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The French Terminology of the Women's Ready-to-Wear Business: A Challenge for Translators, a "Boundary Creator" for Language Users

Abstract

Fashion, including the ready-to-wear business, is a major sector in the French economy, larger than the car or aerospace industries. Additionally, Paris remains one of the world's fashion capitals. Yet, the study of the related terminology appears quite restricted in France. This field does not seem considered as a fully-fledged specialty, even though this terminology is part of the daily life of speakers. Apart from lexical borrowings – from English mainly – three recurrent phenomena may cause interlingual and intralingual difficulties, which could be perceived as terminological boundaries: ellipsis, which turns borrowings into pseudo-borrowings, terminology renewal, characterized by creations and disappearances of terms, and semantic shift, characterized by extensions, modifications, and restrictions. After a presentation of the French terminology of the women's ready-to-wear business, this paper illustrates these phenomena (ellipsis, regular terminology renewal and semantic shift) and their impacts on interlingual and intralingual translation. This illustration is based on a diachronic corpus, covering the period from the 1950s until 2020, compiled from French mail order catalogs.

Keywords: borrowing, ellipsis, necrology, ready-to-wear, semantic shift, terminology renewal

Introduction

The concept of "ready-to-wear" was imported to France from the United States during the postwar period (FFPPF 2009)¹. Nowadays, the fashion industry is a major sector in the French economy, larger than the car or aerospace industries in terms of turnover and gross domestic product share (Godart 2018: 6), and Paris remains one of the four fashion capitals of the world, alongside London, New York and Milan (FFPPF 2016; Godart 2018: 40–44).

1 The advent of the ready-to-wear business in France is the starting point for the analysis.

Yet, the study of the related terminology appears restricted in France, disregarded by linguists, and also by the official authorities in charge of the enrichment of the French language². Several reasons may explain such “scorn” (Godart 2018: 3–4): besides the perceived superficiality of the domain, this object of study is complex and ambiguous because of its changing nature and comprehensiveness (Mattioda 2015: 151).

The stakes are high: this terminology is widely used on a daily basis, and its specificities create obstacles for translators as well as language users. It is a real jargon “because of the use of more or less easily decipherable English words” (Saugera 2017a: 75). Apart from lexical borrowings – from English mainly in the period we studied – three recurrent phenomena may cause interlingual and intralingual difficulties, which could be perceived as terminological boundaries: ellipsis, semantic shift and terminology renewal.

Methodology – Corpus

The present paper is based on a corpus covering the period from the 1950s until 2020, and composed of “sequential parallel corpora” (two catalogs per year every five years or so) to obtain information of diachronic nature through the comparison of “static” states (Dury 2018)³.

Terms were gathered from French mail order catalogs of ready-to-wear clothing (La Redoute [LR], 3 Suisses [3S], Galeries Lafayette [GL], La Blanche Porte [LBP], Daxon, Anne Weyburn [AW], and Bonprix [BP]), focusing on women’s clothing, excluding underwear, nightclothes, and “workwear” (e.g. overalls, aprons). Due to the large size and the nature of the corpus (printed documents only), use of OCR software was not judged practical. As a consequence, term identification was performed manually, centered on potential borrowings and on words no longer in use in 2020 (to identify “necrologisms” [Dury & Drouin 2011]).

Ninety-one catalogs from 1952 to 2020 were examined (Table 1)⁴.

Table 1. Number of catalogs per period.

Period	Catalogs	Period	Catalogs	Period	Catalogs
1900–1949	8	1970–1979	4	2000–2009	4
1950–1959	8	1980–1989	7	2010–2019	40
1960–1969	13	1990–1999	7	2020	8

2 Only 17 terms listed in the “fashion and clothing” category on FranceTerme, the database of the General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France (*Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France*, DGLFLF). <http://www.culture.fr/franceterme>.

3 Renouf (2016) quoted in Dury (2018). Defined by Dury as “sub-corpora of data that each represents distinct and discontinuous chronologic sequences”.

