

Creativity in translation: a case study in Dutch compounding

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1. State of the art

Cross-linguistic differences

Compounds and phrases in Dutch and French

- From a **CxG perspective**, “syntactic constructions may form an alternative to, or compete with the morphological expression of semantic and grammatical content” (Booij, 2002: 301)
- In both Dutch and French, morphological and syntactic patterns are available to build **multi-word expressions**
 - Du. *wetenschapsbeleid* ‘science policy’ vs *wetenschappelijk beleid* ‘scientific policy’ (Booij, 2019: 105)
 - Du. *frisdrank* ‘soft drink’ vs *sterke drank* ‘hard liquor’
 - Fr. *village(-)vacances* vs *village de vacances* ‘holiday resort’
- However, languages may significantly vary with respect to their **degree of analyticity** (cf. ‘Germanic / Romance Sandwich’, e.g. van Haeringen, 1956; Hüning et al. 2006; Lamiroy, 2011)
 - Dutch is a more synthetic language than French
 - **Dutch has a stronger tendency towards compounding than French** (Van Goethem, 2009; Van Goethem & Amiot, 2019)

Examples of Dutch compounds

Vanavond start "De droomfabriek" opnieuw



Media & Televisie

"Het wordt echte nattehaartjestelevsie". Bart Peeters en Gloria Monserec heropenen "De droomfabriek"



'wet-hair-DIM-television'

'the free-wifi-on-the-bus-feeling'

Cross-linguistic differences

Three important **differences** between compounding in Dutch and French:

- 1. Productivity:** Compounding is more productive in Dutch than in French (Van Goethem, 2009; Van Goethem & Amiot, 2019)
 - Du. *badkamer* vs Fr. *salle de bains* 'bathroom'
 - Du. *zoetwaterzwembad* vs Fr. *piscine d'eau douce* 'freshwater pool'
- 2. Word order:** Dutch has right-headed compounding, whereas French has left-headed compounding
 - Du. *bloemkool* vs Fr. *chou-fleur* 'cauliflower'
- 3. Demarcation compound/phrase:** The distinction between compounds and (lexicalized) phrases is more clearly established in Dutch than in French (spelling, prosody, linking elements, loss of adjectival inflection)
 - Du. *frisdrank* vs Fr. *boisson rafraîchissante* 'soft drink'

Previous study

Previous study on learner data in the MulTINCo corpus from 195 learners in French-speaking Belgium (Hendrikx & Van Goethem, 2024):

- Compounds are more frequent in L1 Dutch than in L1 French
- French-speaking learners of Dutch overuse phrasal structures in contexts where a compound should be used (e.g., *lessen van zwembad* 'classes from swimming pool' instead of *zwemlessen* 'swimming classes')
- But they also use compounds in cases where a simplex word is appropriate (e.g., *kookman* 'cookman' instead of *kok* 'chef') and codeswitch within compounds (e.g., *verjaardagsgateau* 'birthday cake').



Present study: novice translators' use of Dutch compounds

Translation as another form of 'constrained communication'

- Translation as another form of 'constrained communication' (Lanstyák & Heltai, 2012; Kruger, 2018; De Sutter & Lefer, 2019)
 - 'communication taking place under conditions where one or several of the potential limiting factors play a greater than average role' (Lanstyák and Heltai, 2012: 100),
 - i.e., writing in L2, editing, translation
 - **Priming** is pervasive in both mono- and multilingual behavior (Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971; Brysbaert, Van Dyck & Van de Poel, 1999)
 - Empirical process-oriented studies corroborate that even experienced translators tend to translate literally (Tirkkonen-Condit, 2002) before overruling these first translation options by more appropriate ones (Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971: 376)

