

## Aphorisms from French to English: Translations of La Rochefoucauld's Maxims

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### Abstract

This article raises the question how aphorisms can signify stable ideas without being grounded in any particular or explicit context, which makes them virtually compatible with any other body of discourse. Aphorisms, being linguistic units in themselves, can be easily transplanted from one discursive situation to another. The article also discusses their translation, which is to some extent an attempt to graft them from a language to another. Observing how aphorisms translate reveals their complex use of language. These observations find a particular echo in the understanding the effects of the grafting process affecting language.

### Keywords:



Aphorisms represent forms of sentences that are used outside any particular context and make sense in themselves: most of the time, they are referred to as proverbs, apophthegms, maxims or aphorisms. I will try to illustrate how such forms play with various linguistic features so as to constitute autonomous utterances, or in other words, a minimal form of discourse.

The main reference I will use for the examples is the French 17th c. writer François de La Rochefoucauld, who wrote a well-known collection of maxims in which he wittily deals with societal concerns. La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* are headed by a programmatic epigraph which is of all the maxims that follow:

Nos vertus ne sont le plus souvent que des vices déguisés.  
[*Our virtues are usually only our vices in disguise.*]

The *Maxims* almost always proceed the same: a notion taken from the moral discourse (in the epigraph, *vertus*) is put in a paradoxical relation with another notion, *vices* here.

Other examples are:

322. Il n'y a que ceux qui sont méprisables qui craignent d'être méprisés.<sup>1</sup>  
322. *Only the contemptible are afraid of being treated with contempt.*

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<sup>1</sup> The number indicated ahead of the maxim refers to the number of the maxim as given in the fifth edition of La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*. See Bibliography.

40. L'intérêt, qui aveugle les uns, fait la lumière des autres.  
40. *Interest blinds some while making others see.*

As maxims 322 and 40 show, La Rochefoucauld wrote sentences which aim at unveiling the deceptive value of virtues, and as he did so he crafted the literary genre of maxims. I have to point out that the genre-defining influence of La Rochefoucauld will not be further developed in this paper, the purpose here being to study the linguistic functioning of these forms of literature.

## 1. Aphorisms and the aphoristic character

### 1.1 Terminology issues in the classification of brief forms of language

Quotations, proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, riddles may all be most unambiguously referred to as 'brief forms of language'. This purposely vague label allows paradoxically for better clarity. From a literary point of view, these forms have been best defined by the formula SHORTNESS, SENSE and SALT.

Short assertions are generally grasped according to literary concerns. They are categorized according to heterogeneous criteria such as their historical context of production, social function or literary purpose. Traditionally, there are, as defined by the French Academy's dictionary:

- Maxims: a general proposition which serves as a principle or rule in some art or science.
- Apophthegms: a noble saying from an illustrious person. It is also the term for any sentence similar to a maxim.
- Sayings: apophthegm
- Proverbs: common sayings
- Sententiae: a famous saying, apophthegm, or maxim which encapsulates a dense concentration of meaning; well formulated moral principles.

The overlap between these various terms and definitions is due to the literary character of the classification, which stresses the content of discourse rather than linguistic features and roles. 'Maxim' belongs to the moral literature, 'apophthegm' to antique writings, the 'sententia' is a rhetorical term borrowed from the Romans and 'sayings' and 'proverbs' are more common short assertions. Literary critics distinguish short assertions according to the period they were written in (apophthegms), modalities of their use (epitaphs for tombs) and rhetorical purpose (common sense, moral prescription, satire).

However, these forms of discourse also attract linguists' interest and studies to understand what their grammatical features have undergone since the beginning of the twentieth century.

To the linguist, the abundance of labels used to designate brief forms of discourse is at the same time deceiving and unsatisfying from a scientific point of view. If the common property of these forms of discourse is their brevity (they are expressed with great economy of words making them easy to memorize), they do not always have the same pragmatic function. Neither do they interact similarly with their context of enunciation.

## 1.2 Aphorisms and short assertions

The word ‘aphorism’ is another term for these so-called brief forms of language. The term derives from Greek *aphorismos*, itself deriving from the verb *aphorizein*, which means to delimit, to circumscribe, and to define. It is used in literary criticism to refer broadly to fragments or quotations. As a linguistic label, it points to a semantic property of certain sentences to define general situations.

