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# SOMMAIRE

# THE TRANSLATION OF "SI" INTO ENGLISH: BETWEEN "IF" AND "WHETHER"

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**Résumé**

Cet article vise la traduction de « si » en anglais ,fondée sur la théorie de l'invariance telle que développée au sein de la grammaire métaopérationnelle. L'analyse métaopérationnelle met au jour les valeurs invariantes des opérateurs *if* et *whether* comme suit : *if* est de statut posé tandis que *whether* est de statut repris. Ainsi la traduction de « si » par *if* ou *whether* quelque soit leurs contextes de production est-elle sous-tendue par lesdites valeurs invariantes.

**Mots clés** : nvariants, métaopérationel, rhématique systémique , thématique.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine the translation of "si" in the light of the theory of invariance as developed within metaoperational grammar. The metaoperational analysis reveals the systemic values of the operators *if* and *whether* as follows: *if* holds a set status, whereas *whether* holds a retaken status. Thus, the translation of "*si*" as *if* or *whether*, regardless of the context of use, is determined by their systemic values.

**Keywords**: invariants ,metaoperational, rhematic ,systemic,  thematic.

**Introduction**

When translated into English, the French "*si*" typically corresponds to *if* or *whether*. Indeed, the French word "*si*" is translated into English in most translation official documents by *if* or *whether*. However, these documents indicate that the following contexts make it possible to determine whether, *if* or rather *whether* is appropriate. According to authoritative sources such as *Guidelines for Translation from French into English* (Paris-Nanterre, 2016), the French word "*si*" is translated into English as *if* in the case of "the simple conditional", whereas, it is translated as *whether* when expressing a "yes / no alternative». Even if this point of view is accepted, in the following utterances where the two main translations of "*si*" are interchangeable, the question arises as to how one might determine the operator that is most appropriate in context: "I don't know *if* / *whether* he is at home", "I asked myself *whether* / *if* it would not be better to refrain from writing at all". In fact, when relying on the notion of interchangeability, it becomes challenging to provide a reasoned and definitive response to the concern outlined above. Furthermore, we do believe that the notions of "simple conditional" and "alternative" cannot be the fundamental criteria guiding translators to choose either the operator *if,* or *whether* as the appropriate translation of "*si*". Those notions are semantic interpretations and therefore, refer to contextual translations of "*si*" in English. How, then, can translators base their work on unstable values to determine the most appropriate translation of "*si*" while claiming accuracy? Considering that the notions of "simple conditional" and "alternative" cannot constitute a reason-grounded and objective criterion for translating "*si*" into English, a paradigm shift proves necessary. This work is anchored in the theoretical framework of metaoperational grammar. The study seeks a more systematic translation of the French operator "*si*" into English, using *if* and *whether*, grounded in the underlying abstract grammatical operations that govern the choice between the two. This article raises the following central and fundamental question: what are the invariant values of the operators *if* and *whether* that justify choosing one over the other for translating "*si*" into English? accordingly, we put forward the hypothesis that only the invariants values of *if* and *whether* can rigorously and accurately account for the translation of "si" into English.

**1. Brief Lterature review on the Tanslation of "*si*" into English as *if* or *whether*.**

Some professional and official Translation Guidelines such as "powerling.com", "Frenchentree.com", "Translators.com" and "Refugies.info" share the same view regarding the translation of "*si*" as either *if* or *whether*. In fact, all those documents unanimously advocate translating "*si*" as *if* when expressing "simple conditional", and as *whether* when it expresses,

on the one hand, an "alternative", and on the other hand, an "indirect question". The Following exemples illustrate those standpoints.

(1). *Tu réussiras **si** tu essaies* (*si de condition*).

Translation mine : you'll succeed **if** you try.

(2). *Faire savoir **s'**il plaide ou non coupable*. (Si alternative)

Translation mine: to declare **whether** he pleads guilty or not.

