



## Translation of False Cognates from English to French: The Case of Kisangani University Students

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### **Abstract**

French and English belong to the Indo-European family of languages and have had a long history of contact, displaying many similar words that range from true cognates through partial false cognates to absolute false cognates. The issue of interference between two or several languages has been widely discussed. This is also of big concern for Congolese students who study French as a second language and English as a foreign language. Experience has shown that there is a kind of influence that arises at all levels (*I*) of language learning: phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic. The present paper seeks to understand the cognate relationship between English and French and the extent to which it interferes with each other when translating. The target group for this research is composed of Congolese students studying French as a second language and English as a foreign language. Literature shows that translating from second language into native language is much easier than the other way around. This paper attempts to find out if this trend may also be confirmed while translating from foreign language into second language, which, presumably, is well mastered by the translators. The paper also aims to check if interference is pyramidal from beginners to more advanced students. It also attempts to see the way in which absolute and partial false cognates interfere in the students' translations depending on the levels to which these students belong.

**Keywords:** false cognate, interference, translation, second language, third language

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is related to multilingualism and translation with the focus on the translation of false cognates from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) into French as the Second Language. There exists an abundant literature on linguistic interference, which impacts language learning most particularly. It is evident that when languages are in contact, mutual influence results; that is to say, speakers use both or all languages concurrently and the fact that they become familiar with both/all talks engenders interlingual interference (Weinreich, 1953). This pressure of one language items on the other, most importantly, from the first learned language, will affect the target language at all levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, etc.). This point of view was even more reinforced when contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) came into fashion

(Lado, 1957) whether in its strong or weak version, also widely discussed by Wardhaugh (1970, p. 3).

If language learning is the field of predilection for such shortcomings, it is, however, noted that at all levels of the language, the bilinguals and trilingual speakers in this particular case, display to an extent the influence of one language into the other and not necessarily always from the previously learned language into the target language. This mutual influence depends on the proficiency level of the language user.

Different researches on the issue have shown that all the newly being learned language levels are influenced by the language already known by the learner, though the classification is that interference is much more prevailing at the phonological and syntactic levels followed by the lexical interference. At the lexical level, transfer errors prime on developmental errors (Abisamra, 2003). The use of false cognates counts among the transfer errors which are interlingual and not developmental. It is important to note that false cognates are subcategorized as absolute false cognates, partial false cognates and nuance differentiated pairs (Veisbergs, 1996).

If false cognates have been largely discussed in the field of bilingualism and language learning, very little has been said about the influence a second language may have on the third language and vice versa. This is to say that the relation of second language (L2) to third language (L3) learning has been relegated to the bottom of concerns raised in the field. This is also true for translation that has always been viewed from the L1 – L2 perspective and seldom from the L2 – L3 perspective. Very few writings discuss the L2 - L3 translations, although - it must be admitted, this translation involving L2 and foreign languages becomes a reality in this time of globalization, where the need for communication between different languages speakers is felt (Ilunga, 2019).

The problem of negative transfer, mainly that of cognates, can be best studied by using translations done by the target group. We may induce that, the context of the L2 – L3 translation happens following to, an extent, the scheme of L1 – L2 translation. It has been proven that translating from Target language (TL) into Native Language is easier than the other way around, and Jabak is correct when he states that:

However, the transference of cultural elements into cultural equivalents tends to be more daunting for the translator who translates them into a second language than for the translator who translates them into his or her first language and culture.

Jabak, <https://www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article1508.php>

He also quotes Dickins (2005), who supports that the high-quality translation is rendered from Second Language into Native Language, and not from L1 to L2. The reasons behind the above research findings, among others, is the fact that the translator departing L2 into the native language (NL) has more natural and practical knowledge of the various linguistic elements of his/her NL such as semantics, syntax, morphology and lexicology than that of the second language – and that translation into NL provides the translator with some advantages, such as an instinctive knowledge of morphological, semantic, syntactic and lexical aspects of his/her mother tongue because the translator acquires

these linguistic elements naturally in the course of time, and he/she does have not the bookish knowledge that we often have in second language (Jakak, op. cit).

The reason why research on cognates is important is the one stated by Marchetti in her abstract, where she notes that

Cognates share the same semantic and similar phonological/morphological forms across two ...; therefore, the use of cognates can have an effect across the different languages. Non-cognates include words whose translation equivalents have different spellings and sound patterns” (2015, p.4).