Let’s consider:

260. *La civilité est un désir d'en recevoir, et d'être estimé poli.*  
260. *Civility is but a desire to receive civility, and to be esteemed polite.*

Maxim 260 asserts the dynamics of the concept of civility. It reveals that what is perceived as an abstraction, a moral value, is actually a social game. This maxim defines the general social situation in which the practice of civility occurs. In this way, M260 is an aphorism.

Proverbs also define similar situations: ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss’, which may mean either:

- A person who is active will not grow stale.
- A person who does not stay in one place very long will not develop roots or meaningful connections with others.

However, their meaning is more often non-compositional (i.e. they are not understandable from the reading of their components) and they need to be paraphrased to be meaningful.

It may be relevant to add that for a sentence to be aphoristic, it is necessary for it to constitute what could be termed as ‘a minimal form of discourse’. For example, proverbs like the one given above would not fall into the category of aphorisms for they do not really make sense in themselves. On the other hand, aphorisms are immediately and invariably understood, even when they have not been heard before. Aphorisms would be meaningful units, substitutable to a whole discourse, but enclosed in a very limited space.

The point I will now make concerns the linguistic properties of these marginal forms of language.

## 2. Aphorisms as textual scions

As in botany, where a scion is a flexible and easily grafted plant, aphorisms may be seen metaphorically as ‘textual scions’. Aphorisms, as instances of minimal discourse, can indeed be construed as such, since they are manifestations of language which virtually fit any context of enunciation, any other discourse. They can be grafted into various places within oral or written speech to trigger discussion, illustrate a point or sum up a whole argument. The grammar of such forms raises questions from a linguistic point of view. The semiologist Greimas considered in his book entitled *Of Meaning* that proverbial forms (what I would term as aphoristic forms) may be treated on a par by grammars.<sup>2</sup> He grounded this assertion on the fact that no other instance of language may be considered strictly autonomous. In pragmatics, the field of linguistics which studies the way interaction between speakers modifies syntax and meaning, aphorisms are exceptional because they may not necessarily originate from a specific speaker neither are addressed to a specific addressee. The question to be raised is: what are the grammatical features of such forms that render them into textual scions?

### 2.1 The grammar of aphorisms

Several studies have tried to formalise the linguistic structure of aphorisms. The linguist Serge Meleuc tried to list all the grammatical constructions of La Rochefoucauld’s Maxims but concluded the impossibility of being able to take into account more than 25% because they were grammatically too complex. Pagliaro addressed the problem from a half-semantic, half-syntactic perspective, establishing a typology of aphorisms, classifying them as being either Expository or Paradoxical, and within the paradoxical type as being either polar or non-polar. Charlotte Schapira places aphorisms into two types: DEFINING maxims and PRESCRIPTIVE maxims. These classifications all associate a semantic or pragmatic purpose (definition, prescription, expression of contrast) to a set of more or less precise grammatical structures which are often contradicted by examples. Because these studies are highly useful to better understand the grammar of aphorisms, I would like to focus on two very broad properties of aphorisms that may account for their propensity to be transplanted from one context to the other.

First of all, aphorisms express generic meaning:

- 102. L’esprit est toujours la dupe du coeur.
- 102. *The head is always fooled by the heart.*

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<sup>2</sup> A. Greimas, 1970: *Du sens*, t. I., p. 309: ‘[on postule] l’existence d’un domaine sémantique indépendant, en affirmant le statut formel autonome d’éléments sémiologiques qu’on appelle traditionnellement proverbes et dictions.’

The noun phrases ‘the head’ and ‘the heart’ have a generic value, they represent everyone’s head and everyone’s heart, without exception. The generic interpretation not only derives from the determination of the subject and object of the sentence but also from the fact that no personal pronoun is expressed. There is no ‘I’ or ‘We’ to specify the origin of the utterance. When personal pronouns are used, they are highly generic like ‘our’, referring to the totality of people:

38. Nous promettons selon nos espérances et nous tenons selon nos craintes.  
38. *Our promises are made in proportion to our hopes, but kept in proportion to our fears.*

The generality of the expression is not the only common feature of aphorisms. Most of them are also articulated through a relation of identification, often expressed by BE:

78. L’amour de la justice n’est en la plupart des hommes que la crainte de souffrir l’injustice.  
78. *In most men, love of justice is simply fear of suffering injustice.*

The structure of the maxim establishes an equivalence between LOVE OF JUSTICE and SUFFERING INJUSTICE. Aphorisms have a defining value: they function like dictionary entries, giving a definition of a first term.

