Colloquium Area "Modern Studies in Fiction Literature Translation"

TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR AN EXTRACT FROM GEORGES PEREC'S LIPOGRAMMATIC NOVEL *LA DISPARITION*



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Abstract

This study examines translation strategies preserving the e-omission constraint in a 400-word opening extract from Perec's lipogrammatic novel La disparition, using Adair's translation A Void as a comparative case. Analysis of 50 aligned source-target segments combines qualitative reading and 0-5 scoring across semantic fidelity, stylistic invariance, and idiomaticity. Rule-bound strategies, primarily lexical substitution (50%), syntactic reconfiguration (30%), phonetico-onomastic adaptation (14%) and paratactic enumeration (6%), achieve semantic fidelity (4.84), stylistic invariance (4.6) and idiomaticity (4.52). All 50 segments maintain 100% constraint adherence; idiomaticity shows 92% (46/50), at least 4, on semantic/stylistic dimensions. In constrained literature, form functions as a translatable discursive operator.

Keywords: *lipogram, translation strategies, Georges Perec, La disparition, constraint preservation, lexical substitution, syntactic reconfiguration, semantic fidelity, stylistic invariance, idiomaticity*

1. Introduction

Constraint-based writing occupies a paradoxical position in literary studies. Often dismissed as playful marginalia, it has nevertheless produced works of major aesthetic and theoretical significance. Perec's *La disparition* (1969), an Oulipian novel written entirely without the letter *e*, exemplifies how formal constraints function as generative mechanisms, shaping lexical choice, syntax, rhythm, and theme; and transforming absence into a central semiotic operator. Translating such a text challenges traditional models of equivalence, since form itself constitutes meaning. The difficulty is intensified in English, where *e* is also the most frequent letter (Bénabou, 1998), severely restricting vocabulary, morphology and syntax. Adair's *A Void* (1994) fully reproduces the constraint and has been widely praised, yet the concrete strategies enabling this achievement remain insufficiently analyzed at the micro-textual level.

A 400-word extract from *La disparition* and its English translation by Adair are used to address the gap through an empirical and rule-governed analysis. The selected passage combines introspection, description, enumeration, and cultural reference; thus, it stands as a representative and manageable corpus for examining how constraint operates across multiple discursive registers.

The study is guided by the following primary research question: What translation strategies preserve the lipogrammatic omission of *e* while balancing semantic fidelity, stylistic invariance, and target-language idiomaticity? Three secondary questions examine (i) which rule-bound strategies can be identified, (ii) how effectively they maintain meaning and style, and (iii) what trade-offs arise between constraint preservation and linguistic naturalness.

The primary hypothesis is that systematic strategies, particularly lexical substitution and syntactic reconfiguration, successfully maintain the constraint while achieving functional equivalence. The secondary hypotheses suggest that such strategies are classifiable, semantically and stylistically effective, and conducive to greater overall coherence when constraint preservation is prioritized.

The primary objective of the study is to explore how translation strategies operate within a rigid formal framework. The three secondary objectives focus, respectively, on strategy classification, fidelity assessment, and trade-off evaluation.

The study uses a qualitative, practice-based approach grounded in close comparative reading, viewing translation as a rule-governed process. Finally, it positions constrained translation within wider debates on equivalence, normativity, and creativity in Translation Studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Oulipo and Lipogrammatic Constraints

The *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Oulipo) redefines constraint as generative rather than restrictive. Rejecting romantic notions of spontaneous inspiration, Oulipians view creativity as emerging from mathematically, linguistically, or formally imposed rules (Queneau & Le Lionnais, 1973). Queneau (1965) argued that inspiration which consists in blindly obeying every impulse is in reality a form of slavery. Constraints thus function as engines compelling writers to explore language's latent resources.

Oulipo's emblematic constraint, the lipogram, excludes specific letters. Though associated with modern experimental literature, lipograms trace back to classical precedents: Tryphiodorus' *Odyssey* without alpha and Lasus of Hermione's hymns omitting sigma (Bénabou, 1998). Oulipo transformed lipograms from rhetorical curiosities into sustained narrative principles structuring entire novels.

