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Collocational translatability: cognate adjectives in an English-French parallel corpus

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Abstract

Starting from the selection of cognate adjectives in English and French in a parallel corpus of translated texts, this paper focuses on the contrastive analysis of the most recurrent adjective + noun collocations in English and their translations into French. The French translations go from the predictable and congruent collocations to the most unpredictable and structurally or lexically incongruent renderings. The results of this corpus-based contrastive study suggest that although collocational translatability is generally possible there is a clear congruence/non-congruence cline which is mainly the product of the extended stylistic use of these combinations that can turn into clichéd collocations in English journalistic discourse.

Keywords: cognate adjectives, collocability, translatability, predictability, congruence/non-congruence cline, clichéd collocations.

1. Cognate words

Cognate words are words in two or more different languages that have the same etymological origin and that can be either orthographically identical or not but whose connection is easily made and observable. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) "English *five*, Latin *quinque*, Greek *πέντε*, are cognate words, representing a primitive **pénke*." It seems obvious that unless one is a scholar in classical languages and a renowned etymologist the connection between these words is not at all easily made. As far as I am concerned I will not be dealing with examples such as these but rather with more straightforward cognate words such as the following pairs: French *encourager* and English *encourage*, Portuguese *coração* and Spanish *corazón* or even Italian *piuttosto* and French *plutôt*.

Cognate adjectives, as is also the case with verbs or nouns, abound among the various Romance languages but also between these languages and English, mainly because of the long and close contact that English has had especially with French since the 11th century. These adjectives very often collocate with nouns in English becoming therefore recurrent collocations and taking on a particular collocational meaning, both more precise and complex than the meaning of the adjective when associated to other bases. They clearly pose a significant challenge to translators as they have become false friends, particularly when used as collocates of a number of nouns, as in *vicious attack* (where *vicious* means 'violent and shocking'), *serious problem* (where *serious* means 'big and important') or *dramatic increase* (where *dramatic* means 'sudden and significant'). It should be said that the collocational properties of etymologically related lexis are not generally the same between the source and the target language and that the transferability of certain collocations remains most unlikely. Both totally and partially deceptive cognates (Granger & Swallow 1988: 108) are to be found among our selection (En. *comprehensive* and Fr. compréhensif are examples of totally deceptive cognates whereas En. *dramatic* and Fr. *dramatique* are examples of partially deceptive cognates).

2. Collocations

The concept of collocation was introduced by Firth (1951) and was later developed by Halliday (1966) and Sinclair (1966). For these highly predictable word combinations, and as an operational working frame, I have selected three definitions which, as a matter of fact, mainly focus on the syntactic side of this phenomenon:

> "Collocation" is the co-occurrence of two items in a text within a specific environment." (Jones and Sinclair 1974: 19).
>
> By collocation is meant the co-occurrence of two or more lexical items as realizations of structural elements within a given syntactic pattern." (Cowie 1978: 132).
>
> Collocations are lexically and/or pragmatically constrained recurrent co-occurrences of at least two lexical items which are in a direct syntactic relation with each other." (Bartsch 2004: 76).

It is not only the semantic side of collocations but also the syntactic side that binds together adjectives and nouns in English that must be taken into account as these combinations abound in English and are not always syntactically transferable to other languages[1]. The term is then frequently used to refer to the co-occurrence of two single words and this will be the case here with adjectives and nouns. In fact, collocations present real problems for translators partly because these units occupy a fuzzy area between free word combinations and idioms and other set expressions or phrases. Contrary to the more orthodox approach to the adjective + noun collocational pattern in which the noun is taken as the node, the adjectives have been used here as nodes or as input words in order to obtain their most frequent and significant collocates, in this case nouns.

2.1. The translatability of collocations

Although collocations, as happens with idioms or other word combinations, seem to be universal, some of them can be regarded as language-specific. *Mental disorder*, *comprehensive school*, *hot line*, *give support*, *free fall*, *work hard*, *sensible clothes*, *bland diet*, *spend time*, *raw evidence* and many others are combinations that have developed a specific, and sometimes figurative or metaphorical, meaning in English or that simply constitute a clear-cut and indivisible unit of meaning that hardly find a word-for-word translation into foreign languages[2]. Apart from these language-specific or idiosyncratic collocations, most adjective-noun collocations in English tend to be rendered by a congruent equivalent in French, even though various synonymous adjectives in the TL tend to alternate with the cognate one mainly for stylistic reasons.

