International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Check for updates

From default output to guided translation: Effect of prompt engineering on AI literary translation quality

Cheryl Amaka UDOGU *

Department of Modern European Languages Favulty of Arts Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2026, 19(02), 625-635

Publication history: Received on 31 March 2026; revised on 06 May 2026; accepted on 09 May 2026

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2026.19.2.1044

Abstract

Large language models (LLMs) are developing tools for literary translation thanks to breakthroughs in artificial intelligence (AI), but their default outputs frequently fail to capture the stylistic and aesthetic elements of literary texts. This work investigates the use of rapid engineering as mediating method for increasing the quality of AI generated literary translation. Using extracts from selected literary text, the study compares AI outputs to prompt guided translations, focusing on semantic fidelity, stylistic coherence, imagery and tone. The approach, which is based on descriptive translation studies and literary stylistics, examines how focused prompting can affect translation outcomes. The findings show a higher semantic and stylistic correctness in prompt-guided translation with the source text. The paper argues that prompt engineering is a significant type of human intervention in AI-assisted translation, establishing the active role of a human translator in shaping the translational intent rather than just a post-editor.

Keywords: Translation; Artificial Intelligence; Machine Translation; Default Prompt; Guided Prompt

1. Introduction

The new possibilities opened up by the use of large language models (LLMs) like GPT-4 has significantly improved machine-aided translation, allowing systems to produce outputs that are more context-aware and fluent1. These modern models rely on deep learning architectures, especially transformer models, to process and produce texts with improved flexibility, in contrast to previous rule-based or statistical machine translation systems. Consequently, AI tools are now widely used in both professional and ordinary translation operations. Research show that the LLMs now provide translations that are both contextually relevant and grammatically correct in a variety of fields. In addition, these technologies' increasing accessibility, especially their user-friendly interfaces, has further democratized translation by enabling non-specialists to perform jobs that were only reserved for trained specialists.

Despite these developments, applying AI to literary translation is still quite difficult. Literary texts are intricate artistic creations influenced by style, imagery, voice, rhythm, and cultural subtlety, they are more than just information carriers and when not carefully analysed, can lead to mistranslation. This is why, according to Udogu et al.2, "…mistranslation occurs when the intended meaning of the source text is not passed across to the target language" (267). These components frequently defy literal translation necessitating imaginative and interpretive choices that go beyond simple linguistic equivalency.

Existing research show that LLMs do well on technical and general translation tasks but their output is yet to be in par with human translation, particularly where stylistic sensitivity and artistic judgement are required3. In practice, this implies that default AI-generated translations created by straightforward prompts such as, "translate this text into French", frequently fall short of capturing the author's voice or the text's emotional resonance. Literary translation, as

* Corresponding author: Cheryl Amaka UDOGU

a result, continues to draw attention to the shortcomings of existing AI systems and the necessity of more sophisticated human participation through prompt engineering.

Prompt engineering transforms AI generic default outputs to a more context-aware translation using structured and detailed instructions. It curbs the fundamental limitation of neural machine translation n (NMT) such as handling idiomatic expression, emotion, as well as stylistic and artistic nuances that could be found in literature. This is done by allowing the AI tool act as a guided and specialised translator by the use of well formulated prompts. It helps AI become a collaborative took where the user's ability to successfully guide the system greatly influences the quality of the output. Effective prompts can significantly improve translation accuracy, fluency, and contextual appropriateness, according to studies, (Wei et al, 2024; Udogu et al, 2023, He, 2024). Contemporary research indicates that LLM performance can be further enhanced by including traditional principle into prompts, such as audience awareness, translation briefs, and translator roles. According to Cipriani4 (p.51), LLMs can produce outputs that are fluent and sound convincing, yet factually incorrect or misleading, a phenomenon often referred to as "hallucination" and "inconsistency". They operate as cooperative assistants under the direction of frameworks established by researchers rather than as independent analysts. This creates transparency and interpretability due to their capacity to offer justifications for annotations in accordance with explainable AI principles. This is indicative of a larger trend away from seeing machine and human translation skills as mutually exclusive.

1.1. Research problem and objectives

Although previous research recognizes the significance of prompt engineering, there is still a lack of evidence regarding the precise ways in which varying degrees of prompting affect literary translation quality. Literary translation is comparatively understudied because the majority of recent study concentrates on general or technical translation tasks. Furthermore, there is little empirical research comparing the stylistic accuracy and aesthetic quality of guided, prompt-engineered translations with default AI outputs.

To this effect, the current study examines the shift "from default output to guided translation", concentrationg on the impact of prompt engineering on the quality of AI literary translation. The research aims to:

- Examine the differences between basic or default prompts and advanced guided prompts,
- Assess the impact of prompt design on voice, style, and overall translation quality,
- Explore the role of prompt engineering as a form of human intervention in AI-assisted literary translation.

