Jerzy Tomaszczyk

THE CULTURE-BOUND ELEMENT IN BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

Introduction

The claim is made that in their efforts to "coordinate with the lexical units of one language those lexical units of another language which are equivalent in their lexical meaning" (cf. Zgusha 1971: 294). Polish-English bilingual lexicographers do not pay sufficient attention to the socio-cultural layer of word meaning. As a result, the English equivalents of the culture-bound items in Polish-English dictionaries are of little use to Polish-English speakers, writers and translators. It is suggested that - in addition to the monolingual dictionaries of both languages - a useful source of language data for L1-L2 dictionaries would be texts produced by competent bilinguals. In order to be entered in dictionaries, translation equivalents would first have to pass acceptability and grammaticality tests with native speakers of English.

By strict definition, the set of culture-bound lexical units should include only those items which represent objects, ideas, and other phenomena that are truly unique to a given speech community. While there may be many such items in various areas of the lexicon (e.g. flora and fauna, foods, utensils, customs, etc.), it is relatively easy to argue not just that the boundary between culture-bound and universal is a very fuzzy one, but that in fact there is no such thing as non-culture-specific or universal vocabulary (cf. Rea 1973), and that culture-specificity is merely a matter of degree. This is due to the well-known phenomenon of 'anisomorphism' of languages which, together with the structural incongruences between languages, forces the people involved in interlingual lexical comparison to conclude that - aside from the technical terminologies of the various fields of science and technology - lexical equivalence is best regarded as always partial and never complete or perfect (cf. Zgusta 1971). Needless to say, this presents numerous problems not only for foreign and second language learners, speakers, interpreters and translators, but also for bilingual lexicographers, who are supposed to know better and actually help the different categories of (incipient) bilinguals.

My main concern in this paper will not be the truly unique items, but the ones which, although not really unique, are felt to be different enough to potentially create communicative problems and thus to deserve rather special treatment. In point of fact, the truly unique items may be comparatively easy to handle both in cross-cultural communication and in bilingual lexicography. This is because, by virtue of being unique, they stand out so clearly and are thus easy to notice both by the encoders and decoders; whatever problems might arise can be dealt with by communicative tactics or lexicographic techniques (for a lucid discussion of the latter cf. Zgusta 1971 and Nguyen 1980 and 1981). It is the often very subtle differences between the partial equivalents that are likely to cause real problems and are responsible, among others, for the fact that the signing of international documents not infrequently takes place weeks or months after the agreements on essentials have been reached.

As with other matters pertaining to dictionaries designed for foreign-language learners and speakers, the problem has two aspects relating, respectively, to the receptive and productive needs of dictionary users. Thus, in an L1-L2 ('passive', 'receptive') dictionary one expects, for the benefit of the native speakers of L2, definitions in L2 of L1 items, as well as the nearest, if possible, L2 equivalents. For the benefit of the native speakers of L1, on the other hand, one expects an 'active' or 'productive' dictionary to provide insertable L2 equivalents, i.e. lexical units which can be inserted in the appropriate L2 contexts and used in fluent translation. Since the equivalents are bound to be partial, the degree of equivalence and difference should be indicated. For practical reasons the information relating to the receptive and productive aspects can be combined in one entry, so instead of four dictionaries for each pair of languages one can have the usual two.

It should be clear from the above discussion that my particular concern is the satisfaction of the productive needs. The reason is that while the receptive needs can be reasonably adequately served by monolingual L2 dictionaries, such as ALD or LDOCE, some of the productive needs do seem to require a bilingual dictionary (cf. Tomaszczyk 1983a).

The small piece of research presented here was motivated by the observation that texts about Poland written in English by Polish-English bilinguals contain some unEnglish lexical features, generally not to be found in Polish-English dictionaries. A more general consideration is related to the finding that bilingual L1-L2 dictionaries generate more dissatisfaction among FL learners and speakers than any other dictionary type (cf. Tomaszczyk 1979). If one wants to be able to deal with a problem effectively, one has first to identify it and discover its nature.