> Translated texts tend to be more explicit, unambiguous, and grammatically conventional than their source texts or other texts produced in the target language; they also tend to avoid repetition that occur in the source text and to exaggerate features of the target language" (Baker 1993: 243-5).

As it will be developed further down the use of synonymous adjectives or word-class shifts and other types of transpositions in the TL cannot only be put down to stylistic reasons but also to a systematic training received by French translators in how to avoid literal translations, even when these are correct. Therefore the interpretation performed by the translator on the SL collocations may result in synonymous TL collocations or in any other extensions or reductions, making the resulting translation sometimes more redundant, other times more compact. Sometimes the choice of a synonym is perfectly justified by the fact that a cognate adjective in the SL may have developed a sense or several senses that are not present in the TL. Thus *sérieux* shares with English the sense of 'severe or bad', among others, whereas *dramatique* does not share with English the sense of 'sudden or noticeable' or even the sense of 'exciting'. These collocational restrictions either in the SL or the TL must be taken into consideration as they vary from adjective to adjective and from language to language. Several studies have been carried out concerning non-equivalent and non-congruent word combinations, otherwise known as collocational faux amis (CFA), for the pair English-Czech (Klégr and Šaldová 2006), English-Italian (Nuccorini 2006) and also, but this time from a lexicographic point of view, for the triad Afrikaans-Dutch-German (Heid and Prinsloo 2008) although they take a much wider view of collocations including larger phraseological units. Concerning the present study, about two-thirds of the examples analysed are translated by the equivalent cognate collocation or by means of a synonymous adjective. The remaining one-third displays a variety of renderings that include abstract-concrete switching, hyponymic/hypernymic shifts, verb/adverb transpositions, point-of-view reversals and other modulation techniques or even compensations.

3. Corpus and methodology

PLECI is an English-French bidirectional parallel corpus of journalistic and literary texts, jointly compiled by the *Université de Poitiers*, France, and the *Université Catholique de Louvain*, Belgium, between 1999 and 2007. The total amount of the French and English journalistic sub-corpus is 660,000 words. For the present study only the unidirectional English-French journalistic section of the corpus has been used. The corpus texts are plain text files aligned to be used with a parallel concordancer.

ParaConc is a search tool designed to work with parallel texts that can be used, among other things, to analyse the choices made by individual translators and this will be in part the main objective of this study. Queries were carried out by using a wild card followed by the following endings: **al*, **ous*, **ary*, **able*, **ible*, **ant*, **ive*, **ic*. Although these endings account for the vast majority of English adjectives having a potential cognate adjective in French, these queries produced a considerable number of results that had to be sorted out manually in order to exclude some nouns and several non-cognate adjectives sharing the same ending. Then, an important number of real cognate adjectives, such as *military* or *international*, were discarded as they do not comply with the principle of translational non-equivalence and therefore the contrastive collocational analysis would

have been useless and uninteresting. Likewise, I decided to check the frequency of certain combinations in the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) to account for representativeness and frequency of use. *Serious problem(s), dramatic change(s), potential problem(s)* and *substantial number(s)* happen to be the most frequent adjective + noun combinations in both corpora for the adjectives in question, which shows the high level of collocability of these combinations in English[3].

4. English adjectives and their cognates in French

A first sample of eight English adjectives was determined with the aim of testing their translatability, predictability and degree of congruence in their parallel French texts.

comprehensive	*compréhensif/ve*
dramatic	*dramatique*
effective	*efficace*
environmental	*environnemental/e*
massive	*massif/ve*
potential	*potentiel/le*
serious	*sérieux/euse*
substantial	*substantiel/le*

The left column shows the selected English adjectives whereas the right column shows their corresponding cognate French adjectives in their singular masculine and feminine forms. The number of tokens of the English adjectives goes from 17 for *dramatic* to 58 for *serious*. I am conscious of the fact that I am dealing with a rather small corpus and that results must consequently be taken as preliminary and showing a trend rather than definite at least for the sample in question. For this study it ha been established that English is the source language (SL) and French, the target language (TL) and that only significant and recurrent collocates of the input words in English have been selected as representative. It is important to introduce at this point the concept of *clichéd collocation*. This term refers to a rather hackneyed, overworked and well-worn collocation, especially an adjective + noun collocation, used repetitively in certain genres such as journalistic discourse. Examples of clichéd collocations include *dramatic change*, *serious problem* and *substantial amount*.