2. Literature review

2.1. AI and Neural Machine Translation in Literary Context

Compared to previous rule-based or statistical methods, neural machine translation (NMT), which is based on deep learning and transformer designs, has allowed systems to produce outputs that are significantly more fluid and context-sensitive. This is backed up by Ganesh et al' 5 and Srivastava et al.'s6 study which, according to them, NMT "uses deep learning techniques including recurrent neural networks and Transformer-based neural networks to produce more meaningful and accurate information" and does away with the drawbacks of previous methods, producing more accurate, natural-sounding translations than the statistical methods. For Hu7, this shows that NMT achieves "superior BLEU scores and fluency" in comparison to Statistical Machine Translation (SMT). By incorporating translation into more comprehensive language generation tasks, modern models such as GPT-4 have further expanded these capabilities, enabling more adaptable and versatile outputs. A more nuanced conclusion is provided by Castilho8 where NMT demonstrates "increases in fluency," human assessments showed "mixed results" for sufficiency.

In relation to Transformer designs and context-sensitivity, Hu6 emphasises the Transformer's "superior capabilities...in handling long-range dependencies and providing contextually accurate translations." Zeng et al 9 offers concrete proof that GPT-4 "outperformed Google Translate" in terms of translation quality, interactive ability, knowledge assimilation, and domain adaption, bolstering the assertion of increased adaptability and versatility.

2.2. Human versus machine translation in literary studies.

In translation studies, comparing human and machine translation has always been a major focus, but in the age of LLMs, it has gained new importance. In addition to linguistic proficiency, human translators also contribute interpretative judgement, cultural understanding and creative agency, which is not present what machine translation is used. In literary translation, where the translator frequently deals with ambiguity, metaphor, and stylistic intention, these

attributes are particularly important. On the other hand, machine translation systems use prediction and pattern recognition, which inhibits their capacity to interact with texts at a deeper interpretive level, while allowing them to produce outputs that are grammatically correct and frequently remarkable. Even though machines can approximate meaning, they often fail to capture authorial voice, emotional tone, and stylistic consistency, according to research comparing human and Ai-generated translations.

This is backed up by the findings of researchers like Belhassen et al10 which proved that while AI is applauded for its speed and affordability, "it faces criticism for losing cultural nuances… and having difficulties with idioms and metaphors". Their research highlights the loss of "stylistic elements, emotional depth and, creativity in literary works" when using machine translation as compared to human translation. Karabayeva et al11 discovered something similar in their research comparing output form Chatgpt and DeepL. It was shown, in their findings that "both systems exhibited reasonable accuracy conveying literal, meanings for straightforward descriptive passages. However, precision suffered for content involving metaphors, allusions, and other figures of speech" (7).

To this effect, there is no longer a strict oppositional perspective of the relationship between human and machine translation, instead, a growing number of academics and researchers are investigating hybrid methodologies, in which AI tools help produce preliminary texts that are then improved by human translators. For instance, Egdom12 et al proposed that prompt-driven post-editing can improve machine translated literary texts to some extent, even though its effectiveness varies. This is supported by the findings of Long13, who proposed that machine translation can be seen as a collaborator rather than a replacement for human translation, with a focus on its potential to assist in generating initial drafts that are refined by human translators. The strength of the evidence is qualitative analysis of Japanese literary texts. The methodology involves a deep, qualitative analysis of machine-translated texts to identify gaps and potential applications. The emphasis therefore switches from replacement to augmentation, posing new questions regarding the most effective ways to combine human knowledge with computer efficiency, especially in the fields as complicated as literary translation.

2.3. Prompt-Engineering in AI-Assisted Language Tasks

With the ongoing advancement of artificial intelligence, prompt engineering has emerged as a significant method for influencing the outputs of these systems. Rather than relying solely on default responses, users are able to direct language modes by designing prompts that specify context, tone, audience, and style. Kulkarni14, for example, reports well-structured prompts improve response accuracy from 85% to 98%. Consequently, the quality of AI-generated text is determined not only by underlying model, but also by the clarity and specificity of the instructions provided. Rathod15 also identifies key evaluation metrics (accuracy, fluency, relevance) and confirms that prompt engineering enhances machine translation performance.

In translation, prompt engineering facilitates a more detailed interaction between the user and the AI system. For instance, prompts may incorporate elements analogous to a translation brief, such as the intended audience or required stylistic features. This method aligns with central concepts in translation studies, which emphasizes the significance of the purpose and context in shaping translation outcomes. However, translation-specific evidence is weaker. He3 directly tested translation brief and persona prompts in ChatGPT, finding that "although certain elements are constructive in facilitating human-to-human communication for translation tasks, their effectiveness is limited for improving translation quality in ChatGPT." This suggests translation concepts from human-centered translation studies does not directly transfer to AI systems.

