

Meaning, Context and Interpretation in French-English Translation: Examining the Limits of Literal Translation

Ihekuna Chidinma Ann
Faculty of Humanities, Department of French, Imo State University, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author: **Ihekuna Chidinma Ann**

Article Info

E-ISSN: 3107-7129
Volume: 02
Issue: 06
Received: 06-09-2026
Accepted: 04-10-2026
Published: 02-11-2026
Page No: 26-30

Abstract
Translation is a complex linguistic and intercultural activity that involves more than the transfer of words from one language into another. It requires the interpretation of meaning within specific linguistic, situational and cultural contexts. In French-English translation, differences in grammatical structures, lexical associations, idiomatic expressions and cultural conventions frequently create difficulties for translators who depend excessively on literal translation. Although literal translation may be appropriate in certain linguistic situations, its application without adequate consideration of context can result in semantic distortion, unnatural expressions and the loss of intended communicative meaning. This paper examines the relationship between meaning, context and interpretation in French-English translation, with particular attention to the limitations of literal translation as a translation procedure. Drawing on semantic, pragmatic and functionalist perspectives, the paper argues that successful translation requires the translator to move beyond formal linguistic correspondence and consider the communicative intention of the source text. Through selected French-English expressions and illustrative examples, the study demonstrates how contextual interpretation, cultural awareness and appropriate translation strategies contribute to the production of accurate and meaningful target texts. The paper concludes that translation should be understood as an interpretative process in which linguistic competence must be complemented by contextual sensitivity and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: French-English Translation, Meaning, Context, Interpretation, Literal Translation, Translation Strategies, Intercultural Communication

Introduction

Translation occupies a central position in communication between speakers of different languages and cultures. As a means of linguistic mediation, it facilitates the exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences and cultural values across linguistic boundaries. However, the process of translating a text from one language into another is considerably more complex than replacing words in the source language with their apparent equivalents in the target language. It involves the reconstruction of meaning within a different linguistic and cultural environment.

In French-English translation, this complexity becomes particularly evident because the two languages, despite sharing certain historical and lexical relationships, differ in their grammatical organisation, idiomatic expressions, semantic associations and patterns of communication. These differences often create situations in which a direct translation of individual words fails to communicate the intended meaning of the original expression.

One of the persistent challenges in translation practice is the tendency to depend on literal translation as though linguistic equivalence necessarily guarantees semantic equivalence. Literal translation, generally understood as a procedure that maintains close correspondence with the lexical and grammatical structures of the source language, can be useful when the two languages

share comparable expressions and meanings. Nevertheless, its effectiveness becomes limited when expressions are influenced by idiomatic usage, figurative language, cultural references or specific communicative situations.

Meaning is not always contained within individual words. It is also shaped by the relationships between words, the circumstances in which expressions are produced, the intentions of speakers and the knowledge shared by participants in communication. Consequently, translators must interpret the source message before reconstructing it in the target language.

For example, the French expression Il pleut des cordes cannot be adequately translated into English through the literal expression "It is raining ropes." Although the individual words may be correctly identified, the resulting English expression does not communicate the intended meaning. The appropriate equivalent, "It is raining cats and dogs" or simply "It is pouring with rain", depends on the context and the intended register.

This example demonstrates that translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but an interpretative activity that requires the identification of meaning beyond the surface structure of an expression.

Against this background, this paper examines the relationship between meaning, context and interpretation in French-English translation. It investigates the limitations of literal translation, discusses the influence of linguistic and cultural contexts on meaning construction and highlights the importance of interpretative competence in achieving effective translation.

Conceptualising Meaning in Translation

Meaning constitutes the foundation of every translation activity. Without an adequate understanding of the meaning conveyed by a source text, the translator cannot produce a reliable target text. However, meaning itself is not a simple or fixed linguistic phenomenon. It operates at different levels and may be influenced by lexical choices, grammatical structures, discourse relationships, cultural conventions and communicative intentions.

In linguistic analysis, a distinction is commonly established between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning refers to the basic or referential meaning of a linguistic expression, whereas connotative meaning involves the additional associations, emotions and cultural implications attached to it.

This distinction is particularly relevant to French-English translation. A French word may have an apparent English equivalent while carrying additional contextual or cultural associations that cannot be reproduced through direct lexical substitution.

For instance, the French word maison and the English word "house" are closely related in their basic referential meanings. However, depending on the context, maison may also appear in expressions where "home", "household" or an institution is more appropriate in English.

Similarly, the French expression chez moi may be translated as "at my house", "at home" or "my place", depending on the communicative situation. A translator who selects an equivalent without considering context may produce a grammatically acceptable but pragmatically unsuitable translation.