> D'autre part, U. Bäcklund (1976, 1978) a démontré que les collocations les plus restreintes présentent une certaine redondance sémantique, la base imprégnant le collocatif de son sens propre. Il cite l'exemple de *hectic fever* où *hectic* signifie « marqué d'une activité fébrile », le tout pouvant signifier « une fièvre fébrile ». (González Rey 2002: 88).

Enlarging on the above quotation it should be said that the concept of clichéd collocation is necessary to account not only for the extremely high frequency of certain collocations in English general corpora but also for the avoidance of their use in the TL as will be observed in some of the examples analysed and that bears on the interpretation of the collocation that the translator makes as a sort of redundant combination.

4.1. The pair *comprehensive* / *compréhensif*

It comes as no surprise that *comprehensive* is the least predictable adjective of all as this adjective is usually mentioned as a classic example of a false friend[4]. As shown in examples (1) and (2), the translation into French is made by means of different synonymous adjectives meaning 'complete' or 'whole' or by means of a word-class shift as with *plan d'ensemble* in example (3). However, the collocation *comprehensive plan* has been rendered into French by a single word that encapsulates the meaning of the whole combination in the SL as can be observed in (4)[5] representing a clear case of reduction in which a multi-word unit in the SL has been rendered by a single-word unit in the TL. This example could also be described as a case of collocational non-equivalence as there is no word-for-word relation between the SL and the TL.

(1) *a* ***comprehensive range*** *of services* > *une* ***gamme complète*** *de services*

(2) *more* ***comprehensive methods*** > *des* ***méthodes*** *plus* ***globales***

(3) *a* ***comprehensive scheme*** > *un* ***plan d'ensemble***

(4) *a **comprehensive plan** > une **stratégie***

No guidance or translation is given in bilingual dictionaries concerning the possibility of translating the collocation in (4) by a single word either in the entry for *comprehensive* or in that of *plan*. This type of translation technique is therefore the product of the translator's own interpretation of the SL collocation.

4.2. The pair *dramatic* / *dramatique*

The polysemy of the adjective *dramatic* becomes apparent in the two main translations into French, the cognate translation for the shared meaning (non-collocational) and the non-cognate translation for the specifically English collocational meaning. In the latter sense it is commonly translated by adjectives meaning 'exciting', 'breathtaking' or 'spectacular'. However, other procedures, namely single word or compound rendering or even ellipsis, have also been found.

(5) *the **dramatic** and terrible **events** > les **événements dramatiques** et terribles*

(6) *this **dramatic recovery** > cette **reprise fulgurante***

(7) *a **dramatic expansion** > une **expansion incroyable (considérable)***

(8) *a **dramatic lurch** to the right > un **spectaculaire glissement** à droite*

(9) *a **dramatic change** in US nuclear policy > un **revirement** de la politique américaine en la matière*

(10) *a **dramatic repudiation** > cette **remise en cause***

(11) *The **dramatic expulsion** of the Hamas leaders > L'**expulsion** de Jordanie de quatre dirigeants du Hamas*

It seems evident by the above examples that combinations with *dramatic* are not predictable in French unless the adjective is used in the sense of 'terrible' or 'violent' as in (5). When *dramatic* means 'sudden and striking', that is when used with its collocational meaning, different renderings are possible in French. In (6) (7) and (8) adjectives meaning 'significant', 'incredible' or 'spectacular' are used in its stead. The clichéd collocation *dramatic change* is translated by a single word in (9), a condensation rather than an implicitation strategy as this is not a case of omission, which would imply implicitation, but a case of stylistic simplification or reduction. Example (10) represents a case of class-shift as the SL collocation has been rendered by a compound. Example (11) shows the combination of an implicitation strategy by omission of the SL adjective and of a cataphoric reference to an element in the following syntagmatic context on grounds of cohesion in the TL translation.

