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An Empirical Study for a Machine Aided Translation of French Prepositions 'à', 'de' and 'en' into English

Violaine Prince

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Abstract

This paper presents a study about ambiguous French prepositions, stressing out their roles as dependencies introducers, in order to derive some translation heuristics into English, based on a French-English set of parallel texts. These heuristics are formulated out of statistical observations and use some up-to-date results in Machine Translation (MT). Their originality mostly relies upon the importance given to syntax and dependency relations, along with lexicons, the latter being well browsed by the present literature in the domain. An experiment has been run on corpora in both languages, using a dependency parser in the source language, and results looked to be encouraging for a "step by step approach" for MT improvement.

1. Introduction

Researchers in in Computational Linguistics (CL) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) have been working on the role of prepositions and the issues they raise for an automated processing of language (Litkowski, 2005). When addressing the pair English-French, the impact of prepositions is a bit underestimated in the literature, when compared to the overwhelming importance given to nouns, noun phrases and adjectival phrases in lexical semantics. Electronic resources such as WordNet still assign to prepositions a secondary role, and mostly restricted to syntax, within multiword expressions. In Machine Translation (MT), a huge project such as ARTFL (American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language), led by the University of Chicago and the French ATILF association for Machine Translation, provides an electronic bilingual resource of 75,000 entries. Though, this resource seems to discard prepositional noun phrases acting as technical (and sometimes usual) multiword expressions. Although ontologies and web semantics have shed light on multiword expressions, several of which containing prepositions, as the lexical impersonation of some of their concepts, it seems that the real importance of prepositions is still left aside, whereas their role is quite crucial in the semantic interpretation of the fragment.

In this pair of languages, the preposition gives the direction in interpretation in a prepositional noun phrase. For instance a set of pairs greatly differs in meaning from a pair of sets. The non commutativity of natural language is here typically demonstrated by the existence and/or position of prepositions (Yeh and Vilain, 1998). Second, the preposition semantics greatly modify the verb meaning in a phrasal verb, especially in English. Whole sets of new verbs are created by combining verbs with a strong polysemous potential such as do, put, make, take, get, etc. with prepositions (B. Trawinski and Soehn, 2006).

Third, prepositions are not univocal terms. They behave like nouns, adjectives and verbs by being as ambiguous as the latter (J. Taylor, 1993). For instance, if the preposition at seems to indicate a projection from a source towards a target in phrasal verbs such as to look at, a sense it shares with the preposition to, at seems a locative tag, with stability and immobility characteristics in 'he is at home', sharing the latter with the preposition in (Japkowicz and Wiebe, 1991). So characteristics such as polysemy and synonymy, common in nouns and verbs, also apply to prepositions.

The issue we try to address in this paper is the role and transformation of prepositions in a machine translation (MT) application in a restricted environment. The main items that we need to tackle are the following:

- Prepositions are often ambiguous in the source language (SL), but also their candidate equivalencies are ambiguous in the target language (TL). How can a task like MT disambiguate and choose the appropriate candidate?
- What is the syntactic role of the preposition? Does it introduce a particular complement? If yes, what is the influence of its semantics in SL on its representation in TL?
- Some prepositions belong to idiomatic multiword expressions and do not need to be examined as such. The recognition of their ineffectiveness as syntactic agents belongs to the existence (or the improvement) of existing translation memories and databases.

All these questions are naturally very broad in their scope. Since languages greatly vary in their use of linguistic dimensions, and in spite of an asymptotic aim at generalization, we have restricted their impact on the pair we address and all results will be considered as locally grounded in our English-French environment. They might possibly have an echo in other pairs of languages, and asserting the generality would be another very interesting issue that we cannot undertake in this paper.

