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Translating the "untranslatable" words

ABSTRACT: For cultural reasons (differences in the ways of life, tradition, beliefs, etc.) every language has words for notions that are absent from the lexical awareness of speakers of many other languages. In addition there are psycholinguistic reasons (Sapir-Whorf) due to which the multilingual lexicographer is constantly faced with the problem of so-called translation equivalents being rather conveyors of some aspect(s) of the whole sense only. The paper presents examples of both kinds from Estonian and Russian, and some theoretical considerations.

The text in any dictionary can conventionally be divided into the left side and the right side. The left side carries a list of units (lexemes) presented in a certain system (usually alphabetically), if it is not a special dictionary, e.g. of morphemes or phrasemes, while the right side is a kind of characterization of the left side. In bilingual dictionaries the right side contains 1) grammatical material (presented in either the source or the target language depending on the purpose of the dictionary), 2) semantic material – translation equivalents, and 3) illustrative material – examples which demonstrate the bahaviour of the equivalents of the headword in texts. The left side contains the vocabulary of the source language in alphabetical order and in numbers chosen by the author.

In bilingual dictionaries the most important thing is to guarantee the semantic correspondences of both sides, the ideal solution being one where every unit of the left side has a corresponding unit of similar capacity and content on the right side. In universal bilingual dictionaries, however, such absolute correspondence is rare and it is really very hard to achieve if the languages are structurally distant. Problems arise on the semantic as well as on the formal level and they may be caused both by the different structures of the languages concerned and differences in the world views and cultures of their native speakers.

When one is trying to find content equivalents for the headword one may come across the following situations, each concerning large word groups: 1) the headword has a precise enough equivalent in the target language, e.g. *taevas* 'sky' – *nebo*, *aine* 'substance' – *veščestvo*, *ehitama* 'build' – *stroit'*, *čelovek* – *inimene* 'man', *veter* – *tuul* 'wind', *bystryj* – kiire 'quick', etc.; 2) the headword has two main equivalents – one of a genuine root and the other a synonymous loanword, e.g. *keeleteadus* 'linguistics' – *jazykoznanie*, *lingvistika*, *arhitekt* 'architect' *arhitektor*, *zodčij*; 3) the equivalents form a string of synonyms (where sometimes it is possible to distinguish the main equivalent covering most of the meaning of the headword and being placed first), e.g. *taščit' tõmbama*, *sikutama*, *rebima*, *kiskuma* 'to

pull'; 4) the headword has no exact equivalent at all in the target language. (The reasons for this will be explained further on.) I believe that these four regularities of correspondence may be common to almost any pair of natural languages. For a bilingual lexicographer the words in the first two groups are consederably easier to handle than those of the last two. At first glance it is the fourth group that seems to present the most difficulty, but this is not always the case, the problem being more obvious here.

The question how to find equivalents and how complicated it is depends on whether the described languages are structurally close or distant. Bilingual lexicography must by all means be based on the results of contrastive study of languages, being in its turn the main basis for the comparison of languages on lexical level. In a bilingual dictionary different language levels may be presented to a different extent which may depend on the type of the dictionary as well as on the differences between the languages in question. The Estonian and the Russian languages are structurally rather distant.

Some problems arise on the formal level due to differences in the principles of nomination in Estonian and Russian, which in their turn result from the grammatical, or categorial differences between the two languages. The main differences are as follows:

1) the opposite directions of phrase structuring in Estonian and Russian (in Estonian the phrase grows to the left, not to the right (Yngve 1961) as in Russian); e.g. *minu ülemuse vennanaise õepoeg* 'my boss' sister-in-law's nephew' – *plemjannik (syn sestry) ženy brata moego načal'nika*;
2) absence of the category of gender in Estonian, e.g. *päikesepiste, päikesesära, päikesekiired* 'sunstroke, sunlight, sunrays' – *solnečnyj udar, solnečnoe sijanie, solnečnye luči*;
3) absence of relative adjectives in Estonian;
4) absence of the category of aspect in Estonian;
5) an extensive system of cases in Estonian (14) versus the 6 cases in Russian;
6) a much more extensive system of affixes being used in Russian than in Estonian.