Recent studies indicate that prompt engineering influences the accuracy, fluency, and stylistic qualities of AI-generated translations. Huang et al.'s16 biometric analysis of 1,049 articles between 2020 and 2025 reveals "striking absence of ethics, bias, multilingualism, and non-English contexts," with negligible representation from linguistics outlets. Existing research has primarily focused on general or technical texts, where clarity and correctness are prioritized. However, limited attention has been given to prompt engineering in literary translation, particularly concerning the impact of various prompts on stylistic and artistic dimensions.

2.4. Gaps in existing research on prompting and literary translation quality

Despite the fast growth of research on artificial intelligence and translation, important gaps still exist. For example, while neural machine translation has been studied a lot, little focus has been placed on literary texts. Most current research focus on practical translation tasks and often overlook the unique challenges of literary translation. Furthermore, although prompt engineering is seen as important for improving AI performance, there is little research on how it specifically affects the quality of literary translation. Few studies have carefully compared results from default

prompts with those from guided, detailed prompts. Without this comparison, it is hard to fully understand how much prompt engineering can reduce AI's known limits in literary translation.

There is also a need for more combined approaches that bring together ideas from both translation studies and AI research. Technical studies often focus on how well models perform, sometimes missing the deeper theoretical and practical challenges of literary translation. On the other hand, traditional translation studies have not yet fully explored the chances and limits offered by large language models.

This study aims to fill these gaps by looking at how prompt engineering affects AI-created literary translations, especially focusing on the change from default results to more guided translations. This method hopes to improve understanding of how human translators and AI work together in literary translation.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Descriptive Translation Studies by Toury (1995/2012)

This study is grounded in Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), a framework developed by Gideon Toury17 in the year 1995 and revised in 2012 that emphasizes the analysis of translated texts in real-world contexts. Rather than prescribing ideal translation methods, DTS seeks to identify patterns, norms, and regularities that inform translation practices, recognizing translation as a norm-governed activity shaped by socio-cultural expectations and contextual constraints. Within this framework, Toury18 differentiates between initial norms, which guide a translator's overall orientation toward either the source or target text, and operational norms, which influence decisions made throughout the translation process at the textual level.

In applying DTS to this study, the research examines AI-generated translations, including both default model outputs and those influenced by prompt engineering, as examples of translational behavior governed by distinct norms. The implicit norms embedded within the model are contrasted with the explicit instructions articulated in prompts. This approach facilitates a shift from merely assessing the correctness of translations to investigating how prompt design shapes translational choices and recurring patterns in AI-generated translations, thereby enhancing understanding of the impact of human input on AI-generated literary translation.

3.2. Conceptualizing Prompt Engineering as a Translational Mediation: A DTS Perspective

Gideon Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) framework offers a valuable perspective for analyzing prompt engineering as a form of norm-oriented translational mediation. DTS conceptualises translation as behaviour governed by socially and contextually conditioned norms that inform decision-making processes. In the context of AI-assisted translation, model outputs embody norms internalised from training data, frequently prioritizing fluency, generalisation, and target-language acceptability, sometimes at the expense of source-text specificity. Prompt engineering enables external regulation of these norms. Carefully constructed prompts permit users to guide the system towards specific translational behaviours, such as preserving metaphor, maintaining narrative voice, or adopting a particular stylistic register.

Within this framework, prompts serve as operational norms that shape micro-level decisions about lexis, syntax, and style. Prompt engineering extends beyond technical input, serving as a locus of translational intervention where norms actively negotiated. The user assumes a translator-like role, shaping the balance between adequacies (source-text orientation) and acceptability (target-language conventions), both of which are fundamental to DTS. Minimal prompts typically yield outputs that are highly acceptable but stylistically neutral, whereas detailed prompts can enhance adequacy by retaining source-text features. Consequently, prompt engineering constitutes mediated norm-setting, consistent with the DTS perspective of translation as a regulated yet dynamic process shaped by both internal and external influences.

This conceptualization is consistent with broader studies that characterizes prompt engineering as a mediating practice in human-AI interaction. Researchers such as Bozkurt19, White et al20, Lund21, Haugsbaken et al22 describe prompt engineering as a mechanism for bridging the gap between human intent and AI outputs, thereby enhancing communication, accessibility, and usability. However, these studies do not explicitly conceptualize prompt engineering as translational mediation, and the connection to DTS remains largely implicit. Simeoni23 offers valuable insights into norms and translator behaviour, but does not address AI or prompt engineering. Conversely, most prompt engineering research is situated outside translation studies framework. As a result, the DTS-based conceptualisation of prompt engineering as translation mediation, while theoretically compelling, remains empirically underexplored. Further

research is necessary to systematically investigate how prompts operate as norm-governed mediators in practice and how they shape the interaction between human interaction and AI-generated translation.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to examine how various prompting strategies affect the quality of AI-generated literary translations. Rather than relying solely of quantitative data, the analysis involves a close textual analysis and comparison of translations produced through different methods. A qualitative approach is selected due to the interpretive and stylistic features inherent in literary translation, which are difficult to quantify. By comparinf standard AI outputs with those influenced by specific prompts, the study identifies patterns, differences, and shifts in meaning, style, and overall effect.

