

Lexical-Semantic Features of French Diplomatic Texts and Methods of Their Translation

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Abstract- This article investigates the lexical-semantic organization of French diplomatic discourse and the principal methods used to translate it into English. Diplomatic documents combine terminological precision with political caution; consequently, their meaning is produced not only by dictionary definitions but also by institutional convention, modality, collocation, politeness, and controlled ambiguity. The study applies descriptive, contextual, contrastive, and functional analysis to representative units drawn from recurrent diplomatic genres, including notes verbales, communiqués, declarations, agreements, and official statements. The analysis identifies eight central features: standardized terminology, formulaic expressions, polysemy, nominalization, modality, euphemistic mitigation, constructive ambiguity, and institutional collocation. It demonstrates that established equivalence is the safest method for conventional legal-diplomatic terms, whereas transposition, modulation, functional equivalence, explicitation, borrowing, calque, and cautious adaptation are required when structural or pragmatic asymmetry occurs. Particular attention is paid to the preservation of legal force and degrees of commitment. The article proposes a controlled translation workflow that integrates genre identification, terminology verification, pragmatic analysis, drafting, and bilingual quality assurance. It concludes that high-quality diplomatic translation is a form of disciplined intercultural mediation in which semantic fidelity, institutional consistency, and pragmatic equivalence must be evaluated together.

Keywords- French diplomatic discourse; lexical semantics; diplomatic translation; institutional terminology; modality; pragmatic equivalence; translation strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic language functions at the intersection of international relations, law, protocol, and intercultural communication. Treaties, notes verbales, memoranda, joint communiqués, official speeches, and declarations do more than transmit information: they record consent, express reservations, manage disagreement, create expectations, and sometimes establish legal obligations. For this reason, lexical choice in diplomacy is rarely neutral. A term may signal recognition without approval, concern without accusation, or intention without commitment.

French has historically occupied a central position in diplomacy and continues to serve as an official or working language in major international institutions. Translation from French into English therefore occurs within a dense network of established formulas, parallel texts, drafting conventions, and institutional terminology. A linguistically fluent rendering may nevertheless be diplomatically inaccurate if it intensifies a

cautious statement, resolves deliberate ambiguity, changes the identity of an institution, or varies a repeated legal term for stylistic reasons

The aim of this study is to systematize the lexical-semantic features of French diplomatic texts and determine which translation methods preserve their denotative meaning, pragmatic force, and institutional register. The research questions are: (1) Which lexical-semantic features most strongly distinguish French diplomatic discourse? (2) Which translation methods are appropriate for recurrent types of difficulty? (3) How can translators control shifts in commitment, politeness, and legal effect?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Diplomatic translation may be approached through equivalence, functionalist, and discourse-pragmatic perspectives. Traditional theories distinguish formal correspondence from functional or dynamic equivalence

(Catford, 1965; Nida & Taber, 1969). Comparative stylistics describes procedures such as borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, and modulation (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). In institutional contexts, however, equivalence is not merely a relation between isolated words. It also concerns genre, speech act, conventional collocation, and the expectations of the professional community (Baker, 2018). A diplomatic utterance can perform an action: it may protest, acknowledge, invite, condemn, reserve a right, or undertake a commitment. Thus, the translator must preserve both propositional content and illocutionary force. The French expression *prendre acte de* is conventionally translated as *take note of*; replacing it with *approve* would introduce consent that is absent from the source. Likewise, *souhaiter poursuivre le dialogue* expresses a desire or intention, whereas *commit to continuing the dialogue* creates a stronger obligation.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a qualitative analytical design. Representative lexical units and sentence patterns were selected from recurrent diplomatic genres and examined as a structured illustrative dataset. Selection was guided by four criteria: recurrence in institutional discourse, semantic sensitivity, potential for French-English asymmetry, and relevance to translation quality. The units cover terminology, formulae, modality, euphemism, institutional names, abbreviations, nominal structures, and ambiguous expressions.

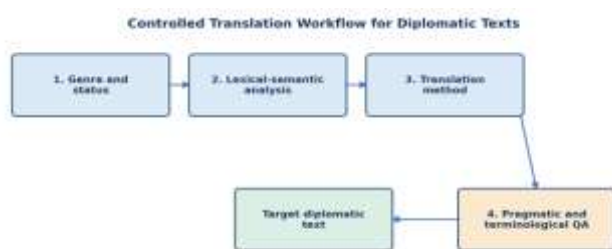


Figure 1. A controlled workflow for translating diplomatic texts (author's model).

Four complementary procedures were applied. Descriptive analysis identified the formal and semantic properties of each unit. Contextual analysis determined meaning within a diplomatic genre and communicative situation. Contrastive analysis compared French constructions with idiomatic and institutionally accepted English forms. Functional analysis evaluated whether the target expression preserved the source

speech act, degree of commitment, politeness strategy, and legal effect. The examples illustrate method selection; they are not presented as a statistical corpus survey.

