanche*; *en revanche*; *une chance de revanche*; blank x 3
    comment: If you look up *revanche* you are sent to *vengeance* which I think is nearer the English meaning here.

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12. **put the chair <u>out</u> to <u>grass</u> in my study**
    target text: *qu'il prenne sa retraite*
    errors produced: *la laisser fermenter*; *la planter*; *la retirer*; *la placer dans une position principale*, blank
    comment: You might look up *herbe*, which gives you *pâture*, which might, if you are francophone, decode the English for you. Not a lot of help for an anglophone. Judging by some of the errors produced, several of the latter were not familiar with the expression.

Absolute disappointments among the 12: *chair*, *format*, *duplicate*, *out to grass*

Redeemable disappointments: *interrogation*, *contestant*, *grill*, *opening titles*, *ransom*, *quizmaster*

Bullseyes: *spotlight*, *revenge*

For the record, *Harraps Shorter* 1991 bilingual dictionary has a mixed offering. It does not always supply full information (*spotlight*, *contestant*, *duplicate*), sometimes makes you work hard (only if you look up *credits* do you get *générique*) and on two occasions is of no help at all (*format*, *pressure*). On the remaining 12 of the 18 items, it gives complete satisfaction. However, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, too, gives good satisfaction: it fails on 4 items, makes you work hard on 6, but will answer your needs fully on the remaining 8.

The above dictionary analysis applies to English L1 speakers translating from English into French. The study would indicate that although a bilingual dictionary may be the first choice for the English L1 speaker translating into French, in its absence, a French monolingual dictionary could be used to good effect.

Conclusion

The question asked here is not whether it is better for examinees to use a bilingual or a monolingual French dictionary in translation examinations, since in Birkbeck (at present at least) we have no choice. The question is rather, what difference does it make to use a monolingual French dictionary rather than none at all? And, leading on from that, how can students use the monolingual French dictionary to its full potential?

We have seen that, produced in examination conditions, English L1 F⇒E scripts in cohort B displayed considerably fewer lexical errors (a drop of 21%) than English L1 scripts in cohort A. Since cohort B used a monolingual French dictionary, it is possible, perhaps likely, that the dictionary was a factor.

The study would seem to suggest that under examination conditions students did not exploit the full resources of the monolingual French dictionary, especially English L1 students translating from English into French. It may well be the case that if formalised training in the use of a monolingual French dictionary were provided throughout the course, students would make much better use of it when it came to the examination. One also feels intuitively that a dictionary such as *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, with its constant use of synonymy and analogy, is a very powerful learning tool in the search for improved competence in the areas of French lexis and register, and that its regular use can therefore bring great benefits to students, perhaps more benefits that the utilitarian, narrow, bilingual dictionary.

P.M. Sewell
Department of French
Birkbeck College
University of London

References

References

Le Nouveau Petit Robert 1995
Harraps Shorter French and English Dictionary 1991

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Appendix

This is an extract from Albert Camus' 1957 short story, La femme adultère. *Janine and her husband Marcel, a travelling salesman, are a couple (of French descent) living in Algeria. This scene takes place on a bus.*

« Janine ! » Elle sursauta à l'appel de son mari. Elle pensa une fois de plus combien ce prénom était ridicule, grande et forte comme elle était. Marcel voulait savoir où se trouvait la mallette d'échantillons. Elle explora

du pied l'espace vide sous la banquette et rencontra un objet dont elle décida qu'il était la mallette. Elle ne pouvait se baisser, en effet, sans étouffer un peu. Au collège pourtant, elle était première en gymnastique, son souffle était inépuisable. Y avait-il si longtemps de cela? Vingt-cinq ans n'étaient rien puisqu'il lui semblait que c'était hier qu'elle hésitait entre la vie libre et le mariage, hier encore qu'elle pensait avec angoisse à ce jour où, peut-être, elle vieillirait seule. Elle n'était pas seule, et cet étudiant en droit qui ne voulait jamais la quitter se trouvait maintenant à ses côtés. Elle avait fini par l'accepter, bien qu'il fût un peu petit et qu'elle n'aimât pas beaucoup son rire avide et bref, ni ses yeux noirs trop saillants. Mais elle aimait son courage à vivre, qu'il partageait avec les Français de ce pays. Elle aimait aussi son air déconfit quand les événements, ou les hommes, trompaient son attente. Surtout, elle aimait être aimée, et il l'avait submergée d'assiduités. A lui faire sentir si souvent qu'elle existait pour lui, il la faisait exister réellement. Non, elle n'était pas seule...

This article was printed in a major British newspaper on 1.12.96. It has been slightly adapted.

Secrets of the Seat

The black leather chair and the spotlight which became the symbols of *Mastermind* were designed to recreate the atmosphere of a wartime interrogation. Bill Wright, a former prisoner of war who devised the show's format, wanted contestants to feel they were being grilled under the fiercest pressure.

Although a duplicate chair is kept in case of emergencies, the same original model has been used since 1972, transported around the country by lorry. The duplicate chair has been used in the opening titles and for certain comedy shows. Magnus Magnusson has always refused to sit on either chair.

Between filming, the main chair is kept in a secret location in London and guarded closely. In 1979 students at the University of Coleraine "kidnapped" it and demanded a small ransom in aid of Cambodia. After tense negotiations, it was handed back with no money changing hands.

Although Magnusson has always avoided it, he may be forced to sit in the chair for the first time as part of the programme's finale next year. Under the famous spotlight, he is expected to be asked questions on his 25 years as quizmaster by former contestants in a last act of revenge.

Magnusson suggested last night that the BBC should present him with the chair as a "permanent memento of 25 of the happiest years of my life. I would like to put it out to grass in my study."

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