4.2. Selection of literary texts

A small, carefully selected group of literary texts was used to enable in-depth analysis. These texts are drawn from prose fiction and other narrative forma, in which features such as tone, imagery, and narrative voice are prominent. The study focuses on English and French as the language pair due to their significance in both literary translation and AI-assisted translation. The texts were selected according to the following criteria:

- Presence of figurative language, such as idiomatic expression, metaphor and symbolism.
- Distinct stylistic features, including tone, rhythm, and narrative voice.
- Moderate length to facilitate detailed comparison.
- Cultural and contextual richness.

These criteria ensure that the selected texts provide a robust foundation for evaluation how AI addresses literary complexity across various prompting scenarios.

4.3. Description of AI too used

This study employs GPT-4, a large language model, as the primary translation tool. GPT-4 was selected because of its advanced language generation capabilities and widespread application in A-based translation.

GPT-4 utilizes a transformer-based architecture and is capable of generating fluent, contextually appropriate text across multiple languages. Similar to other large language models, its outputs are influenced by the quality of its training data and the specificity of user instructions. In this study, the model is implemented under controlled conditions to ensure that variations in output primarily result from differing prompting strategies rather than external factors.

4.4. Prompting strategy

This study investigates the role of prompt engineering by comparing two prompting conditions

4.4.1. Default Prompt Condition (No Guidance)

In this condition, the artificial intelligence model receives only minimal instructions: “Translate this text into French.”

This serves and the baseline condition, representing the model’s default translation behaviour in the absence of explicit guidance. The resulting output reflects the model’s inherent tendencies, such as its preference for fluency and general acceptability.

4.4.2. Guided Prompt Condition: (Enhanced Instruction)

In the second condition, the AI model receives structured, context-rich prompts intended to guide the translation process. These prompts incorporate elements commonly addressed in human translation practice, including

- Style (for example, formal, literary, or poetic)
- Tone (such as emotional, neutral, or dramatic)
- Fidelity (closeness to the source text meaning)

Here is an example of a guided prompt used in this study: "Translate this text into French, preserving the literary tone, maintaining the imagery and metaphors, and ensuring stylistics coherence with the original texts."

This condition helps show how clear instructions affect the model's translation choices, especially when it comes to literary features.

4.5. Evaluation criteria

- The evaluation of translations relies on three principal criteria, chosen to represent both linguistic precision and literary merit
- Semantic fidelity: This criterion concerns the degree to which the translated text accurately conveys the intended meaning of the source text, encompassing the precise rendering of concepts, relationships, and contextual subtleties.
- Stylistic coherence: This criterion evaluates the extent to which the translation maintains a consistent and appropriate style. It considers factors such as register, narrative voice, and readability within a literary context.
- Imagery and tone: This assesses how effectively the translation preserves figurative language, emotional impact, and tone. It examines whether metaphors, symbols, and expressive details are retained or appropriately adapted.

4.6. Data Analysis Procedures

This analysis employs a comparative close-reading methodology to examine differences between translations produced under two distinct prompting conditions. Each translation systematically compared with the original text, with particular attention to the conveyance of meaning, style, and imagery.

The procedure consists of the following steps

- Generate translations for each selected text under both prompting conditions.
- Align each source text with its corresponding translations.
- Identify key differences in word choice, sentence structure, and stylistic features.
- Evaluate each translation according to established criteria.
- Interpret the findings within the theoretical framework, with emphasis on the influence of norms and mediation in translation.

Rather than assigning numerical scores, this study prioritizes interpretive analysis, this approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the impact of prompt engineering on AI translation outcomes.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1. Comparison of Default Output and Prompt-Guided AI translation

The comparative analysis reveals consistent distinctions between AI-generated translations and those produced using prompt guidance. When provided with a basic instruction such as "Translate this text into French", translations tend to prioritize fluency and grammatical accuracy. Although these outputs are clear and accessible, they frequently omit original stylistic elements and nuanced details, especially in figurative or expressive passages.