Linguistic creativity

- Sampson (2016):
 - Distinction between
 - **F-creativity** (Fixed creativity, like productivity)
 - **E-creativity** (Extending creativity, creativity beyond rules)
 - In Chomskyan generativism, only F-creativity is allowed
- Bergs (2018):
 - More dynamic linguistic approaches such as **Construction Grammar** also allow E-creativity
 - Possible **sources of E-creativity**:
 - (unintentional) errors and mistakes in performance (e.g., slips of the tongue)
 - language contact (e.g., intentional or unintentional borrowing)
 - intentional manipulation of linguistic material (e.g., mismatch and coercion)
 - **Cline between F- and E-creativity**

Linguistic creativity

- Uhrig (2020): ‘the fine line between creative and wrong’
 - Criterion of “**deliberateness**”: creativity is intentional; mistakes are not
 - But additional factors should be considered:
 - **Frequency effects**: preemption or negative entrenchment (e.g., Sp. *vino tinto* ‘coloured wine’ blocks *vino rojo* ‘red wine’)
 - **Hearer expectations (context)**: “if the hearer thinks the competent native speaker wants to be funny, they will more readily accept the resulting utterance as creative than if the same utterance is produced by a struggling learner whose aim seems to be to produce a simple sentence that is compatible with the native norm” (Uhrig, 2020: 8)
- A **cline from creative to wrong ‘constructions’** depending on multiple factors



2. Aims of the study and research hypotheses

Aims

- The **aim of the project** is threefold:
 - i. to investigate language-specific tendencies towards the use of nominal compounds and their analytic equivalents
 - ii. to compare the use of Dutch compounds by young French-Dutch translators (whose L1 is Dutch or French)
 - iii. to reveal the (creative) strategies novice translators use to tackle problems caused by cross-linguistic differences

Hypotheses

- i. Overgeneralisation of phrasal patterns in translation as a priming effect from French : *cours de natation* (fr) : **lessen van zwembad* vs *zwemlessen*
- ii. More priming effects in French-speaking translators than in Dutch speaking translators
- iii. Mostly F-creativity in Dutch-speaking translators; Possible E-creativity in French-speaking translators (unintentional mistakes)



3. Corpus data and methods

Data collection and corpus sample

Data collection

- French source texts from Multilingual Traditional, Immersion and Native Corpus (MulTINCo) (Meunier et al., 2023)
 - Task: write an e-mail to a friend about a party or their holidays
 - 30 texts selected and edited (shortened) for the translation task
- Translation corpus collected in 2024
 - Antwerp University, UGent, VUB
 - ULiège

	L1 Dutch	L1 French	Other L1
Number of participants	39	10	4
Number of nominal compounds	311	68	28
Average number of compounds per text	7.97	6.80	7.00

Other L1: Arabic (1), Spanish (2), Italian (1)

[Note: Spanish and Italian have similar word formation strategies as French]

Data annotation

Formal properties:

Compound length (number of lexical components)

Compound structure ([NN]_N, [VN]_N, [AN]_N, ...)

Accuracy:

- **Accuracy of the compound:** spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes, lexical mistakes, linking morpheme, codeswitching (Fr/Eng), word order
- **Word-formation accuracy:** phrase instead of compound*, simplex instead of compound, etc.

***Checked in *Corpus Hedendaags Nederlands*: the compound had to be at least 10 times more frequent than the phrase to consider it “non-idiomatic”:**

- *mensen van mijn klas* (1 hit) vs *mijn klasgenoten* (123 hits) → non-idiomatic
- *in het centrum van de stad* (1076 hits) vs *in het stadscentrum* (956 hits) → accurate



