Translation Units

Translation units: meaning and use

Reading the text to be translated, the basic task of the translator, in the transfer process from SL to TL, is to transcend the words to the concepts behind them. In this phase of translation, the translator goes beyond words, languages, into pure sheer thought, before encoding the message in the new shape. This is called attaining Universal Semantic Representation (USR). Literal or word for word translation occurs whenever there are no semantic or grammatical obstacles, i.e. when one noun in the SL corresponds to one noun in the TL, one verb to one verb, one structural pattern to as similar structural pattern and when the word order is also identical. However, such ideal conditions generally do not exist, except perhaps in sister languages coming from a common tongue with similar grammar and syntax as Romance languages, which all derive from Latin.

In the case of English and Arabic however, we neither have sister languages nor semantically close ones as they derive from two different language families. This does not deny the fact that they have some common vocabulary items due to the exchange that occurs over the centuries of mutual contact. But they both differ significantly in grammar and syntax; English belonging to the family of Germanic languages and Arabic to the Aramaic or Semitic languages group. Between English and Arabic, therefore, literal translation may occur in very simple and short sentences, ones such as: *The cat ate the mouse*, القطة أكلت الفأر, but never in complex structures. In Arabic, or in English, a concept may not always coincide with one word, and so one word in one language may correspond to several words in the other and the other way around. Both languages have different characteristics. Arabic tends to be analytical. English tends to be structural and more synthetic, using compound expressions. A translation into English from Arabic will typically run much longer than the original without any addition to the general message. The translator must then learn what constitutes a concept, a unit of thought in the SL, define the message to be translated into as many translation units as there are concepts, and finally translate them into their TL equivalents.

A translation unit is the smallest portion of a sentence whose words cannot be translated separately without resulting in nonsense or mistranslation.

Lexical translation units

Translation units may be lexical, based on words or expressions which cannot be found in a good dictionary. Overtranslation is a common mistake made by beginners: several translation units are seen where only one exists and the end result is either nonsense or mistranslation i.e. an inaccurate interpretation of the SL:

Easter, movable feast, A Christian celebration of the Resurrection of Christ; Good Friday, Friday before Easter:
The translator must learn that The Good Friday is not good at all and that Easter is not related to east; Thus Good Friday corresponds to the nonsensical جمعة الجمعة and Easter stands for the nonsensical ريح الشرقية. Similarly, one who comes early in English equals one who (literally) comes at a good hour in French. Also, machine gun: does not stand forrushاً، rather forسلاح أشعة.

1- Lexical translation units in English and Arabic:

Nominal phrases: a city center وسط البلد, a bus conductor سائق حافلة.
Verbal phrases: to refer to يشير إلى, and throw away يرمي.
Adverbial phrases: rapidly بسرعة, gracefully ببراعة, at midnight متنصف الليل.
Adjectival phrases: critical مميز, comfortable معز، مشروع، ختير.
Prepositional phrases: above زائد, over أدناه, under أعلاه.
Conjunctural phrases: as لأن, when حين, where حيث.
Adjectives: learnable قابل للتعلم, breakable سريع الانكسار, graceful شيق.
Adverbs: henceforth من الآن فصداً, easily بسهولة.

Standard expressions:
General expressions which are standard and idiomatic in the language also constitute units of translation. They involve for instance a verb and a direct object, such as:

To draw a comparison يعقد مقارنة, to meet an obligation يثير اعتراضًا, or to raise an objection يتحقق, to make a profit بيفي بالالتزام، أرباحًا.

Or a nominal group, such as:
Circumstances beyond one’s control منفذ الغرقى or طوف النجاة.
Or even a group adjective-noun:
A bad cold نزلة برد, a severe injury جراح بليغة, a German car سيارة ألمانية.

2- Grammatical translation units
Translation may also be grammatical, based on different grammatical or syntactical structures between the two languages, structures giving cohesive unity to a general concept.

Verbs followed by prepositions:
Verbs whose construction requires that they be followed by a special preposition before a noun or another verb constitute translation units:

This depends on you: هذا يعتمد عليك.
Sometimes the prepositions coincide in the two languages; but other times can be different as well, or there can be a preposition in one language and none in the other. Grammar books will offer lists of such prepositional constructions. Otherwise, consult your dictionary.

Examples of grammatical constructions which coincide:

To get used to يعتاد على
Which do not coincide:

He sat at the table جلس على الطاولة

Examples in which there is a preposition in one language and none in the other:

Ask for يطلب; overlook يغض الطرف عن; look at

Active/passive voice:
Very often an active voice in Arabic will be translated as a passive voice in English. The corresponding structure constitutes a translation unit.

Your were notified. نتم أشعراكم instead of the journalistic إشعاركم English prefers the passive pattern above to the active pattern: we notified you. The use of the passive voice in English will produce an idiomatic translation.

