

## Chapter Two: Translation Unit

The translator's work needs to be taken more closely by examining the units on which he operates, the planes on which these units are located, and finally the techniques which allow the passage from one language to another.

### 1. Definition:

The unit of translation is the smallest segment of the utterance whose signs are cohesive that they do not have to be translated separately.

"Translation unit is the smallest segment of the utterance whose signs are linked in such a way that they should not be translated literally".<sup>1</sup>

A translation unit is a segment of a text that the translator treats as a single cognitive unit for the purpose of establishing equivalence. It may be a single word, a phrase, one or more sentences, or even a larger unit.

According to Vinay and Darbelnet, 'the UT is the smallest segment of the utterance whose signs are linked in such a way that they should not be translated individually.'<sup>2</sup>

'Unité de traduction est le plus petit segment de l'énoncé dont la cohésion des signes est telle qu'ils ne doivent pas être traduits séparément.'<sup>3</sup>

Examples from both French and English:

Parts of speech	French	English
Verbs/verb phrases	Montrer du doigt	To point
	Donner un coup de pied	To kick
	Rentabilité	To make profitable
Adjectives/ adj. phrases	Mal a l'aise	Uncomfortable
	Influénçable	Easily influenced
Adverbs/ adv. Phrases	A toute vitesse	Speedily
	Dans tout le pays	Nationwide
	Dorénavant	From now on
Prepositional phrases	Le long de	Along
	Au dessus de	Above

According to Matthiessen<sup>4</sup>, the UT is a TT (target text) segment instead of the commonly accepted ST (source text) segment, He assumes that:

<sup>1</sup> Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday, *Translation: An advanced resource book* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 138.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, *A Methodology For Translation* (London: Routledge, 1958/1995), 84-93.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, *Stylistique Compare du Français et de L'anglais, Méthode de Traduction* (Paris : Didier, 1958/1977), 37.

- The UT creates an interval in the translating process,
- It is into which the translator renders from the ST,
- It has distinct and consistent grammar features, and
- It possesses presence of meaning which is identifiable, and accuracy which is measurable through standardized assessment.

In summary, the UT bears universal features; it plays a consistent role in the construction of translation, and has measurable meaning. The UT may have a co-UT (ST) that has the same or different syntax features and whose meaning comes from the same or different linguistic units. In other words, a TT sentence may be a translation of a ST sentence, or a clause of a sentence, or two clauses, two parts of two ST sentences, or a sentence and part of another sentence.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Delineation of Translation Units

It is a process which consists in delimiting these units within a text. The translator starts from the meaning and performs the operations of transfer from one language to another within the semantic domain. In these conditions, the unit to be identified is the unit of thought, in accordance with the principle that the translator must translate ideas and feelings and not words. The terms (translation unit, lexical unit or thought unit) are equivalent because translation units are lexical units in which lexical elements combine to express a single thought element.

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

‘The translation unit may be the individual word, group, clause, sentence or the whole text.’<sup>6</sup>

For instance:

- A la prochaine! → See you soon!
- J’étais sur mon trente et un → I was dressed to the nines.

---

<sup>4</sup> Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, “The Environments of Translation,” in E. Steiner and C. Yallop (eds.), *Exploring Translation and Multilingual Production: Beyond Context* (Berlin and New York: Mouton deGruyter, 2001), 127-160.

<sup>5</sup> Harry J. Huang and Canzhong Wu, ‘The Unit of Translation: Statistics Speak’, *Meta:Translators' Journal* (2009), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday, *Translation, an Advanced Resource Book*, London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 17.

- Il avait la moutarde qui lui montait au nez —→ He was getting miffed.

When a translator starts his work, i.e. translation, in accordance with the type of ST he's working on, he decides about the basic segments in ST to be translated into TT. These segments range from a whole text, as in poetry, to a single phoneme.

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.

### 3. Types of Translation Unit

Vinay and Darbelnet consider three following terms as being equivalent: "unit of thought", "lexicological unit" and "unit of translation". Lexicological units of Vinay and Darbelnet contain "lexical elements grouped together to form a single element of thought".<sup>7</sup>

Several types of UT are recognized according to its grammatical function in the message and its form.

#### 3.1. According to the particular role it plays in the message, there are:

- **Functional units**, whose elements participate in the same grammatical function,

Example:

Il est partie/à quatorze heures/ juste dix minutes /avant votre arrivée.

He / left / at two o'clock / just ten minutes / before your arrival.

رجل/عزبه اللحية/ زوال/شهره/ ثباته قبل وصولك

Il habite/ Saint-Sauveur/ à deux pas/ chez ses parents

He lives in Saint-Sauveur two steps away from his parents' house

يقطن / سكان سوفس / عشي ديج خطوبين / عن منزل لبريه

- **Semantic Units**, as the name suggests, represent the unit of meaning (thought).

Example:

Prendre place= to sit/ to take place = يجلس

Avoir l'air= to seem/ look like = يبدو Avoir

lieu= to happen= يحدث

Sur le champ = immediately = فوراً

<sup>7</sup> Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday, *Translation*, 138.



work on form. In these conditions, the unity to be identified is the unity of thought, in accordance with the principle that the translator must translate ideas and feelings and not words.