In contrast, translations generated with detailed prompts exhibit a distinct shift in approach. When provided with specific instructions regarding tone, imagery, and style, the model prioritizes the artistic and interpretative dimensions of the source text. This suggests that prompt engineering establishes external standards, enabling the system to align more closely with established literay translation practices. Although default outputs are sufficient for general tasks, guided prompts substantially improve literary quality.

5.2. Textual Examples and Analysis (Difference between default and advanced guided prompts)

A detailed examination of specific sections of the text reveals how these differences manifest in subtle details. The default prompt used is: "Translate to French" while the guided prompt used is: "Translate the following text into French with high literacy fidelity."

5.2.1. Requirements

- Preserve metaphors, similes, and symbolic expressions without literalising them.
- Maintain the original tone (e.g., solemn, ironic, philosophical, or tragic).
- Retain cultural elements (e.g. chi, icing, Ogene) using transliteration where necessary, with minimal explanation.
- Reproduce the oral and rhythmic qualities of the text (parallelism, repetition, cadence).
- Do not simplify, summarise, or modernise the language.
- Aim for a natural but literary French style equivalent to the original.
- If a direct translation is not possible, prioritise stylistic and cultural equivalence over literal meaning."

5.2.2. Example 1. Figurative expression

- **Source text**: "When he likes a man wealth flow like a river into his house; his yams grow as big as human beings…" Achebe[24],
- **Default prompt** : « Lorsqu'il apprécie un homme, la richesse afflue dans sa maison comme un fleuve ; ses ignames poussent aussi grosses que des êtres humains. »
- **Guided prompt:** Two options were suggested
- Lorsqu'il prend un homme en faveur, la richesse afflue vers sa maison comme un fleuve en crue ; ses ignames croissent, vastes et pleines, à la mesure des corps humains…
- Lorsqu'il prend un homme en faveur, la richesse afflue dans sa maison comme un fleuve ; ses ignames croissent jusqu'à atteindre la taille des êtres humains…
- **Commentary:** In the default version, the statement is stylistically constrained but logically correct. The cultural and nearly metaphysical power of "likes" in the original, which in contexts conveys divine favour rather than merely appreciation, is diminished by the verb "apprécie". In literary French, "poussent aussi grosses" is likewise grammatically correct but a bit banal. On the other hand, the tone and stylistic refinement are clearly elevated in the first and second choices of the guided version. The expression "prend un home en faveur" more effectively conveys the sense of bestowed grace or divine preference. The comparison is strengthened by the addition of "en crue" in the first option which turns the river into a powerful, overflowing symbol of plenty. Additionally, the descriptive expansion "vastes et pleines" and the change from "poussent to "croissant" enhance the imagery and add a more poetic rhythm. Achebe's narrative is closely aligned with the phrase "à la mesure des corps humains," which rejects direct comparison in favour of a more fluid, even mythic proportionality.

The improvement is more modest but still noteworthy in the second guided version. The literary tone is further enhanced by the verb choice "croissant" while "atteindre la taille des êtres humains" is a more fluid and colloquial rendition than "aussi grosses".

5.2.3. Example 2: Figurative expression

- **Source text**: "The moon he saw that day was as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster-mother."Achebe [24]
- **Default prompt :** « La lune qu'il vit ce jour-là était aussi mince qu'un orphelin nourri à contrecœur par une marâtre cruelle. »
- **Guided prompt** : « La lune qu'il aperçut ce jour-là était aussi maigre qu'un orphelin nourri avec réticence par une marâtre cruelle. »
- **Commentary**: The analogy is expressed with strong lexical integrity in the default translation, where "mince" denotes physical thinness and "à contrecoeur" reflects the hesitant cruelty implied in "grudgingly". But in French, "mince" can also imply a refined slenderness, somewhat mitigating the severity of Achebe's vision. The replacement of "maigre" in the guided prompt heightens the image's emotional and visual impact because it conveys misery, deprivation, and frailty rather than just thinness. Similarly, compared to the neural "vit", "aperçut" offers a more literary narrative tone. The guided version generally achieves a more vivid and artistically evocative interpretation, exhibiting better sensitivity to the sad undertone and metaphorical depth of the source material.

5.2.4. Example 3: Figurative expression

- **Source text**: "The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave."
- **Default prompt** : « La mouche qui n'a personne pour la conseiller suit le cadavre jusque dans la tombe. »
- **Guided prompt** : « La mouche qui n'a personne pour l'avertir suit le cadavre jusque dans la tombe.»

- **Commentary**: In the default translation, the verb "conseiller" creates a tone that is somewhat formal and logical, which partially lessens the proverb's underlying warning. The substitution of "averter" in the guided translation strengthens the expression's cautionary effect because it conveys warning and imminent danger rather than instruction, which is in line with Achebe's proverb's fatalistic and moral undertone.

