

# Getting at language use in translation history through dictionaries produced for interpreters

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## Abstract

This paper examines dictionaries produced for military interpreters on the Western Front during the First World War as a source on the history of military interpreting. Methods from lexicography, translation studies, and the cultural history of the First World War provide us with possible approaches to this unique trace of language use in the past. History of translation and interpreting is thus shown to be in construction on the boundaries of several disciplines which mutually enrich each other.

Keywords: translation history, dictionaries, military interpreting, terminology

## 1 Military interpreters as a means of understanding the Allied Coalition

The Franco-British alliance in the Allied coalition during the First World War not only lasted for the entire duration of the conflict, but also led to the eventual Allied victory. Yet the two countries had a long history of enmity and very little experience of fighting together; communications problems were rife throughout the conflict (e.g. Philpott 2006). This little-studied question (as shown in Greenhalgh 2002; Greenhalgh 2005) has to draw on cultural, social and military history of the Great War on the one hand, but on the other it has its place in translation history as we examine the several thousand rank military interpreters and liaison officers who, as language intermediaries, made this cooperation possible in the end (Heimbürger 2007; PhD forthcoming). The French<sup>1</sup> and British<sup>2</sup> military archives provide us with a multitude of sources on the administrative set-up of language services, while a considerable number of interpreters wrote their memoirs during or after the conflict, giving insight into individual experiences of coalition warfare on the language front (e.g. Boulestin & Laboureur 1916; Breyer 1917; Laurent 1917; Maze 1934; Boulestin 1936). Actual language usage by these interpreters is more difficult to grasp, as no recordings or other precise traces of their actions remain. There is, however, one extraordinary source in this area: Eugène Plumon,<sup>3</sup> a Paris-based lawyer who had lived abroad, both in Germany and in several English-speaking countries, and who served as military interpreter to British troops during World War One, set up a flourishing business publishing dic-

tionaries for other interpreters and later for officers more generally (e.g. Plumon 1914; 1915; 1916; 1917a; 1917b). This paper aims at first to give a rapid survey of approaches for analysing dictionaries, in lexicography, in translation studies and in history, before attempting a comparative analysis of the 1914 and 1917 editions of Plumon's French-English *Vade-Mecum* for interpreters.

An historical study of dictionaries for translators must at first position itself with regards to the vast area of lexicology and terminology. Fundamental texts (Hausmann et al. 1989; Sterkenburg 2003) in the domain provide a useful introduction and several others can help us to categorise the dictionaries at our disposition, most notably into active/passive and production/reception categories (Szende 2000; Hannay 2003). In the case of Plumon's dictionaries for interpreters and officers, we are confronted at once with a bilingual dictionary and a specialised dictionary mainly of military terms and we must thus also take into consideration works of terminology which investigate how technical terms can be presented and organised in a reference work (Bowker 2003; Campenhoudt 1997).

In the field of Translation Studies there has been a certain amount of work on dictionaries, be it focussed on translator training, or more generally on dictionaries and their relationship to translating and translators (Dancette 2004; Hoof 1994; 1995; Mackintosh 2006). The larger context of translation and especially interpreting history gives valuable examples of early lexicography by interpreters (Fausz 1987; Demers 2004; Agrifoglio 2005; Karttunen 1994). The role of the interpreter in creating or defining linguistic standards is an important aspect which transpires from all these case studies. General considerations on translation history provide us with categories and methods for analysing historic translations (Delisle 2001; Pym 1998; Buttiens 2004).

Language considerations in cultural and social history of the First World War have tended to focus on trench slang and its analysis, be that in contemporary studies (Dauzat 2007; Brophy & Partridge 1965) or in recent works by historians (Prochasson 2006; Roynette 2004). Larger considerations on languages and war are slowly starting to emerge, be that in a comparative, but essentially literary context (Beaupré 2006) or more generally (Reimann 2000; Roynette 2010).

The success of Eugène Plumon's dictionary publishing lead to frequent re-editions of his most popular handbooks, which means we can compare for the purposes of this study the first (Plumon 1914) and fourth (Plumon 1917a) editions of the *Vade-Mecum*. After a quick description of these two documents, we shall look at them in turn from the point of view of lexicology, translation studies and history.