It is a fact that, nowadays, people in the Democratic Republic of Congo become more and more interested in the English language learning. It goes without saying that many people with a fair knowledge of English and French venture into translation and interpreting because it pays well. In this way, they do it as amateurs as they do not have prerequisites to do so. The students in the English department in Kisangani (the target group in this paper) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are frequently hired like translators and interpreters due to the pressure that the English language exerts on the ground with the increasing contact of the country with English language speakers.

From the discussion in the paragraphs above, the research questions can be stated as follows:

1. As the sentences are translated from English (L3) into French (L2), do the false cognates interfere at a high rate?
2. How much interference can be expected at the different levels of these students?
3. Do the targeted students’ translations interfere in the same way in the two subcategories of false cognates (absolute and partial)?

I hypothesize that:

1. Given that the students are more proficient in the second language than in the third one, they are likely to be less influenced by the presence of false cognates in the source language material (third language).
2. Beginners will be more influenced by the presence of cognates, followed by intermediates and less influence will be noted in advanced students’ translations.
3. Beginners and intermediates will be interfering in both types of cognates (absolute and partial), whereas advanced students will be more interfering when it comes to partial cognates.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Interference**

Interference is defined as “a term used in sociolinguistics and foreign-language learning to refer to the errors a speaker introduces into one language as a result of contact with another language; also called negative transfer” (Crystal, 2008, p. 249). The same author

argues that Contrastive analysis (CA) also called contrastive linguistics was and is still used in applied linguistics. Furthermore, CA and serves language teaching purposes in order to contrast parallel languages with the ultimate goal of sorting out similarities and differences that will cause interference and negative transfer in the foreign language learner (Crystal, 2008).

As mentioned in the introduction, Robert Lado (1957) took the lead on contrastive analysis. It should, however, be noted that prior to Lado, this point was already discussed by another researcher who claimed that “the most efficient materials are those that are based upon scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner” (Fries, 1945, p.9). The work of Fries was indeed a contrastive theory, where he thought there was

the first stage of language learning and the end to be learned’. This end to be attained was nothing more than the building up of a new set of habits for the oral production of a language and for the receptive understanding of the language when it is spoken (Selinker, 1992, p. 7).

The theory on contrastive analysis was largely discussed by Wardhaugh (1970) and later on relayed by Rustpa, who made a clear synthesis of Lado’s findings and thus that of contrastive analysis in these points: (1) foreign language learning is based on the mother tongue, (2) similarities facilitate learning (positive transfer), (3) differences cause problems (negative transfer/Interference), (4) via contrastive analysis, problems can be predicted and considered in the curriculum (2011, p. 17).

Let us quickly mention that this contrastive analysis was rejected by coming generations. Among these are researches by Corder (1968), Smith (2004) with the decline of behaviourist theory. Still, remnants are still found in researches on language learning, and Selinker makes it plain when he states that

The strongest motivation for doing CA came from its earliest days and involves applied work, namely, in considering what the best teaching materials might be, one has to look carefully at the learner from the point of view of possible transfer. This still is, I would maintain, a useful current position (1992, p.7)

With regard to interlingual interference at the lexicon level, Marchetti (2015, p.12) writes that “since cognates share the same semantic and similar phonological/morphological forms across two languages [...] the use of cognates can have an effect across the different languages. Some cognates even have identical overlap”. Similarly, Szubko-Sitarek (2011) conducted a study on non-selectivity of cognates and claimed that “the notion of nonselective lexical access that has recently received growing support within the bilingual domain seems to generalise to trilinguals and three languages” (p. 203). The result he came to is in line with the findings of Dijkstra (2005, p. 187) who discussed the issue of interlingual neighbour that he defines as “any word differing by a single letter from the target word with respect to the length and letter position. This is also close to the position held by Szubko-Sitarek (2015) who concludes that

empirical studies show that neighbours from both the same and the other language [...] are activated during the presentation of a target

word. This provides evidence that, with respect to orthographic codes, the lexicon of bilinguals is integrated and nonselective in nature (p.86).

On his part, while interpreting his results on the linguistic analysis on errors committed by Jordanian students, Al Karazoun (2016) found that

another probable interpretation is highly related to the assumption that most scholars believe that several words may seem to have similar meanings and they can be used interchangeably in all contexts, but in real sense, they have different meanings and senses and their usages may vary depending on the meaning intended to be expressed (p.183)

Sikogukira (1993) did an interesting research on English – French interference in the Burundian context. His research is about that assumption that L2 influences L3 speakers, but he seeks to know the reason why their L1 is of little influence on L3 learning. The main difference between his hypotheses and the ones stated in this paper is that he studies the occurrence of non-cognates in terms of synonymy and hyponymy, and that the use of false-cognates will decrease with level of study of the students, whereas in this paper, though there is a decrease in interference as students go up in the next level of studies. The intend here to demonstrate that partial false cognates will be the area of predilection of the students at higher level of study.