All these differences are very important from the nomination point of view. The first two underlie the productivity of nominal compounding in Estonian, while the rest play as important part in the existence and functioning of complicated verbal constructions in the system of the Russian language. Especially pronounced is the difference based on the noun/verb dichotomy: compound nouns and phrasal verbs in Estonian versus compound verbs in Russian. A few examples:

jooksukross 'cross-country race' – beg po peresečennoj mestnosti
leiliviskaja ' the one who adds steam in sauna by throwing water on hot hearth-stones' – poddajuščij par (v bane)
leivakõrvane 'sth to eat with or besides bread' – 'dobavok k hlebu', pliška krome hleba
leivamure 'worries about getting one's daily bread' – zabota o hlebe nasuščnom
lõuatäis *'fam., masc.* gulp (*usu.* of alcohol)' – dobryj glotok vina (vodki, piva i t. p.)
maailmaparandaja 'world reformer' – 'ispravitel' mira', nalvnyj čelovek, verjaščij, čto sposoben ispravit' i spasti mir
maakuulaja 'scout' – čelovek, pytajuščijsja predvaritel'no razuznat', vyvedat' čto-l.
musirull *'coll.* a sweet (*usu.* plump) child' – ljubimoe suščestvo (obyčno rebënok), kotoroe hočetsja zacelovat'
sõnakunstnik 'declaimer' – master hudožestvennogo slova

tondilugu 'ghost story' – rasskaz o prividenijah
vtemjašit' – (korrutades) pähe taguma 'get sth. into one's head'
vsporhnut' – lendu tõusma (lindude kohta), *ülek.* kergel sammul ülespoole tõusma, üles lipsama 'take wing'
vsmatrivat'sja – teraselt silmitsema *v.* vaatama jäämä 'scrutinize'
vyplakat'sja – end tühjaks nutma 'sob out'
dobegat'sja – mingi seisundini jooksma, jooksma, kuni... 'run until...'
dozvonit'sja – 1. lõpuks *v.* vaevaga telefoniühendust saama, 2. uksekella helistama kuni avatakse '1. set sb. on the phone, 2. ring at the door till the bell is answered'
zamolit' – palvetamisega andeks paluma 'pray for forgiveness'
zahvalit' – liiga *v.* ülearu kiitma *v.* ülistama, liigkiitusega rikkuma *v.* ära hellitama 'flatter unduly'
zahlopotat'sja – askeldamisest *v.* askeldustest ära väsima 'be run off one's feet (with bustling)'
ishitrit'sja – kavalaks *v.* osavaks muutuma, osavasti hetke kasutama, osavat nõu leidma, kavalust appi võtma 'find a clever way'
nedoučest' – mitte täielikult arvesse võtma *v.* arvestama, mitte kainelt hindama 'fail to consider fully'
opaivat' – joogiga mürgitama '1. injure (a horse) by giving too much to drink, 2. *arch.* poison by means of a potion'
opostylet' – ebameeldivaks *v.* vastikuks muutuma, surmani ära tüütama '*coll.* grow hateful (to)'
ob"jasnit'sja – vahekordi selgeks *v.* sirgeks rääkima, suhteid selgitama *v.* klaarima '1. explain (oneself); 2. be explained (by), be accounted for (by); 3. have a talk (with); have it out (with); 4. speak, make oneself understood; 5. v ljubvi komu-l. make smb. a declaration on love
otfutbolit' – enda kaelast ära saatma *v.* saama, teisele kaela *v.* ära sokutama '*coll.* get rid of a petitioner by telling him to apply elsewhere'
ublažit' – *kellele* igati meele järele olema, meeltmööda *v.* suud mööda olema, igati meeldida püüdma '*coll. iron.* humour; indulge; gratify; please'

The examples show that in Estonian a complex scene of life can be compressed in a compound noun, whereas in Russian the function is served by a compound verb. (The term "compound verb" is used only conventionally here as formally it is a combination of morphemes.) A thorough-going contrastive study of the compounds would take the researcher to the exciting field of semantic studies of metaphor, metonymy and other figurative devices.