IV. LEXICAL-SEMANTIC FEATURES OF FRENCH DIPLOMATIC TEXTS

Standardized terminology and formulaic expressions

French diplomatic discourse relies on stabilized units such as *note verbale*, *pleins pouvoirs*, *État accréditant*, *État accréditaire*, *instrument de ratification*, *entrer en vigueur*, and *sous réserve de*. Their English equivalents—*note verbale*, *full powers*, *sending State*, *receiving State*, *instrument of ratification*, *enter into force*, and *subject to*—are conventional rather than freely invented. Established equivalents support continuity across documents and reduce interpretive risk.

Polysemy and contextual specialization

Common words frequently acquire specialized meanings. *Disposition* may mean *provision*, *partie* may denote a party to an agreement, *engagement* may mean *commitment*, and *réserve* may indicate a formal reservation. Context, genre, and collocation therefore determine the correct equivalent. False friends present an additional risk: *actuel* normally means *current*, *éventuellement* often means *possibly*, and *assister à* means *to attend*.

Nominalization and abstraction

Institutional French favors nominal structures such as *la mise en œuvre*, *la poursuite des consultations*, *le renforcement de la coopération*, and *le respect des engagements*. Nominalization removes the agent, compresses complex processes, and creates an impersonal tone. English may preserve the noun phrase in treaties and communiqués, but verbal restructuring can improve readability in speeches or explanatory texts, provided that agency and legal scope are not altered.

Modality and commitment

Modal verbs and semi-fixed constructions encode finely graded relations among possibility, permission, recommendation, intention, agreement, commitment, and obligation. *Devoir*, *pouvoir*, *souhaiter*, *inviter à*, *convenir de*, *s'engager à*, and *être tenu de* are not interchangeable. The target form must be selected with regard to document status and drafting convention; an apparently small modal change can modify the obligations of the parties.

Euphemism, mitigation, and politeness

Diplomatic actors often communicate criticism through restrained formulas: exprimer sa préoccupation, regretter, appeler à la retenue, divergences de vues, and ne pas être en mesure de. These expressions protect dialogue while making a position visible. Translation must preserve their calibrated intensity. Rendering divergences de vues as conflict, for example, would amplify disagreement and change the relationship encoded by the text.

Constructive ambiguity

Negotiated wording may remain intentionally broad because greater precision would prevent consensus. Expressions such as dans les meilleurs délais, mesures appropriées, and toutes les parties concernées permit flexibility in timing, action, or reference. The translator should reproduce this openness whenever the target language allows it. Unauthorised explication can redistribute responsibility or narrow the scope of agreement.

Institutional names and abbreviations

Official names require documentary verification. Where an institution has an authorized English name, that form should be used consistently. Abbreviations frequently change across languages: ONU becomes UN, OTAN becomes NATO, and UE becomes EU. If no official English equivalent exists, the French name may be retained and glossed at first mention.

Collocation and semantic prosody



Figure 2. An indicative semantic scale of commitment; exact force remains genre-dependent.

Diplomatic vocabulary occurs in conventional combinations: relations bilatérales, coopération étroite, condamnation ferme, respect mutuel, consultations régulières, and intégrité territoriale. Their English counterparts—bilateral relations, close cooperation, strong condemnation, mutual respect, regular consultations, and territorial integrity—carry the expected institutional tone. A dictionary synonym can preserve

reference while producing an unnatural or evaluatively different target phrase.

V. TRANSLATION METHODS

Table 1. Principal methods used in French-English diplomatic translation.

Method	Primary function
Established equivalence	Uses an accepted institutional target form; preferred for stable legal and diplomatic terminology.
Literal translation	Preserves structure where direct correspondence is both idiomatic and semantically safe.
Transposition	Changes grammatical category or structure without changing meaning, for example a clause to a noun phrase.
Modulation	Changes semantic viewpoint to produce an idiomatic target expression while preserving communicative intent.
Functional equivalence	Selects a target formula that performs the same diplomatic action rather than copying lexical form.
Explication	Makes an implicit reference minimally explicit where necessary; requires special caution in negotiated texts.
Borrowing and calque	Retains or closely models a source term when it is recognized in English diplomatic usage.
Contextual adaptation	Adjusts wording to the relevant genre or institutional practice without substituting an approximate institution or concept.

VI. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION DECISIONS

Table 2. Context-sensitive translation of representative diplomatic units.