However, the definition provided by aphorisms is deceptive: in Maxim 78, the equivalence is only structural because of the presence of BE between the two phrases. The definition of LOVE OF JUSTICE provided by the sentence is perfunctory. It actually leaves the real meaning of JUSTICE to the personal interpretation of the addressee while associating its signification with its origin.

A defining value is always to be found in aphorisms, even when there is no relation of identification explicitly expressed by BE:

86. Notre défiance justifie la tromperie des autres.  
86. *Suspicion in our part justifies deceit in others.*

The relation between SUSPICION and DECEIT is articulated around moral considerations, implied by JUSTIFY. This aphorism does not define, in the strict sense of the term, the word SUSPICION, yet it associates it with a general situation, that of being deceived.

Aphorisms can be construed as sentences that anchor a departing term into a generic situation, establishing a domain of validity for a term mentioned. In Maxim 86, DECEIT is said to exist, or to be active when SUSPICION occurs. Even though there is no strict definition expressed, a close association between two generic terms is established.

## 2.2 Contextual compatibility and linguistic/pragmatic features

Free from contextual bonds, dense in meaning and compact in form, aphorisms are extremely fit for textual transplantation. What allows the compatibility of aphorisms with virtually any context is their recourse to generic reference and implicit definition. Being self-referential keeps

them independent from a particular context, which would normally be a necessary condition for a discourse to be meaningful.

The quotational status of aphorisms pertains to pragmatic specificities on both sides of the author and users or addressees. Indeed, when aphorisms are transplanted and used in a target text, they are selected for their impact and concentration of meaning. But, one aspect not often dealt with, is that authors of aphorisms like La Rochefoucauld intend attributing the status of ‘quotation’ to their aphorisms. This implies a complex set of strategies which are better revealed through the analysis of their translation.

We are going to see briefly that while their formal features matter so much, they are especially problematic in translation.

### 3. La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* and their translations: grafting meaning

La Rochefoucauld published the first edition of his collection of maxims in 1660. They were immediately very successful even beyond the French borders. From 1670 until today, his *Maxims* have been translated at least thirty-seven times in English. This substantial number of translations is explained by the difficulties encountered by translators in the structure of aphorisms which is based on both idiomatic specificities and grammatical particularities in order to condense meaning. A literal translation is hardly ever possible and leads, almost invariably, to misleading interpretations.

Examples can be found where a translation which follows the French too closely can produce serious mistranslations. The word for word translation produces a counter interpretation of the maxim, as we can see in:

325. Nous nous consolons souvent par faiblesse des maux dont la raison n'a pas la force de nous consoler.  
325. *We often comfort ourselves by the weakness of evils, for which reason has not the strength to console us.* (BF)<sup>3</sup>

This translation dating back to 1871 betrays a misreading of the original maxim. In French, ‘par faiblesse’ is not a MEANS ADJUNCT but a CAUSAL ADJUNCT. The weakness evoked is not to be related to ‘evils’ but to ‘comfort’. A correct translation from a 1959 edition gives:

325. *Often, simply out of weakness, we get over troubles for which reason is powerless to console us.* (T)

However, it requires a thorough rearrangement of the elements of the maxim.

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<sup>3</sup> The initials between parentheses specify the identity of the translator: BF stands for Bunds-Friswell (1871) and T for Tancock (1959).

There are traditional methods of translation that help provide satisfying versions in the target language by changing the grammatical category of words, or the whole formulation, so as to adjust the specifications of the original language.

Here is an example of a transposition, which consists in changing the grammatical category of a word:

135. On est quelquefois aussi *différent* de soi-même que des autres (added emphasis).  
135. *We sometimes differ more widely from ourselves than we do from others* (added emphasis).

The verb ‘differ’ in the English version is an adjective in French.

An example of modulation, which can be defined as a change of point of view:

423. *Peu* de gens savent être vieux (added emphasis).  
423. Not many *know how to be old* (added emphasis). (T)

The quantifier of paucity ‘peu’ in French is turned into a negation of the multi-quantifier in English: ‘few’ becomes ‘not many’. The meaning remains the same, but the words used and features pertaining to enunciation in aphorisms change.