The 1914 first edition, entitled *Vade-mecum for the use of interpreters in the present campaign*, has a modest 84 pages divided into four large sections: I. "General military information" (p. 5–18), II. "From landing to the field" (p. 19–37), III. "The field" (p. 38–80), IV. "Matters of general knowledge" (p. 81–84). The prefatory note (p. 2) is dated 1<sup>st</sup> November

1914 and the copy currently in the British Library reached the British Museum on November 14<sup>th</sup> 1914. If we take into account the delays necessary for printing and assembling the booklet, we are thus dealing with a document from the very beginning of the conflict, written towards the end of the period of war of movement, before trench warfare was established and at a moment when the new structures of coalition warfare were still very much being tested and finalised.

The fourth edition has a slightly more comprehensive title: *Vade-mecum for the use of Officers and interpreters in the present campaign*. The preface dates it to January 1<sup>st</sup> 1917 and states that many additional elements and amendments had been received from readers, which in turn explains the very much larger format of 233 pages. Crucially, the publisher is no longer the same: whilst the 1914 edition appeared in the obscure provincial establishment of “Moullot Fils Ainé” in Marseilles, the subsequent editions are care of the prestigious publisher Hachette in Paris.

## **2 A rather curious object – lexicographical approaches to this dictionary**

In order to fully understand how and why any one type of dictionary differs from another, one has to view the dictionary as essentially a translation-related problem-solving tool for users with different needs, but at the same time one cannot forget the practical concerns of the dictionary publishers. (Hannay 2003, 145)

Taking this position as a starting point, we shall now investigate how the two editions of Plumon’s dictionary fit into lexicographical analysis.

Our first consideration must thus go to the potential users that Plumon would have had in mind when he put together his dictionary. Secret negotiations between the French and British military had been pursued during the prewar years in order to prepare a hypothetical British involvement on the continent. As early as 1905 a memorandum by Lieutenant General Grierson of British Headquarters specified: “In the event of operations taking place in France, non-commissioned officers of the French Reserve, mounted on bicycles, will be attached to each unit of the British Army to act as interpreters or orderlies.”<sup>4</sup> This general line of preparation was then pursued, leading to a note by the French military attaché in London, dated 1<sup>st</sup> June 1913, which specifies that 53 “officiers interprètes” and 576 “hommes de troupe” (rank soldiers) would be detached to the British Expeditionary Force upon arrival<sup>5</sup> to furnish all language assistance. We could thus assume that Plumon’s natural public would be these French soldiers who spoke English and had been selected to do duty alongside British units – he himself was one of them.

The language set-up at the beginning of coalition warfare in World War One was not, however, as clear-cut as these official preparations would make it appear: The French army providing all linguists for the British units. Instead, documents conserved by individual British soldiers<sup>6</sup> suggest another parallel structure. An un-dated official bulletin entitled “Interpreters for British Forces” indicates that “[a] number of interpreters will probably

be required shortly for British forces abroad” and specifies that they should have “[a] good knowledge of French”, be able to ride and be physically fit and that they would obtain rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant upon volunteering.<sup>7</sup> There are no traces of this British recruitment of linguists in the War Office Archives, so we cannot be sure of the numbers involved, but individual testimony of one such volunteer interpreter shows up potential problems:

Sunday 27th Sept. Landed during the morning [in Marseilles] but only to find that we were not expected and that a large number of French interpreters were filling some of our places. However Col. Block wired to the W.O. and received a reply confirming all our appointments.<sup>8</sup>

The parallel existence of French and British interpreters did not last long and was soon abandoned in favour of using exclusively French interpreters, while the British men initially selected as interpreters were turned into Intelligence Corps Officers (Beach 2004, 126–130), by mid-1915 at the latest.<sup>9</sup> In the early months of the war, however, and specifically where Plumon worked, in Marseilles, crucial port for the landing of the colonial elements of the British Expeditionary Force, French and British interpreters coexisted occupying similar posts and doing similar work.

According to Hannay (2003, 145f), the first distinction which needs to be established is that between active/production-oriented dictionaries, i.e. those destined for users who seek to find words to express something and advice on how to employ these words and passive/reception-oriented dictionaries, aimed at those users who wish to understand a written or spoken element of the foreign language they are confronted with, and then possibly translate it into their own language.

Several elements of the 1914 edition of Plumon’s Vade-Mecum may be considered as production-oriented for a public of native French-speakers who need to communicate in English. There is first of all the general lay-out with the French word on the left and its English equivalent on the right:

Molletières, f.	–	Puttees
Guêtres, f.	–	Gaiters (Plumon 1914, 8)

Then there is an explanatory section on military rank in the British and colonial armies with titles in French, clearly aimed at individuals who are not familiar with this system of rank:

Grades dans l'Armée Hindoue			
Infanterie			
at bottom of sleeve	One chevron	^	Good conduct
at top of sleeve	One chevron	v	Lance Naik
at top of sleeve	Two chevrons		Naik (Plumon 1914, 7)

Finally, the preface explicitly states that the dictionary is “specifically written for the use of Interpreters attached to British Forces” (Plumon 1914, 2), which corresponds with the con-

secretated formula used by the French military administration of “interprètes militaires détachés auprès de l’Armée Britannique”.