The notion of avoidance has been used to identify the strategy that a new language learner uses to sort out difficulties in certain areas of the target language, or because there is so much likeness between the two languages, and in this case, the learner tends to avoid what is too literal. In this line, three factors have been identified as being the causes for avoidance (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, p. 37): (a) Difference between L1 and L2), (b) identity between L1 and L2, and which is construed as difference by the learner, or (c) inherent complexity of the avoided item or construction. It is to be emphasized that most of these studies on avoidance do not tackle the other type of avoidance that the translator has recourse to by avoiding the straightforward word that is a cognate but uses its synonym in avoiding being too literal.

My understanding here is that such words should be regarded as false cognates because psycholinguistically speaking, the use of the word derives from false cognate. The patent example is that of a student translating “to rate” as “manquer” which is synonymous to the French “rater”; therefore, false cognate to the English verb “to rate”. In the whole, lexicon, including false cognates, has been found to be among the major areas of interlingual interference. Another example to support this type of avoidance is the translation of the English word “actually” by the French “de nos jours”. This French translation comes from the word “actuellement”, which is a false cognate to English “actually”.

### **Translation of false cognates**

This paper does not deal with positive transfer, and, in this case, with true cognates. It rather focuses on false cognates, and the latter refer to semantic false friends rather than to chance false friends which are “those pairs of words which are (graphically and/or

phonetically) the same or similar in two or more given languages, but without any semantic or etymological reason which may account for the sameness or similarity (Chamizo-Dominguez, 2008, p.5). In this paper, the two words “false cognates” and ‘false friends’ will be invariably used. They are words that have the same spelling in the two languages but have developed different meanings. Vinay and Darbelnet provide the following definition that “sont des faux amis du traducteur ces mots qui se correspondent d’une langue à l’autre par l’etymologie et par la forme, mais qui ayant évolué au sein de deux langues différentes, ont pris de sens différents” [are false friends of the translator these words that correspond from one language to another by etymology and form, but which have evolved within two different languages, have taken on different meanings] (1968, p. 71).

Newmark (1988, p.27), on his part, states that “Both in West and East, thousands of words are drawing nearer to each other in meaning. Many sound natural when you transfer them and may still have the wrong meaning”. Thus, Hein and Tymowski (2006, p.9) warn translators on the words that have the same form in two languages but with different meanings, and mainly calques and conceptual false friends.

In the same line, Cognates priming are widely discussed in the following terms:

cognates such as ‘tomato’ in English and ‘tomate’ in French will prime each other more reliably than forms that share less phonological material such as ‘forest’ and ‘forêt’. Results of translation to and from pairs of languages have shown that as proficiency increases, there appears to be a shift from form activation to meaning activation. In other words, in the early stages, ‘flesh’ would activate ‘flèche’ for a beginning francophone learner of English because of lexical links, but the prediction is that more proficient bilinguals will show effects of ‘arrow’ for ‘flèche’ (Juffs, 2009, p.189)

While this statement is correct in many ways, it still proves limited in cases of second language and third language interaction given that sometimes, the level of proficiency is not that high even at advanced level as will be developed later in this paper in Participants section.

Odlin states that

when individuals know two languages, knowledge of both may affect their acquisition of a third. Most probably, knowledge of three or more languages can lead to three or more different kinds of source language influence, although pinning down the exact influences in multilingual situations is often hard. (1989, p. 27)

Quoting Odlin, Murphy (2003, p.7) argues that “the correlation between low L2 proficiency and transfer applies primarily to negative transfer, whereas certain types of transfer, such as cognate vocabulary use, occur even at high levels of proficiency”. Llach (2010) writes that “Language transfer is not equal to all areas of language so that some are more permeable to transfer than others. Lexis is especially sensible to cross-linguistic influence” (p.2).

