

## French English Translation: A Linguistic and Stylistic Breakdown

English and French have a lot of similarities, a fact which should simplify French English translation. Both languages are subject-prominent languages whose SVO (subject-verb-object) word order is relatively stable. Despite their common grammatical structure, the two languages have vastly different literary conventions.

Both English and French are Indo-European languages. English is a derivative of the Germanic branch while French is a derivative of the Italic. Aside from English, all Germanic languages are V2 languages (the verb always occupies the second position in the sentence) and, aside from French, all Italic languages are null subject languages (the sentence does not need a subject because the verb itself implies the subject). Today, both French and English are fixed, subject-prominent, SVO languages that have lost much of the grammatical inflection of their forebears on the Indo-European tree. Other word order combinations have not, however, been in lost in either language:

French English

VSO Questions:

French: Sais-tu l'heure? (Do you have the time?) - verbatim: know you the time?

English poetics, Shakespeare: Met I my father? (King Lear)

SOV With all pronoun objects:

French: Je le vois. (I see it.) - verbatim: I it see

English fossilized expressions: 'Til Death do us part.

Although these two languages share many syntactic parallels, their literary conventions are quite dissimilar: wherefrom the challenge of French English translation. French tends to be a language of long sentences carefully constructed with copious commas and stacked phrases (appositives and subsequent actions). English tends to be more limited in sentence construction, often requiring connectors in place of mere commas. So the French English translator frequently finds himself faced with a French sentence that is too long by English standards and which will not translate gracefully. A talented French English translator must be prepared to dissect the lengthy sentence into pieces that will make sense to an English reader. There are a few different ways to do this: 1) break the sentence apart (either into two sentences or two independent clauses with and or but...) or 2) demonstrate the relationship between the clauses in another way (a demonstrative determiner, like that or which, or a dash). Regrettably, this de-stacking breaks apart the rhythm of the original. Another major hurdle in French English translation is the separation of a noun phrase from its modifier. Because French includes noun genders and verb conjugations, it is not difficult for French readers to ascertain to what a modifying clause refers. English, on the other hand, has neither of these morphosyntactic properties and English writers are taught to place modifying phrases directly adjacent to the noun phrase to which they refer. Ultimately, translators must reorganize sentences and perform various linguistic somersaults so that nouns and their modifiers are friendly and flow naturally in the English.

People often think that because French and English are linguistic cousins, French English translation is fairly uncomplicated. Although the two languages have a common Indo-European base and similar basic syntax, their literary traditions are separated by centuries.

### About the Author

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