The only non-cognate adjective found in the *Oxford Hachette French Dictionary* (OHFD) in the entry for *dramatic* is *spectaculaire*, the translation into French suggested for combinations with the nouns *change*, *impact*, *goal* or *landscape*. As regards the entry for *change*, no information concerning the collocation *dramatic change* is provided. The translation of this collocation by a single word into French could be interpreted as a clear indicator of its being a clichéd collocation.

4.3. The pair *effective* / *efficace*

Although the usual translation of *effective* is the cognate adjective *efficace*, it should be added here that *effective* as well as *efficient* and *efficacious* or any of their French counterparts are ultimately related to the same etymological source, namely the Latin verb *efficĕre*, meaning 'to accomplish'. There seems to be a clear tendency for ellipsis particularly in the case of the collocation *effective means* in examples (15) and (16). The same type of reduction technique is to be found in (17) and (18), which can shed some light on the superfluousness or rather the stylistic use of the adjective in English in a certain number of collocations.

(12) *an **effective weapon** > une **arme efficace***

(13) *an **effective actor** alone > le seul **acteur efficace***

(14) *all **effective means** of > tous les **moyens efficaces** pour*

(15) *The only **effective means** of > les seuls **moyens** de*

(16) *One of the most tested and* ***effective means*** *of keeping order > L'un des* ***moyens*** *de faire régner l'ordre*

(17) *an* ***effective anti-missile defence system*** *> un* ***bouclier anti-missile***

(18) *good old-fashioned British bureaucracy* ***is likely to be a more effective tool*** *than Texans in baseball caps > la bonne vieille bureaucratie britannique* ***se révélera bien plus utile*** *que des Texans coiffés d'une casquette*

The semi-predictable translation is to be found in (12), (13) and (14). This is semi-predictable in the sense that although the adjective *effectif* exists in French, its use is extremely restricted and is considered highly formal or even outdated. Even though the collocation *effective means* has been translated congruously in (14), the adjective is considered superfluous in examples (15), (16), (17) and (18), making of this adjectival base one of the most dispensable among the selected sample of adjectives.

4.4. The pair *environmental* / *environnemental*

As can be observed from (19) to (22), in co-occurrence with the nodes *policies*, *records*, *reports* and *standards*, one tends to find the cognate French adjective in the same collocation. However, in combination with the nodes *issues*, *initiatives*, *conscience*, *harm*, *damage* and *awareness*, as observed from (23) to (28) explicitation strategies are adopted that imply cross-linguistic word-class non-equivalence (from adjective into noun). The societal problems posed by the environment are explicitly conveyed or described in French by the use of words such as *problèmes*, which is overtly expressed in the translation in (25) and (28). These explicitation strategies may involve the inclusion of a preposition (*concernant*), a complex preposition (*en faveur de*), a noun or noun phrase (*(les) problèmes*), or even a past participle (*subis par*). When the adjective collocates with the nouns *movements*, *causes* or *activists*, as in (29), (30) and (31), the non-cognate translation *écologique/écologiste* is to be found. The translation by a single word, a sort of condensation translational procedure, is observable in (32).

(19) ***environmental*** *and social* ***policies*** *> des* ***politiques*** *sociale et* ***environnementale***

(20) *their* ***environmental*** *and societal* ***records*** *> leurs* ***politiques environnementale*** *et sociale*

(21) ***environmental*** *and social* ***reports*** *>* ***rapports environnementaux*** *et sociaux*

(22) *a set of* ***environmental standards*** *> un ensemble de* ***normes environnementales***

(23) ***environmental issues*** *> des* ***questions concernant l'environnement***

(24) ***environmental initiatives*** *>* ***projets en faveur de l'environnement***

(25) ***environmental conscience*** *>* ***conscience des problèmes d'environnement***

(26) ***environmental harm*** *> les* ***dommages subis par l'environnement***

(27) ***environmental damage*** *>* ***nuisances pour l'environnement***

(28) *the US public has one of the highest levels of* ***environmental awareness*** *in the world > l'opinion américaine est l'une des mieux* ***sensibilisées aux problèmes d'environnement***