## **METHOD**

## Participants

The participants in this research are all students in the Department of English, faculty of Humanities, University of Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the 2018-2019 academic year. Since there are few students, I decided to investigate all of them except 50% of the 12 students who were absent. In this department, English is taught as the main subject through the following courses: Grammar and composition, Idioms and conversation (from *l1* to *l3*), phonetics, phonology and morphology, applied linguistics, English linguistics, business English, etc. From *l4* and *l5*, these students have been introduced to other courses like translation, pragmatics, Second Language Acquisition, Semantics, Sociolinguistics, etc. These students are frequently hired as translators/interpreters depending on the need. In the course of grammar and composition, they have been taught among other things, the false cognates. This notion on false cognates is reinforced in the course of translation at *l4*.

The participants are all Congolese and have been exposed to the English language almost in the same conditions, in the French and other local languages environment. It is also important to note that the mean age for these students is 25 (Ilunga, 2019b). During the first two years of studies in the department of 'Lettres et Civilisations Anglaises' (English Department), there are many courses taught in French (Ilunga, 2008, p. 2). This high incidence of French is reduced as students go up. In general, the curriculum looks like this (Programme des cours, 2004, pp. 42 – 45):

**Table 1.** Number of hours taught in French and English per level

Year of study	Max. no. of hours	Hours of English	%
<i>l1</i>	645	345	53.48
<i>l2</i>	615	315	51.21
<i>l3</i>	610	450	80
<i>l4</i>	720	675	94
<i>l5</i>	515	500	97

These students have been found to highly display the two types of motivation (integrative and instrumental) (Ilunga, 2019) and are much like in the same learning environment as those described by Sikogukira (op cit). Their professors also studied and graduated in the same institution as the students, though some of the professors were trained by some English native speakers in the course of their secondary and college studies. Some of them have also visited countries like the UK, South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya, etc. for short periods of time. To sum up, the participants learn English as L3 in L1 and L2 environment more or less like their professors from whom they get the input.

## Data collection and procedure

I selected 25 English words believed to be false cognates with their French equivalents. The list comprised absolute false cognates (9) and partial false cognates (16). The rationale for this selection was dictated by the hypotheses to test the area of predilection

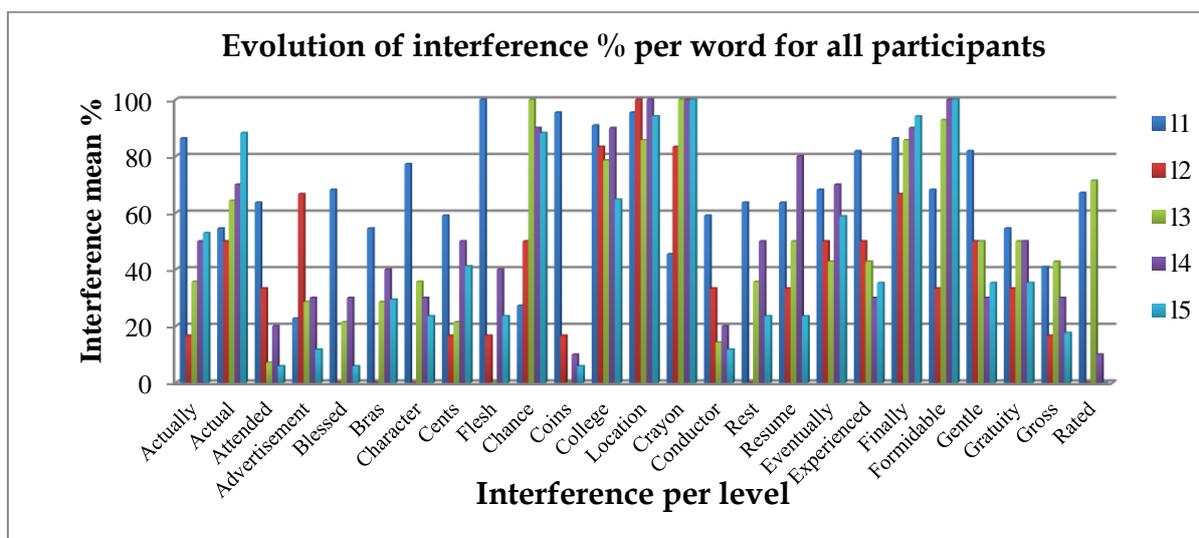
for interference with reference to beginners, intermediate and advanced students. The English sentences are provided in the appendix.

With regard to the procedure applied in this paper, since it has been found that translating from L2 to L1 is much easier (cf. section 1), I also deduced that translating from L3 to L2 would also be easier than the other way around. The selected false cognates were inserted in English sentences that the students were tasked to translate into French. The linguistic analysis of these translations bore only on the targeted words and did not take into account the other shortcomings the students may have encountered. And with reference to words identified as having not undergone interference, it does not mean that the words were necessarily correctly translated. The translation of the word may be incorrect, but still, there is no interference at all.