2. Machine Translation and Prepositions : Is There a Most Appropriate Approach?

The ground hypothesis is that MT, a very large field with several paradigms and software that contribute to its evolution, should be enhanced with tools able to detect as automatically as possible the nature of the dependency introduced by the preposition in SL, as a requirement for discriminating the proper equivalent in TL, provided that the preposition is not an element of an idiomatic multiword expression. Idiomatic expressions, as multiword collocations, can be stored in extensive lexicons, or translation memories. Their enhancement has been long studied in MT, and any survey, however extensive, will not capture all the achievements in this domain. A few works are still more
dictionaries and a French to English translation prototype that would
serve as a proof of concepts, some ideas about
and to a French to English translation
Our research team has access to a dependency
rule-based tool within a statistical overall frame could be
provide a true added-value to their translation then a local
approach (if the local syntactic properties of prepositions
would undergo the same browsing, but would
try to semi-automatically extract patterns to be rewritten
into transformation rules. A more costly approach in terms
of human effort, but since prepositions seem to deal with
hidden construction aspects (e.g. syntax, dependencies)
and less with apparent lexical data, it seems that a more
rule based approach would not be totally out of scope, in
such a case.
We have chosen to explore the second (and less used) path
for which we have particular opportunities. If statistical
MT was all successful in properly translating prepositions
in the selected pair of languages, the issue would have
dropped. However, the rationale is not "to beat" statistical
MT, but to contemplate a hybrid method (both statistical
and rule-based) seen as a task-properties oriented
approach (if the local syntactic properties of prepositions
provide a true added-value to their translation then a local
rule-based tool within a statistical overall frame could be
envisaged). Our research team has access to a dependency
parser for French (Chaucé, 2005), our source language,
and to a French to English translation prototype that would
implement, as a proof of concepts, some ideas about
transformation rules as a formal rewriting of regular
transformation patterns. This prototype is compatible with the parser. But
in order to do so, we needed to produce a study of preposi-
tions behavior in both SL and TL, and this is what this paper is about. As computational linguists, we tried the most
automatic approach, by parsing an SL corpus for which we
had a TL aligned equivalent, we tagged parsed chunks with
dependency tags, and studied the regularity (or not) of the
prepositions translation according to their role.

3. Looking for Translation Patterns: An
Experimental Framework
For a POC (Proof of Concepts) result, we have
restricted the study to three prepositions widely used, which
are à, de and en. The three could be seen as locative (Jap-
kowicz and Wiebe, 1991)) but are highly ambiguous, and
might present a distributional similarity close to that de-
scribed in (Baldwin, 2006). We have a pair of aligned
French-English corpora of about 54,000 words (in French)
about stock exchange and economics, extracted from com-
panies reports. The present corpus is specialized, "clean"
and its quality is sufficient to ensure a reliable study. More-
over, it is naturally rich in prepositions. It is a good can-
didate "to begin with". We also used bilingual economics
dictionaries 1 and an access to French and English Word-
net. First subsection states the issue, the second gives the
general methods we have tried to follow and the third pro-
vides the obtained results.

3.1. A brief Overview of The Issue
This section describes the characteristics of the studied
prepositions and their linguistic properties and the
subsequent issues raised for computational representation. A
particular light will be shed on the role of these preposi-
tions as dependency triggers. As a consequence, we will
address the particular problem of modeling translating ac-
tions for these prepositions.

3.1.1. Source Language Morphological Variation
Table 1 refer to lexical variability of prepositions 'de'
and 'à' in SL, whereas 'en' is invariant. The two variants
correspond to the contraction of a determinant (i.e. le, les)
and the preposition and plays both the role of a preposition
and a determinant. Some linguists consider only the de-
terminant tag, some others insist on the dual role invoking
the substitution theory (i.e, if one substitutes the singular
feminine form of the determinant to the contracted token,
expands into two tokens, the preposition + the determin-
ant. Thus, theoretically, aux should expand into à les, du
should expand into de le, etc.). With substitution, one
has to read "tag 1" and "tag 2" in table 2 not as mutually
excluded tags, but as conjugated tags. The ambiguity here
is not to be solved but is intrinsic to the contracted form,
whereas with en, it is a classical mutually exclusive ambi-
guity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canonic Form</th>
<th>à</th>
<th>de</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Variant (Sing)</td>
<td>au</td>
<td>du</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Variant (Plur.)</td>
<td>aux</td>
<td>des</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>d'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Different lexical forms representing the preposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Token</th>
<th>Tag 1</th>
<th>Tag 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>du, des</td>
<td>determinant</td>
<td>preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>au, aux</td>
<td>determinant</td>
<td>preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en</td>
<td>pronoun</td>
<td>preposition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Different Part-of-Speech tags associated to lexical forms

1URL :http://www.e-anglais.com/ressources/glossary.html, developed by Kevin Hallion. Mostly human readable, but machine operability was easy.
3.1.2. Dependency Roles

The different dependency roles of these prepositions are the following:
- in a noun phrase introducing a noun complement (NC)
- in a verb phrase introducing an indirect noun phrase object complement for verbs either transitive of intransitive (OC)
- in a verb phrase introducing an infinitive proposition acting as an object complement (OCP)
- in a verb phrase introducing a noun phrase location complement (LC)

Table 3 gives a few examples of translations with the three prepositions.

3.1.3. Multiple Equivalencies in Target Language

The ambiguity of the three studied prepositions is revealed and enhanced by the multiplicity of their equivalencies in the target language. Table 3 has already hinted at the fact that more than one equivalent is available for each of the prepositions. Table 4 shows what the bilingual dictionary we use suggests.