At the same time such words often help one to express the contents of the "untranslatables", i.e. words without direct translation equivalents. Every language has words denoting concepts and things that another language has not considered worth mentioning, or that are absent from the life or conciousness of the other nation. The reasons are differences in the ways of life, traditions, beliefs, historical developments – in one word, the *cultures* of the nations. Also, differences can be observed on conceptual level. Different languages often nominate concepts from different viewpoints, and they also tend to classify them slightly differently. This may cause difficulty in finding a direct, let alone a full equivalent to a concept in another language. At first sight the vocabulary without

direct equivalents looks unfathomably large and diffuse, but a more detailed look offers fine possibilities for generalization from the aspect of language typology. In spite of the fact that the difference in vocabularies is common knowledge, available studies on this subject are still few.

Conventionally my material could be divided into 2 large parts: general vocabulary and the so-called exotisms (ethnic or cultural-historical vocabulary). I should like to characterize briefly the general notions that have no direct equivalents either in one or the other of two languages, Estonian and Russian. This material is rather large. Analyzing concepts that the other language has not considered worth mentioning directly, I have tried to find out if there is any regularity in the choice: in nominating and not nominating on the other hand, and in the system of their explanation and compensatory mechanisms on the other hand. The analyzed unit is an individual word (lexeme) that, having no direct translation equivalent, is characterized by means of a whole complex of semantic features.

On the ground of preliminary analysis it is possible to conclude, for instance, that most of the adjectives without direct equivalents are evaluative. Although emotional evaluations of the phenomena of the surrounding world as to their form, size, quantity, intensity, etc. are different in Estonian and Russian, they do not really exclude each other. They only differ in shades, nuances, the level of classification, etc. In both languages similes are important in expressing evaluations, but the basis of the similes are often different.

If no direct equivalent is available, one may choose from the following strategies: 1) direct borrowing, 2) word-for-word translation, 3) explanation by means of a word combination, and 4) representation of the sense by a list of partial synonyms, where every member includes some part of the concept while the whole concept is either conveyed by the whole list or is distributed according to the concretization of meaning in the other language. A few examples:

I. **lora** 'a lie; hot air, idle talk; prattle; prate, tittle-tattle; nonsense; rubbish' *vran'ë, eres', erunda, brehnja, okolesica, vzdor, čepuha, čuš', galimat'ja*
lačuga hurtsik, onn, osmik, ubrik, hagerik 'hovel, hut, shanty, shack'

II. **kest** *oboločka* 'membrane' *šeluha* 'husk', *skorlupa* 'shell', *kora, kožura, kožica,* 'rind, peel, skin', *kapsula* 'capsule', *gil'za* 'case', *kožuh* 'casing', *obložka, pleva*
golovka *pea* 'head (of a match)', *nutt* 'capitulum', *nupp* 'pommel', *kaba* 'butt', *ots* 'end', *otsak* 'endpiece', *kupar* 'boll'

In the first example the sum of the right side is the complete equivalent of the unit on the left side. Every unit on the right side covers the headword partially. Beside this headword each of them may have other equivalents in the source language that are semantically close to the headword. In the second example every unit on the right side is a precise (bound) equivalent of the headword, only the denotata are absolutely different. In such a case the lexicographer helps the user of the dictionary by illustrating all those possibilities by examples.

As general vocabulary without direct one-to-one equivalents is of very considerable volume, including several thousands of headwords both in Estonian and in Russian and it is impossible to publish such a dictionary at the present moment, I first concentrated

on a more limited and concrete field – the fourth group of words mentioned in the beginning, vocabulary with no equivalents, the cultural vocabulary. This includes names of certain holidays, rituals, dishes, clothes, musical instruments, tools and other things typical of either the Estonian or of the Russian nations, historical concepts, folklore terms, etc. While translating from Russian into Estonian one is also faced with a large amount of words that can be called "sovietisms". They have been formed over the past 70 years and have penetrated into Estonian as direct borrowings and loan-translations, together with the Soviet lifestyle. For example: *avos'ka* 'string-bag', *agitpunkt* 'canvassing/campaign centre', *agitbrigada* 'propaganda team', *baton* 'long loaf', *dublënka* 'sheepskin coat', *zabegalovka* 'snack-bar', *zatovarivanie* 'overstocking', *izbač* 'izbach, village librarian', *izba-čital'nja* 'village library and reading-room', *kipjatok* 'hot drinking-water', *kolhoz* 'kolkhoz, collective farm', *kulak* 'kulak', *kul'turnik* 'person in charge of cultural and educational activities', *likbez* 'campaign for abolishing illiteracy', *mestkom* 'local trade union committee', *mičurinec* 'Michurinite', *mjasopostavki* 'meat deliveries', *obščepit* 'public catering', etc. While examining this group of words I came to a conclusion that Russian has grown noticeably poorer during the past decades and this circumstance is reflected on the lexical level as well. The Russian vocabulary has lost a great deal of its traditional richness, only a certain clerkish minimum widely used. Many lexical patterns have totally disappeared from the language. Sovietisms have been borrowings and loan-translations. However, despite its having been subjected to a strong destructive influence during the past 50 years, the Estonian language has not created any sovietisms of its own, at least on the vocabulary level. I discovered only one sovietism, the compound "suvepäevad" 'lit. summer days', meaning a summer camp for youth (to mark their becoming of passport age, i.e. 16), which the people called "võsaleer" 'confirmation classes in the bush' and which has no counterpart in Russian. The linguistic material shows clearly that as reflections of a particular lifestyle sovietisms are in the first place a phenomenon of the Russian language which has also suffered most under their influence. So lexical analysis reveals the fact that languages live along with their time and nation, they suffer and even put up quiet resistance.