As stated before, avoidance has also been one of the strategies used by these translators; that is to say, instead of using a false cognate, the translator, as discussed above, may use its synonym with no phonemic/semantic relation with the English word, still the word is counted as part of false cognate repertoire (see section 2).

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Graphic data analysis



**Figure 1.** Interference per level

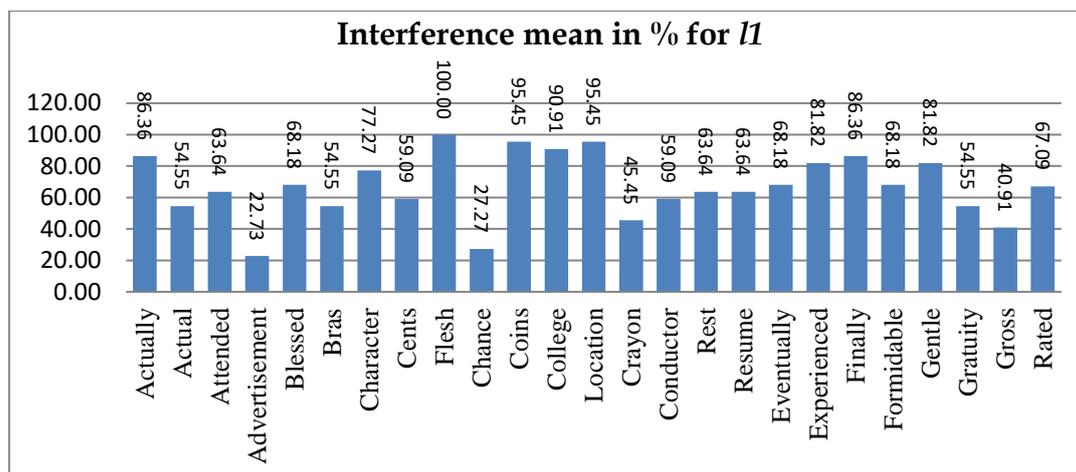


Figure 2. l1 interference

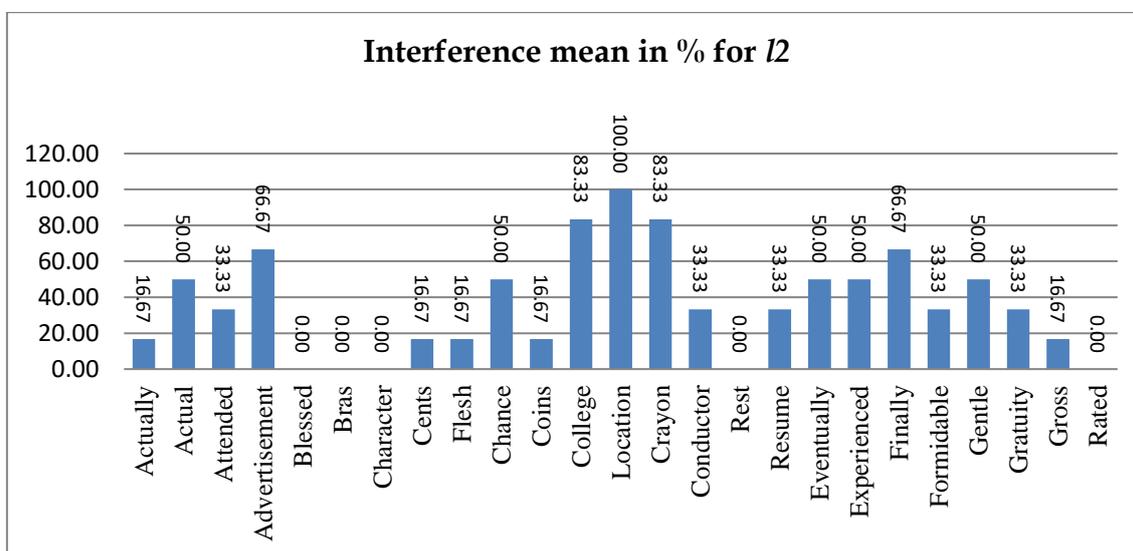


Figure 3. l2 interference

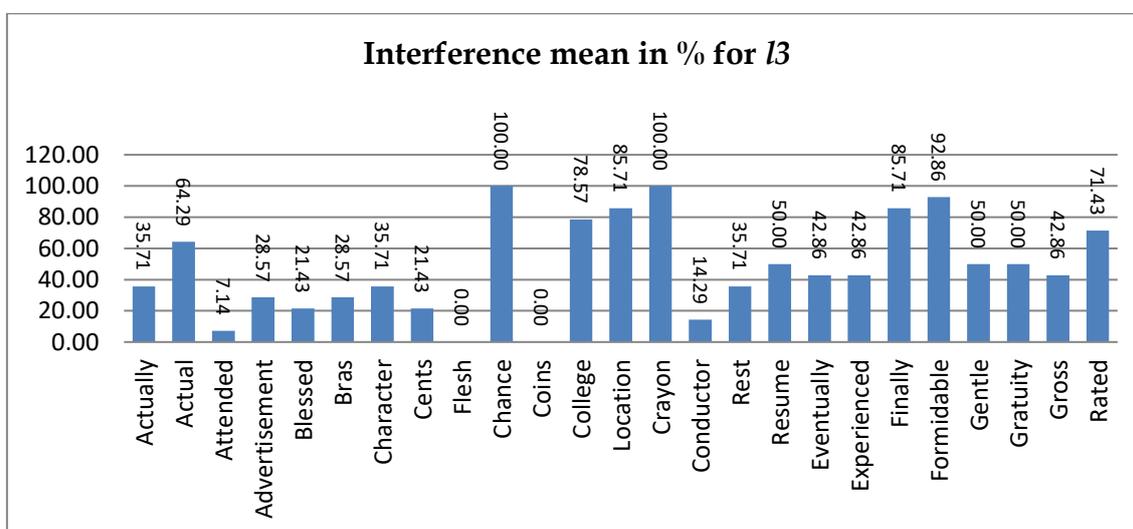


Figure 4. l3 interference

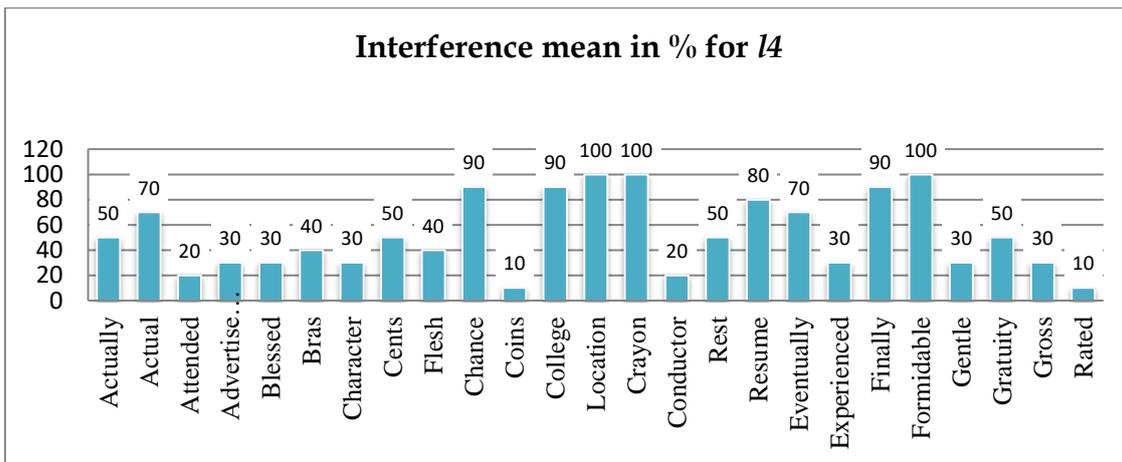


Figure 5. l4 interference

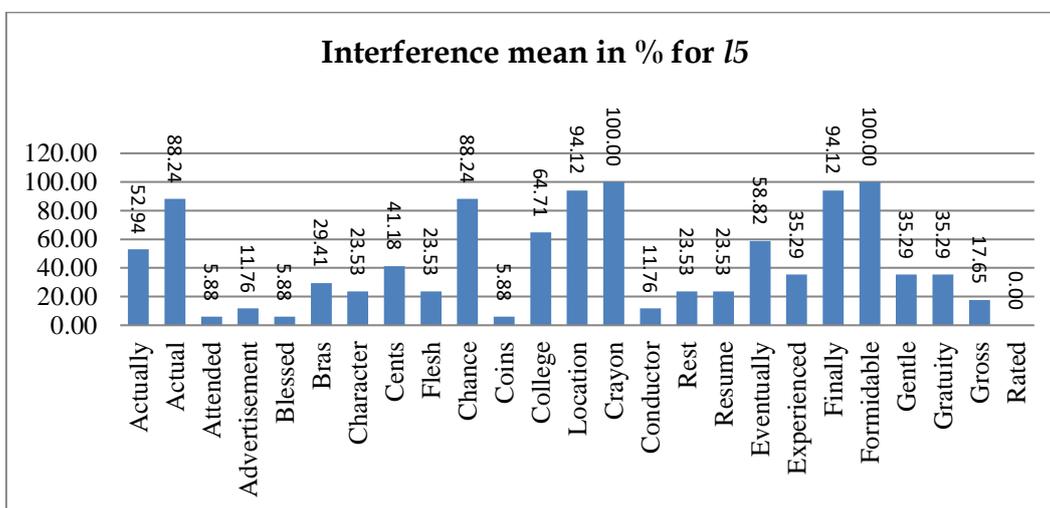