3.2. Modeling Prepositions Translation

One of the main items is the following question: Are prepositions part of a multiword expression? Do they already belong to a bilingual dictionary? If not, could they be possible candidates for domain-oriented translation lexicon?

The second question rises if prepositions are not part of multiword expressions. Some of the examples in table 3 show that translation sometimes deletes them. For instance, the NC (noun complement) dependency role seems to favor deletion of the preposition in TL (cf table 3). Could it be flattened back at the pure component level? Could it be a transformation rule at the dependency level?

3.2.1. Experimental Setup

We ran an experiment by parsing the SL corpus (54,000 words) with our morphosyntactic parser, which provides an deep syntactic analysis (with a syntactic tree) and assigns dependency roles to subtrees. The experiment was divided into three parts. It needed to answer the 'lexical or not lexical' question. Is the preposition an element of a multiword expression belonging or not to a lexical resource? For that we first checked that the parser was able to recognize lexical prepositional noun phrases. A second step aimed at tracking domain oriented multiword expressions by retrieving the most frequent subtrees containing any of our studied prepositions, in order to see if we can enhance a translation lexicon. The third investigated the remaining occurrences, focusing on dependency tags whenever they appeared.

3.3. Experiment Results

3.3.1. Checking the Parser

In our system, if the morphosyntactic parser recognizes the candidate as an idiomatic expression it transforms its pattern by adding "%'%20" tags in the lexical string to replace the blanks. For instance, the idiomatic 'pomme de terre' meaning potato is transformed into 'pomme_%%20de_%%20terre'. The bilingual lexicon must contain it as a single entry. Other adjectival and verbal locutions exist in our dictionary, such as 'Beaucoup_%%20de' (many), 'A_%%20partir_%%20de' (from... on) 'en_%%20de_p_%%20de' (in spite of, despite). We created the machine readable bilingual lexicon out of our bilingual resources in such a format. We ran the parser on the SL corpus and obtained the results in table 5 according to the type of multiword expression. Two usual measures have been used: recall and precision. Recall is calculated as following: ρ = nc/np.

Where ρ stands for the number of candidates correctly extracted and np the number of candidates forgotten. Precision is calculated as: π = nc/np.

Another way to look at it is to consider the impact of dependency role on the translation. Does it reduce the translation ambiguity for a given preposition? If in the NC role, prepositions are deleted, in the LC (locative complement) role, is à always translated by to, de by from, and en by by?

An experiment is interesting to conduct on such an issue. Object complements (both OC and OCP roles) are more difficult to stress down. Here, a more thorough empirical study might lead to a better view of the subject.
most of these are known to be noun phrases, so we extracted the 20 most frequent prepositional noun phrases. Since we had a TL corpus that was a translation of our SL corpus, we associated the TL equivalent and obtained the results given in table 6. The first observation was that the deletion of the preposition in the noun complement dependency role was quite regular, except in item 19 of table 6, so it was not a negligible clue for our future transformation rules. Second, it seems that the pattern $N1 \text{ prep } N2$ in French is not always transformed into $TN2 \text{ TN1}$. For instance, item 8 in table 6 gives birth to four English nouns, whereas items 12 pr 14 drop down to only one. Moreover, $TN2$ (respectively $TN1$) is not always the translation of French $N2$ (respectively French $N1$). 13 out of 20 expressions in table 6 do not follow such a pattern. So, in our opinion, Domain Idiomatic Noun Phrases would be those prepositional noun phrases in which nouns in TL are not translations of nouns in SL and should be candidate entries to the bilingual lexicon. Thus, we incorporated items 5,6,7,8,9,10,12,13,14,15,17,18,19 to our lexicon. Other noun phrases were extracted, and we noticed that there was a distribution, for the pattern $N1 \text{ de } N2$ (value "de" for the preposition) between $TN2 \text{ TN1}$ and $TN1 \text{ of } TN2$, the latter being a word to word translation. These noun phrases were not specific to the domain.