In translating Estonian exotisms into Russian one can be helped greatly by the EXPLICATIVE DICTIONARY OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE by V. Dahl (1978–80). In those Russian dialects that are spoken close to the Estonian or other Finno-Ugrian areas many of the missing concepts do exist and there are translation equivalents for Estonian words that were considered to be without any equivalents and that have not been registered in any bilingual dictionary. E.g. in dialects of the Pskov area there were Russian words for the words *ehaline* 'a girl's night visitor' and *ehal käima* 'to visit girls by night' that no Estonian-Russian dictionary has ever before reflected. Dahl's dictionary also suggests translations for many national costume items (especially those of the Setu) and household tools, hard to find anywhere else. Sometimes there are even direct equivalents like *karpetka* (kapukas) 'thick woollen sock', *kitasnik, kitajnik* (kitasnik), *verhonka* (kuuselatvake) 'spruce-top harrow', *tanik, mička* (čepec èstljandskih bab) (tanu) 'married woman's head-dress', *sukman* (sukman), *salamata, kuleš, razmaznja, zavara* (kört) 'gruel', etc. Popular names (often several) are available for all months in Russian just like in Estonian. There are also many forgotten names for holidays and for the appropriate rituals (e.g. Christmas and the New Year's Eve), and also for supernatural creatures, words which have all been dislodged from active vocabulary and even from the nation's memory. I am glad to

mention that since last year Russian TV has been showing great interest in this meanwhile neglected theme and the corresponding vocabulary.

Where it was hopeless to find an equivalent I used direct borrowing, sometimes combining it with translation or explanation. Some examples: *mulgipuder kaša-mul'gi* (kaša iz perlovoj krupy i kartofelja) 'stew of pearl barley and potatoes', *muruneitsid devy-muru* (lugovye, 'travjanye' rusalki) 'lawn fairies', *nuditanu čepec-nudi*, 'kucyj čepec' 'simple coif'.

A bare explanation was not used very often, I used it only where a direct loan would have had a very queer pronunciation in Russian and would have required an additional translation anyhow.[1]

The practical result of this work is the manuscript of an ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN AND RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN DICTIONARY OF CULTURAL HISTORY which includes 1408 words (696 headwords in Estonian and 712 in Russian).

Theoretically, the nomination differences met in different languages could be treated as a problem of meaning shifts. The studies of "shifts" on the lexical level of two or more languages should generally address the following: 1) the relations between "shifts" (discrepancies) and linguistic universals; 2) "shifts" as a potentiality for linguistic creation (including potential metaphors and metonomy); 3) the problem of "shifts" in bilingual lexicography. My interest in this problem was provoked by my work in compiling and editing the Estonian-Russian and Russian-Estonian dictionaries (RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN DICTIONARY, 1984, 1988; ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN DICTIONARY FOR LEARNERS, 1984). At the same time the lexicographic treatment of a pair of languages enables one to approach the lexical inconformity of languages as a problem of general theory.

Endnotes

1 In my attempts to translate the corresponding Russian vocabulary I could rely on my previous experience of editing the RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN DICTIONARY together with my colleagues at our Institute of Language and Literature. I feel especially indebted to my colleague Henn Saari for his work in contrasting this kind of vocabulary.

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