Figure 6. l5 interference

Global graph of interference

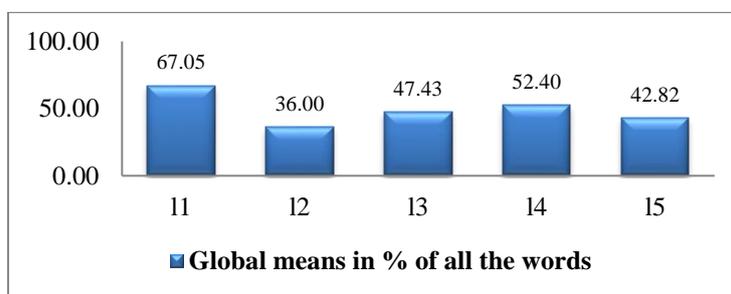


Figure 7. Global means in % of all the words per Level

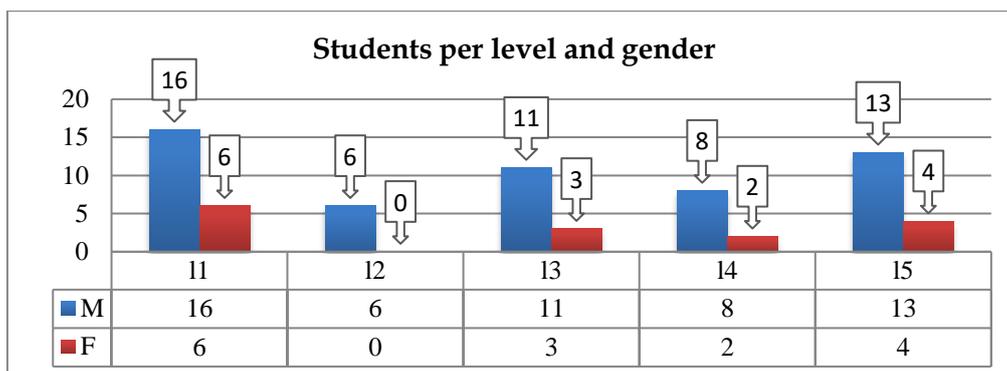


Figure 8. Students gender per Level

**Statistical analysis of data**

***Homogeneity variance test***

The hypotheses are as follows:

H0: There is no difference between the average of male and female students in the English department

H1: There is a difference between the average of male and female students in the English department.

After analyzing data under SPSS, the results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Results of the homogeneity variance test

		<i>F</i>	<i>Significati on</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Bilateral significati on</i>	<i>Mean differen ce</i>	<i>Standar d error differen ce</i>	<i>confidence interval of difference at 95</i>	
									<i>Inferi or limit</i>	<i>Superi or limit</i>
Mean s in %	Hypothes is of equal variances	1.37 2	0.246	1.67 4	67	0.099	8.207	4.902	-1.577	17.992
	Hypothes is of inequal variances			1.79 8	24.91 7	0.084	8.207	4.566	-1.197	17.612

The results show that the probability of this test is superior at 0.05 (0.246>0.05). Thus, the null hypothesis is validated. Statistically male and female students of the English department react in the same way with regard to false cognates given that there exists variances homogeneity. In other words, there is no correlation between gender and interference related to the use of false cognates.