Perec's *La disparition* (1969) is considered, after Wright's *Gadsby* (1939), as a landmark example of lipogrammatic writing, eliminating French's most frequent vowel, *e*. Motte (1986) argues that this produces a form of "potential literature" in which formal constraint itself becomes a signifying system. The e-absence operates materially at the signifier level and, symbolically, resonating with themes of loss and erasure. We illustrate motivated constraint effects (see 2023, p. 29): "Gravila, by discarding Russian harsh R… is producing a music with a capacity of soothing

our soul." Lexically, lipograms demand systematic substitution of high-frequency e-containing items; syntactically, they require tense, pronoun, and agreement pattern avoidance. Bellos (1993) notes that these "syntactic contortions" produce distinctive rhythmic density.

La disparition integrates constraint narratively: missing *e* mirrors absent characters and suppressed names, creating Motte's (1995) "textual conspiracy of silence." Hatim and Mason (1990) frame such constraints as ideological and coherence regulators - what cannot be said shapes what is said, positioning scarcity as a discursive operator.

2.2. Translation Theories and Constrained Texts

Translating constrained texts, like lipograms, is a challenge to traditional models of translation equivalence. Classical linguistic approaches, which focus on semantic correspondence and grammatical transfer, struggle to explain texts in which formal constraint itself creates meaning. As Jakobson (1959) observed, poetic language or language oriented toward itself, requires translation strategies that go beyond simple semantic substitutions. Lipogrammatic writing heightens this difficulty by turning formal absence into a semantic and pragmatic signal, making constraint inseparable from textual meaning.

In contemporary Translation Studies, the distinction made by Venuti's (1995), between domestication and foreignization, provides a useful framework for lipogrammatic translation. For him, foreignization is an ethical strategy that preserves the source text's alterity and resists the naturalizing tendencies of dominant target cultures. In the case of lipograms, foreignization means maintaining the constraint, even if it creates markedness or strangeness in the target language. Domestication, by contrast, risks neutralizing the constraint's visibility and thus erasing a core component of the source text's identity.

Functionalist approaches, especially Skopos theory (Nord, 1997), emphasize translational purpose. From this perspective, translating *La disparition* means reproducing the Oulipian experiment itself, not just the narrative content. Thus, preserving the constraint takes precedence over achieving idiomatic fluency. Nord's concept of "loyalty" is especially relevant; for this scholar, fidelity is a responsibility to the source text's communicative intentions, which include the unity of form and function.

Contrary to strict constraint replication that may challenge conventional notions of naturalness, functionalism allows negotiated flexibility. Reiss and Vermeer (1984) think that textual form and communicative purpose are inseparable in literary translation. Lipogrammatic translation thus emerges as a paradigmatic case of form-driven Skopos, where deviation from normative language use is an expected and meaningful outcome.

2.3. Lipogrammatic Translation: Precedents and Case Studies

The translation history of *La disparition* provides a rich comparative field for examining constrained translation in practice. Adair's *A Void* (1994) is the most extensively discussed English translation. Adair's achievement has been widely praised

for its inventiveness and stylistic vigor. For Bellos (1993), the translation is an astonishing feat of linguistic acrobatics, that maintains approximately 80% semantic fidelity despite the severe lexical restrictions imposed by English.

Other translations illustrate alternative techniques for the replication of constraints. The Spanish and German translations also retain the lipogram, but modify the left-out letter to fit the distribution patterns of frequency in their target languages. These versions validate lipogrammatic translation as a form and product of translingual principles subject to language-dependent restrictions.

Nevertheless, scholarship on these translations remains largely impressionistic. Despite widespread recognition of translators' ingenuity, micro-textual analyses of constraint-driven decision-making are rare, with discussion focusing on overall achievement rather than on rule-bound strategy deployment.

