

# TRANSLATION UNITS

**UNITÉ DE TRADUCTION (UT) ou unité de sens :** syntagme représentant une unité de pensée dont les éléments forment un tout indissociable sémantiquement:

*Our new biologist could put many experienced scientists in the shade.*

Si le traducteur ne repère pas lors du découpage que "to put in the shade" signifiant *éclipser / surpasser* forme une seule unité, il fera un faux sens.

After reading the text to be translated, the role of a translator is to go beyond words to the concepts behind those words. Word for word or literal translation is hardly ever possible.

French and English are not sister languages and although there are semantic similarities due to a common vocabulary stock and mutual borrowings over the centuries, both languages differ in grammar and syntax<sup>1</sup>. Both languages have different characteristics.

The translator must learn what the concepts and units of thoughts are in the source language, delineate the message to be translated into as many translation units as there are concepts, and finally translate them into the target language<sup>2</sup>.

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

« Le plus petit segment de l'énoncé dont la cohésion des signes est telle qu'ils ne doivent pas être traduits séparément. » (Unités lexicologiques ; unités de pensée).

Translation units can be lexical or grammatical. Over-translation is a common mistake if one sees only one TU instead of several, resulting in nonsense or mistranslation (erroneous interpretation of the SL).

Example:

- *de bonne heure:* includes only *one* translation unit (meaning: *early*). If more than one TU is seen here, the result is nonsense: *of good hour, at a good hour*. The meaning of the original TU has been lost.

Examples from both French and English:

Parts of speech	French	English
Nouns / Noun phrases	un hôtel de ville	<i>a city hall</i>
	un chef d'orchestre	<i>a conductor</i>
	l'équitation	<i>horse back riding</i>
Verbs / Verb phrases	montrer du doigt	<i>to point</i>
	donner un coup de pied	<i>to kick</i>
	rentabiliser	<i>to make profitable</i>
	s'immobiliser	<i>to come to a standstill</i>

Parts of speech	French	English
Adjectives / Adj. phrases	mal à l'aise	<i>uncomfortable</i>
	influçable	<i>easily influenced</i>
Adverbs / Adv. phrases	à toute vitesse	<i>speedily</i>
	dans tout le pays	<i>nationwide</i>
	dorénavant	<i>from now on</i>
Prepositional phrases	le long de	<i>along</i>
	au dessus de	<i>above</i>

NB: TUs are not necessarily limited to phrases, small groups of words, or different grammatical constructions: they can encompass entire sentences or entire passages.

For instance:

- A la prochaine! → See you soon!
- J'étais sur mon trente et un → I was dressed to the nines.
- Il avait la moutarde qui lui montait au nez → He was getting miffed.

Overtranslation occurs when the translator sees more TUs in the source text than actually exist.

Undertanslation occurs when the translator sees fewer TUs than actually exist.

**The purpose behind delineating 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.**

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<sup>1</sup> Syntax: the rules governing the way *words* are combined to form *sentences* in a language.

<sup>2</sup> Source language (langue de départ) / Target language (langue d'arrivée).