It is possible to consider that the aphoristic character of the original sentences is somewhat distorted in these examples. In numerous examples, the translation of aphorisms triggers or imposes a dramatic loss of aphoristic features:

171. **Les vertus** | se perdent <sub>1</sub> | dans l'intérêt, <sub>2</sub> | comme les fleuves <sub>3</sub> | se perdent <sub>4</sub> | dans la mer. <sub>5</sub>

The vertical bars indicate the meaningful units of the maxim and the figures subscript their order according to the position of the units. The word in bold characters is the THEME of the maxim. One of the translators translated maxim 171 as:

171. *As rivers <sub>3</sub> / are lost <sub>4</sub> / in the sea <sub>5</sub> / so are <sub>1</sub> / virtues / in self.<sub>2</sub>* (BF)

The pattern is transformed from an initial: **Th** -> 1 -> 2 -> 3 -> 4 -> 5 into: 3 -> 4 -> 5 -> 1 -> **Th** -> 2.

While brevity is preserved and the general meaning still the same, the aphoristic character of the maxim is lost. Indeed, the French version plays on a rhythmically balanced pattern (‘se perdent’ is repeated) which thematically departs from the mention of VIRTUE. The English translation changes the informational structure of the maxim as well as its rhetoric strategy. The carefully studied prosody of the French version emphasises the impact of what is said, while the English tends to flatten it by reorganising its material.

An extreme example of variation of the aphoristic nature of an enunciation can be illustrated by Maxim 351:

351. On a bien de la peine à rompre, quand on ne s'aime plus.  
351. *How hard is it to break with somebody we have ceased to love!* (T)

Here it is no longer possible to consider the translation an aphorism: the exclamatory mood of the English translation perverts the initial strategy of La Rochefoucauld.

However, some translations seem to renew the aphoristic properties of the initial sentence:

155. Il y a des gens dégoûtants <sup>-</sup> avec du mérite <sup>+</sup>, || et d'autres qui plaisent <sup>+</sup> avec des défauts <sup>-</sup>.

Maxim 155 establishes a double antithesis, i.e. 'dégoûtant' is opposed to 'qui plaisent' and 'mérite' to 'défauts'. Also, a symmetry of lexical polarity is posed (- + || + -). This is a canonical aphorism: its theme is elaborated into a formally balanced construction, reminding us of the defining value of aphorisms.

In one of the translations we found that these complex features have been successfully transposed:

155. *There are some persons who only <sub>1</sub> disgust <sub>2</sub> <sup>-</sup> with their abilities, || there are persons who please <sub>2</sub> <sup>+</sup> even <sub>1</sub> with their faults.* (BF)

The aphoristic nature of this maxim is translated very cleverly: it indeed preserves both the double antithesis (which is rather a proper antithesis 'disgust / please' and an implicit opposition 'abilities / faults') and the symmetry, which is no longer polar but positional (adverb<sub>1</sub> verb<sub>2</sub> || verb<sub>2</sub> adverb<sub>1</sub>). However, if the initial structural pattern is preserved, the meaning is greatly modified since the initial meaning of the French is that "there are disgusting persons who are deserving and others who are popular but flawed". This not what the translation signifies.

The translations almost invariably have to choose between betraying the meaning or flattening the aphoristic character of aphorisms.

#### **4. Conclusion: translation and transplantation**

The basic properties of aphorisms are their brevity and autonomy of enunciation. Their concision allows them to have an immediate impact on the addressee, or they can be used to illustrate an argumentation. They also elaborate the aesthetics of brevity which makes them memorisable and memorable. Brief forms of language are also said to be free from any dependence on context: they need not be embedded in a logically constructed discourse, such as a dialogue or written pieces of writing, to have an immediately promptly intelligible meaning. In actuality, they tend to house the context of the discourse they are inserted in because they characterize a general situation and formulate a rule or principle exemplified in the context of their enunciation.



These briefly exposed examples show how complex the relation between aphorisms and their translations is. What the study of the translation of aphorisms shows is that aphorisms, in an even greater degree than poetry, build their meaning not only upon the words they use but particularly upon the structural features they display. Aphorisms, grammatically speaking, reveal a way of signifying that which relies on contrasts between lexemes, and semantic contrasts which are paralleled by a syntactical organisation. The very organisation of the words in aphorisms is significant in itself since it participates in a rhetorical strategy. Translation adds a number of constraints linked to the particularities of the target language, which in turn makes it difficult, if not occasionally impossible, to render any given aphorisms into another language. One may say that while aphorisms might have an optimal nature towards being transplanted, they have a minimal propensity towards being translated.

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