5.2.5. Example 4: Tone and emotional register

- **Source text:** "Today the world is spoilt and there is no longer head or tail in anything that is done." Achebe[24]
- **Default prompt :** « Aujourd'hui, le monde est corrompu et il n'y a plus ni tête ni queue dans tout ce qui se fait. »
- **Guided prompt** : « Aujourd'hui, le monde est gâté, et plus rien de ce qui se fait n'a ni tête ni queue.»
- **Commentary**: The phrase "le monde est corrumpu » in the default translation includes a strong moral and political connotation that somewhat restricts the source text's suggested sense of chaos, the use of "le monde est gaté" by the guided prompt stays truer to the oral and cultural simplicity of Achebe's style. Furthermore, the term "ni tête ni queue" successfully maintains the figurative connotation of confusion and incoherence but the use of "dans tout ce qui se fait" sounds weighty and official. The guided prompt's use of "plus rien de ce qui se fait…" flows more easily and rhythmically in French.

5.2.6. Example 5: Tone and emotional register

- **Source text:** "We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live." Achebe [24]
- **Default prompt** : « Souvent, nous nous tenons dans la cour d'un lâche pour montrer du doigt les ruines où vivait jadis un homme brave. »
- **Guided prompt** : « Bien souvent, nous nous tenons dans la concession d'un lâche pour désigner du doigt les ruines où demeurait autrefois un homme courageux. »
- **Commentary**: The guided translation achieves greater stylistic refinement and narrative depth, better capturing the sombre and contemplative aspect of Achebe's oral manner, even if both versions maintain the proverb-like framework of the original text. Nonetheless, phrases like "la cour d'un lâche" and "un homme brave » continue to be rather straightforward and impartial. A stronger cultural and spatial resonance is introduced in the guided translation by using "concession" instead of "cour" which is more in line with the traditional communal setting in Achebe's narrative world. Similarly, "home courageux" sounds more elegant in French that the more literal "home brave" while "demeurait autrefois" has a more literary and comtemplative tone that the more straightforward "vivait jadis".

5.2.7. Example 6: Tone and emotional register

- **Source text**: "The reed we were blowing is now crushed." Achebe [24]
- **Default prompt :** « Le roseau dans lequel nous soufflions est désormais brisé. »
- **Guided translation :** « Le roseau dans lequel nous soufflions s'est à présent brisé. »
- **Commentary**: The use of « est désormais brisé" in the default translation gives the impression of a sudden loss, as opposed to the guided translation where "s'est à présent brisé**"** introduces a more dynamic nuance through the reflective construction, making the breaking feel more immediate and unfolding. The addition of "à présent" also strengthens the temporal emphasis, heightening the emotional weight of the rupture.

5.2.8. Example 7: Tone and emotional register

- **Source text:** "When an adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition…"
- **Default prompt :** « Lorsqu'un adulte est dans la maison, la chèvre n'est pas laissée à souffrir des douleurs de la mise bas… »
- **Guided prompt** : « Lorsque l'adulte est dans la maison, la chèvre n'est point abandonnée aux douleurs de la parturition… »
- **Commentary:** The register is somewhat simple in the default translation, for example, "mise bas" is a more technical, agricultural term that somewhat lessens the expression's literary and popular significance, "mis bas" as used in the guided translation enhances the sentence's literary and almost archaic aspect, bringing it closer to a spiritual or didactic language. In the guided translation, the use of "n'est point abandonee" raises the style register through a more formal and forceful negation, while the change to "lorsque l'adulte est dans la maison" introduces amore proverbial and pervasive tone than the more generic "un adulte".

5.2.9. Example 8: Cultural lexicon

- **Source text:** "No matter how strong or great a man was he should never challenge his chi." Achebe[24]
- **Default prompt** : Aussi fort ou grand soit un homme, il ne doit jamais défier son *chi*.
- **Guided prompt** : Si fort et si grand fût-il, nul homme ne doit jamais défier son *chi*.
- **Commentary**: The default prompt and the guided prompt is semantically accurate and preserves the cultural term *chi* without distortion, but the syntactic structure of the default prompt remains relatively straightforward and explanatory in tone. In the guided translation introduces a markedly more literary and archaic register through the inversion « fût-il » and the use of « nul homme », which enhances the proverbial gravity of the statement.

5.2.10. Example 9: Cultural lexicon

- **Source text:** "…took the ikenga from his shrine… split it in two."
- **Default prompt :** « …prit l'*ikenga* de son sanctuaire… le fendit en deux. »
- **Guided prompt** : « …retira l'*ikenga* de son sanctuaire… le fendit en deux. »
- **Commentary:** The default translation conveys the activity clearly while maintaining the cultural term "ikenga" in a straightforward and semantically understandable manner just like the guided translation did. The line has a more literal and less ritual-sensitive tone, nevertheless, because the word "prit" is somewhat simple and rather mechanical. The substitution of "retira" in the guided translation adds a more ceremonial and intentional subtlety, implying cautious removal as opposed to simple taking, which more accurately captures the hallowed context of a shrine piece. The guided version reaches a somewhat more refined and culturally sensitive register, heightening the ritual and symbolic weight of the act within Achebe's narrative world, even if both versions retain the violent ending action, "le fendit en deux."