#### **4. Over-translation And Under-translation**

Both over-translation and under-translation consist in reproducing in the target language (TL) the non-equivalence of the source language (SL) message, in terms of meaning or style. Over-translation refers to the information that the target language contains is more than that of the source language. Under-translation refers to the information that the target language contains is less than that of the source language. In other words, over-translation conveys the target language readers more information than the source language readers should receive, which could lead to a misunderstanding between the source language and the target language. On the contrary, under-translation overestimates the knowledge reserve of the target language readers and neglects the comprehensibility of the translated works, which could lead to a lack of necessary information that the source language attempts to convey. However, both over-translation and under-translation are deviation from the ideal, faithful and expressive translation. And there is one common thing between over-translation and under-translation that both of the two translations produce non-equivalence in translated works.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, over-translation and under-translation are common mistakes that the translator sees more or less TUs than actually exist, 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.

---

<sup>9</sup> Mian Wang, 'An Analysis of Over-translation and Under-translation in Perspective of Cultural Connotation', *Lecture Notes in Information Technology*, Vols.16-17 (2012).

## PRACTICE

**Exercise: find the main translation units in the following sentences , then translate them into English**

1. Il a été battu á mort.
2. Il est resté planté devant la poste.
3. Il ferma la porte d'un coup de pied.
4. Á cause de l'augmentation des prix.
5. Elle se dépêcha d'entrer dans l'église.
6. Il a évalué la situation en un clin d'œil.
7. Il a dû accepter un emploi á l'étranger.
8. Je pris le livre qui se trouvait sur la table.
9. Tout le temps que j'ai perdu à lire des livres...
10. Ann fait le tour du parc en courant chaque jour.
11. Il a pris la succession de son père dans l'entreprise.
12. Son père, qui est avocat, veut qu'il fasse du droit.
13. Mais je n'ai fait que sortir pour prendre mon gilet!
14. Les gens, à ma naissance, n'attendaient pas un poète.
15. Selon un rapport publié dans l'European Policy Analyst
16. En retournant vers sa chambre, il acheta le Daily News.
17. On ne doit pas jeter les bouteilles vides, mais les recycler.
18. Nous avons un temps qui n'est pas normal pour la saison.
19. Il est parti à quatorze heures juste dix minutes avant votre arrivée.
20. Je suis sorti de la ville par la route principale que je connaissais bien.
21. C'est évidemment une perte de temps que de chercher á lui cacher quoique ce soit.
22. Les employés gardent un emploi qu'ils détestent de peur que leur passe médical leur empêche d'être couverts dans une autre entreprise.

**The answers :**

1. Il a été battu á mort.  
—→ He was beaten to death
2. Il est resté planté devant la poste.  
—→ He stayed in front of the post office for a long time

3. Il ferma la porte d'un coup de pied.  
 —> He shut the door with a kick
4. À cause de l'augmentation des prix.  
 —> Due to the increased prices
5. Elle se dépêcha d'entrer dans l'église.  
 —> She hurried into the church
6. Il a évalué la situation en un clin d'œil.  
 —> He evaluated the situation in a glance
7. Il a dû accepter un emploi à l'étranger.  
 —> He was obliged to work abroad
8. Je pris le livre qui se trouvait sur la table.  
 —> I took the book on the table
9. Tout le temps que j'ai perdu à lire des livres...  
 —> All the time I wasted on books
10. Ann fait le tour du parc en courant chaque jour.  
 —> Ann turns/runs around the park every day
11. Il a pris la succession de son père dans l'entreprise.  
 —> He succeeded his father in the company
12. Son père, qui est avocat, veut qu'il fasse du droit.  
 —> His father, who is a lawyer, wants him to study law
13. Mais je n'ai fait que sortir pour prendre mon gilet!  
 —> I only went out to take my vest
14. Les gens, à ma naissance, n'attendaient pas un poète.  
 —> When I was born, people did not expect a poet
15. Selon un rapport publié dans l'European Policy Analyst  
 —> According to a report published in the European Policy Analyst
16. En retournant vers sa chambre, il acheta le Daily News.  
 —> While returning to his room, he bought the Daily News
17. On ne doit pas jeter les bouteilles vides, mais les recycler.  
 —> We must not throw away the empty bottle, but (rather) recycle them
18. Nous avons un temps qui n'est pas normal pour la saison.  
 —> We are living unseasonable weather
19. Je suis sorti de la ville par la route principale que je connaissais bien.  
 —>

I left the town by the principal road that I knew well

20. C'est évidemment une perte de temps que de chercher à lui cacher quoique ce soit. Obviously, trying to hide anything from him is a waste of time.

21. Les employés gardent un emploi qu'ils détestent de peur que leur passe médical le empêche d'être couverts dans une autre entreprise.

Employees keep jobs they hate for fear that their medical records will prevent them from being covered at another company