

## ADVICE ON THE LANGUAGE EXAMINATIONS

by George Bergman

A perennial question among students taking the language examinations is “How literal should the translation be?”

The answer is, “Don’t unnecessarily change the meaning of the text, even in small ways; but do make what changes are called for by the real differences between the original language and English.”

Here is a sentence from the French exam I just graded:

- (1) L’ensemble des  $x \in E$  possédant une certaine propriété  $P$  sera noté  $\{x \in E : P(x)\}$ , ou s’il n’y a pas d’ambiguïté,  $\{x : P(x)\}$ .

A correct translation is

- (1E) The set of  $x \in E$  having a certain property  $P$  will be denoted  $\{x \in E : P(x)\}$ , or if there is no ambiguity,  $\{x : P(x)\}$ .

Here “possessing” or “with” are perfectly acceptable alternatives where I put “having”; and “written” is as good as “denoted”. But I marked it as an error when a student had “is denoted” instead of “will be denoted”, as many did, and likewise, when the translation said “the property  $P$ ” where the text has “a certain property  $P$ ”, or said “if it is not ambiguous” in place of “if there is no ambiguity”. Another sort of pointless change was to rearrange the sentence, saying “We will denote the set of  $x \in E$  having a certain property  $P$  ...”. All these were counted as minor errors, since they did not alter the import of the sentence, and they lowered the student’s score by much less than errors that did; but if a student made enough of them, it could change a close pass to a not-pass.

Here is another sentence from the same text, which preceded the explanation of a special convention that the author would follow throughout the book:

- (2) On trouvera fréquemment des phrases de la forme suivante.

A good translation is

- (2E) One will frequently encounter sentences of the following form.

But replacing the future tense by the present in (2E) would lead to a misunderstanding: (2) refers to a usage the reader will encounter in reading the book, while a translation using the present tense would sound as though it concerned a usage common in the mathematical literature, which it does not.

The mistake of translating the French too literally was much less common than that of translating it too freely. An example of an over-literal translation would be to render “des phrases” in (2) by “of the sentences”. The “des” is an example of the partitive construction in French, meaning “some”, and in cases like this, it is correctly rendered by the plural without any preceding words in English. Several students rendered it, also incorrectly, by “the sentences”, apparently seeing that the “of” didn’t make sense in the context, but not knowing that the construction meant what we express in English by the bare plural.

As a more minor example, the text contained the phrase “un tel ensemble” for which the correct translation is “such a set”. The word-for-word translation, “a such set” is incorrect English. (Whether to take points off for this is a borderline decision.)

Other examples of too-literal translations involved idioms. For instance, where the author said that he would discuss a certain point because it is not familiar “à tout le monde”, i.e., “to everybody”, some students translated this literally as “to the whole world”. Likewise, “n’importe quel élément”, meaning “any element”, was translated literally by one student as “an element, it doesn’t matter which”.

But these cases were rare. In general, students would have done better if they had paid closer attention to the words of the French original. In particular, they should be aware of the grammatical endings used. (In the French exam, mistakes in this area generally involved interchanges between present and future tenses, and between singular and plural nouns. Years ago, when I regularly graded the Russian language exam, I saw more mistakes of this sort, and the effects were more serious, because case-endings in Russian signal the relation of a noun to the rest of the sentence.)

Addendum (Spring 1998)

A problem that comes up much more rarely, but which you should be aware of, is “Should I believe my dictionary?” There are words for which the dictionary may give everyday meanings, but which may have different technical meanings. For instance, in French “corps” ordinarily means “body”, and might indeed mean that in a text on mathematical mechanics; but in algebra it means “field”. If you prepare for the exam by doing a bit of reading in various fields of mathematics, you should make a list of cases like that.

Occasionally, a dictionary will fail you even on an ordinary word or phrase. In the text for an exam I just graded, it is noted that if  $f$  is a continuous linear bijection of topological vector spaces, then  $f^{-1}$  will clearly also be linear. The next sentence says that *En revanche*,  $f^{-1}$  may not be continuous. My dictionary translates *revanche* as “revenge” or “return”, and the phrase *en revanche* as “in return” (which is what one student, who must have had a similar dictionary, wrote). It fails to note that this phrase is also used to introduce a fact that points in the opposite direction to a preceding statement. Good translations would have been or “On the other hand” (which most students gave), or simply “However”.

So if you cannot see how a translation given by your dictionary can make sense in the context, but you can see a rendering that would make sense, you may be right in trusting your guess.