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

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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’, shar-
dedicated to prepositions (e.g., (Wehrl, 1998), (A. Villavicencio and Waldron, 2004)) or tend to stress them out (e.g., The Ultralingua dictionary at http://www.ultralingua.net/ provides human readable cross-lingual idiomatic expressions containing prepositions. The problem is that is not machine operable as such). Others (e.g. (V. Seretan, 2003)) have focused on the requirements for candidate idiomatic expressions in order to enhance existing resources. Several works have thoroughly contributed to the domain, but those we cite here have been the most inspiring to us, or the closest to our specific issue.

If the fragment to be translated is not idiomatic, then two approaches might compete:

- One that would browse aligned corpora and automatically learn translations and storing them in translation memories thus 'lexicalising' as much as possible the translation process. This is the actual main trend in MT. It needs important resources but few manpower.

Another that 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 (Chauché, 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 translation patterns. This prototype is compatible with the parser. But in order to do so, we needed to produce a study of prepositions 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 (Japkowski and Wiebe, 1991)) but are highly ambiguous, and might present a distributional similarity close to that described 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 companies reports. The present corpus is specialized, "clean" and its quality is sufficient to ensure a reliable study. Moreover, it is naturally rich in prepositions. It is a good candidate to "to begin with". We also used bilingual economics dictionaries \(^1\) and an access to French and English Wordnet. First subsection states the issue, the second gives the general methods we have tried to follow and the third provides 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 prepositions as dependency triggers. As a consequence, we will address the particular problem of modeling translating actions for these prepositions.

3.1.1. Source Language Morphological Variation

Table 1 refer to lexical variability of prepositions 'de' and "a" 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 determinant 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, it expands into two tokens, the preposition + the determinant. 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 ambiguity.

<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

\(^1\)URL :http://www.e-anglais.com/ressources/glossary.html, developed by Kevin Halion. 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 a transformation rule at the dependency level? Could it be flattened back at the pure component level in which the French Noun Phrase pattern N1 Prep N2 (where N1 and N2 are nouns) , respectively NP1 Prep NP2 (where NP1 and NP2 are noun phrases) would be translated in English into TN2 (’s) TN1, respectively TNP2 TNP1 (where Tx is the translation of x)?

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.

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’.

3.3.2. Extracting the Most Frequent Noun Phrases with Prepositions

The second step was quite important in the sense that we needed to isolate sentence fragments containing prepositions that had proper syntactic roles, that were properly constituted and to which dependencies roles have been assigned. This meant that the corpus needed to be totally parsed.

The parser performances are not perfect: if POS tagging is over 98% in precision and recall ([Chauché, 2005]), syntactic analysis and dependency assignment, although quite successful compared to the on-going state-of-the-art, are closer to a 70% value. We had to run a tedious checking on the results and then, for well parsed subtrees, we re-run an automatic counting on the corpus.

As a first approach, we were interested in enhancing our bilingual lexicon with domain oriented expressions, and
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 Prep N2 in French is not always transformed into TN2 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 Prep N2 (value “de” for the preposition) between TN2 TN1 and TN1 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 sub-trees (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 adversarial 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Example in SL</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>médecin de famille</td>
<td>family doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moulin à café</td>
<td>Coffeemill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pot en terre cuite</td>
<td>terracotta pot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Je pense à lui</td>
<td>I think of him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Je parle de lui</td>
<td>I am talking about him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Je pense en Francais</td>
<td>I think in French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCP</td>
<td>Je viens de manger</td>
<td>I have just eaten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Je refuse de parler</td>
<td>I refuse to talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Il parle en dormant</td>
<td>He talks in his sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Je pars en avion</td>
<td>I am going by plane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Je pars à Londres</td>
<td>I am going to London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Je viens de New York</td>
<td>I am coming from New York</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Dependency Roles Examples

<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

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2The parser developer has created a semi-automatic counting tool which allows him to check the parser abilities in terms of recall and precision.
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) quite often, whereas as a temporal complement, 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 at 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