4. Results

Results

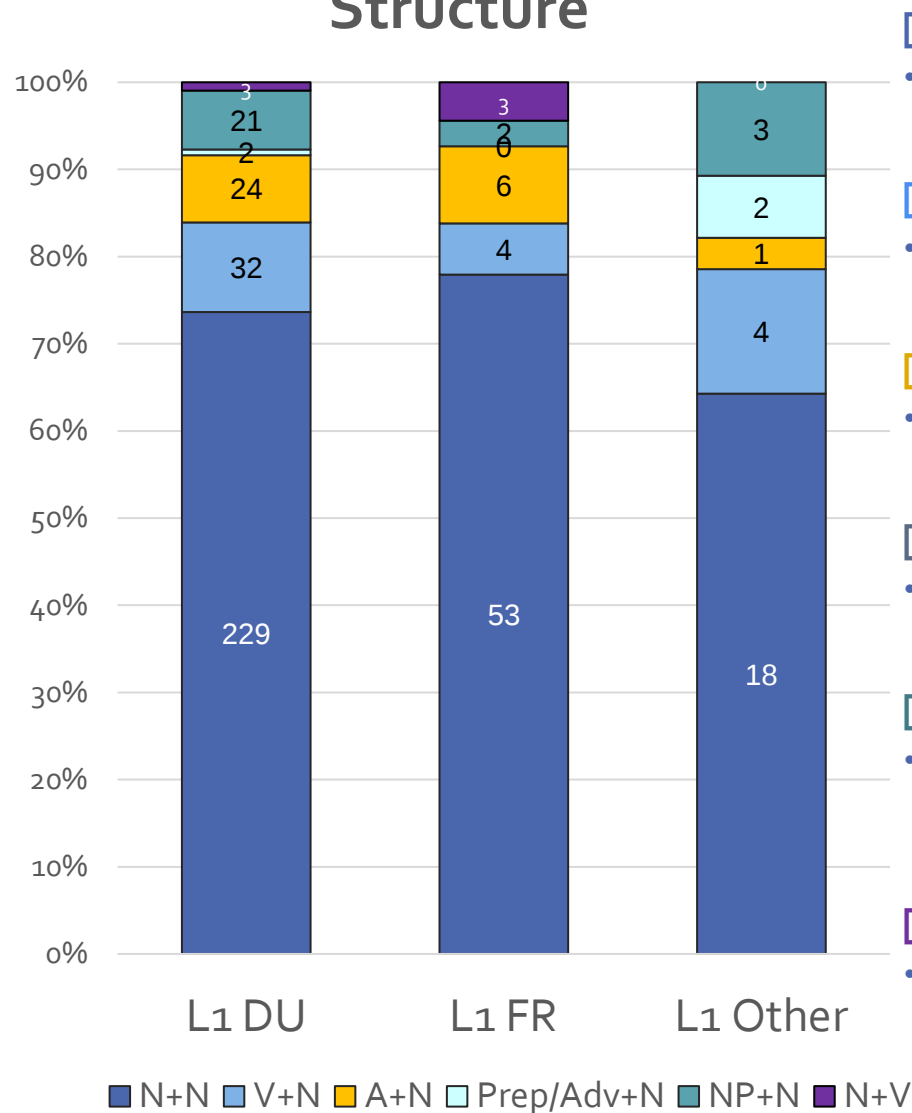
Length compounds	L1-DU	L1-FR	L1 Other
2 components	271 (87%)	51 (75%)	21 (75%)
3 components	40 (13%)	17 (25%)	7 (25%)
Total	311	68	28

$p = 0.015$

- **2 lexical components:**
 - *Een **postkaart*** (L1-DU) [FR 'une carte postale']
 - *Mijn **lievelingsmoment** van de dag* (L1-FR) [FR 'mon moment préféré de la journée.']
- **3 lexical components:**
 - *warmwaterbronnen* (L1-DU) [FR 'sources d'eau chaude']
 - *Mijn **lievelings waterbron*** (L1-FR) [FR 'Ma source préférée']

Results

Structure



[N+N]_N

- *Ik ben naar Guillaume's **verjaardagfeest** geweest.* (L1 FR) [FR. 'fête d'anniversaire']

[V+N]_N

- *Ik heb zelfs **surflessen** kunnen volgen.* (L1 DU) [FR. 'des cours de surf']

[Adj+N]_N

- *Het was niet het **hoogseizoen**.* (L1 DU) [FR. 'la grande saison']