6. Discussion

6.1. Interpretation of findings (Impact of prompt design on voice, style and overall translation quality)

Through the lens of Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), the results show that machine translation follow different sets of translation standards, depending on the prompt used. Unguided outputs produce literal translations with little stylistic or cultural depth since they strictly follow preparatory and operation guidelines that prioritise formal and semantic and figurative language. On the other hand, guided prompt outputs exhibit more sensitivity to tone, rhythm, and figurative language, reflecting a shift toward target-orientated norms of acceptability. This shift from adequacy (source-oriented) to acceptability (target-oriented) along Toury's continuum illustrates how prompts might trigger different translational behaviours. When it comes to managing metaphor, ritual; and oral rhythm in translations of "Arroe of God", guided outputs more closely resemble target literary norms, suggesting that quick engineering can mimic norm shifts in machine translation.

Within a DTS framework, prompt engineering represents a means of activating and manipulating translational norms rather than direct intervention. Since AI systems lack internalised normative awareness, prompts act as external instructions that temporarily impose the values of a target-culture translation context, emphasising metaphor preservation, stylistic fidelity, and the retention of culturally embedded terms such as "chi" or "ikenga". This creates a form of simulated norm-governed behaviour, where the system approximates choices a human literary translator might make. In this sense, prompt engineering operates as a meta-normative layer mediating between the model's statistical defaults and externally constructed translation expectations, extending Toury's idea of norm constraint to an artificially engineered environment.

6.2. Prompt engineering as a form of human intervention in AI-assisted literary translation

Prompt engineering moves machine translation along Toury's adequacy–acceptability continuum by acting as a type of external norm conditioning. The socio-cultural engagement essential to human translation is not replicated, even though it gets AI outputs closer to target literary norms. Instead of internalized cultural awareness, translation conduct is guided by external instruction, resulting in a type of programmed norm conformity. However, by demonstrating that translational norms can be purposefully created in artificial systems in addition to being observed, this approach broadens DTS. Examining prompt control through DTS reveals a number of limitations.

- Instability of Enforcement: Complex or metaphorical passages continue to apply norms inconsistently.
- Competing requirements: Stylistic inconsistency results from the model's internal adequacy requirements frequently clashing with prompt-induced acceptability norms.

- Surface-Level Transfer: Linguistically, cultural concepts are maintained, but they are not necessarily contextualized semantically.
- Lack of Social Embeddedness: AI systems are not positioned within cultural systems of production or reception, in contrast to human translators, which leads to simulated norm adoption rather than actual norm adoption.
- Norm Complexity Ceiling: Even thorough prodding is insufficient to maintain complete literary or cultural coherence in highly symbolic or ideological writings.

7. Conclusion

Using specific extracts from Arrow of God by Chinua Achebe, this study investigated how prompt engineering affected the literary quality of AI-generated translations. A comparative study of unguided and guided prompt outputs shows that prompting has a considerable impact on the stylistic and cultural behavior of translations systems, especially in texts rich in metaphor, rhythm, and indigenous expression.

By prioritizing literal and structural integrity, default prompt translations frequently flattened cultural resonance and imagery. In contrast, guided prompt versions retained more stylistic features as well as figurative texture and tonal rhythm. These findings suggest that AI systems can be somewhat aligned with literary translation standards through prompts.

Prompt engineering serves as external norm conditioning in Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) approach. By showing that translational norms can be purposefully created through design rather than internalized through social practice, prompts expand DTS by acting as instructions that move machine output along the continuum from adequacy (source oriented) to acceptability (target orientated).

By demonstrating that AI translation performance is not fixed but can be deliberately molded, the study advances scholarship at the nexus of translation studies and artificial intelligence. Thus, prompt engineering is a type of translational mediation that influences stylistic and interpretative results, demonstrating how computational systems may mimic some characteristics of human translator decision-making.

Nonetheless, prompt engineering does not address the fundamental limits of literary machine translation. AI systems still struggle with cultural interpretation, symbolic reconstruction, and philosophical nuance. While prompts improve style accuracy, they cannot replicate the interpretative agency or cultural intuition of human translators.

Future research should compare several AI models and literary corpora to test cross-system consistency, investigate reader perception of AI outputs, and investigate adaptive prompting capable of contextually sensitive responses to genre and discourse variance.