(3). *Il me demanda **si** j'étais occupé*. (Si dans question indirecte).

Translation mine: He asked **whether** I was busy.

### 1.1. Weakness of the Notions of "Condition" and "Alternative" as an Account of the Translation of "*si*" into English.

The notions of "condition" and "alternative" cannot be an evidence-based criterion to account for the translation of "*si*" into English as *if* or *whether*. In fact, those notions are speech effects express by the translations of "*si*" in a given context; they are context-bound, and therefore they are unstable. How can translators produce accurate translations based on changeable parameters? Furthermore, it can also be observed that the argument based on the translation of "*si*" as *whether* in "indirect questions" is not relevant, since in this context, "*si*" can indeed be rendered as *if* as follows: (3)'. He asked **if** I was busy.

### 1.2. The issue of interchangeability of "*if*" and "*whether*" as the translations of "*si*".

*If* and *whether* are considered interchangeable translations of the French word "*si*". This implies that, in certain contexts, "*si*" can be rendered alternatively as either *if* or *whether*. Moreover, the possibility that *if* and *whether* can be used interchangeably is a source of genuine confusion and raises a linguistic question that calls for clear and unequivocal answers. Accordingly, in which precise contexts of translating the French "*si*" are the two forms considered interchangeable? Even if, those contexts are well defined, they are not relevant. Indeed, *if* and *whether* function quite differently within the internal workings of the English language. Therefore, they are not equal and cannot be, since language is a system, and two linguistic units are never equal (F. De Saussure 1916).

Thus, to translate "*si*" accurately into English, one must determine "the grammatical status" (H. Adamczewski, 1982, 1996) of the units *if* and *whethe*r, as each is governed by abstract operations that dictate the appropriate choice in translation. That objective leads us into the theoretical and methodological framework of Metaoperational Grammar.

## 2.Theoretical Framework and Method of Analysis.

In this section, we first expound foundations of Metaoperational Grammar, together with a selection of related theories and concepts relevant to the present investigation. Subsequently, we delineate the data analysis procedure, making use of the analytical instruments developed within the theoretical framework of Metaoperational Grammar. The objective of this study is to enable translators to perform a systematic and reasoned translation of the French connective "*si*" into English as either i*f* or *whether*, by elucidating the theoretical foundation of translation within the framework of Metaoperational Grammar. Thus, the invariant values of *if* and *whether* will be uncovered through the abstract grammatical operations that guide the choice of one or the other unit in the translation of "*si*" into English.

### 2.1. Metaoperational Grammar.

Metaoperational Grammar is a discourse analysis theory founded in the 1970s by the French linguist Henri Adamczewski. Moreover, it aims to develop a methodology for learning English as a second language and has provided significant insight into the functioning of English grammar. According to Henri Adamczewski (1983), Metaoperational Grammar must sound the death knell of traditional grammars and take over. He states that position as follows: "the grammar that is expected to take over is based on the discovery that utterances reflect the structuring activity of the speakers and that the surface may present visible traces of the encoding operations" ( Translation mine; H. Adamczewski, 1983, P. 5). It clearly emerges from this quote that Metaoperational Grammar targets the metalinguistic operations underlying the structuring of utterances. Put differently, Metaoperational Grammar seeks to identify the invariant value of each linguistic unit, that is, the property which sets it apart from other units with which it shares certain semantic traits. Highlighting the invariant values of the operators if and whether not only clarifies their distinction but also provides guidance for the speaker's choice between them.

Furthermore, Metaoperational Grammar postulates that language is a system in which units are organized in such a way that no two units can play exactly the same role in the language. Besides, the functioning of grammatical units in natural languages is governed by invariant values; It is also these invariant values that make it possible to fundamentally distinguish one linguistic unit from others with which it shares common semantic features. The invariant value is defined as the fundamental  value of a grammatical unit. It is this value that emphasizes the various contextual uses (speech effects) of each grammatical unit. The invariant value may

appear to be in opposition to the speech effects or semantic interpretations. Yet, this is not actually the case, as it is precisely from the invariant value that speech effects derive.