There are, however, also a series of elements which seem to point in other directions. First of all, the fact that the whole paratext is in English is surprising. From the preface to the chapter headings, but also the description of rank insignia and the differences between French and British units of measure – the dictionary does not comport any explanation in French. The only consistently French elements are the left-hand-columns of vocabulary in the main body of the dictionary. A further, possibly surprising element is the inclusion of the gender of French nouns. In a production-oriented dictionary for native speakers of French we would expect little information about the headwords in French, yet they systematically bear their articles. Finally, there is a very curious section of two pages in length entitled “Termes de Campagne/Field Service Expressions” (Plumon 1914, 60), where English words are followed by their French translation in brackets and then an explanation in English:

- |                                   |   |  |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Cossack Post (Groupe de vedettes) | – | A group in outpost mounted troops  |
| Command (Hauteur de tranchée)     | – | Vertical height of the crest of a work above the natural surface of the ground (Plumon 1914, 60) |

Considering these dictionaries from the point of lexicology and using the two categories of production-/reception oriented does not provide us with a neat answer. Plumon’s work appears to be curiously hybrid. We can however, establish a framework of hypotheses to help us in our reflection on interpreters working for the Franco-British coalition at the time.

First of all, the curious structure of the 1914 dictionary – apparently aimed at French soldiers, yet using English explanations may well have been the result of the chaotic mixed-language situation of the language service at the time. Plumon in Marseilles during the early months of the war would probably have seen or exchanged with British interpreters in similar functions to his own and they may thus have naturally been part of the public for which he intended his dictionary. This initial hesitation later paid off as we see in the title of the 1917 edition which is now *Vade-mecum for the use of Officers and interpreters in the present campaign* (Plumon 1917a). The dictionary initially aimed at interpreters seems to have found larger use, essentially among the Officers of the coalition troops and the choice not to include French explanatory paratexts would have made it most suitable.

We do not know to what extent these dictionaries circulated, only indications that they were considered in 1917 and 1918 in the United States to supplement language lessons for American soldiers preparing to cross to Europe (Downer 1918, 243; McKenzie 1918, 363f).

Plumon had spent five years in the United Kingdom and two years in the United States of America, had been married to an English operatic singer and by all accounts had an excellent grasp of the English language. He may well have expected all interpreters to be as pro-

ficient as he was and therefore well-served by a dictionary which includes little French explanation, preferring instead to use English wherever possible. We might even envisage the consistent use of English as a pedagogical ploy, aimed at improving the interpreters' command of the language by exposing them to English rather than French explanations.

### **3 What happens in the translation of these military terms?**

From a translation perspective, these dictionaries are a very interesting source object because the translator is also the author/compiler and part of the end-user group. Plumon chose the words he was going to include and then provide their translations. This was presumably a dynamic process – there would have been cases of French words he wanted to include for which he had to find English equivalents, but also English words that would have to be provided in French. Looking in detail at the pairs of terms from one section of the dictionary should therefore provide us with an interesting insight into a very particular translation situation and enable us to formulate hypotheses on the writing process for this terminological dictionary.

In the preface to the 1917 edition Plumon states that the successive revisions of his dictionary are in part due to the work of “many of the readers interested in the previous issues [who] have afforded us bits of information, while several specialists have been good enough to revise the proofs of the chapters within their provinces.” (Plumon 1917a, preface). Indeed, the volume increases from 84 pages in 1914 to 233 pages for the 1917 British edition and in the following we shall begin by looking at this increase in volume in a specific section:

The 1914 edition has the following vocabulary concerning footwear:

Bottes à l'écuyère, f.	–	Riding boots
Brodequins, m.	–	Ammunition boots
Grosses bottes, f.	–	Jack-boots (Plumon 1914, 8)

The British army traditionally had a wider range of boots in its standard issue uniform, which leads to Plumon having to call the British standard issue jack-boots by the rather inelegant “grosses bottes” in French as the French army did not routinely use them and therefore had no standard term for them. By 1917 the vocabulary concerning footwear in the dictionary had been vastly enlarged:

Bottes en caoutchouc, f.	–	Gum boots
Bottes à l'écuyère, f.	–	High boots
Bottes molles, f.	–	Wellington boots
Brodequins, f.	–	Ammunition boots (Service boots)
Demi-bottes, f.	–	Mess boots
Grosses bottes (à mi-cuisse)	–	Jack-boots (Plumon 1917a, 58f)

We can see quite clearly that the information conveyed in this dictionary has become a lot more detailed, but also that, if anything, the imbalance between English garments with words in English for which terms have to be found in French has become stronger. It can only be assumed that years of living along-side the British troops gradually introduced the military interpreters to the full diversity of British uniform, different as it was from French uniform. Gradually the necessary vocabulary to designate these objects in French is built up and put into place.

