

Journal des traducteurs Translators' Journal

A Word to Translators

Donald Buchanan

Volume 1, numéro 3, février 1956

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1056498ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1056498ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (imprimé)

2562-2994 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Buchanan, D. (1956). A Word to Translators. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, 1(3), 72–73. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1056498ar>



Donald BUCHANAN

A Word to Translators

I should like to congratulate all those tireless workers who are making such historic strides in organizing "Translation", which, it seems, until now, has been in the same category as the weather—with everybody talking about it but nobody doing anything about it. Nobody can do anything about the weather but, thank goodness, somebody is doing something about translation.

It is to certain students of translation that I should like to say a word.

If you haven't passed the grammar book stage, you are not ready for translation. I pity those unfortunate ones who, year by year, absorb all the information contained in one good grammar only to sally forth lustily in search of a second one—and a third... I notice that most errors are not grammatical, but are, rather, errors in language—errors which can be eliminated only by a greater familiarity with the language, not with the grammar.

Such familiarity cannot be gained overnight, but only through sustained and diversified reading over a long period—or until such time as the language has been assimilated. Each field of endeavour has its own particular mode of expression. Students

should be familiar with the language used on the "Financial Page" of a newspaper. They should know the "Classified Ad" section because there, for instance, every type of employment will appear over a period of time.

If you have to keep your thumb in your dictionary while you are translating, you are not translating. An overdose of dictionary administered to any translation is usually fatal and the translator who uses the dictionary as a crutch is a chronic invalid.

There are few true synonyms in the language, and it is extremely disconcerting to find, as one usually does, that one French word may have several English translations—to jump, to skip, to leap, to bound. Which one is to be chosen? Cross-checking proves fruitless. The correct choice of word, then, can come only to the one who is already familiar with the language and, by way of example, to one who knows that "sauter aux yeux" has, in English, little to do with either "sauter" or "yeux".

If you cannot "take each man's censure", if you cannot stand corrected, then progress as a translator is impossible for you. I encounter many who have learned an extremely

plebian language and who, when corrected, and told that such terms are vulgar slang or low-class or provincialisms, or obsolete or just plain incorrect by any standard, reply that such cannot be the case as "My boss uses that expression" or "I have seen it written" or "I've heard it said many times"—and the error persists. Others refuse to distinguish between good modern usage and language that is literary, commercial, biblical, poetic, or obsolete.

If you have a supply of grammatical rules which constantly wreck your sentences, you would do well to discard such rules in favour of ones which give excellent results. There are many observations or analyses made in grammars under the heading of "rules" which students have been required to learn. No one will doubt that it is easy to make up a rule on what he already understands but in grammars all rules are not learners' rules. Some are grammarians' observations. For instance, what learner can follow such a labyrinth as "when

the action is not completely in the past" or "when one action is not terminated before the second begins..." To be effective, a rule must be concrete and concise.

A good translator has many long hours of language study behind him, we can be sure of that. There is no substitute for work, yet all is not "blood, sweat and tears". Much is expected of a translator and he must bow to that demand. Reading must be his hobby, but in his reading he must include a wide variety of subjects whether or not these happen to fall within the range of his personal interest.

Study your own particular case. Find out just where you stand—just how far up you are on the ladder to perfection. Never mind thinking about such words as "mood" or "génie" until you have reached the top rung. Get down to brass tacks. Remember that "un cours de **perfectionnement**" is **not** translated by "a course in perfection"!

Si le Journal vous plaît,
faites-le connaître.

Si vous avez des critiques à faire,
écrivez-nous.

Nous en tiendrons compte.

MERCI

If you like the Journal,
please tell your friends about it.

If you find any faults,
please write to us so that
we may take them into account.

THANK YOU