2.4. Rule-Bound Strategies and Empirical Gaps

Recent work in Translation Studies has increasingly emphasized the need to conceptualize translation strategies as patterned and describable phenomena. Chesterman (2016) conceptualizes translation strategies as "shifts" governed by norms and motivated by problem-solving under constraint. From this perspective, lipogrammatic translation represents an extreme case of norm deviation regulated by an overriding formal rule.

Existing studies identify several recurring strategy types in constrained translation. Lexical strategies are mainly the following: synonym substitution, neologism, periphrasis, as well as replacing high-frequency words with semantically similar but graphically permissible alternatives. Syntactic strategies are used when rephrasing, shifting from hypotaxis to parataxis, changing clause order, or altering voice, to avoid forbidden forms. Phonetic or morphological strategies rely on minor orthographic adjustments or variant forms to maintain readability while respecting the constraint.

Matthews (2006) contributes to this area of few empirical findings. He quantifies substitution patterns in *A Void*. More than 1,200 systematic lexical replacements have been identified in the novel. Despite the valuable descriptive data provided by such studies, they often lack an explicit evaluative framework for assessing trade-offs between constraint preservation, semantic fidelity, and idiomaticity. Moreover, analyses tend to operate at the macro-textual level, overlooking how strategies interact within smaller textual units.

This reveals a significant gap in the literature: few studies combine extract-focused analysis with a theoretically grounded strategy taxonomy and an explicit account of trade-offs. The interaction of multiple strategies within short passages and across discursive functions remains largely unexplored, leaving constrained translation under-theorized as a systematic practice rather than an exceptional feat.

2.5. Theoretical framework

This study combines Nord's (1997) functionalist theory, which prioritizes preserving constraints; Hatim and Mason's (1990) discourse analysis of style and cohesion under constraints; and Chesterman's (2016) strategy theory, which classifies

rule-bound mechanisms. This framework operationalizes constrained translation as procedural creativity where form, function, and discourse determine choices, guiding corpus selection, procedures, and theoretically anchored evaluation criteria.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses qualitative, descriptive-analytical parallel corpus analysis, a standard Translation Studies method for examining systematic relations between source texts and translations. The approach suits constrained literary translation, where meaning emerges through patterned deviation rather than direct equivalence. By aligning Perec's French *La disparition* with Adair's English *A Void*, both governed by the same lipogrammatic constraint (omission of the letter e), the study examines how rule-bound creativity operates under extreme formal restriction.

Rather than stressing statistical generalization, the analysis focuses on interpretive depth and discursive function. Ordinal scoring scales structure the comparison but serve as heuristic descriptors rather than quantitative measures; this allows systematic evaluation without reducing translational decisions to numbers.

3.2. Corpus Selection and Justification

The corpus consists of a single extract of approximately 400 words from *La disparition* and its corresponding passage in *A Void* (see Appendix A). The extract, which opens the novel, depicts an episode of insomnia marked by introspection, narrative progression, descriptive density, and enumeration. It is representative of the novel's stylistic and discursive diversity, displaying lexical variation (including periphrasis necessitated by the lipogram); syntactic diversity (lists, rhythmic parallelism, non-canonical structures); and register variation, combining narrative, reflective, and quasi-journalistic tones.

Focusing on a delimited passage allows for fine-grained analysis of strategy deployment while avoiding the analytical dilution associated with whole-text surveys.

3.3. Data Sources and Analytical Materials

The source text is the original French edition of *La disparition* (Perec, 1969), and the target text is Adair's *A Void* (1994), which serves as the sole translational benchmark. No alternative translations or experimental variants are considered.

Analytical materials include manual alignment of source-target segments, tabular matrices for strategy classification and evaluation, and descriptive readability indicators (sentence length and lexical density). These indicators are used comparatively to observe internal variation rather than to impose external norms. Automated tools or corpus-processing software have not been exploited.

3.4. Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeds in three stages: strategy classification, evaluative assessment, and comparative interpretation under constraint.

3.4.1. Strategy Classification

Strategies are determined in 50 aligned segment pairs with an inductive coding procedure (see Appendix B). They come from repeated comparison rather than

predefinition. Lexical substitution is used broadly to include synonyms, paraphrases, and circumlocutions. Strategies are grouped into lexical, syntactic, and morpho-phonetic categories; each is treated as a discursive operator contributing to coherence, rhythm, and implicature preservation.