We can see from the footwear-example not only how the degree of detail in the provision of vocabulary increases, but also how translation strategies evolve. We shall however investigate another example which makes this even clearer. In 1914 the dictionary provides the following translations for terms of outer-wear:

Manteau, m	–	Cavalry Cloak
Capote, f.	–	Great-coat
Vareuse, f.	–	Patrol-coat (Plumon 1914, 8)

What we see here is a very clear decision to provide cultural equivalents for the various terms. The French army “capote”, for example, is physically a very different garment from a British army “great coat”, yet the two pieces of clothing were worn by the corresponding hierarchical levels of the two armies for equivalent occasions and purposes. By 1917, we find a very different selection of vocabulary on outer garments:

Manteau, m	–	Cloak
Capote, f.	–	Sort of great-coat, in the French army
Vareuse, f.	–	Service jacket
Pardessus, m. (court pour officier)	–	British warm (Plumon 1917a, 58–60)

Here the translation strategy has changed completely and cultural equivalence has been abandoned in favour of descriptive translation, practically definition in the case of the translation of “capote”. In the absence of definite statements by Plumon about the strategies used in his compilation and translation, we can only speculate as to the reasons for this fundamental change. It would seem however, at the very least, that the 1914 choice of providing cultural equivalents must not have held up to the daily work requirements of the military interpreters. We can thus reason that these men, untrained as interpreters and who only gradually discovered the full range of tasks they were expected to do, changed their perception of the translation process, becoming more aware of cultural differences and specificities as the war continued.

#### **4 Conclusion**

We have seen how lexicography, translation studies and cultural history all provide valuable avenues to analysing and understanding the fascinating source that are Plumon’s dictionaries. The three approaches are very much complementary in a true interdisciplinary

sense and show up perspectives for a new and improved history of translation and interpreting (as called for by Pym 1992). In closing there is one final perspective that should be indicated. *Vade-Mecum* in French designates an aide-mémoire, a memory-aid, a pocket-book which one carries on one's person in order to be able to refer to the reference values contained within it. As such it has a practical dimension that cannot be ignored. This book was prepared for actual use on the ground and the feedback which served to improve the subsequent editions presumably came from just there. In order to take the analysis of this unique source a step further, more research is needed into the numbers of books in circulation, their adoption by the different user groups and their actual impact in interpreter-mediated negotiations, for example between British military authorities and the French civilian population.

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<sup>1</sup> Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Département Armée de Terre (DAT), Château de Vincennes.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives, PRO Kew, W Series.

<sup>3</sup> According to the records conserved in SHD Vincennes DAT 17 N 482, he was born in 1880, spoke English, German, Italian and Flemish, had spent five years each in England and in Germany as well as two years in the United States. His profession at the beginning of the war was 'avocat à la cour', lawyer, in Paris. He was at the time freshly divorced from the British opera singer Maggie Teyte, had no children, could ride a bicycle and drive a car. Due to illness he had only accomplished six of the normal twelve months of military service for men of his education. He spent the first four months of the war as a military interpreter in Marseille

assisting the arrival of British colonial troops and was then transferred to the main British base in Le Havre on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1914. Throughout the duration of the conflict, illness frequently saw him unfit for service for months on end.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives. PRO Kew, WO 106/49 C 'Preparation for Expeditionary Force'

<sup>5</sup> SHD DAT, 17 N 1782, War Ministry to French Military Attaché in London, Colonel de la Panouse 01/06/1913

<sup>6</sup> Conserved in the archival holdings of the Imperial War Museum, London

<sup>7</sup> IWM 7/6/1, DH Loch album

<sup>8</sup> IWM, Jeune box, war notebook

<sup>9</sup> As indicated by telegram dated 20th June 1915 conserved in IWM 7/6/1: "A G. Branch informs me that English Interpreters for Divisions no longer sanctioned and suggest you applying for Intelligence Corps. Posting to 6th Corps could be arranged."