Bilingual Dictionary and Meaning Discrimination in Venda

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Abstract

Venda, one of the minority languages in South Africa, has few dictionaries. All are translational bilingual dictionaries meant for dictionary users who are non-native speakers of the language. Dictionary users find it difficult to use the Venda bilingual dictionaries because they are confronted with equivalents which they cannot distinguish. In most cases the equivalents of the entry-words are provided without supplying meaning discrimination. Dictionary users are therefore confronted with several equivalents which express different meanings. Without a good command of the Venda language and the provision of meaning discrimination, they find it difficult to make a correct choice of the equivalent for which they are looking. Venda bilingual dictionaries are therefore not helpful for dictionary users who are not speakers of the language. Devices such as definitions of equivalents, provision of illustrative examples and labels in the form of parts of speech could be used to solve the problem of meaning discrimination in Venda bilingual dictionaries. This paper highlights the problem of the absence of meaning discrimination and suggests solutions to future Venda lexicographers in this regard.

1. Venda Bilingual Dictionaries.

A bilingual dictionary entails the description of two cultures because it deals with the translation of entry-words from the source language to the target language. Bilingual dictionaries may serve both target language and source language speakers. When a target language speaker wants to comprehend a foreign language he or she will consult a bilingual dictionary. When a source language speaker wants to express himself or herself in a foreign language, he or she will also consult a bilingual dictionary. As Swanson (1983:193) puts it, a bilingual dictionary can be useful and desirable to several kinds of people: students, travellers and linguists. According to Zgusta (1971:294), the basic purpose of a bilingual dictionary is to co-ordinate with the lexical units of one language those lexical units of another language which are equivalent in their lexical meaning. Such co-ordinations in many instances are accompanied by problems on the part of dictionary users, especially if they are not native speakers of the target language. A user is much less likely to know the meanings of foreign language words in the entries, and will therefore need information on how these foreign language words differ in meaning. Gouws (2000:102) writes that this is a direct result of the traditional approach which sees a bilingual dictionary as a mono-functional product in which the treatment is restricted to the mere listing of a number of translation equivalents.

The translation equivalents of entry-words in a bilingual dictionary are usually of two types i.e. translational and explanatory. A translational equivalent is a lexical unit which can be immediately inserted into a language, whereas the explanatory equivalent is of general

nature and it works well if the target language is the user's native tongue because it may suggest or elicit in him some other equivalent which fits the particular context he/she is dealing with (Al-Kasimi 1983:60 - 61). Translational equivalence is favoured in a bilingual dictionary intended for the speakers of the source language who want to express themselves in the foreign language or translate into the foreign language.

Venda, one of the languages which were marginalised by the previous government in South Africa, has very few dictionaries. Linguists in the Venda language did not pay much attention to lexicography. The cultivation and development of dictionary culture in the indigenous languages was minimal in the past, hence there is a need to cultivate and develop dictionary culture in the Venda language. As Van der Merwe (2003:183) writes:

> In order to cultivate and develop a dictionary culture in a country the existence
> of lexicography has to be recognised as a subject field. Lexicographical research
> has to lay the foundation for sound dictionary projects. Lexicographers have to
> be trained to compile user-friendly dictionaries that are theoretically sound.

None of the above-mentioned was ever implemented in the cultivation and development of dictionary culture in the indigenous languages of South Africa in the past. At present, Venda has three English - Venda dictionaries (*Phindulano: English - Venda Phrase Book, Phrase Book for English and Venda, Dictionary of Basic English-Venda)*, one Afrikaans - Venda dictionary (*Afrikaans - Venda Vocabulary and Phrase Book),* one Venda - English dictionary (*Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda -English)* and one Venda - Afrikaans - English dictionary (*Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda - Afrikaans - English)*. All the above-mentioned are bilingual dictionaries, except one (*Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda - Afrikaans - English)* which is partly bilingual and partly trilingual. The translation equivalents of entry-words in almost all of them are translational. With the exception of one reference dictionary (*Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda - English)*, all are meant for foreigners, mainly missionaries (*Phindulano: English - Venda Phrase Book, Phrase Book for English and Venda, Afrikaans - Venda Vocabulary and Phrase Book)* and students (*Improved Trilingual Dictionary: Venda - Afrikaans - English)*, who know very little or nothing at all about the Venda language or culture.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the problem of the absence of meaning discrimination for the equivalents of the entry-words in the target language and the effect this has on dictionary users with reference to bilingual dictionaries in Venda. Suggestions about devices which can help solve this problem will be provided in the concluding remarks of the presentation.