(29) ***environmental movements*** *> des* ***mouvements écologistes***

(30) ***environmental causes*** *> les* ***causes écologiques***

(31) ***environmental activists*** *>* ***écologistes***

(32) *digital* ***environmental niches*** *>* ***écosystèmes*** *numériques*

4.5. The pair *massive* / *massif*

Massive is largely translated by its cognate adjective as shown from (33) to (38), making of this adjective a rather predictable collocate. Otherwise, synonymous adjectives are used in the French translation as in (39) and (40) meaning 'gigantic' or 'enormous'. This can be explained by the fact that the French adjective is more semantically restricted than its English counterpart and tends to be used to describe something very large in amount or number rather than in size. Ellipsis can also happen when the qualification is explicitly or implicitly found in the co-text as is the case with *massive extra cost* and *massive Israeli attacks* in (41) and (42) respectively.

(33) ***massive*** *human-rights* ***abuses*** *>* ***atteintes massives*** *aux droits de l'homme*

(34) ***massive increases*** *in emissions > une* ***augmentation massive*** *des émissions*

(35) *a* ***massive sale*** *>* *une* ***vente massive***

(36) *this* ***massive support*** *>* *ce* ***soutien massif***

(37) ***massive*** *US military* ***intervention*** *>* ***intervention*** *militaire américaine* ***massive***

(38) ***massive privatisation*** *>* *les* ***privatisations massives***

(39) ***massive, warehouse-style establishments*** *>* *de* ***gigantesques magasins-entrepôts***

(40) ***massive*** *federal* ***investment*** *>* ***énormes investissements*** *publics*

(41) *the* ***massive*** *extra* ***cost*** *>* *les* ***dépenses*** *supplémentaires*

(42) ***massive*** *Israeli* ***attacks*** *>* *les* ***attaques*** *israéliennes*

4.6. The pair *potential* / *potentiel*

This adjective is largely translated by its cognate counterpart as shown from (43) to (49). Other structurally non-congruent translations can be observed in examples (50) and (51) in which a complex number of syntactic and lexical translational procedures have been put into place that could be subsumed under the general heading of modulation.

(43) *its* ***potential audience*** *>* *son* ***auditoire potentiel***

(44) *a* ***potential customer*** *>* *le* ***client potentiel***

(45) ***potential consequences*** *>* ***conséquences potentielles***

(46) ***potential sources*** *>* ***sources potentielles***

(47) ***potential donors*** *>* ***donateurs potentiels***

(48) ***potential employers*** *>* ***employeurs potentiels***

(49) ***potential discordances*** *>* ***dissidences potentielles***

(50) ***the potential use of such weapons*** *by rogue states >* ***la menace représentée*** *par les « Etats voyous »*

(51) *Concentration of world oil production in any one region is a* ***potential contribution*** *to market instability > La concentration de la production pétrolière dans une seule région du monde* ***risque de contribuer*** *à l'instabilité du marché*

4.7. The pair *serious* / *sérieux*

Except for the non-collocational meaning of *serious* as 'not joking' or 'earnest', the adjective takes on a special sense in collocations such as *serious problem* or *serious trouble* as revealed by the French adjectives meaning 'big' or 'severe'.

(52) *a* ***serious problem*** *>* *un* ***gros problème***

(53) ***serious*** *long-term health* ***problems*** *>* *de* ***graves problèmes*** *de santé à long terme*

(54) *we are in* ***serious trouble*** *>* *nous sommes en* ***grand danger***

(55) *a* ***serious concern*** *for protecting Kosovars >* *un* ***souci sincère*** *de protéger les Kosovars*

(56) *a precondition for any* ***serious thinking*** *>* *un préalable à toute* ***réflexion***

(57) ***serious change*** *is unlikely >* *toute* ***réforme*** *paraît improbable*

The pair *serious / sérieux* represents an example of a partially deceptive cognate. The examples extracted form our corpus and listed above are all cases of the use of *serious* in its several collocational meanings, either 'big and important' as in (52), (53) and (54) or as 'real and honest' as in (55). As regards (56) and (57), the use of a single word in French (*réflexion* for *serious thinking* and *réforme* for *serious change*) corroborates the hypothesis that some of these combinations are not rendered as such in the TL.

4.8. The pair *substantial* / *substantiel*

Both the cognate translation and non-cognate adjectives meaning 'considerable', 'important' or even 'whole' are to be found as can clearly be observed in the examples from (58) to (63).