References

[1] Wang Wei, Zhou Weihong. Optimizing Prompt Engineering in Translation Practice: A Comparative Study of ChatGPT-4.0 and ChatGPT-4.o. Canadian Social Science, 2024. 20 (5), p. 12-29

[2] Cheryl Amaka Udogu and Oluchukwuu Asadu . A critical analysis of Igbo-English translations in social media posts: A study of Twitter and Facebook. World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2023, 19(01), p. 265–272

[3] Sui He. Prompting ChatGPT for Translation: A Comparative Analysis of Translation Brief and Persona Prompts, 2024. https://aclanthology.org/2024.eamt-1.27.pdf

[4] Anna Maria Cipriani and Federico Milana. Exploring Early English translations by Aphra Behn and her Contemporaries of Fontenelle's (1686) Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes. 2026

[5] S. Ganesh, V. Dhotre, P. Patil and D. Pawade, "A Comprehensive Survey of Machine Translation Approaches," 2023 6th International Conference on Advances in Science and Technology (ICAST), Mumbai, India, 2023, pp. 160-165

[6] Srivastava, Siddhant et al. Machine Translation: From Statistical to modern Deep-learning practices. ArXiv abs/1812.04238 (2018).

[7] Junhui Hu. Neural Machine Translation (NMT): Deep learning approaches through Neural Network Models, 2024. Applied and Computational Engineering, 82, pp 93-99

[8] Shelia Castilho, Jos Moorkens, Federico Gaspari, Iacer Calixto, John Tinslley and Andy Waya. Is Neural Machine Translation the New State of the Arts? The Prague bulletin of mathematical linguistics. 2017 pp 109-120.

[9] Zhaohan Zeng and Zhibin Liang. Large Language Models are Good Translators. Journal of emerging investigators. 2024

[10] Saler Belhassen, Ahmed Haami, Soleman Alzobidy and Achwak Hamda. Navigating the Complexities of AI-Driven Literary Translation: Challenges and Perspectives across Diverse User Groups. International journal of innovative research and scientific studies, 8(3) 2025, pp 3571-3580

[11] Irina Karabeyaya and Anna Kalizhanova. Evaluating Translation of Literature through Rhetorical Analysis. Journal of translation studies. 5(1) 2024 pp 1-9

[12] Gys-Walt Egdom, Christoph Declercq, Onno Kosters. 'Can make mistake'. Prompting ChatGPT to Enhance Literary MT Output. CTT, 2024

[13] Long, Hoyt. "Learning to Live with Machine Translation." New Literary History 54 (2022): 721 - 753.

[14] Nilesh D. Kulkarni. Crafting Effective Prompts: Enhancing Ai Performance through Structured Input Design. Journal of recent trends in computer science and engineering (JRTCSE). 12(5) 2024, pp 1-10.

[15] Jay Dinesh Rathodl et al. Systematic Study of Prompt Engineering. International journal of research in applied science &engineering technology (IJRASET). 12(6), 202,. pp 597-614.

[16] Lujie Huang, Ming Liu. The Application of Prompt Engineering in Ai-Assisted Writing: A Cross Domain Biliometric Literature Review (2020 – July 2025). Proceeding of the 2nd international conference in intelligent computing and data analysis. 2025, pp 76-80 https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3772726.3772738

[17] Toury, Gideon. The nature and role of norms in translation. (1995).

[18] Toury, Gideon. Descriptive Translation Studies – and beyond: Revised edition. (2012).

[19] Aras Bozkurt. Tell Me Your Prompts and I Will Make Them True: The Alchemy of Prompt Engineering and Generative AI. Open Praxis, 2024, pp 111-118 chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://storage.googleapis.com/jnl-up-j-op-files/journals/1/articles/661/660d5a9fa8517.pdf

[20] White, Jules, Quchen Fu, Sam Hays, Michael Sandborn, Carlos Olea, Henry Gilbert, Ashraf Elnashar, Jesse Spencer-Smith and Douglas C. Schmidt. "A Prompt Pattern Catalog to Enhance Prompt Engineering with ChatGPT." ArXiv abs/2302.11382 (2023): n. pag.

[21] Lund, Brady D.. "The prompt engineering librarian." Library Hi Tech News (2023): n. pag.

[22] Haugsbaken, Halvdan and Marianne Hagelia. "A New AI Literacy For The Algorithmic Age: Prompt Engineering Or Eductional Promptization?" 2024 4th International Conference on Applied Artificial Intelligence (ICAPAI) (2024): 1-8.

[23] Simeoni, Daniel. "The Pivotal Status of the Translator's Habitus." Target-international Journal of Translation Studies 10 (1998): 1-39.

[24] Achebe. Chinau. "Arrow of God" Penguin Classics, 2010.