Meaning therefore extends beyond dictionary definitions. It emerges through the interaction between linguistic elements and the circumstances in which they are used. The translator's responsibility is consequently to identify the intended meaning of an expression rather than simply reproduce its most obvious lexical equivalent.

The Role of Context in French-English Translation

Context is an essential element in the interpretation of language. It provides the information necessary to understand why a particular expression is used, what it communicates and how it should be interpreted.

In translation studies, context can be examined through several interconnected dimensions.

Linguistic Context

Linguistic context refers to the words, expressions and grammatical structures surrounding a particular linguistic item. The meaning of a word may change according to the expressions with which it occurs.

For example, the French verb passer has several possible English equivalents. It may mean "to pass", "to spend", "to take", "to undergo" or "to hand over", depending on its linguistic environment.

Consider the Following Expressions:

- Passer un examen – To take an examination.
- Passer du temps – To spend time.
- Passer une commande – To place an order.
- Passer par une période difficile – To go through a difficult period.

A literal translation of passer as "to pass" in every situation would produce inaccurate or unnatural English expressions.

The examples demonstrate that lexical meaning is often determined by collocation and grammatical relationships. Translators must therefore interpret words within their immediate linguistic environments rather than isolate them from the structures in which they occur.

Situational Context

Situational context concerns the circumstances surrounding an act of communication. It includes the participants, their relationship, the purpose of the communication, the setting and the particular situation in which an expression is produced.

An expression may communicate different meanings depending on whether it is used in a formal, informal, professional or personal situation.

For example, the French expression Vous pouvez entrer may be translated as "You may come in" or "You can come in", depending on the circumstances. In a formal institutional environment, the translator may need to preserve the politeness and authority conveyed by the original expression.

Similarly, Je vous en prie cannot be assigned one fixed English equivalent in every situation. It may mean "You're welcome", "Please", "Go ahead" or "Don't mention it", depending on the conversational context.

The situational dimension of context is therefore indispensable to the production of translations that preserve the communicative intention of the source text.

Cultural Context

Language is closely connected to culture. Words and expressions frequently reflect the historical experiences,

social values, beliefs and conventions of the communities that use them.

Cultural context becomes particularly important when translating expressions that contain references to social practices, traditions, humour, religion and collective experiences.

For example, French expressions such as bon appétit, la rentrée and terroir carry cultural associations that may not be fully represented by their closest English equivalents.

Although bon appétit is commonly translated as "enjoy your meal", the French expression also reflects a conventional social practice associated with meals.

Similarly, la rentrée may refer to the return to school, university or professional activities after a holiday period. Translating it simply as "the return" may fail to communicate its institutional and cultural significance.

The translator must therefore recognise that cultural meaning is not always transferable through direct lexical equivalence. Appropriate translation may require contextual explanation, adaptation or the use of a functional equivalent.

Literal Translation and Its Limitations

Literal translation is one of the recognised procedures used in translation practice. It generally involves maintaining close correspondence between the linguistic structures and lexical elements of the source text and those of the target text.

When French and English expressions share similar meanings and structural patterns, literal translation can produce accurate and natural results. For example, La situation est difficile can appropriately be translated as "The situation is difficult."

However, the procedure becomes problematic when the source expression depends on idiomatic meaning, figurative language, cultural references or grammatical structures that do not correspond directly to those of the target language.

One major limitation of literal translation is its inability to adequately reproduce idiomatic expressions.

Consider the following examples:

French expression| Inappropriate literal translation| Appropriate English equivalent

Avoir le cafard| To have the cockroach| To feel down

Donner sa langue au chat| To give one's tongue to the cat| To give up guessing

Coûter les yeux de la tête| To cost the eyes of the head| To cost an arm and a leg

Tomber dans les pommes| To fall into the apples| To faint

Mettre la main à la pâte| To put one's hand in the dough| To lend a hand

These examples demonstrate that the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot necessarily be recovered from the individual meanings of their constituent words.

A translator who reproduces their lexical structures without interpreting their idiomatic functions may generate expressions that are confusing, humorous unintentionally or semantically inaccurate.

Another limitation concerns differences in grammatical structures. French and English do not always organise information in identical ways. Differences in tense, aspect, gender, articles and sentence construction may require structural adjustments during translation.

For instance, the French expression J'ai vingt ans is translated as "I am twenty years old" rather than "I have twenty years." The literal rendering reflects French grammatical organisation but violates the conventional English construction.

Similarly, Il me manque may be translated as "I miss him" or "I miss her", depending on the referent. A mechanical translation such as "He is missing to me" would not reproduce the intended English meaning.

These examples reveal that literal translation is limited not because it is inherently inaccurate, but because its appropriateness depends on the relationship between the linguistic structures, communicative purposes and contextual conditions of the two languages.