(58) ***substantial revenues*** *>* *des* ***profits substantiels***

(59) *gained a* ***substantial majority*** *> a obtenu une* ***majorité substantielle***

(60) *presence with* ***substantial*** *Nato* ***participation*** *> avec une* ***participation substantielle*** *de l'OTAN*

(61) ***substantial sums*** *of money > des* ***sommes significatives***

(62) ***substantial help*** *> une* ***aide considérable***

(63) ***substantial*** *US military* ***aid*** *> une* ***importante aide*** *militaire américaine*

(64) ***substantial parts*** *> des* ***pans entiers***

Although the adjective *substantial* seems to be the most congruent of all the adjectives in our sample when used in collocation, one unpredictable translation has nevertheless been found. The example in (64) shows an interesting translation into French which literally means 'whole pieces'. This seems to be a stylistic choice of the translator since the literal translation is also possible in French.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study has been the investigation of collocational patterns and the collocational properties of semantically related lexis from the source and target languages and the transferability of certain collocations. Although adjective + noun collocations are not specific to either language, English seems to be more inclined to use them than French, especially in journalese where stories are consciously told in an exciting and vivid way and the use of adjectives definitely contributes to this. It is interesting to notice that some collocational patterns such as *environmental issue, initiative, conscience, harm* or *damage* can be identified by crosschecking with their French renderings to find translational regularities. It can also be argued that there is an overuse of adjectives in English which can result in what can be called clichéd collocations. In their turn, these redundant adjectives are sometimes regarded as dispensable or superfluous by French translators. As a consequence, 7 out of the 8 English adjectives are avoided or disregarded in French translation with the result of an English collocation being reduced to a single word in French, and this is the case with *comprehensive*, *dramatic*, *environmental* and *serious* or by simply eliding the adjective as with *dramatic*, *effective* and *massive*. The results indicate that translated texts tend to show a lower number of collocates for each node in comparison with non-translated texts of the same genre. Although the number of examples analysed is relatively small, translational trends are well-defined for the sample under study. These results lead to a predictability/unpredictability cline going from the most predictable adjective *efficient* to the least predictable *comprehensive* and to a congruence/non-congruence cline going from the most congruent, the adjective *substantial*, to the least congruent, *environmental*. It is then most important that these clines concerning collocations and their translations should be well-defined for the sake of professional translators, contrastive linguists and language scholars in general. Contrary to the assumption that the stylistics of French requires a greater number of words, examples of both addition and omission have been found in our corpus, showing that French translation makes use of both techniques albeit being in general more verbose than the English source text. This analysis mainly shows that collocational translatability involving cognate adjectives in English and French is generally possible as most adjectives share one or various senses and can naturally collocate with the same paradigm of nouns in both languages.

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[1] I am not referring here to the obligatory syntactical shift between English and French or other Romance languages concerning the order adjective + noun in English (*dramatic situation*) and noun + adjective in Romance languages (Es. *situación dramática*, Fr. *situation dramatique*, It. *situazione drammatica*, Po. *situação dramática*).

[2] The word-for-word translations that can sometimes be found in French or other Romance languages represent clear examples of calques or loan translations, that is clear cases of collocational calques.

[3] For example, the collocation *serious problem(s)* registers 2,524 tokens and *dramatic change(s)*, 997 in the COCA. These results show the extensive use of these collocations that have become, by recurrence, clichéd collocations.

[4] As a matter of fact, calques of certain idiosyncratic collocations can result in absurd and nonsensical combinations such as the Spanish *escuela comprensiva*, a loan translation from English *comprehensive school* for which it is blatantly obvious that formal similarity is highly unreliable.

[5] Only two occurrences of the French calque of *comprehensive plan* have been found in the online archives of the French newspaper *Le Monde* spanning from 1944 to date. « M. Alliée écrit que la liste des usines devant être démantelées au litre des réparations fait partie d'un *plan compréhensif* qui ne laissera pas l'Allemagne dans un dénuement complet » (16/10/1947) and « Adenauer communiquerait jeudi au Bundestag de Bonn un *plan "compréhensif"* substituant aux démantèlement des réparations prélevées sur la production courante » (02/11/1949).