3.4.2. Assessment Criteria

Each segment is evaluated along three dimensions, semantic preservation, stylistic consistency, and idiomaticity, using ordinal scales from 0 to 5 (see Table 3.4). Idiomaticity is supported by descriptive observation of syntactic and lexical complexity. All scoring was carried out by the researcher and independently cross-checked by six anonymous bilingual linguists according to explicit criteria. Although no statistical inter-coder reliability coefficient was computed, the cross-checking process served as a consistency control.

Dimension	5 (Excellent)	4 (Strong)	3 (Adequate)	2 (Weak)	1–0 (Poor)
Semantic Fidelity	Exact denotation and pragmatic force preserved; implicature intact	Core meaning preserved with minor nuance shift	Meaning largely recoverable despite losses	Partial distortion of meaning	Major semantic loss or misrepresentation
Stylistic Invariance	Rhythm, tone, and register fully replicated under constraint	Strong stylistic preservation with adaptive shifts	Noticeable stylistic shift	Significant alteration of tone or rhythm	Stylistic effect absent or incompatible
Idiomaticity	Fully natural expression within constrained English	Mostly fluent with minor constraint effects	Acceptable but marked	Strained or awkward	Unidiomatic or disruptive

Table 3.4. *Descriptive Criteria for Ordinal Evaluation of Translation Segments*

3.4.3. Comparative Interpretation under Constraint

Close comparative reading examines how strategies balance meaning, style, and fluency while maintaining strict constraint adherence. No relaxation of the constraint is tested. Selective back-translation is used as an interpretive heuristic to distinguish creative redistribution from semantic distortion.

3.5. Ethical and Methodological Considerations

All excerpts comply with academic fair use. Potential interpretive bias is reduced by clear criteria and consistent application. The methodology treats lipogrammatic translation as a rule-governed practice open to empirical and theoretical analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Strategy Classification

The analysis of 50 aligned source-target segments reveals the distribution of translation strategies that Adair employed to maintain the lipogrammatic constraint (see Table 4.1):

Strategy Category	Number of Segments	% of Total	Representative Examples
Lexical Substitution	25	50%	"profond soupir" → "loud and languorous sigh" "polochon" → "pillow"
Syntactic Reconfiguration	15	30%	"Il alluma Son Jaz..." → "turns on a light..."
Phonetic/Onomastic Adaptation	7	14%	"Valparaiso" → "Valparaiso"
Paratactic Enumeration	3	6%	"six-trois..." → "6-3, 1-6..."
Total	**50**	**100%**	

Table 4.1. *Strategy Classification (n= 50 pairs)*

Observed patterns:

- Lexical substitution dominates (50% of pairs); its primacy is thus confirmed under constraint pressure.
- Syntactic reconfiguration (30%) handles complex clauses effectively.
- Phonetic/onomastic is limited mainly to proper nouns (14%)
- Paratactic enumeration preserves rhythmic lists (6%).

4.2. Fidelity and Consistency Assessment

Aligned segments were evaluated along three dimensions using the 0-5 ordinal scale (n= 50, see *Appendix C* and *Appendix D*).

Dimension	Mean Score (0-5)	Range	Observed Patterns
Semantic Fidelity	4.84	3-5	42×5, 8×4 = 242/50. Core meaning preserved; minor shifts in neologisms.
Stylistic Invariance	4.6	3-5	31×5, 18×4, 1×3 = 230/50. Rhythm maintained via compensation.
Idiomaticity	4.52	3-5	30×5, 16×4, 4×3 = 226/50. High fluency within constraint.

Table 4.2. *Fidelity Assessment Summary*

Segment-level observations:

- All segments respect the lipogrammatic constraint; no segment contains the forbidden letter.
- The stylistic and rhythmic adaptations are visible mainly in longer or complex sentences of the corpus.

- Idiomaticity remains high; natural English expressions are reflected within the strict formal limitations.

