

Les trucs d'anglais qu'on a oublié de vous enseigner
by Grant Hamilton

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reviewed by **Cindy Hazelton**, French-English translator

Cette critique est la première d'une série de trois critiques provenant des lecteurs du *Mot juste*.



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Grant Hamilton has recently published a book for French speakers who use English in their business communications. But his book, **Les trucs d'anglais qu'on a oublié de vous enseigner**, (*Stuff About English They Forgot to Teach You*) is much more than just a style guide for Francophone business owners. Anyone who writes in both French and English, especially translators, will find this book interesting, funny and an invaluable language resource.

If you've ever attended one of Hamilton's seminars at ATA conferences, you know that he can make a potentially mind-numbing topic come alive with his sense of humor and great use of examples. True to form, this book also holds your interest, thanks to his wit, organizational skills and interesting use of linguistic examples. The 220-page book, written in French, is divided into ten chapters that are subdivided into 65 lessons. The lessons are short, most only one or two pages long, making it the kind of book you can pick up to read a chapter or two and then come back to a few days later. This design also makes it very easy to use the book as a reference tool.

Each lesson begins with an introductory text box in which the topic is briefly discussed. Chapter 1, for example, is entitled *Let's Plunge into English*. In Lesson 1, *Six Rules for Making a Good Impression in Business English*, the reader finds a textbox describing the difficulties faced by a Francophone who wants/needs to communicate in English. But the author is encouraging: English conjugations are fairly simple (except that the singular looks like the plural and the plural looks like the singular), nouns have no gender and the disparaged Anglicism is suddenly a source of inspiration. Furthermore, "the English language is massacred by millions of people around the globe!" An example of pure Hamilton wit. Six suggestions follow, each one expanded by just a sentence or two. The author ends the chapter with a

short summary and the hope that readers will find a mine of useful information in the following chapters. That they will!

Hamilton uses various strategies to concisely present each chapter, including lists and charts in which English and French terms are compared or contrasted. Lesson 2 asks, "*Does your English Sound Natural?*" We learn that English uses *phrasal verbs* (idiomatic pairs of verbs + adverb or preposition). Here Hamilton uses a chart to show examples of phrasal verbs using *put*:

They're always <i>putting us down</i> .	Ils nous rabaisent constamment.
I <i>put in</i> for a transfer.	J'ai demandé une mutation.
I'm <i>putting on</i> a show.	Je présente un spectacle.
I <i>put the meeting off</i> .	J'ai remis la réunion à plus tard.
The smell <i>put me off</i> .	L'odeur m'a dégoûté.
You're <i>putting me on</i> .	Vous me faites marcher.

He advises Francophones to use more phrasal verbs when writing or speaking English, to make their English more natural sounding. So for example, instead of writing "I understood very quickly" they should write "I caught on very quickly."

Lesson 3 continues to discuss phrasal verbs, but here Hamilton presents a pattern drill that he frequently uses during his conference presentations.

You say...you translate...but try saying...

For example, "You say *comprendre*, you translate *understand*, but try saying *figure out*." It's amazing what a difference this makes when translating or writing in English. It's a simple lesson, but one that most people would never consciously consider. (Or should I say *think about*?)

In Chapter 8, entitled "*No Sex, Thank You, We're English*", he points out that English now tends to eliminate gender indications. A chart is used to illustrate this evolving grammatical issue:

What we said 50 years ago...	What we say today...	What we say in French...
Policeman	Police officer	Policier/Policière
Weatherman	Weather forecaster	Météorologue
Stewardess	Flight Attendant	Agent/agente de bord

The movement to "desexualize" English presents another problem with gender-based pronouns. How, the author asks, can we best write the sentence, "If the customer does not have a receipt, he? she? it? cannot obtain a refund." This is an interesting issue that translators and business writers must be conscious to avoid. Chapter 9 offers helpful strategies to avoid this gender trap.

Hamilton presents a different challenging topic in each lesson, such as in Chapter 38: *Negative Connotations*. In this chapter, the author points out that while many French and English words look similar, they actually have a very different connotation in English, and therefore, should be used with care. He gives the following examples:

Delay: The English word *delay*, unlike the French *délai*, always implies lateness. If you tell your client there will be "a three-day delay," he will not be pleased. It's better to say "a turnaround time" or "delivery time of three days." Or use a verb: "It will take three days."

Attitude: The city of Montreal designed a new slogan: "A City with Attitude" only to learn that English speakers interpreted it to mean that the city's atmosphere was cool, haughty or snobbish.

Notorious: Unlike in French, this adjective in English has the sense of being known for reprehensible or scandalous reasons. We are advised to use *famous* for the more neutral meaning.

To summarize this chapter, the author tells business writers to consult a dictionary or language professional before using English terms that may or may not connote the intended French meaning.

The book covers a multitude of generic linguistic topics ranging from punctuation and capitalization differences between French and English, British vs. American English usage and false cognates to the art of understatement in British English. But what sets Hamilton's book apart from all the others is his ability to think of totally obscure grammar points and present them in such an entertaining way that it's a pleasure to read. An example is found in Lesson 19: "*Words That Confuse Anglophones*". Like a linguistic George Carlin, Hamilton points out that each language group perceives and describes reality in its own way. The French "find death" but Americans "lose their life." What the French call the building's "first floor" is the "second floor" to Americans. You find yourself wondering, "How does he think of this stuff?"

Les trucs d'anglais qu'on a oublié de vous enseigner is entertaining, interesting and extremely useful for writers of either French or English. It's a must-read for French/English translators.