Evidence

By way of getting some data to illustrate a problem I have long known to exist, I read a few newspaper articles and excerpted a number of lexical items (nouns) that impressionistically might be regarded as more or less specific to Polish life and institutions and looked them up in two standard desk-size Polish-English dictionaries, the KOŚCIUSZKO FOUNDATION DICTIONARY and the GREAT POLISH-ENGLISH DICTIONARY. Since both dictionaries were published quite a while ago, I made sure that the items selected were in existence at the time they were being compiled. Of the 36 nouns collected, 8 are not entered in either dictionary, and another two are entered only in one. While this, in itself, is a trivial point, it does nevertheless show that, with the culture-bound element being so noticeably underrepresented, neither dictionary can be said realistically to reflect the state of the language, not only as it is now but also as it was twenty or so years ago. And it may not be irrelevant to add that, according to an estimate made a few years ago, about a quarter of the Polish lexicon has come into being since World War II and, as time goes on, this proportion keeps rising (cf. Szymczak 1982).

The next step was to compare the dictionary equivalents of the items selected with the most frequent renderings of those items found in English texts produced by Polish-English bilinguals. The texts were all about things Polish and were meant for English-speaking readers outside Poland. Large numbers of such texts are published every year in English and other major international languages and they include scholarly and popular books on a variety of topics related to Polish life and institutions, journals, monthlies, weeklies, as well as a host of occasional publications, such as advertising pamphlets, travel brochures and the like. The translation equivalents were taken from the files of the project briefly described in Tomaszczyk (1980). A selection of the Polish items excerpted together with their dictionary and translation equivalents is reproduced below. KF and GP stand for the two dictionaries, and T denotes translation equivalents.

<u>docent</u> KF mp Privatdocent
GP sm am. assistant professor; reader
T docent

<u>habilitacja</u> KF f examination for the right to teach at a university as docent (and to be ultimately appointed a professor)
GP sf oral examination on a thesis presented to qualify (oneself) as assistant professor
T habilitation

<u>harcerz</u> KF mp boy-scout
GP sm boy-scout
T pathfinder

<u>liceum</u> KF n (2) two highest grades of the Polish gymnasium (3) (in France) lycée (secondary school)
GP sn Polish secondary school
T general-education secondary school; (rarely) lyceum, lycée

<u>Marszałek Sejmu</u> KF mp speaker
GP sm president of the Polish Seym; speaker
T Marshal of the Sejm

<u>matura</u> KF f final examination in 1. diploma from a European gymnasium
GP sf (1) (egzamin maturalny) examination for the secondary school certificate; (2) (świadectwo maturalne) secondary school certificate
T matriculation (examination)

<u>okupant</u> KF mp occupant
GP sm invader
T occupier

przedsiębiorstwo KF n concern, business; - państwowe, state-owned business
GP sn (handl.)(an) undertaking; (a) business;
T (state) enterprise

Sejm KF mi diet (t. = zjazd); Seym
GP sm Seym; diet
T Sejm

województwo KF n (1) province, (2) voivodeship; the administration of a voivodeship
GP sn (1) (jednostka administracyjno-terytorialna) province, (2) (urząd) voivodeship; provincial administration
T province, voivodship (sic)

There are some inconsistencies in the dictionary equivalents as well as inaccuracies in the definitions, but we will ignore them as irrelevant to the present discussion. What is relevant is the fact that bilingually competent people fairly consistently ignore the lexicographers' advice. The reason, one feels, is that the compilers took great pains to implement the basic principles and assumptions of bilingual lexicography as far as possible and somehow carried them too far. One such principle defines the basic purpose of a bilingual dictionary, which is "to co-ordinate with the lexical units of one language those lexical units of another language which are equivalent in their lexical meaning". An assumption implicit in this statement is that the entry words should belong to one language, and the equivalents to the other. On the face of it, nothing could be more obvious. Finally, in his attempt at coordinating the lexical units of two languages, the lexicographer is bound by the generally recognized requirement that the equivalents match the entry words as closely as possible in terms of semantic range, syntactic behaviour, collocability, social status, emotional load, etc. Since, for reasons hinted at in the Introduction, equivalents that would meet all these requirements to everyone's (including the lexicographer's) full satisfaction are best regarded as non-existent, the ones that are selected to do the job should be accompanied by information (glosses, labels etc.) specifying the degree to which such requirements are satisfied. Whether the two dictionaries under discussion are adequate in this respect does not, however, seem to have anything to do with the fact that their advice is so often disregarded.