2. The choice of Equivalents and Equivalence Discrimination

An equivalent is a word or phrase in one language which corresponds in meaning to a word or phrase in another language (Prinsloo & de Schryver 2002: 162). Al-Kasimi (1983:58) sees the major task of a bilingual lexicographer as to find appropriate equivalents in the target language to the units of the source language. Some Venda dictionaries, especially the early dictionaries in the language, provide the users with word-for-word equivalents that comprise one source language entry and one equivalent in the target language. Hereunder are examples from the *Phrase Book for English and Venda (*Marole *1932)*.

1.	kidney	tswiyo	p.4
2.	elbow	lukudavhavha	p.4
3.	nail	nala	p.4

Newman (1980:41) sees word-for-word equivalence as a bad second language learning method. In many instances, a bilingual dictionary that does not provide more than one equivalent in the target language does not become a problem to the users because it does not involve meaning discrimination. Users of the dictionary in *Phrase Book for English and Venda* do not encounter difficulty in choosing the equivalent of example 1. The equivalent of **kidney** is *tswiyo* in Venda. *Tswiyo* does not have synonyms or near synonyms. However, examples 2 and 3 can lead the user in making wrong choices of equivalents because the entries in the source language are polysemous, and that only one translation equivalent has been provided in each case. Both **elbow** and **nail** should have more than one equivalent characterised by different meanings. For example, the entries **nail** and **elbow** are defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1990) as follows: *nail:* (a) a small usu. sharpened metal spike with a broadened flat head, (b) horny covering on the upper surface of the tip of the human finger or toe, (c) fasten with nails; *elbow:* (a) joint between the forearm and the upper arm, (b) a short piece of piping bent through a right angle. In the entry **nail** the Venda equivalent is *nala* (horny covering on the upper surface of the tip of the human finger or toe); and in the entry **elbow**, the equivalent is *lukudavhavha* (joint between the forearm and the upper arm). The other meanings of the entry-words have been left out. If the user is looking for an equivalent of an entry-word which is found in a different context than the equivalent provided, then the user will make a wrong choice of the equivalent. The provision of more equivalents, accompanied by equivalent discrimination is vital in this situation.

In some Venda bilingual dictionaries, users are confronted with several equivalents in one entry. They cannot discriminate between the equivalents because of the absence of the necessary information for the purpose of meaning discrimination. They therefore fail to make a correct choice of the equivalent. The notion of equivalent discrimination applies to all dictionaries that include the presentation of one or more translation equivalents as part of the lexicographic treatment of the lemma sign (Gouws 2000:99). As Al-Kasimi (1983:67) writes:

> When a person wants to say something in a foreign language, he might consult a bilingual dictionary. But instead of finding one word which expresses his meaning, he is frequently confronted with several words which he cannot distinguish one from another

The equivalents themselves are the most important part of the entry. However, in the majority of cases, it does not suffice to indicate them alone, first because most of them have a multiple meaning of their own and second, because they are only partial equivalents of the entry-word (Zgusta 1971:329). Without additional information, the dictionary user will not be in a position to select the correct equivalent which fits the meaning in the context, unless he or she has a command of the target language.

Hereunder are examples of dictionary entries from three English - Venda bilingual dictionaries which will assist in illustrating the problem mentioned above:

4.	ape (n) (monkey)	thoho (dzi); (vb) -edzisa	p.155
5.	amputate	-tumula, -thukhula	p.154
6	abduct	-tahisa (musadzi); -hwala	p.153
7	abstain	-didzima	p.153
8	bellow	-kuma	p.157
9	buffalo	nari	p.161
10	console	-fhembeledza, -khuthadza, -fhumudza, -lilisa	p.163
11	difficulty	vhuleme(abstr.), tshikundisi (zwi)	p.147

<div align="center">(Improved Trilingual Dictionary, 1982)</div>

12	abandon (n)	u lata, u furalela p.3
13	swarm (n)	murivha, gogo
14	act (v)	mushumo, mulayo p.3
15	boundary (n)	mukano, thanganyoni p.8
16	teacher (n)	mudededzi, mufunzi p.64

<div align="center">(English - Venda Vocabulary, 1954)</div>

17	baard	dzindebvu, vhutambo
18	berg	thavha

<div align="center">(Afrikaans - Venda: Vocabulary and Phrase book, 1955)</div>

From the examples cited above, one can notice that some entries have one equivalent each, i.e. examples 7, 8, and 9; while others have more than one equivalent each. In the case of entries having one equivalent each, as mentioned above, the dictionary user does not have a problem of distinguishing equivalents in the Venda language because there is only one meaning. In the case of entries having more than one equivalent, it is difficult for the source language dictionary user to select the correct equivalent relevant to the context because of multiple meanings which are at times synonyms or near synonyms.