4 In the 2010s, the bi-annual thousand-page LR catalogs have been replaced by smaller and more frequent ones.

Definitions and etymology were systematically looked up in⁵: *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé* (TLFi)⁶, *Larousse*, *Le Grand Robert* (LGR), *Le Grand Dictionnaire Terminologique*, *Wiktionnaire*, *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), *Merriam Webster*.

Despite a focus on borrowings, preliminary collection was extended to include French terms: 1) not to exclude possible phenomena; 2) to notice semantic shifts and neologisms; and 3) to notice manufacturing and societal evolutions.

Apart from a “clothing” category, terms were distributed into the following pre-established categories: styles (e.g. *business chic*), various marketing terms (e.g. *mode-story*, *it-pièce*), colors, jeans, cuts and treatments (e.g. *droit*, *straight*, *bleached*), textiles (e.g. *rayonne*, *popeline*). Further information gathered encompassed the following: company, catalog, year, collection, catalog page.

With the purpose of questioning lexical evolutions compared with societal evolutions, and to question generational and marketing factors, we adopted a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach for the following reasons: 1) length of the period and quantity of documents involved; 2) compilation methodology; 3) restrictions on access to specific catalogs. Given this qualitative purpose, only the first occurrence of terms was noted in each catalog, to show that terms were still in use (and how) in the given year.

In total, more than 20,000 terms were collected. Based on this compilation, it has been possible to indicate years of appearance and, if applicable, disappearance from the corpus. These are the dates provided for the examples hereafter.

Terms in the clothing category are currently the object of a deeper analysis, to find out their exact definition – as denominations and definitions vary between brands, which makes dictionary definitions nearly irrelevant –, their etymology, and their English equivalent(s) (British / American English). These details will be used: 1) to make a distinction between borrowings and French creations, and to classify borrowings according to their origin, 2) to sort borrowings (e.g. false borrowings, integral borrowings with or without adaptation) according to the OQLF typology, and 3) to shed light on lexical evolutions, trends, and uses. Note that the analysis presented herein is based on preliminary results.

The focus on women's clothing represents a limitation, possibly concealing the true date of appearance or disappearance of terms in other subfields of fashion.

Finally, although the input from marketing experts is required to validate certain hypotheses, finding experts willing to answer constitutes one of the main challenges of the research.

Despite the unfinished analysis of the corpus and the abovementioned limitations, preliminary analysis shows recurrent phenomena (ellipsis, semantic shift and terminology renewal) possibly causing interlingual and intralingual difficulties, which could be perceived as terminological boundaries.

1. Theoretical presentation of the observed phenomena

a. Ellipsis

We follow Saugera's definition of ellipsis as the process where “the modifying element of a donor compound becomes a simplex through deletion of the head and lexicalization in the recipient lexicon” (2017b:

5 Specialized lexicons were also consulted for shoes or jeans.

6 On the website of the Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales (National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources, CNRTL).

57). This process is common in French, especially when studying French borrowings from English (Piechnik 2009: 180–189; Saugera 2017b: 57–59), borrowing being defined as “any process by which the users of a language fully or partially adopt a linguistic unit or trait of another language” (OQLF 2017: 25), and lexical borrowings as the “integral (form and meaning) or partial (form or meaning only) borrowing of a foreign lexical unit” (Loubier 2011: 14) (e.g. *boots* [buts], *cardigan* [kɑʁdigã], *top* [tɔp]). Ellipsis can create false borrowings, defined as “terms having the appearance of an integral borrowing and which consist of formal borrowed elements, but without the same combination of form and meaning being attested in the lending language” (Loubier 2011: 14). For example, in our corpus, we note the following genuine false borrowings (which are not the result of an ellipsis consecutive to an integral borrowing or a calque):

- *babies* [bebiz; babiz]⁷ (mary janes)⁸, present from the beginning of the corpus and still in use; it was apparently competing with the term *Charles IX* until 1981;
- *cardicool*⁹ [kɑʁdikul] (attested in 2013 and 2017);

and the following false borrowings resulting from French or English ellipses:

1. *Pull* [pyl; pul] (1939)¹⁰: *pull-over* [pulɔvœʁ; pylɔvœʁ] is attested in the corpus from 1932 until 1990.
2. *Sweat* [swit; swet] (1984): *sweat-shirt* [switʃœʁt; swetʃœʁt] (1954) is still in use; *sweat* is a false borrowing, since *sweats* in American English designates a tracksuit or tracksuit pants.
3. *Polo* [pɔlo] (1969): from *chemise polo*, a calque of *polo shirt*; *polo-shirt* [pɔloʃœʁt] is attested in the corpus between 1964 and 1967; *polo* is likely a borrowing from English as the *OED* dates the ellipsis to 1967.
4. *Trench* [tʁɛ̃ʃ] (1973): *trench-coat* [tʁɛ̃ʃkɔt] (1959) is still in use and competing with the ellipsis; it is unclear whether *trench* is a French ellipsis or a borrowed English ellipsis (*OED* 1917).

Terms 1-2 are false borrowings resulting from French ellipses, whereas there remains doubt as to the origin of the ellipsis for terms 3-4.

b. Semantic shift

Two categories of semantic shift can be distinguished: changes that occur at the same time as the borrowing, and changes occurring later in the borrowing language.

Regarding the first type, it is noted (Saint 2013: 88; Bogaards 2008: 36) that, even if the term is polysemous in its source language, it becomes, at the time of the borrowing, monosemous in the borrowing language, as if it underwent some “semantic specialization” (Winter-Froemel 2009: 98).

The second type falls under terminological variability, which is “the ability of any natural language to produce change when spoken” (Desmet 2007: 3). Following Sablayrolles (2018: 4), we observed three types of shift:

7 Phonetic transcription (IPA) is given for (false) borrowings only, based on transcriptions from *LGR*.

8 *OED*: A type of low-heeled shoe with a single strap round the ankle or across the instep.

9 A hybrid clothing item between a jacket and a cardigan (*cardigan+cool*).

10 Dates in brackets indicate the first occurrence in the corpus.

- extensions:
 - » *blazer* [blazɛʁ; blɛzœʁ] (1959): borrowed in the 1920s to denote a “striped jacket in the colors of an English college or sports club” (*Larousse*), the term now also means “double-breasted jacket for men or women, slim fit, often in flannel” (*LGR*).
- modifications:
 - » *jumper* [dʒœmpœʁ]: attested in the corpus from 1954 to 1959 meaning *sweater* (British meaning), and from 1969 to 1976 to designate a type of dress (American meaning);
- restrictions:
 - » *décolleté*: not attested in the corpus after 1982, losing the meaning of *heels/stilettos* and conserving that of *neckline*.¹¹

Exploring this matter, Dury and Drouin (2011) questioned the future of the original meaning: does it still exist alongside one or more new meanings, or does it disappear completely in favor of one or several new meanings (“semantic necrology”)? A term such as *jumper* falls into the second case.

c. Terminology renewal

Two scenarios are to be considered when terms disappear. On the one hand, this disappearance is associated with the disappearance of the product itself and with changes in society. The absence of either the terms or the concepts *souliers d'appartement* (indoor shoes) or *robe d'hôtesse* (hostess dress) is therefore hardly surprising today. But the disappearance of a term does not necessarily imply the disappearance of the concept, whose name may have simply changed. As Barthes noted (1957: 431), “not only can a clothing item see its name change without seeing its function changing, (...) the function may change without any change in its name”. Our corpus shows that there is indeed terminology renewal taking place, with both neological and necrological activity. Necrology is defined by Dury and Drouin (2011: 19) as “the disappearance of a term, the disappearance of a part of term, a change in grammatical status, and/or the disappearance of a meaning over a given period of time”.