Even a cursory analysis of the textual equivalents vis-à-vis dictionary entries suggests that what speakers/writers/translators object to in the latter is not so much their basic or core meaning as the socio-cultural layer. They seem to find such equivalents too specific to British or American life and institutions. Texts put together using such items would pretend that they were about Britain or the USA. The original writers (of translated texts) would not accept that, nor, it seems, would their addressees. This latter conjecture is prompted by the lexical usage in the texts about Poland written by British and American authors (e.g. Galbraith 1958, Grant 1969) who, when writing about Poland - or any other country for that matter - make a noticeable attempt not to describe things in terms of words specific to their own culture.

The sociolinguistic context of non-native language use

The sociolinguistic context of the situation sketched above is the existence of non-native varieties of international languages. We are thus told, for example, that non-native speakers constitute between 30 to 50 per cent of all speakers of English (Kachru 1982). The majority of them are inhabitants of countries where English has the status of official second or auxiliary language, and where it usually coexists with one or more indigenous languages. On the other hand, English is also spoken and written by comparatively small but still significant numbers of people in virtually all countries of the world. This, of course, corresponds to the familiar second/foreign language distinction and to natural vs. artificial, or élite, bilingualism. The differences between these two types of situation are both qualitative and quantitative, and they are all interrelated. There are thus differences in the numbers of speakers and amount and types of interaction that goes on via English.

Second languages are used primarily for internal communication (inside the country), while foreign languages are used first of all for communication with the outside world. Moreover, in the case of second-language speakers there is usually at least some sharing of the socio-cultural realities, while no such sharing can be assumed a priori in cross-cultural communication involving a foreign language. Finally, while foreign-language speakers are generally thought to recognize and aim at the target-language norm (L2), second-language speakers tend to develop a norm of their own and, not infrequently, such a norm does evolve, even though its speakers are not always willing to admit it. This can be seen in the various Third World countries; historically speaking this has been the case with e.g. American, Australian, Canadian English, Canadian French, etc., and at present it is also witnessed in Gastarbeiter communities where contact dialects with bilingual norms arise. Judging by the speaking and writing habits of the foreign-language people, it seems that also the foreign varieties tend to develop a norm of their own, although, admittedly, on a limited scale (limited to the culture-specific segment of the lexicon). Consequently, Braj Kachru's (1982) distinction between 'institutionalized' and 'performance' varieties of non-native languages, very useful as it is, cannot be accepted without reservations. It is, of course, true that many of the inaccuracies and deviations characterizing the spoken and written performance of most foreign-language learners and speakers can be attributed to interference or insufficient learning. Nevertheless, the extent and consistency of the 'deviance' in much of their lexical behaviour is too great to be dismissed as accidental and unintentional.

Analysis of translation equivalents

When one takes a close look at the translation equivalents listed above (and many others not listed here), it soon turns out that the ostensible deviance follows the familiar paths observed in contact varieties, in indigenized or nativized varieties, and also in the historical development of all recognized standard languages.

Thus, we have

(a) native (L1) items imported into L2 utterances, almost as they are, except that they are usually formally adapted to be pronounceable by the native speakers of L2, e.g. Seym/Sejm, voivodship. This seems to be an attempt at introducing bits of L1 culture-specificity into L2 texts, the initial stage in the process of lexical borrowing.

(b) loans from other languages are employed, apparently in the hope that they will be more familiar to the reader. At the same time, it is made clear that the bit of L1 reality referred to is distinctly different from anything found in the L2 frame of reference. Good examples include Habilitationsschrift, lycée, professor (extra) ordinarius.

(c) legitimate L2 items are used to refer to bits of L1 reality, but they are enlarged, or stretched, to cover the particular sense intended, which the word may not have in the L2, e.g. enterprise, militia, pathfinder. This happens especially frequently with cognates, but there is nothing really surprising about that; every student of bilingualism knows that bilinguals tend to exploit similarities between their two languages to the utmost.

