

It means the same, more or less

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Some rather innocuous expressions can get translators into a surprising amount of trouble. One of these is the French expression *plus ou moins*, which looks much like the English expression *more or less*, but which is far from a perfect match.

Le Petit Robert defines *plus ou moins* as “à des degrés différents et dans une mesure variable selon les cas. Réussir *plus ou moins*, bien ou médiocrement, avec des résultats incertains.” Compare this to the primary meaning *Webster’s* gives for the expression *more or less*: “to a varying or undetermined extent or degree: somewhat or rather.”

While both definitions begin the same, the examples they provide by way of explanation differ. *Le Petit Robert’s* “bien ou médiocrement” is hardly the same as *Webster’s* “somewhat or rather.”

Webster’s also gives a second meaning for *more or less*: “with small variations: approximately, substantially.” Here again, how could *bien* or *médiocrement* equal *approximately* or *substantially*? We can only conclude that the two expressions have slightly different meanings.

The first meaning of plus ou moins in French

An analysis of *plus ou moins* in original French texts reveals that the expression is used in three different ways. One of these ways is neutral, i.e., it puts equal emphasis on *plus* and *moins* and simply means “sometimes more, sometimes less.”

Consider this example: “La précuisson est plus ou moins longue selon la taille des légumes racines.” The context suggests that pre-cooking time is sometimes longer and

sometimes shorter, depending on the size of the root vegetables. In English, however, it would be impossible to say this using the expression *more or less*. The result would mean either “somewhat or rather long” (*Webster’s* first definition) or “approximately or substantially long” (*Webster’s* second definition). In neither case would the cooking time ever be shorter. To convey the idea contained in French, English must reword the sentence: “Precooking time **may vary** depending on the size of the root vegetables.”

Here’s a second, similar example: “La dépendance physique est un besoin physiologique créé par l’accoutumance du corps à l’action de la drogue, engendrant une difficulté à s’en passer et provoquant, en état de manque, des réactions physiques plus ou moins fortes.” Here again, the withdrawal symptoms vary from high to low, so saying “more or less strong” would obscure the meaning of the French. We could follow the previous example and simply end the sentence with “...provoking physical withdrawal symptoms that can vary,” but this seems truncated. A better solution would be to say, “...provoking physical withdrawal symptoms **of varying severity.**”

A third example: “La plupart des ouvriers ont été blessés, plus ou moins gravement.” Taking the first approach would give us “Most workers were injured, and the injuries varied,” a rather odd wording at best. The approach from our second example would lead to “Most workers were injured to a varying extent,” which doesn’t work either because the individual injuries did not vary. A better and simpler translation of this sentence would be, “Most workers were injured, some more seriously than others.”

The second meaning of plus ou moins in French

A second, very common meaning of *plus ou moins* is “rather less than more,” “barely,” or “not very,” in other words *mediocre*. Let’s look at an example: “La précision des données peut faire toute la différence dans un processus de prise de décision tactique, mais les systèmes traditionnels permettent de soutenir ce processus avec plus ou moins d’efficacité.”

We can tell right away that the author is criticizing conventional systems. It is therefore impossible that the author means they do a “more or less efficient” job of supporting the process. The context here suggests a different translation altogether: “Data precision can make all the difference when it comes to tactical decision making, an area in which conventional systems **only go so far.**”

Here is another example of *plus ou moins* used with the emphasis on *moins*: “L’adoption du comportement de fumeur par le jeune est précédée d’une familiarisation « mentale » avec ce comportement, qu’il découvre étant enfant et perçoit graduellement, plus ou moins consciemment, comme « normal ».” It is unlikely that the author means “sometimes more consciously, sometimes less consciously” for a phenomenon perceived gradually by children as they grow older. This leads us to a simple solution in English: “Before they start to smoke, youth first become mentally accustomed to the habit, which they discover in childhood, then gradually and **rather subconsciously** come to consider ‘normal.’”

The third meaning of plus ou moins in French

To complicate matters a bit more, *plus ou moins* sometimes has a meaning very similar to that of *more or less* in English. Consider this example: “À travers l’histoire de la communauté, le costume des religieuses a subi des transformations plus ou moins importantes.” Here again, the context informs us of the author’s true meaning. We can assume that the nun’s habit has changed a lot over the years (des transformations plus importantes), not a little (des transformations moins importantes), because the author goes on to explain all the many changes. We can thus translate, “Throughout the history of the community, the nun’s habit has undergone some **rather major transformations.**”

This same emphasis on *plus* is apparent in the following example: “Comme la publicité en faveur des produits du tabac a été plus ou moins limitée dans nombre de pays, l’industrie du tabac a rapidement réorienté sa stratégie de promotion.” Had the emphasis been on *moins*, the tobacco industry would not have had to redirect its promotional strategy. This suggests the following translation: “When advertising to promote tobacco products was **virtually banned** in many countries, the tobacco industry quickly redirected its promotional strategy.”

The moral of the story? It is simply not possible to blindly substitute *more or less* for every *plus ou moins* you encounter in a French text, or vice versa. You must first decide which of the three possible meanings *plus ou moins* conveys, then formulate your English sentence accordingly. If you make this a habit, everything will come out more or less fine! ☺