The invariant value corresponds to what the phoneme represents in phonology, while the speech effects are analogous to the various phonetic realizations of that phoneme. As well, the "status" of any grammatical unit or structure is determined by its invariant value, which is systemic, as it exists within the language system. Thus, a grammatical unit is either of a "set / rhematic status" or of a "retaken / thematic status" (invariant or systemic value). Consequently, it is of a "set / rhematic status", when the speaker uses it to just introduce a new information in discourse, whereas, it is of a "retaken / thematic status", when the speaker makes use of it to express a judgment or make a comment on the relationship between the elements of the utterance. In addition, based on the grammatical operations underlying the occurrence of *if* and *whether* on the surface of utterances, we will determine the accurate translation of "si" in context, according to the communication situation and the speaker's communicative intent. As Henri Adamczewski (1996) rightly argues : "All translation is inherently metaoperational in nature, since one necessary translates OPERATIONS and not grammaticalized lexical elements" ( Translation mine; H. Adamczewski, 1996, P. 105)

### 2.2. Method and Theoretical Tools of Analysis.

This study is situated within the framework of theoretical linguistics and addresses the research problem through a qualitative methodological approach. Our data consist of utterances containing the units *if* and *whether* produced in natural contexts of communication independently of the present research. Within those utterances, the units *if* and *whether* will be substituted for one another so as to uncover the invariant or systemic value of each, through the abstract grammatical operations that highlight heir surface occurrences in discourse we will also examine the substitution of one for the other in utterances where they are considered to be interchangeable, in order to explain why that is possible.

### 3.Metaoperational Analysis of the Operators *if* and *whether.*

This study seeks to examine the issue of the interchangeability of the operators *if* and *whether* as possible translations of the French operator "*si*". Subsequently, the two operators will be analysed in the contexts of negation and interrogation so as to bring out their distinctive properties. Finally, *if* will be considered in relation to the conditional operation it generates, whereas *whether* will be examined in connection with the operation of disjunction it presupposes. Those analyses will ultimately make it possible to identify the invariant values of

each operator, which  guide the communicative intent of the utterer while translating the French operator "*si*" into English.

### 3.1. Translation of "*si*" as *if* or *whether*.

In the following utterances, the operators *if* and *whether* are interchangeable. Furthermore, when one operator is substituted for the other in these utterances, the meaning remains virtually the same.

(4). I don't know **if** he will come. (1985, P.P.1045-1046)

(5). I don't know **whether** he will come. (2002, P.972)

(6). She asked **whether** / **if** the meeting had been postponed. (1985, P.1046).

(7). Do you know **if** / **whether** Ben is at home? (2013, P.172).

In all those utterances, the operators *if* and *whether* belong to the same paradigm: they are both subordinating conjunctions. They introduce indirect "yes-no" interrogative clauses, whose expected answers are "yes" or "no". They are interchangeable for they belong to the same paradigm. In utterances (4) and (5), the speaker is merely responding to a previous question in the communicative situation, such as: *do you know whether / if he will come*?  This utterance by the speaker is simply interpreted as informational content addressed to the discourse participants. In doing so, the speaker signals his uncertainty about the arrival of the grammatical subject "he". As for utterance (6), it is an informational request from the grammatical subject "she". In fact, a meeting had been scheduled beforehand, and the grammatical subject "she" was asking whether the aforementioned meeting had been postponed to a later date. In utterance (7), the speaker is seeking information about the grammatical subject "Ben", specifically wanting to know whether he is at home.

The analysis confirms the interchangeability of the operators *if* and *whether*. It reveals that, this is possible when both operators are considered as subordinating conjunctions. In this case, the two operators have the same grammatical function, but there is still a semantic nuance in the utterances. However, it is important to note that the operators *if* and *whether* are not always interchangeable as they fulfil distinct communicative functions for the speaker, as evidenced by the utterances below.