***The correlation test***

The results in the table below were obtained after using the SPSS application:

**Table 3.** Results of the correlation test.

		Correlations	
		levels	Mean %
Levels	Pearson Correlation	1	-,476**
	Bilateral signification		,000
	N	69	69
Mean %	Pearson Correlation	-,476**	1
	Bilateral signification	,000	
	N	69	69

\*\* *The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral).*

From table 3, it appears that there is a link between the variables ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, this correlation has a negative effect of medium size (-47.6%). In this sense, it is a negative linear relationship. Statistically, students' membership to a given has a negative impact on the average level of interference for each word. This means, the higher the level of education, the lower the average level of interference.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that the high level of interference in L1 correlates with their low input with regard the number of English classes they have per year. 53% of hours only are taught in English, the rest being taught in French. That these fresh students interfered at the rate of 67.07% is no surprise. Their interference is felt in both types of false friends (absolute and partial). This means that they are not selective in their translations.

The results obtained by *I2* students is much a surprise at first glance. Their level of interference has been rated at 36.00% below the other levels including the advanced level students who have already been exposed to the course of grammar and composition over three year and got an amount of experience in the course of translation that is taught at *I4* level. As mentioned in section 3.1, 50% of participants at this level were absent compared to the other levels where the corpus comprised of all the students. This may be the reason why their rate of interference appears to be low.

Let us note that there is high rate of interference in *I4* translations compared to *I3* students' translations. It is not understandable that *I4* participants can interfere at the rate of 52.40% since, not only are they advanced, but also, they have been freshly exposed to a 45-hour course of translation. At this level a strong warning is given to them in relation with the use of false cognates which counts among the stumbling block of the translators. The fact is that this is the class that excelled in avoidance strategy using synonymous cognates that also, as explained earlier, were counted as interference instances. That may contribute to account for why these L4 students performed lower than those of 3<sup>rd</sup> level.

Using the simple average, I may say that interference level is low in the whole those 49.14% (on interference) is not that much far from the 50.86% on non-interference. It however validates the first hypothesis according to which the interference level from third language to second language is low. To an extent, these findings are not in dissonance with Jakob's literature on the translation from second language into native language as discussed in the review of the literature. I was expecting to have a pyramidal diagram of interference with reference to the difference levels, this is not however the case, and the 'yes' or 'no' to the second hypothesis (beginners will be more influenced by the presence of cognates, followed by intermediates and less influence will be noted in advanced students' translations) is somewhat mitigated by some variables that need more explanation in a different research approach.

From the figures at different levels, the results show that first level students interfere invariably in partial and absolute false cognates, and this interference is reflected at both and semantic levels. On the contrary, at the more advanced level, the high rate of interference appeared in partial false cognates (actually, actual, character, chance, college, location, conductor, eventually, experienced, finally, formidable, gentle, gratuity, gross, crayon, and rest). It means that the semantic selection as a criterion prevails over phonemic orientation. This result in fact validates the third hypothesis. The overall results are in agreement with the findings of Sikogukira (1993) and in line with Szubko-Sitarek's findings, though, the settings, contexts and experiments are not necessary the same in these three research models.

## CONCLUSION

The research has shown that interference between French and English is not necessary as much high as presumably thought of. Proficiency of students involved in the translation plays a great role in determining the amount of interference, but also departing from third language to second language will reduce this interference but at the same time be a good incentive for the translators who are much familiar with words in second language rather than in third language. Not quite sure is the fact that translating from second language to third language will produce the countereffect, but rather may lead to avoidance in its strict sense and lead to a much less interference rate. This can be attested only after a documented investigation in the issue.

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#### **APPENDIX: Translate the following sentences in French**

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Level: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Actually, I inadvertently omitted his name
2. The actual value of the diamond is unknown.
3. He attended the meeting, but in the absence of the boss no decision was made.
4. The advertisement did not have any impact on the buyers.
5. He blessed the boy whose parents died in the aircraft crash.
6. Don't put your bras on the table.
7. The characters did not perform as expected.
8. I have two cents in my pocket.
9. The flesh can kill the soul.
10. Did you have any chance to meet your former employer?

11. Can these two coins help you?
12. This college is the most expensive in the town.
13. The conductor was speaking to a passenger when they had an accident.
14. Did you use the crayon while drawing?
15. the car's location was not known.
16. Rest a bit and then resume your work.
17. I will do the washing-up and eventually the homework late in the evening.
18. He experienced a lot of difficulties during his career.
19. Muller has finally joined the team.
20. Your story is formidable.
21. He is gentle with his hands
22. Did you receive any gratuity from him?
23. You are so gross that I do not like you.
24. He rated it very low.