### 3.3.3. Comparing Translations of Prepositions according to their Dependency Roles

If the NC role seems to lead to preposition deletion in quite an important number of cases and could be used as a rule if the expression is not idiomatic or domain specific, and if the preposition is not de, we tried to investigate other roles and the variation in translation within a given role. From the parsed corpus, we extracted all subtrees (chunks) in which prepositions à, de and en had one of the other dependency roles (within verb phrases). It is to be noticed that not all sentences were completely parsed, but all of them had at least a partial parsing (local subtrees formed). We had, at that point, two solutions: Either we checked all occurrences of those prepositions in a window of words (with an n-gram approach) on the aligned corpora (the SL and its translation), then assigned by hand dependency roles to our prepositional phrases, or we had to rely on the parsed SL corpus with its shortcomings. We chose to examine the well-formed verbal subtrees of the parsed SL corpus, containing our prepositions. Out of 1305 verbal phrases containing any of these prepositions, 962 were correctly parsed and the subtrees having the proper information in terms of dependency role tag. Some of the reasons for such a recall value (i.e. 0.73) were issued of a bad recall and precision on verbal locutions (cf table 5) or adverbial ones. The comparison of translations was made semi-automatically (with sentence numbers as usual in aligned corpora). The results are given in table 7. What is quite interesting is the regularity of translations in the case of the locative complement (LC). à is translated as much by at as by to. The distribution has a semantic grounding: at is more static, pointing at the present place, whereas to is projective and points at the place to reach. In our corpus de is always translated by from, and en by by. Thus, the relationship with the semantic aspects is quite obvious: en designates the mean with which the movement is performed, and de the source. The only ambiguity is about the location, either present or future. The

![Table 4: Dependency Roles Examples](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Typical Example</th>
<th>Recall</th>
<th>Precision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idiomatic NP</td>
<td>Hôtel de ville (Town Hall)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiomatic Nominal Locutions</td>
<td>En raison de (because of)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiomatic Verbal Locutions</td>
<td>A partir de (from ... on)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiomatic Adjectival Locutions</td>
<td>A peu près (circa)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Table 5: Extracted Candidates For Parser Checking](image)
OCP role, or the verb or proposition acting as an object complement, is more ambiguous for all prepositions, with a deletion case (represented by ‘-’ in table 7) quite present. Let us note that preposition *en* is quite often translated in the meaning of a duration (*while, during*) especially with a present progressive verbal form. The widest distribution is for the OC (object complement) role assigned to a noun phrase. Here, it seems that the POS tag of the preposition (ambiguous as shown in table 2) has a role to play. When the tag is that of a determinant (case of *au, aux, du, des* as shown in table 1), then *to* respectively - (i.e., the deletion of the preposition), are quite dominant, as well as *some*, an unlikely translation for *de*. It is also true for *en* : as a preposition, it is widely translated by *by*, whereas as a pronoun, it differs according to the nature of the object it refers to.

Last, a very interesting track has been suggested to us: Considering a ‘verb/preposition’ pair as a multword expression *per se* and studying its semantic properties and the dependency roles attached to it. For this, one has to discard the classical tree building of Chauche’s great parser for French and possibly ‘re-work’ the corpus looking for POS tags bi-grams and thus producing patterns and associative rules that could be statistically exploited. This is a quite enjoyable research perspective and a work to be undertaken as a possible alternative to our present framework.

4. Conclusion

This first semi-automatic study on a corpus seemed to show the emergence of a few regular patterns, strongly related to the dependency role in case of noun and locative complements, and better discriminated when the appropriate POS tag is included in the case of noun phrases object complements to verbal phrases. The case of a verbal complement seems to indicate a preferred translation (see OCP line in table 7). This tends to mean that preposition translation obey to rules, and are far from being pure custom based (a case which would have favored a pure statistical approach). It also asserts that semantics have an important position (J. Taylor, 1993): Locative complements hint a spatial semantics, the behavior of *en* as a temporal complement appears in both noun phrases and OCP role and is translated by *in or during*, whereas its behavior as an instrument case indicates the use of *by*.

There is a very clear frame that appears if a precious resource such as a semantic parser, able to assign casual roles
to chunks in SL, is available as a pre-processor for machine aided translation. In our case, semantic roles were assigned in almost 90% of the correctly parsed OC and OCP, and all LC roles were correctly assigned. This gave us a valuable setting to produce transformation rules for our prototype, in which they were implemented (unfortunately, we have no room here to detail all the further work that has been undertaken and its results).

As an answer to the question concerning a possible generalization to either other prepositions or to another pair of languages, a broader experiment is currently being set up in order to investigate the prepositions behavior: 1) Outside the original corpus, extended to other corpora (focusing on the generic capacity of our results in a specific domain), 2) Compared to results returned by statistical MT devices (stressing out, or not the possible added value of semantic patterns), 3) Including other prepositions that would have similar properties in the same pair of languages, 4) Extending the framework to at least another pair (and relying upon the state-of-the art in such a pair). This is a huge research program and we just wanted to reach a reasonable outcome on the first item. Thus we intend to pursue the experiment by running the modified prototype on another corpus, and examining its success rate in properly translating

5. References