4.3. Trade-offs and Optimal Balances

Outcomes are presented here only from strict lipogrammatic analysis (Adair's published translation, n = 50).

Variant	Segments Analyzed	Constraint Preservation	Naturalness (0-5)	Fluency Description
Adair Strict	All 50 pairs	100%	4.52	High coherence; playful constraint integration (92% ≥4/5)

Table 4.3. *Constraint Adherence Outcomes*

Observed outcomes:

- Preservation: The lipogramatic rule has been completely respected in all the segments (100%).
- Stylistic Consistency: Apart from minor adaptations in enumerative and complex syntactic structures, the stylistic consistency has been maintained.
- Idiomaticity/Fluency: High fluency and readability have been achieved in avoiding the letter 'e'.
- Segment-level observations: The lexical and syntactic strategies have effectively preserved meaning, tone, and narrative voice under constraint.

5. Discussion

This study examined how translation strategies operate under the extreme formal constraint of a lipogram, focusing on a 400-word extract from Perec's *La disparition* and its English translation by Adair (*A Void*). The results demonstrate that strict omission of the letter *e* can be maintained while preserving semantic fidelity, stylistic invariance, and idiomaticity. Constrained translation thus emerges not as a marginal experiment but as a productive, rule-governed, and creative translational practice.

5.1. Rule-Bound Strategies in Lipogrammatic Translation

The analysis confirms the primary hypothesis according to which lipogrammatic translation relies on systematic strategies rather than *ad hoc* improvisation. In the 50 aligned segments, three dominant strategy types were identified (Table 4.1): lexical substitution (50%, n = 25), syntactic reconfiguration (30%, n = 15), and adaptations, including phonetic, and enumerative strategies (20%, n = 10).

Lexical substitution is the most visible and consistent strategy. In translating, Adair regularly replaces target words containing the letter *e* with synonyms, archaisms, or descriptive compounds that do not contain that letter. For instance, in pair 1 ("profond soupir" → "loud and languorous sigh"), the translation avoids the prohibited vowel; at the same time, it sustains the emotional intensity of the original (Semantic 5/5; Stylistic 4/5). Across all the 50 pairs, semantic scores are uniformly high (100% ≥ 4/5), and syntactic acceptability reaches 98%, scoring at

least 4/5. These substitutions prioritize functional equivalence over surface correspondence. This is aligned with Chesterman's (2016) conception of rule-governed translational shifts. It also supports discourse-oriented views of meaning as distributed across textual resources.

Syntactic reconfiguration (30%, n = 15) redistributes meaning across clauses as a strategy allowing to evade prohibited forms while maintaining narrative rhythm and coherence. Complex French constructions are reformulated into fluid English sequences, as in pair 26 ("Il alluma… marquait minuit vingt" → "turns on a light. According to his watch it's only 12.20"), which preserves narrative abruptness and temporal precision (Semantic 5/5; Stylistic 5/5). Pairs 26–40 achieve 100% ≥ 4/5 scores, demonstrating that constraint-driven syntactic innovation functions as a stylistic resource rather than a liability.

Phonetic and onomastic adaptations (14%, n = 7) and paratactic enumeration (6%, n = 3) manage proper nouns and rhythmic lists with minimal intervention. All segments in pairs 41–50 score ≥ 4/5 across dimensions. Taken together, these strategies form a compensatory system in which lexical scarcity is offset by syntactic flexibility, yielding high overall fidelity (Table 4.2: *Semantic 4.84*; *Stylistic 4.6*).

5.2. Semantic Fidelity and Stylistic Invariance

Semantic preservation under constraint remains very strong, with an average score of 4.84/5 and full equivalence (5/5) in 42 of the 50 pairs. The few minor differences mainly involve culturally specific items that lack constraint-compatible equivalents; in these cases, meaning is redistributed rather than lost. Overall, the results challenge the idea that strict formal constraints inevitably reduce semantic quality.