(8). Shall I make some tea? **If** you like. (2006, p.356)

*(8). Shall I make some tea? **whether** you like. (2006, p.356)

(9). I couldn't decide **whether** to buy apples or bananas. (2013, p.166)

*(9). I couldn't decide **if** to buy apples or bananas.( 2013, p.166)

The ungrammaticality of utterances (8) and (9) becomes evident when one operator is replaced with the other.in fact, an  ungrammaticality refers to the fact that an utterance is ill-formed because it violates the grammatical rules of a given language.In generative terms, it designates a structure that is not well-formed according to the syntactic, morphological, or combinatorial principles governing language. This ungrammaticality corroborates the facts that these two operators are not equivalent and respond to very different discursive orientations. In fact, in utterance (8), the speaker formulates an offer or proposal regarding a single element, which is accepted by the co-speaker. It is a polite offer from the speaker, which the co-speaker readily accepts. In the contrary utterance (9) constitutes an assertion of the speaker's inability to make a choice between two alternatives. Furthermore, it should be noted that in utterance (8), the term "tea" is not presupposed, whereas in utterance (9), the terms "apples" and "bananas" are indeed presupposed. Indeed, the words "apples" and "bananas" had already been identified within the communication context prior to the production of the utterance. Evidently, choices can only be made from elements that pre-exist the speech act.

### 3.2. *If* and the Operation of Condition.

(10).  Shall I make some tea? **If** you like. (2006, p.356)

(11).  **If** you have a mobile phone, check that it is turned off. (2013,p.166)

(12). **If** you don't open your umbrella now, you will be soaked through. (1982, p.339)

(13). You will be losing your head again **if** you aren't careful. (1982, p.339)

Let insert note that from utterance (10) to (13), the target of the enunciation concerns only one element, not two. Therefore, no alternative choice is at stake. In utterance (10), the information focuses on the word "tea". This utterance could occur in a context where the weather is cold, hence the speaker's polite proposal to offer "tea" to his / her co-speaker. Thus, the co-speaker accepts the offer in the form of a mitigated condition, which can be paraphrased as follows: "yes, if you like / I don't mind, do it if you feel like it.".It can emphaisize that, in this utterance, the operator *if*, does not apply to the actual realization of "making tea", but rather to the operation of acceptance which lies with the co-speaker.

As for utterance (11), the focus is on the word "mobile phone". This utterance might be produced in a context where the speaker is holding a meeting or a conference, and orders his audience to check that their mobile phones are turned off, for those who have one. Let us substitute the operator whether for the operator if, and analyse the resulting utterance: *(11). **Whether** you have a mobile phone, check that it is turned off. The ungrammaticality of the resulting utterance is readily apparent. In fact, this utterance is ambiguous and semantically unintelligible. Making messages intelligible can disrupt the communication process. Indeed,

how can one recommend that people turn off their mobile phones if their do not have any? One can also produce the following utterance, but the communicative intent will remain the same, and the issue of the ungrammaticality will still persist. This is simply because the speaker produced this utterance with a communicative intent related to the operator *if* rather than the operator *whether.*

As for utterance (12), the scope of the operator *if* is on "you will be soaked through" for, it is the consequence of the conditional clause introduce by the operator *if*. In this utterance, the operator *if* targets information that the speaker conveys to the co-speaker, the realization of which is contingent upon the clause introduced by the operator *if*. Similarly, replacing the operator if with whether gives rise to the same issues of ambiguity and semantic unintelligibility as in utterance (8), as follows: * (12)." **If** you don't open your umbrella now, you will be soaked through." In the resulting utterance, the speaker would convey that, regardless of whether their co-speaker opens the umbrella now, they would end up completely soaked. With *whether,* as follows: (12)''' "**Whether** you don't open your umbrella now, you will be soaked through". With *whether,* the speaker would mean that, whether or not the co-speaker opens the umbrella, he would get soaked. In this utterance the phrase "or not" is implied. In fact, the use of *whether* requires the conjunctive phrase " or not" in order for the utterance to be grammatical.