[Prep/Adv+N]_N

- *We hadden bijna altijd de zee op de **achtergrond**.* (L1 DU) [Fr. 'en arrière plan']

[NP+N]_N

- *Daarna stapten we naar het **driesterrenhotel**.* (L1 DU) [Fr. 'l'hôtel trois étoiles']

[N+V]_N

- *We gaven hem een **skydive** Cadeau.* (L1 FR) [Fr. 'un saut en parachute']

Results

Accuracy of the compounds

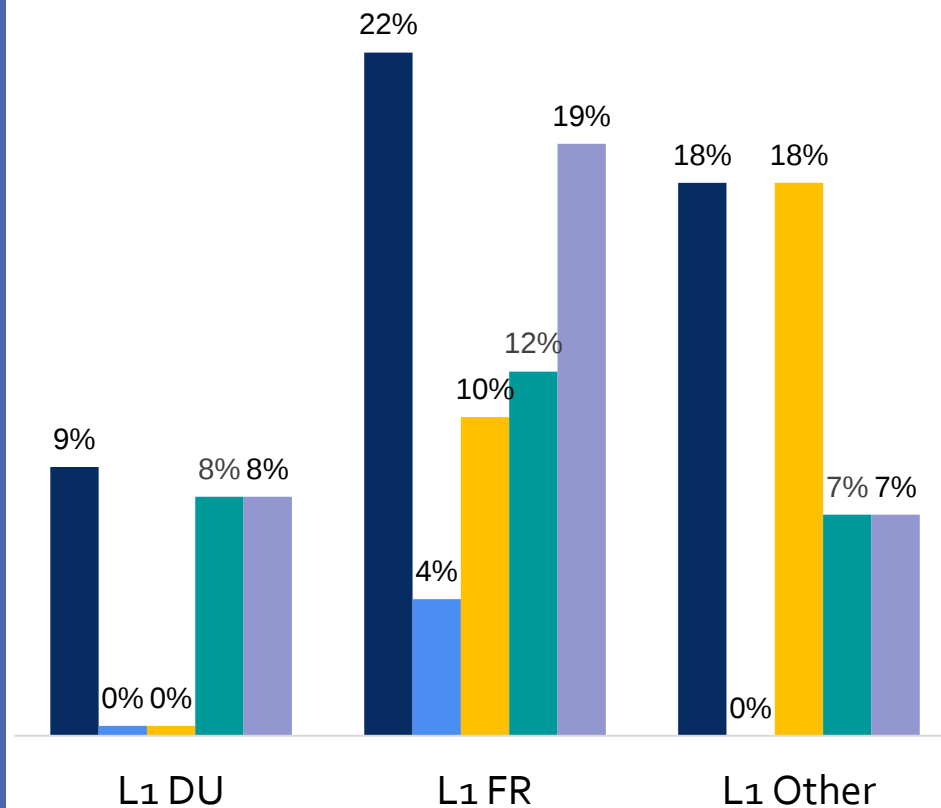
- Total number of inaccuracies: L1 Dutch
 - Compound: 77
 - Word formation: 70
- Total number of inaccuracies: L1 French
 - Compound: 46
 - Word formation: 38
- Total number of inaccuracies: L1 Other
 - Compound: 14
 - Word formation: 11

	L1 DU	L1 FR	L1 Other
Inaccuracy compound	77 (25%)	46 (68%)	14 (50%)
Inaccuracy word formation	70 (23%)	38 (56%)	11 (39%)
Total number of compounds	311	68	28

Significant differences in freq. of errors in compound ($p < .001$) and word formation ($p < .001$)²¹

Results

Type 1 mistake (compound)



Spelling **

- *Het was mijn **lievelings** tijdstip.* (L1 FR) [
> mijn lievelingstijdstip;
FR 'mon moment préféré']

Linking morpheme *

- *Een **verjaardagfeest**.* (L1 FR) [
> verjaardagsfeest;
FR 'une fête d'anniversaire']

Grammar ***

- *De **vuurwerk*** (L1 Other) [het vuurwerk;
FR. 'le feu d'artifice']