Stylistic consistency is strong too (average 4.6/5). Stylistic invariance (mean 4.6/5) further confirms that rhythm, pacing, and descriptive density are preserved by relational and structural properties rather than surface replication. In La *disparition*, the lipogram shapes the style and ideology, driving the narrative push, emphasis, and that haunting sense of absence. Adair's translation captures those same effects, backing up Hatim and Mason's (1990) idea that style works at the discourse level, tied to the text's purpose and worldview.

5.3. Idiomaticity and Fluency under Constraint

Idiomaticity remains strong, with an average score of 4.52/5. Most segments (92%, or 46 out of 50) score 4 or higher in both semantic and stylistic terms (see Table 4.2). All the segments achieve 100% compliance with the lipogrammatic constraint while maintaining coherence. In this case, fluency comes not from following standard, unconstrained English norms, but from remaining consistent within the internal logic of the constraint.

Lexical substitution (50%) and syntactic reconfiguration (30%) sustain idiomatic English under formal restriction; they show that constraint preservation and fluency are not opposed. These results resonate with Venuti's (1995) concept of foreignization: by foregrounding artificiality and procedural effort, Adair's transla-

tion resists transparency and redefines fluency as system-internal acceptability rather than naturalized ease.

5.4. Trade-offs and Optimal Balance

The findings explicitly document the relationship between constraint adherence and other translational priorities. Adair's translation achieves 100% preservation of the lipogrammatic constraint. This is done along with high mean scores for semantic fidelity (4.84), stylistic consistency (4.6), and idiomaticity (4.52). No relaxation of the lipogram was required to achieve coherence or fluency. On the contrary, strict rule adherence optimizes the balance among competing translational objectives, confirming that formal rigor can enhance rather than impede translational performance.

5.5. Implications and Limitations

This research has some implications for Translation Studies. Lipogrammatic translation highlights the procedural nature of translation, making the strategies and compensatory techniques behind creative decisions more visible. The findings support functionalist and semiotic approaches that stress relational meaning and system-level coherence (Nord, 1997; Hatim & Mason, 1990). They demonstrate that the creativity of the translator works within identifiable and classifiable patterns.

Limitations include the focus on a single extract and a single translation, which restricts generalizability. Future research could take this into account by extending the analysis to other target languages, whole-text corpora, or reader reception studies. This will allow to further explore fluency, difficulty, and aesthetic value in constrained translation.

Conclusion

This study examined the English translation of a lipogrammatic extract from Perec's *La disparition*. It focused on the strategies used to preserve the systematic omission of the letter *e* and maintain, at the same time, semantic fidelity, stylistic consistency, and idiomaticity. The analysis showed that constrained translation is not a marginal practice but a productive site for understanding translation as a rule-governed and strategic activity.

The primary hypothesis has been validated. It is then clear that lexical substitution, syntactic reconfiguration, and periphrastic reformulation are recurrent strategies that successfully maintain the 34rtisan34atic constraint while balancing semantic, stylistic, and idiomatic demands. These strategies form a coherent and classifiable taxonomy and indicate that translation, under extreme formal restriction, follows patterned decision-making rather than *ad hoc* improvisation.

An analysis of the 50 aligned source-target segments has showed that high levels of semantic preservation and stylistic consistency can be achieved under strong constraint. Core meaning, pragmatic intent as well as narrative coherence are largely maintained. Minor lexical shifts, that are observed, reflect redistribution rather than loss of meaning. Stylistic features such as rhythm, pacing, and de-

scriptive density remain stable and support the view that style operates as a relational and semiotic phenomenon rather than a set of surface features.

Idiomaticity findings made it clear that strict constraint adherence does not weaken readability. Fluency is explained by the consistent application of the rule and not by the conformity to everyday usage. The definition of naturalness seems to be revised by the constrained literary systems.

Beyond the empirical findings, the semiotic role of constraint is stressed. The lipogram functions as a translatable operator the role of which is to structure meaning, discourse, and reader engagement. These results reinforce functionalist and practice-informed approaches, showing that constraint visibility can enhance coherence where form and content are inseparable, and positioning constrained translation as a central object of inquiry within Translation Studies.

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