(d) L1 items are semantically decomposed and what are thought to be the criterial components are translated into the L2, e.g. general-education secondary school. This is a clear attempt at having a culturally neutral or nonspecific item rather than one that is specific to another culture.

(e) multi-word units of L1 are translated into L2 word for word, e.g. basic vocational school, medical academy, agricultural circle. This too could be explained in terms of economy of effort.

While some of the above renderings may not carry too much meaning for the native speakers of English if encountered in isolation (does this not apply to most, if not all, lexical items, including the entire lexicons of the standard varieties of prestigious languages?), their interpretation presents little difficulty when placed in contexts in which they customarily appear. Obviously, making sure that such, and indeed any, lexical items convey the meanings intended is the job of the language user, not of the dictionary. Thus, scanty as the evidence presented here may be it does, nevertheless, warrant the conclusion that much of the apparent deviance in EFL writings and speech is formally creative, contextually coherent and (potentially) communicatively effective (cf. Tomaszczyk 1983b).

Implications for bilingual lexicography

The developments sketched above have their parallels virtually all over the world. They are inevitable whenever the native speakers of one language attempt to talk or write about things specific to their own culture in another language. Sooner or later, depending on the amount of such speaking or writing, partially nativized varieties of the other language are bound to evolve, and their existence as independent and valid means of communication must be recognized. What is called for is not so much a liberalization of attitudes as admitting a sociolinguistic reality (cf. Loveday 1982). However, for English to remain a viable means of international communication, such developments should not be allowed to go on unrestrained lest we end up with a wide range of mutually incomprehensible Englishes. The risk of this happening is especially high in the lexical layer of language; as relevant research shows, deviant lexical behaviour poses a greater threat to intelligibility than deviant pronunciation or syntax. In other words, it appears that native speakers can easily supply the correct forms, but cannot so readily supply the correct (intended) meanings. 'Deviant' and 'correct' would be defined here with reference to native English. In this connection, it should be kept in mind that while the use of international languages is not - by definition - confined to interaction involving non-native and native speakers, it is nevertheless true that foreign-language learners and speakers of various backgrounds do attempt to adopt the native L2 norm and usually acquire some familiarity with the L2 system of reference.

Given the fact that there is, e.g. a Polish variety of English, even though it is limited to the culture-specific segment of the lexicon, one might be tempted to contemplate compiling a list of such items for the benefit of non-Polish speakers of English. If one were to be consistent about this idea, one would have to propose a long series of such glossaries to cover all non-native (performance) varieties of English. Such glossaries would complement the ever-expanding series of dictionaries of the institutionalized varieties, but they would only serve the function of providing outsiders with clues to the local lexical usage. By contrast, dictionaries of the indigenized varieties, in addition to performing the above function, are also there to provide standards of usage for their own speakers and, probably most importantly, serve as declarations of linguistic independence. Clearly, no such thing can ever apply to the dictionaries of the numerous performance varieties (if they are ever compiled). The entries in such dictionaries would be the most typical translation equivalents of L1 culture-bound items as they occur in the speech and writing of bilinguals competent in both languages with explanations (definitions) in some kind of standard average English. In addition to that, the entries might also include (on the right-hand side) the closest British and American English counterparts, with glosses indicating the degree of equivalence and/or difference.

Essentially, dictionaries of this type would not be much different from, e.g., the Russian-English CONCISE DICTIONARY OF SOVIET TERMINOLOGY or the English-Russian VELIKOBRITANIJA except that the source language would be a kind of target language, i.e. a performance variety of English. Naturally, they too would be reading dictionaries serving the receptive needs of the native, and other non-native, speakers of English. Notice that, if such a proposal were to be implemented, the hitherto clear-cut distinction between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries would become somewhat fuzzy.