Our corpus shows several clothing items involved in such processes:

- *Jumper* disappeared from the corpus in 1976, probably¹² replaced by *pull* [pyl; pul] (sweater), *robe-pull* [ʁɔbpyl] (sweater dress), and the names of different types of dresses.
- *Training* [tʁɛniŋ; tʁɛniʃ]¹³ disappeared in 1982, seemingly in favor of *jogging* [(d)ʒɔgiŋ] or *survêtement* (tracksuit), and *basket* [basket] (sneakers) or other sports shoe names.
- *Décolletés* disappeared in 1982 and has probably given way to *trotteurs* (flats) or *escarpins* (heels, stilettos).

Even if we consider terminology renewal as unavoidable and necessary, and as a sign of the vitality and dynamism of a language (Crystal 1996: 15), it appears particularly present in the ready-to-wear fash-

11 Note that this meaning (“heels”) does not even appear in *Larousse* (attested however in *TLFi* and *LGR*).

12 Substitutes need further investigation.

13 Attested in the corpus from 1973 until 1982, meaning both “sports shoes” and “tracksuit”; the origin of the ellipsis remains to be determined.

ion sector. Several explanations can be put forward, related to the functioning of fashion, to the value of borrowings, and to polysemy.

It is commonly accepted that fashion runs according to various cycles, categorized into two types by Gofman (2004). The first type, relatively long, consists of “oscillations between defined limits for a specified period of time”. *E.g.*, the length of a skirt which gradually goes from long to short before returning to long, or, for the cut of jeans, from flared in the 1960s–1970s to skinny in the 2010s. Such cycles last about a century and are divided into sub-cycles of about thirty years, which correspond more or less to generations. The second type of cycle is shorter, based on the degree of acceptance, and on a “dynamic of distinction and imitation” (Godart 2018: 17–18): a style is first adopted by a minority, before being adopted by a majority, and finally this adoption decreases. The influence of the bi-annual renewal of fashion should also be considered¹⁴. All these cycles/renewals seem to be accompanied by the appearance of new terms – including borrowings – that do not necessarily seem to be used for innovations or to fill linguistic gaps.

The ready-to-wear business does show some recent innovations that needed to be named, such as *jegging* [dʒɛŋɪŋ] (*jeans+leggings*) or *tregging* [tʁɛŋɪŋ] (*trousers+leggings*), attested in the corpus in 2017. However, research seems to reveal a large number of “unjustified borrowings (...) for which the French language already has an equivalent” (Cynarska-Chomicka 2011: 80). This raises the question of “necessary” vs “luxury” borrowings (Bogaards 2008: 33). If these borrowings are not strictly necessary, they may have another function, a “connotative” one. Cynarska-Chomicka attributes a playful value to them (2011: 80), while Saint sees “snobbery” in them (2013: 91). Parente mentions “a desire to follow the trends of the moment” and a sense of modernity (2016: 68). Other explanations have been put forward, such as the “prestige of North American culture” (Soubrier 2016: 85; Pešek 2007: 20).

Two other dimensions – a marketing one and a sociological one – may be considered to justify terminology renewal and borrowings. Borrowings are often used in the case of innovations. The seasonal renewal of collections or the cyclic return of past styles is often accompanied by the appearance of new terms. It is thus possible that this terminology renewal could be part of a marketing strategy to arouse enthusiasm for something whether it is novel or not, or to infuse modernity to previous generations’ clothing styles.

Sociologically, “fashion (...) provides groups and individuals with signs allowing them to shape their identities” (Godart 2018: 24), and these signs are not restricted to garments. As we will discuss below, beyond snobbism, the use of borrowings is also a way to distinguish oneself, to signify one’s belonging to a group. Elements from the corpus show the use of different terms depending on target audiences (at first glance, differences between, for example, LR and Daxon or LBP, these latter two brands targeting more “senior” female customers) (see 2.b).

A final, more practical explanation may also be considered: polysemy may be ill-suited to English borrowings in the ready-to-wear field, and it may be argued that terms like *training* or *jumper* have been replaced in usage to avoid confusion. As indicated, *training* has meant “sports shoes” as well as “tracksuit”, and *jumper*, sometimes a sweater, sometimes a dress.