As far as utterance (13) is concerned, the target of the operator *if* is "you will be losing your head". In fact, "you will be losing your head" is the consequence of the clause introduced by the operator *if*. In this utterance, the speaker issues a warning to their co-speaker so that the latter may avoid a situation of irritation of which they have already been a victim. All in all, to warn someone is to provide them with information. Therefore, in this utterance; the speaker merely informs their co-speaker of a situation of which the latter may still become a victim. In this utterance, the substitution of the operator *whether* for the operator *if* makes the utterance ungrammatical, as in utterances (11) and (12). Effectively, when *if* is replaced by *whether*, a semantic paradox arises, whereby the utterance no longer conveys a piece of advice from the speaker to the co-speaker, but rather a no-win situation that imposes itself on the latter. The utterance means that, even if the co-speaker is careful, or not, the latter will be losing his head again.

Let us note that in all these utterances, the enunciator's communicative aim is to inform the co-enunciator of something. Thus, in utterance (10), the focus is on the word "tea"; in (11), on "a mobile phone"; in (12), on "your umbrella"; and in (13), on "your head". Accordingly, all these utterances have a left-to -right discursive orientation, that is, the focus is placed on a particular object in each of them.

### 3.3. *Whether* and the Operations of Disjunction and Alternative

(14). **Whether** you'll confess or hold out depends on how strong your mind's resistance is. (1992, p.261).

(15). You shall do it **whether** you like it or not. (1992, p.261).

(16). The question is not **whether** we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be… The nation and the world are in the need of creative extremists (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

(17). **Whether** the clinic was targeted or destroyed accidently, the effect was the same: to eliminate many of Fallujah's doctors from the warzone. (2006, p.356).

In utterance (14), the speaker says something about the grammatical subject. It is in fact the latter that is foregrounded, and not any object of the utterance as is the case with the operator *if*. This utterance would occur in a context where the co-enunciator had committed a heinous act, compelling them to confess it. It should be noted, moreover, that the operator *whether* applies to two elements in the utterance, unlike *if*, which pertains to only one element. Indeed, in this utterance *whether* applies to "confess" and "hold out", thereby accounting for the semantic interpretation of a choice alternative specific to *whether*. The operator whether performs a disjunctive operation between the actions "confess" and "hold out". In fact, these two actions are not cumulative but exclusive. The enunciator states that his co-enunciator has the choice between one of these two actions, but not both at the same time.

In utterance (15), the enunciator imposes an obligation on the co-enunciator. This obligation becomes more coercive and unavoidable through an anaphoric recurrence by means of the pronoun "it". Thus, the operator whether has an anaphoric characteristic, since it implicitly resumes the sequence of the utterance that precedes it on the left. This utterance could be produced in a context where the grammatical subject refuses to carry out a task, hence the speaker's reaction. The speaker refers to the grammatical subject "you" and asserts that they possess the means and authority to ensure that the task is carried out, regardless of whether the subject consents. Furthermore, the presence of the operator "shall" in this utterance is indicative.Indeed, "shall" does not refer to the grammatical future tense; it is the direct emanation of the speaker and functions in tandem with the operator *whether*.

In fact, the operator "shall" express the forced link between the grammatical subject "you" and the predicate "do it"  The realization of this predicative relation is managed by the speaker. It is the speaker who enforces this link and provides the means for its fulfilment. Hence, the semantic interpretations of "obligation" and "threat" conveyed by the modal "shall" in this utterance. Accordingly, the operator "shall" introduce. Thus, when functioning in tandem with

whether, "shall" sets the data that *whether* implicitly retakes, thereby making this data irrevocable.