On the other hand, considering the details of even the highly competent bilingual's behaviour in the L2 with respect to L1 culture specificities, it seems even more important to pay more attention to such items in regular L1-L2 dictionaries. Alternatively, one might think of compiling specialized dictionaries that would concentrate solely on such items. A dictionary of this type might, of course, supply non-native speakers/readers of L1 with more realistic information concerning L1 culture-bound units, but its main function would be to provide the native speakers of L1 with some standards of L2 use with regard to L1 culture specificities. With the existing Polish-English dictionaries being of little use in this respect, texts about Poland written by Poles in English provide many examples of renderings that are formally awkward, if not totally unacceptable. In some cases this is due to ignorance. On the other hand, such texts sometimes contain a dozen or more renderings of the same item; e.g. politechnika, the technological version of university, is rendered, among others, as polytechnic, polytechnic institute, technical university, technical college, technical academy, polytechnic school, technological university, higher school of technology, institute of technology, higher institute of technology, higher technological school. Some standardizing activity is clearly in order here, as it is in hundreds of other similar cases.

A detailed proposal would be outside the scope of this paper. Let me only suggest that in compiling such a dictionary one would have to take into account the translation equivalents that are already well-established, and that the necessary detailed comparison, or contrastive analysis, of both the two lexicons and their systems of reference would have to be supplemented with acceptability tests with the native speakers of L2. Tentatively, I would suggest that an entry in such a dictionary should include, on the right-hand side, (1) a definition of the L1 entry word in L2, (2) a recommended translation (insertable) equivalent which, in many cases, would be the established textual equivalent that has passed acceptability and grammaticality tests with native speakers and, in the case of English, (3) the closest British and American English counterparts of the L1 item. Wherever relevant, the information about the extent of similarity and/or difference would also have to relate to the differences between the various L2 equivalents; consider, e.g., the difference in attitude conveyed by words like Communist bloc, Socialist camp, Comecon or Warsaw pact countries. The acceptability and grammaticality tests would be of great importance considering the fact that - from the point of view of conventional English usage - many a recommended equivalent would be engineered. Such a lexicographic treatment of culture-specific items would, it seems, enable the user to make more informed lexical choices than are currently possible.

Implementation of the above proposals depends on whether publishers consider such dictionaries economically viable propositions. But it ought to be clear that in gathering the language data for L1-L2 dictionaries (where L2 is a world language), bilingual lexicographers would do well not to ignore texts produced by competent bilinguals.

References

Galbraith, J.K. (1958) Journey to Poland and Yugoslavia. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P.

Grant, N. (1969) Society, Schools and Progress: Eastern Europe. Oxford: U.P.

Kachru, B. (1982) "Models for non-native Englishes" in The Other Tongue: English across Cultures ed. by B. Kachru. Oxford: Pergamon

Loveday, L. (1982) The Sociolinguistics of Learning and Using a Non-native Language. Oxford: Pergamon

Nguyen, D.-H. (1980) "Bicultural information in a bilingual dictionary" in Theory and Method in Lexicography: Western and Non-Western Perspectives ed. by L. Zgusta. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press

Nguyen, D.-H. (1981) "Teaching culture through bilingual dictionaries" Dictionaries 3: 57-68

Rea, J.A. (1973) "The Romance data of the pilot studies for glottochronology" in Current Trends in Linguistics (Vol. 11) ed. by T.A. Sebeok. The Hague: Mouton

Szymczak, M. (1982) "Język polski w sześćdziesięcioleciu naszej niepodległości (1918-1978)" in Język i językoznawstwo polskie w sześćdziesięcioleciu niepodległości ed. by J. Rieger and M. Szymczak. Wrocław: Ossolineum

Tomaszczyk, J. (1979) "Dictionaries: users and uses" Glottodidactica 12: 103-119

Tomaszczyk, J. (1980) "Lexicography in Poland" DSNA Newsletter 4: 2

Tomaszczyk, J. (1983a) "The case for bilingual dictionaries for foreign language learners" in Lexicography: Principles and Practice ed. by R.R.K. Hartmann. London-New York: Academic Press

Tomaszczyk, J. (1983b) "Lexico-semantic features of official Polish-English" Paper presented at the International Conference on Polish-English Contrastive Projects, Błażejewko, Poland, December 1983

Zgusta, L. (1971) Manual of Lexicography. The Hague: Mouton