14 This is the classic renewal of haute couture, with the bi-annual presentations of collections (fashion weeks); it should be noted, however, that fast fashion brands like Primark renew their range every six weeks.

2. Interlinguistic and intralinguistic frontiers for translators and language users

a. Interlinguistic frontiers

These phenomena generate obstacles for language users as well as translators. Interlinguistically, the “issues” seem fairly obvious.

With ellipsis, English>French translators face intellectual gymnastics bordering on the theater of the absurd: should English terms with different meanings in French be used when translating to French? *E.g.*, the word used to denote Adidas® shoes literally means “basket”. Such examples are numerous and well-known: *e.g.*, *slip* [slip] (underpants), *smoking* [smɔkiŋ] (tuxedo). If this intellectual gymnastics represents only a minor inconvenience for translators, it can be problematic for users, whether they be a French person in the USA looking to buy “baskets” (sneakers), or allophones in France, who do not understand why their friends reminded them to bring their “baskets” to go for a “jogging”.

Semantic changes generate similar “misunderstandings” (Parente 2016), and the issue appears to be the same with terminology renewal, which poses an additional challenge to translators: terminology has to be systematically checked whilst taking use into account. This difficulty is reinforced by the speed of renewal of this field, and the necessary delay between real-world use and the recording of this real-world use in dictionaries and databases.

b. Intralinguistic frontiers

Intralinguistic frontiers appear more complex. Translators are confronted with a classic issue, whatever the phenomenon: adapting translations to target audiences and clients. That is nothing more than one of the daily aspects of the job, all fields considered. The impacts of these phenomena seem more complex for users, among which two types of barriers are distinguished, according to the users' underlying intent: some barriers may have been involuntarily created by and between users, whilst others may be deliberate and associated with different groups.

First, the corpus reveals terminological differences depending on the age of the audience. This involuntarily creates a frontier between generations: it seems that, to refer to the same products, the terms used in LR catalogs are different from those found in Daxon or LBP catalogs. While LR targets all generations, LBP clients are, on average, 57 years old (Bouaziz 2019), and Daxon clients, 70 years old (Caussil 2015a, b). For instance, these brands still offer items such as *trotteurs* (flats) – where other brands offer *escarpins* (heels) – or *sans-gêne* shoes (shortened term of *souliers sans gêne*, “shoes without discomfort”). The term *sneakers* is conspicuous in its absence, just like the terms *slim* and *skinny* referring to trousers, for which LBP offers *fuseau* (ski pants/stirrup pants), *fuselé* (tapered), *caleçon* (leggings/long johns) or *cigarette*. One hypothesis is that the use of borrowings requires some knowledge of the English language. Given the age of the clients, these brands perhaps deliberately choose more “intelligible” words to avoid difficulties in understanding the borrowings. LBP thus avoids sources of misunderstandings and communication failures between generations who use different terms to describe the same object, such as:

- the *trotteurs/escarpins* duo,

- the *fuseau*/legging duo (or quartet if we consider the terms *collant* [*sans pied*] [footless tights] and *caleçon*)¹⁵,
- the *jogging*/*survêtement*/*training* trio.

This phenomenon was already mentioned by Guilbert in 1975: “the new term does not eliminate the old term, a new word can spread in a generation of speakers while the previous generation continues to use its own term to mean the same thing” (Guilbert in Pešek 2007: 16). These elements merit further investigation, through interviews with managers of the brands concerned.

The presence or absence of certain items from brands targeting customers over fifty could also be due to social conventions (justifying the absence of crop-tops¹⁶) or to the body changes that come with ageing (the appearance of corns justifying “shoes without discomfort”). However, if the corpus suggests such a boundary at a particular time, this boundary seems to be fading, both in terms of clothing items offered and of terminology. As regards clothing items, clients in their fifties and over are now more likely to wear skinny jeans, probably unlike fiftysomethings of the previous generation. Other factors explain that the 1990s or earlier 50+ client is nothing like the one from the 2020s: the former was born in the 1930s–1940s, had experienced war, restrictions, a different family and marital model, while the latter was born in the 1960s–1970s, grew up and became a woman in a context marked by emancipation, feminism, and all the other (r)evolutions of these decades. So, this evolution of the target audience is accompanied by a change not only in the products offered (Nebia 2013; Lecocq 2007), but also a change in terminology, whose extent remains to be defined.