Compound expressions/Concise expressions:

These are tight fitting trousers: ضيق هذه أسراويل
منطق ذات نمو سكاني سريع: a fast growing population area:

3- Extended translation units
Translation units are not necessarily limited to phrases, small groups or words, or different grammatical structures: they can encompass entire sentences or even entire messages. Idioms and slang, greetings and reflex-formulas, clichés, proverbs and sayings, public signs and regulations, all constitute translation units whose elements cannot be translated separately:

See you soon إلى اللقاء
Look here, cannot you be more careful افتح عينيك، هل عميت!
I was on tenterhooks كنت في ورطة
Your brother is as good as gold أخوك ولد طيب
As he spoke, I was getting miffed لما تحدث، تمكني العذاب
As you sow, so shall you reap كما تزرع تḥمص
One way street طريق باتجاه واحد
4- Delineation of translation units

It is good practice for the student translator to learn how to delineate translation units, i.e. make a semiological analysis of the text, by cutting out and pairing the words which constitute single concepts in order to translate them with their proper counterparts. Experienced translators will automatically do a quick mental delineation of translation units before a translation, and after some practice this procedure should become habit.

Make sure that all nominal, verbal, adverbial, prepositional and conjunctural phrases are correctly recognized, as well as grammatical TUs such as active/passive constructions, prepositions attached to verbs, and all the idiomatic expressions which are grouped under the heading Extended TUs.

Everyone/tells/her/that/she/is/the/spitting/figure/ of/here/mother.

It should be noted that (the spitting figure of) constitutes one concept, therefore, should be recognized as one TU.

They were asked/to leave/the country/in a couple of days.

No smoking/

Heaven helps those who help others/

Public signs and regulations, proverbs and sayings, which are fixed in the language, constitute one TU each.

Overtranslation and undertranslation are standard translation mistakes resulting from improper TU delineation:

- **Overtranslation** occurs when the translator sees more than TUs in the source text than actually exists.
- **Undertranslation**, when the translator sees fewer TUs than actually exist.

**Example one**: what do you want to say?

If the translator sees two TUs in the verb *to want to say* instead of only one (يقصده), as is correct, the result will be an overtranslation: *what do you want to say?* Instead of *what do you mean?* The first translation is erroneous because it introduces an intent absent from the source text, and would be more the equivalent of *ماذا أردت أن تقول لها؟* *What did you want to say to her?*
**Example two:** when shall I see you again? (متى نلتقي؟)
If the translator fails to recognize that the verb نلتقي actually constitutes two TUs (to see / again) the result will be an undertranslation: when shall I see you? Instead of when shall I see you again? When shall we meet again?

**Example three:** where do you come from? (من أي البلاد أنت؟)
If the translator fails to recognize that the question is a fixed expression and constitutes one TU (what’s your country of origin?) the result will be a mistranslation: where have you been? Instead of what’s your nationality?

**Example four:** what does your mother do? (ما مهنة أمك؟)
If the translator fails to recognize that the question is a fixed expression and constitutes one TU (what’s the occupation of your mother?) the result will be a mistranslation: what’s your mother doing? Instead of what’s your mother’s job?

In summary, the main purpose behind the delineation of a text into translation units is to remind the novice translator to work with concepts rather than words: you must rise to the message behind the signs in order to avoid error, nonsense or just plain unidiomatic translation.
Delineate the TUs in the following sentences and expressions:

1- Please set out the tea cups.
2- Would you like another cup of tea?
3- Come tomorrow morning at 9 without fail.
4- I won’t fail this exam.
5- They are not in the know.
6- They are not to know.
7- Concerning this matter, we are all in the same boat.
8- The same boat took them to the other side of the lake.
9- There’s a man in the street standing in front of our door.
10- How does the man in the street feel about this issue?
11- Serves you right!
12- Guests must be served first.
13- One can never tell!
14- One can never tell you anything for fear of having it broadcast everywhere.
15- That takes the cake!
16- Take the rest of the cake with you, we’re on a diet.
17- I took this antique chest for a song at a flea market.
18- For this song you’ll get a kiss.
19- There is no need to rub it in.
20- The instructions say: first rub the paste in, let it dry, then puff it to a polish.
21- You are going about it in the wrong way.
22- We drove up the street the wrong way.
23- There you go again: you spelled the beans!
24- Be careful not to spell any beans on the floor.
25- The prisoner was shot in the arm while trying to escape.
26- Lower interest rates have given the economy a shot in the arm.
27- That’s it, I get it
28- Buddy
29- Sweepstakes
30- A booby trap
31- A strange thing happened to me
32- Nothing doing
33- You must be kidding
34- To be busy reading
35- For goodness sake
36- Congratulations
37- If you think I’m gonna fall for this
38- Speaking