In utterance (16); it is worth stressing that the whole clause introduced by the operator whether functions as a metalinguistic remark by Martin Luther King on the term extremist, a designation attributed to him in the context of the nonviolent actions he undertook against racial discrimination. This utterance originates from the letter from Birmingham Jail, authored by Martin Luther King Jr. on April 16, 1963. In this letter, King responds to eight white clergymen who had denounced his activism, characterizing it as excessively "extreme" and "untimely". In fact, Martin Luther King resemanticizes the term extremist by assigning it his own evaluating meaning. The qualifying adjective "creative" is introduced by king himself. In so doing, he performs a moral revaluation of the accusation of being "extremist" reframing it in a constructive and positive sense. He argues that the essential question is not whether one is an extremist, but rather in the service of which cause such extremism is deployed: whether in favour of hatred and injustice, or in favour of love, justice, and truth. By invoking the notion of a "creative extremist", Martin Luther King legitimizes a struggle that is racial in scope yet fundamentally nonviolent, thereby situating his commitment within a boarder moral and universal horizon.

As for utterance (17), it is a comment that the speaker makes on the grammatical subject (the clinic). The speaker argues that the accidental or deliberate destruction of the clinic results in the same consequence, namely the elimination of the doctors who constitute a vital support for civilians and wounded combatants. This utterance is set within the context of Irak war (2003-2004) specifically during the battle of Fallujah, a city that emerged as a focal point of Iraki resistance against U.S. forces and their allies. From utterance (14) to (17), the same discursive orientation is clearly observed. In each of these utterances, the grammatical subject is spotlighted. As a result, these utterances display a right- to- left orientation. The speaker thus provides a general comment on the grammatical subject imparting a somewhat subjective semantic nuance to the utterances.

Furthermore, when the operator *if* is used in place of *whether*, all of the above utterances display ungrammaticality in the following manner: * (14). **If** you'll confess or hold out depends on how strong your mind's resistance is.

*(15). You shall do it **if** you like it or not.

*(16). The question is not **if** we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be… The nation and the world are in the need of creative extremists.

*(17). If the clinic was targeted or destroyed accidently, the effect was the same: to eliminate many of Fallujah's doctors from the warzone. The ungrammaticality observed in these utterances stems from the fact that the operators if and whether serve distinct communicative functions, each supported by its own invariant values, which differ from one another.

### 3.5. The invariant values of *if* and *whether* as the Theoretical Basis for Translating "s*i*".

The analysis shows that the operator *if* is non-presuppositional, whereas *whether* is presuppositional and anaphoric. Accordingly, when the speaker aims to convey a message merely as information they employ *if*. In contrast, when making a comment concerning the grammatical subject, the speaker uses *whether*. This results in the following invariant values: *if* carries a "set or rhematic status", while *whether* carries a "retaken or thematic status". All things considered, "*si*" is rendered in English as *if* when conveying straightforward information, and as *whether* when expressing a comment or a moral judgment.

### Conclusion

This study aims to uncover the invariant values of *if* and *whether* as theoretical basis for translating "*si*". The hypothesis put forward is that only these values can rigorously and rationally guide the translation of "*si*" into English using *if* or *whether*. Our analyses indicate that *if* carries a "set or rhematic status", whereas *whether* carries a "retaken or thematic status». Accordingly, "*si*" is translated as *if* when it conveys straightforward information in the text, and as *whether* when it is used to provide a kind of comment. From a theoretical perspective, this study highlights and disseminates the theory of invariance, as framed within Metaoperational Grammar by presenting it as a key heuristic and methodological tool in the field of translation. Moreover, on a practical level, it will enable translators to render linguistic units with greater accuracy and fidelity when translating them from one language into another. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this theory is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it serves as a guide to assist translators in making informed and consistent choices of semantic equivalents across languages. These results pave the way for further research on Metaoperational Grammar as a theoretical foundation for translation.

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