French unit	Recommended English	Method	Rationale
prendre acte de	to take note of	Established equivalence	Formal acknowledgment; does not imply approval.
sous réserve de	subject to	Established equivalence	Preserves a condition or reservation.
exprimer sa vive	to express deep concern	Functional equivalence	Maintains conventional

préoccupati on			diplomatic intensity.
dans les meilleurs délais	as soon as possible	Modulation	Retains flexible timing without an unnatural calque.
la mise en œuvre de l'accord	implementatio n of the agreement	Established/liter al	Nominal register is suitable in official prose.
les parties conviennent de	the parties agree to	Established equivalence	Expresses negotiated consent.
appeler toutes les parties à la retenue	to call on all parties to exercise restraint	Functional equivalence	Preserves mitigation and avoids an order.
se réserver le droit de	to reserve the right to	Literal translation	Directly corresponding legal-diplomatic formula.
note verbale	note verbale	Borrowing	French form is established in English.
dispositions du présent accord	provisions of this Agreement	Contextual equivalence	Dispositions means legal provisions here.

The examples confirm that method selection is local rather than global. A single paragraph may require an established equivalent for a treaty term, transposition for syntactic clarity, and functional equivalence for a politeness formula. What unifies these choices is the requirement to preserve institutional function. Consistency is particularly important: a repeated source term should not be translated by stylistic synonyms unless the conceptual distinction is demonstrably absent.

VII. TYPICAL ERRORS AND QUALITY-CONTROL CRITERIA

Table 3. Recurrent translation risks and recommended controls.

Risk	Possible distortion	Control measure
False-friend substitution	Incorrectly treating <i>actuel</i> as <i>actual</i> or <i>éventuellement</i> as <i>eventually</i> .	Verify meaning in context and in authoritative parallel texts.
Modal strengthening	Turning <i>souhaite</i> into <i>commits</i> or <i>devrait</i> into <i>must</i> .	Map the degree of commitment before drafting.
Modal weakening	Rendering <i>doit</i> as <i>should</i> where an obligation is intended.	Check genre-specific legal drafting conventions.
Over-explicitation	Adding an agent, deadline, or cause	Preserve constructive

	that the source leaves open.	ambiguity unless clarification is authorized.
Terminological variation	Using several synonyms for one recurring defined term.	Maintain a project glossary and consistency log.
Register shift	Using colloquial or excessively archaic English.	Compare with contemporary institutional documents.
Institutional substitution	Replacing a source institution with a roughly similar target institution.	Use the official name or retain and explain the source name.

Quality assurance should combine terminology control with pragmatic revision. First, all defined terms, institutional names, and repeated formulas should be checked against authoritative bilingual documents and databases such as UNTERM. Second, modal expressions should be reviewed as a separate layer. Third, the translator should test sensitive passages through meaning-based back-translation: if the reconstructed French statement becomes stronger, weaker, more accusatory, or more precise than the original, the English version requires revision. Finally, a second reviewer should evaluate political tone and legal scope, not only grammar.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that lexical equivalence in diplomatic translation cannot be separated from pragmatic equivalence. Words with similar denotation may differ in institutional force. Acknowledging a position is not approving it; inviting action is not imposing an obligation; and expressing concern is not making an accusation. These distinctions explain why general dictionaries are insufficient as the sole source of evidence.

A practical hierarchy of sources is therefore necessary. Official bilingual treaties and authenticated institutional documents should have the highest evidential value, followed by terminology databases and comparable texts from the same organization. Specialized dictionaries can clarify semantic range, while general dictionaries remain secondary for formulaic or legally sensitive units. This hierarchy also reduces inconsistent innovation by individual translators.

The proposed model treats translation as controlled decision-making. Genre analysis establishes the document's legal and communicative status; lexical-semantic analysis identifies risk; method selection produces a provisional equivalent; and quality assurance verifies pragmatic force and terminological consistency. The model is particularly relevant to translator training because it makes tacit diplomatic judgment explicit and reviewable.

The study is limited by its qualitative and illustrative character. Future research may build a parallel French-English corpus of diplomatic genres, annotate modal and euphemistic units, and test inter-translator agreement. Corpus evidence could also reveal whether translation choices vary systematically among treaties, press statements, notes verbales, and speeches.

IX. CONCLUSION

French diplomatic texts are characterized by standardized terminology, formulaic expressions, contextual polysemy, nominalization, controlled modality, euphemistic politeness, constructive ambiguity, and stable institutional collocations. These features make diplomatic translation a task of semantic, pragmatic, and institutional precision. Established equivalence is generally the safest solution for conventional terms, while transposition, modulation, functional equivalence, explicitation, borrowing, calque, and cautious adaptation address structural and cultural asymmetries. The decisive criterion is not surface similarity but preservation of communicative effect and legal-political scope. Translators must reproduce who acts, what is required or merely desired, how strongly a position is expressed, and which ambiguity is intentional. Reliable diplomatic translation therefore depends on authoritative terminology research, parallel-text analysis, controlled method selection, and systematic bilingual review.

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