Secondly, the terminological phenomena presented form part of the intentional building of barriers between groups that are no longer necessarily distinguished by age (Mediapost 2016). “The main role of clothing is to indicate the place of an individual within a group and the place of this group within society. It is a thorough and restrictive system of signs” (Pastoureau 1988: 17). The garment is in itself a distinguishing tool. This characteristic of fashion can be explained by its origins. Fashion was born in the Renaissance, with the rise of a new bourgeoisie which felt a need to “assert its existence in the face of the aristocracy” (Godart 2018: 13–14), to “block access to the greatest number to [its] class” and to “unify the bourgeois around a common style” (Godart 2018: 19). Garments (the products *and* the words used for them) therefore have connotative values, and the terms used to describe these connotations are reminiscent of the functioning of language, of terminology, and of borrowing. In this respect, it would seem that the English language enjoys an image of modernity in French but also in other languages, as it has been noted in Italian by Parente (2016) and Mattioda (2015), and in Czech by Mudrochova and Lazar (2018). In Czech and in Italian, however, the issue seems somewhat different. Parente¹⁷ and Mattioda both come to the same conclusion: when it comes to fashion, French terms are used to convey an idea of luxury and know-how, but they may be replaced by English terms for reasons of modernity, and

15 Note, however, that there seems to be a slight difference between these items, the *fuseau* being provided with an elastic band under the arch, and the “footless tights” being more considered as an undergarment.

16 Tight tops the size of a bra.

17 To illustrate this phenomenon, Parente (2016: 67) studied a term presenting in Italian a path similar to its path in French, *fuseau*: “This is the case for example for an article in vogue in the 1980s, the *fuseau* (literally transcribed in Italian by *fusò* or more rarely designated by two creative neologisms: *pantacalza* or *pantacollant*). These form-fitting pants in stretch fabric that have recently come back into fashion are now called *legging*. The preference for the American English terms at the expense of the French ones is often interpreted in terms of modernity”.

this replacement also appears in Czech (Mudrochova & Lazar 2018). Thus, terminology forms part of the deliberate creation of intralinguistic frontiers serving a need of self-assertion and distinction, both individually and collectively. This serves the goal of asserting oneself as a fully-fledged individual, by adopting a different clothing style coupled with terms that are modern, opaque, new or even confusing for the previous generation (*sneakers, legging*). Beyond this vertical individual distinction from previous generations, there is also a horizontal distinction, irrespective of status (Godart 2018: 24), based on ideas and clothing styles (Gothic, streetwear, grunge, *etc.*). A second goal would therefore be to show one's belonging to a subculture, in Hebdige's sense of the term, as "a meaning-laden set of practices and representations that can help distinguish a group of individuals from another, (...) composed of several facets, such as identifiable clothing items and specific musical tastes, as well as more or less structured political ideas, and a particular way of speaking" (Hebdige in Godart 2018: 23).

Conclusion

While France no longer takes center stage as it used to, it does remain an unquestioned fashion capital. The famous myth of the *Parisienne* remains very much alive, even if she now uses a vocabulary tinged with Anglo-Saxon influences. This situation – English as the international *lingua franca* – is unanimously recognized, in fashion as in other fields. However, as has been shown, borrowings from English and the various terminological specificities of this sector can cause misunderstandings and communication failures between users, issues that are all the more important since the ready-to-wear business is by no means a technical niche affecting only a small group of experts. However, this object of study does not seem to find favor in the eyes of French linguists, whereas, in terms of the study of neology and terminological variation in particular, it may be the proverbial gold mine. Other fields of research, from sociology to semiology, have indeed perceived its potential as well as the obvious links between clothing, language, and identity, even if fashion were deemed too superficial, too gender-specific, or not serious enough to be deemed worthy of study.

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