Lexicon

- *Een enorme **zonnslag*** (L1 DU) [
> zonnebrand;
FR. 'un énorme coup de soleil']

Codeswitching *

- *Een **skydive**.* (L1 FR) [
> parachutesprong;
FR. 'un saut en parachute']

$p < 0.001$ *** ; $p < 0.01$ ** ; $p < 0.05$ *

Results

Type 1 mistake (compound)

- **Spelling** and **grammar** main differences between L1 DU and other L1s

= areas that are most strictly codified and, hence, allow for least 'creativity' in translation

- Yet, spelling errors also common with L1 DU translators, due to 'English' spelling strategies and typos

een sportauto salon (L1 DU) > een sportautosalon
FR 'un salon de voiture de sport'

de jeugdherbreg (L1 DU) > de jeugdherberg
FR 'l'auberge de jeunesse'

Results

Type 1 mistake (compound)

- **Codeswitching** also common across groups, but significantly more so with L1 FR translations

→ L1 DU codeswitch to EN:

e.g., *Er was ook een **photobooth*** > fotohokje
FR 'Il y avait aussi une cabine photo'

→ L1 FR codeswitch to FR and EN:

e.g., *De landschappen waren mooi. **Kaskaden**, volcans, etc.*
> watervallen

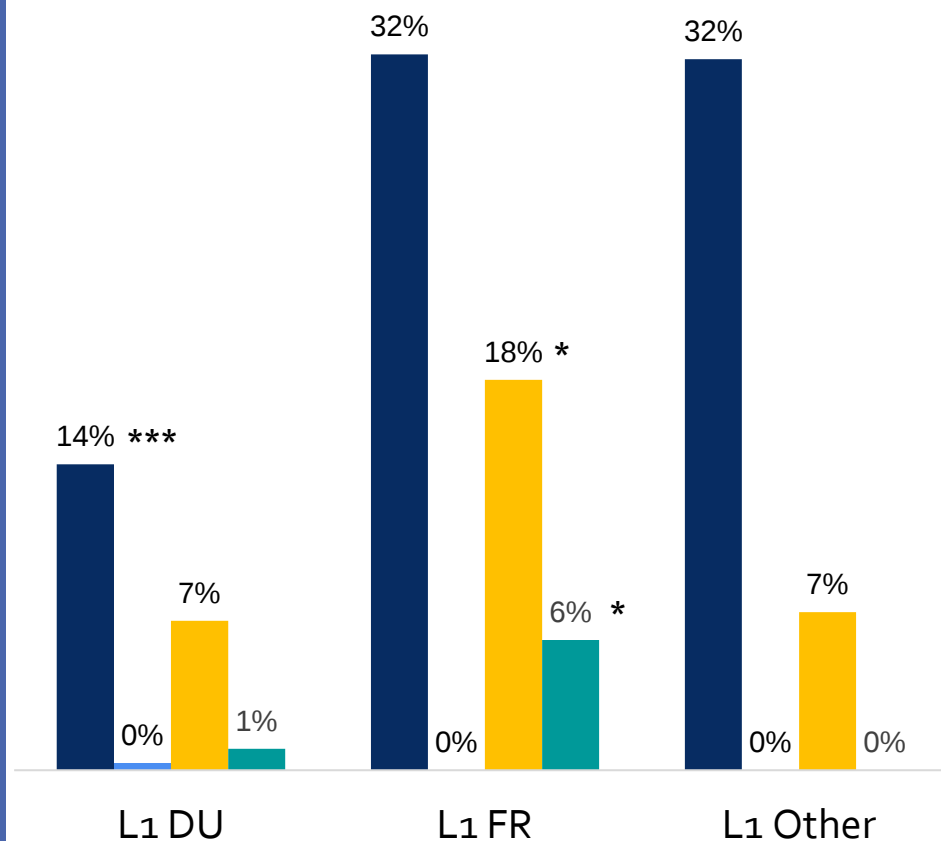
FR 'Les paysages étaient magnifiques. Cascades, volcans, etc.'