Interpretation as an Essential Component of Translation

Interpretation is central to the translation process because the translator must first establish what the source text communicates before attempting to reproduce it in another language.

Translation involves at least two interconnected intellectual activities: understanding the source message and reconstructing that message in the target language.

The first activity requires linguistic comprehension, contextual analysis and the recognition of implicit meanings. The second involves selecting appropriate expressions and structures that communicate the interpreted message effectively to the target audience.

This process is particularly important in French-English translation because certain expressions may communicate meanings that are not immediately apparent from their grammatical or lexical composition.

Consider the French expression Il a le cœur sur la main. A literal translation would produce "He has his heart on his hand." However, the expression describes a generous and open-hearted person.

The appropriate English translation could be "He is very generous" or "He wears his heart on his sleeve", depending on the intended nuance.

The translator must therefore interpret the figurative meaning before selecting an equivalent expression.

Interpretation also involves identifying implied meanings. In everyday communication, speakers do not always express their intentions explicitly. They frequently depend on shared knowledge, conversational conventions and contextual assumptions.

For example, the French expression Ce n'est pas mauvais literally means "It is not bad." However, depending on the situation and tone, it may function as an understated positive evaluation.

A translator who ignores the pragmatic dimension of the expression may reproduce its literal meaning while failing to convey its communicative force.

Interpretative competence therefore enables translators to recognise the relationship between what is explicitly expressed and what is implicitly communicated.

Theoretical Perspectives on Meaning, Context and Interpretation

The relationship between meaning and translation has been examined through different theoretical approaches. Several of these perspectives provide useful foundations for understanding the limitations of literal translation.

Nida's Dynamic Equivalence

Eugene Nida's work on dynamic equivalence provides an important contribution to the understanding of meaning in translation. Nida (1964) [6] argues that translation should seek to produce an equivalent effect or response among target-

language readers rather than concentrate exclusively on formal correspondence.

This perspective is relevant to French-English translation because the same meaning may require different linguistic structures in the two languages.

For example, translating J'ai faim as "I have hunger" would reproduce the source structure but fail to produce the natural English expression "I am hungry."

The principle of dynamic equivalence therefore encourages translators to prioritise communicative effectiveness while maintaining fidelity to the intended message.

Newmark's Communicative and Semantic Translation

Newmark (1981) [5] distinguishes between semantic and communicative translation.

Semantic translation gives considerable attention to the contextual meaning of the source text and seeks to preserve its expressive and semantic characteristics.

Communicative translation, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on producing an understandable and appropriate message for the target audience.

Both approaches are relevant to the present discussion. While semantic translation recognises the importance of preserving meaning, communicative translation highlights the need to consider the expectations and comprehension of target-language readers.

The distinction suggests that effective translation requires flexibility rather than an unconditional commitment to literal procedures.

Skopos Theory

The functionalist approach associated with Reiss and Vermeer (1984) [8] places particular emphasis on the purpose of translation.

According to Skopos theory, translation decisions should be guided by the intended function of the target text.

This approach challenges the assumption that the structure of the source text must always be reproduced. Instead, it recognises that the target text must fulfil its communicative purpose within the receiving linguistic and cultural environment.

For example, a French public-information message translated into English may require adjustments in sentence construction and terminology to ensure that English-speaking readers understand the information correctly.

Such adjustments do not necessarily represent a departure from translation accuracy. They may constitute necessary decisions for preserving the intended communicative function.

Pragmatic Approaches to Translation

Pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted within specific communicative situations.

The pragmatic perspective is especially important in translation because expressions frequently communicate more than their literal linguistic content.

Speech acts, politeness strategies, presuppositions, implicatures and conversational intentions can all influence the interpretation of a message.

In French-English translation, the translator must recognise how such elements operate in the source language and identify appropriate ways of reproducing their communicative functions in English.

Pragmatic competence therefore strengthens the translator's ability to preserve meaning beyond the level of individual words and grammatical structures.

Translation Strategies for Preserving Meaning

The limitations of literal translation do not imply that translators should abandon it completely. Rather, translation procedures should be selected according to the nature of the source expression and the intended purpose of the target text.

Several strategies can assist translators in preserving meaning in French-English translation.

Equivalence: This involves replacing a source-language expression with a target-language expression that communicates a comparable meaning or function. For instance, Il pleut des cordes may be translated as "It's pouring with rain."

Modulation: This involves changing the perspective or conceptual orientation of an expression while preserving its intended meaning. For example, Il n'est pas difficile de comprendre may be rendered as "It is easy to understand."

Transposition: This involves changing grammatical categories or structures to produce a natural target-language expression. The translation of Après son arrivée as "After he arrived" illustrates a shift from a French noun construction to an English clause.