e.g., *Rond middernacht hadden de ouders een **firework** gepland.*
> vuurwerk

FR 'Vers minuit, les parents avaient prévu un feu d'artifice'

Results

Type 2 mistake (word formation)



Phrase (instead of compound) ***

- *Het **gooien van ballen met wat alcohol*** (L1 FR)
[> bierpong;
FR 'un beer pong']

Compound (instead of phrase)

- *haar **bourgeoisie vrienden*** (L1 DU)
[> haar bourgeois vrienden;
FR 'ses amis bourgeois']

Simplex (instead of compound) *

- *De **vakantie*** (L1 FR)
[> *de zomervakantie*; FR 'les vacances d'été']

Compound (instead of simplex) *

- *De **feestzaal***
[> *de zaal*; FR 'la salle']

$p < 0.001$ *** ; $p < 0.01$ ** ; $p < 0.05$ *

Results

Type 2 mistake (word formation)

- All groups more likely to use phrases or simplex words instead of compounds

e.g., FR source text: *Notre programme de la journée était vraiment très fatigant.* [DU *ons dagprogramma*]

<> L1 DU *Onze **programma's overdag** waren vermoeiend.*

- L1 FR translators use this strategy significantly more so than L1 DU

e.g., FR source text: *un pain saucisse* [DU *een worstenbroodje*]

<> L1 FR *een broodje met een worst ertussen*
'un sandwich avec une saucisse dedans'

e.g., FR source text: *Avec un climat pareil, j'ai pris quelques **coups de soleil**.* [DU *zonnebrand*]

<> L1 FR *Met zo'n klimaat ben ik rood geweest.*
'Avec un climat pareil, j'ai été rouge.'



5. Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

Creativity in translation:

- **L1 Dutch novice translators** mostly perform so-called **F-creativity** (productive application of the rules)
 - Idiomatic variation in translation strategies (compounds and phrases)
 - E.g., *met een groep vrienden* / *met een vriendengroep* (FR 'avec une bande de potes')
 - E.g., *het zuiden van Frankrijk* / *Zuid-Frankrijk* (FR 'dans le sud de la France')
 - Few (grammatical) 'mistakes'
 - However, we do observe spelling mistakes, lexical mistakes and codeswitching to English (**E-creativity**)
 - E.g., FR *coup de soleil* / DU *zonnslag* ('insolation') (faux amis !)
 - E.g., FR *la préparatrice de l'événement* / DU *eventmanager*

Discussion

- **L1 French novice translators** perform more **E-creativity** (extending creativity, breaking the rules):
 - More spelling and grammar mistakes
 - 'Mistakes' because of frequency effects (negative entrenchment)
 - Use of phrases that are blocked by compounds in Dutch (e.g., **broodje met een worst ertussen* vs *worstenbroodje*)
 - Greater impact of language contact (due to 'double' priming: source text + L1):
 - Phrasal structures instead of compounds
 - More codeswitching to French (also to English)
 - *Kaskaden* instead of *watervallen*

Conclusions

Hypotheses largely confirmed:

- ✓ Overgeneralisation of phrasal patterns in translation as a priming effect from French
 - In all translator groups, but stronger effect in non-native translators
- ✓ More priming effects in French-speaking translators than in Dutch-speaking translators
 - Double priming effect (source text + L1): e.g., more codeswitching to French
- ✓ Mostly F-creativity in Dutch-speaking translators; Possible E-creativity in French-speaking translators (unintentional mistakes)
 - E-creativity in all translator groups, but more in non-native translators
- Confirms a cline from creative to wrong constructions
- Multiple factors to be taken into account:
 - Frequency/blocking effects: difficulty for non-native translators
 - Deliberateness, e.g., spelling typos? (difficult to operationalize!)
 - Hearer expectations: contextual factors (translation, native vs non-native, ...)

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