Adaptation: This involves replacing a culturally specific expression or situation with one that performs a comparable function in the target culture, where appropriate.

Explicitation: This involves making information that is implicit in the source text more explicit in the target text when necessary for comprehension.

These procedures demonstrate that effective translation requires the ability to select appropriate strategies rather than apply one method indiscriminately.

The translator's task is not to preserve the external appearance of every expression but to reproduce its relevant meaning, communicative intention and contextual significance.

The Translator as a Cultural and Interpretative Mediator

The translator occupies an important position between linguistic communities. This role extends beyond the transfer of linguistic information to include the interpretation and mediation of cultural meanings.

In French-English translation, cultural differences may affect how concepts, emotions, politeness and social relationships are expressed.

A French expression may contain cultural assumptions that are familiar to French-speaking audiences but less accessible to English-speaking readers. The translator must therefore identify these assumptions and determine how best to communicate them.

This responsibility requires more than bilingual competence. It demands bicultural awareness, critical thinking, interpretative ability and an understanding of the communicative conventions of both languages. The translator must also avoid excessive intervention. Cultural adaptation should not become an excuse for distorting the source message or introducing meanings that are not supported by the original text.

The challenge is to maintain an appropriate balance between fidelity to the source text and intelligibility within the target language.

In this sense, translation can be understood as an act of intercultural negotiation through which meaning is reconstructed rather than mechanically transferred.

Discussion

The preceding analysis establishes that meaning, context and interpretation are inseparable dimensions of French-English

translation. The examples demonstrate that linguistic correspondence does not always guarantee communicative accuracy.

Literal translation remains useful where the source and target languages share comparable structures and meanings. However, its limitations become evident when expressions are idiomatic, figurative, culturally specific or pragmatically dependent.

The discussion also reveals that translation difficulties frequently arise from differences in how French and English organise and express experience. Such differences may involve vocabulary, grammar, idiomatic conventions and culturally established patterns of communication.

The theoretical perspectives examined in this paper provide complementary explanations for these difficulties. Nida's dynamic equivalence highlights the importance of the response of the target audience. Newmark's distinction between semantic and communicative translation illustrates the need to balance textual meaning with communicative effectiveness. Skopos theory demonstrates that translation decisions must also take account of the purpose of the target text, while pragmatic approaches explain how meaning is influenced by communicative situations and implied intentions.

Taken together, these perspectives support the argument that successful translation requires an interpretative approach rather than an exclusive dependence on lexical and grammatical correspondence.

An important implication for French translation practice is the need to develop translators' analytical competence. Translation training should therefore encourage students to examine expressions within their linguistic and cultural contexts, compare alternative translations and justify their choices.

This approach would help future translators recognise that the most accurate translation is not necessarily the one that reproduces the greatest number of source-language structures. Rather, it is the one that communicates the intended meaning appropriately within the target linguistic and cultural environment.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between meaning, context and interpretation in French-English translation, with particular emphasis on the limitations of literal translation. It has established that translation is a complex interpretative process in which linguistic forms, contextual conditions and cultural meanings interact.

The analysis demonstrates that literal translation can be effective in certain situations but becomes inadequate when applied without consideration of idiomatic meaning, grammatical differences, cultural references and communicative intentions.

The examination of French-English expressions further illustrates that the meaning of a linguistic item cannot always be determined independently of its context. Translators must therefore develop the ability to interpret expressions beyond their immediate lexical structures and select translation procedures that preserve their intended communicative functions.

The theoretical perspectives discussed in the paper reinforce the importance of equivalence, communicative purpose and pragmatic interpretation in translation practice.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of French-English translation depends not on the mechanical reproduction of words but on the translator's ability to understand, interpret and appropriately reconstruct meaning. Literal translation should consequently be regarded as one of several available translation procedures rather than a universal solution to the challenges of interlingual communication.

References

1. Baker M. In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation (3rd ed.). Routledge; 2018.
2. House J. Translation Quality Assessment: Past and Present. Routledge; 2015.
3. Larson ML. Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence. University Press of America; 1984.
4. Munday J, Ramos Pinto S, Blakesley J. Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications (5th ed.). Routledge; 2022.
5. Newmark P. Approaches to Translation. Pergamon Press; 1981.
6. Nida EA. Toward a Science of Translating. E. J. Brill; 1964.
7. Nord C. Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained. St. Jerome Publishing; 1997.
8. Reiss K, Vermeer HJ. Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie. Max Niemeyer; 1984.

How to Cite This Article

Ann IC. Meaning, context and interpretation in French-English translation: examining the limits of literal translation. Int J Humanit Susta Innov. 2026;2(6):26-30.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.