In example 4, the entry **ape** is a noun and verb at the same time, i.e. it is polysemous. Although the lexicographer has written one part of speech, the entry-word has equivalents both as a noun and a verb in Venda. The parts of speech (n) and (vb) have been used by the lexicographer to distinguish the meanings of the equivalents. As Iannucci (1983:179) noted, sometimes meaning discrimination is effected by the designation of the part of speech of the entry word. In this example, it is easy for the dictionary user to select the correct equivalent because there is only one noun and one verb in the definition, i.e. thoho (monkey) and -edzisa (imitate). However, in examples 5 and 6 the dictionary user will have some difficulty in distinguishing meanings between the given equivalents. When a user consults a bilingual dictionary, he or she wants to achieve an unambiguous identification and interpretation of the target language data and consequently the optimal retrieval of the target language information (Gouws 2000:101). This is not possible in the examples given above. The lack of the inclusion of meaning discrimination impedes the user to choose the correct equivalent. In example 5, both equivalents -tumula and -thukhula are synonymous verb stems. The verb stem -tumula is associated with cutting with an instrument such as a knife, whereas the verb stem -thukhula is associated with jerk to pieces (e.g. a rope) by way of pulling. Therefore, the selection of the equivalent will depend on the context. As Gouws (2000:110) puts it,

users often need a co-text or other contextualising information to achieve equivalents. He further suggests that to ensure this, the lexicographer has to complement the translation equivalents with ample additional data. Without this additional data it would be difficult for the user to select the correct equivalent. Meaning discrimination in this regard will involve the power of observing differences between meanings of equivalents of the same entry-word.

In example 6, abduct is defined by The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English as: carry off or kidnap (a person) illegally by force or deception (Allen 1990:2). Unlawfulness is an essential element of abduction as evidenced in the definition (Mtuze 1990:30). The equivalents of this entry-word, -tahisa and -hwala, are all verb stems. Their meanings are not related. The verb stem -tahisa means to cause to elope; whereas the verb stem -hwala generally means to carry something. When a girl is caused to elope, she might go of her own volition, especially if there is some consent between her and the man. The girl may also be forced to accompany the man. Even if there could be an agreement between the girl and the man, the process of eloping is considered not a proper marriage procedure by the Venda society. The context in which the entry-word abduct is used will therefore be the guideline on the choice of the correct equivalent because -tahisa and -hwala have different meanings. Meaning discrimination is therefore important in order to distinguish between the two equivalents which belong to the same part of speech and are near synonyms. For the user to be able to make the correct choice of translation equivalents in this situation, he or she has to be familiar with Venda language and culture.

Worse still is when one encounters an entry-word with four or more equivalents which all belong to the same word category and which are found to be synonymous, such as in example 10. All the equivalents are verb stems.

-fhembeledza	persuade, coax
-khuthadza	appease; pacify
-fhumudza	silence; comfort, console
-lilisa	make cry; console

The verb stem *-fhembeledza* has a different meaning from the other equivalents. When one persuades a person, he or she does not console him or her. The term *persuade* is defined as to cause to do or believe something, especially by reasoning and urging (Guralnik 1981:716). Although the verb stems *-fhumudza, -khuthadza* and *-lilisa* are related, their meanings are not exactly the same. For example, the other meaning of *-lilisa* is *make one to cry*. Dictionary users will find it difficult to choose the correct equivalent. The selection of the correct equivalent will depend on the context, and this will be guided by the provision of meaning discrimination.

In example 12, the entry-word **abandon** has two equivalents in Venda, *-lata* and *-furalela* which are all verb stems. Van Warmelo (1989:61) describes *-furalela* as *turn one's back upon,* whereas Wentzel and Muloiwa (1982:17) describe *-furalela* as *turn one's back upon; ignore.* On the other hand, the verb stem *-lata* means to *throw away, discard or abandon.* From the definitions of the two equivalents shown above, it is clear that the equivalents are not absolute synonymous. The same applies to example 13; there are two equivalents, *murivha* and *gogo,* which are both nouns and near synonyms. The noun *murivha* refers to a group of birds flying together, while the noun *gogo* refers to many people gathered in one place. One cannot talk of *gogo* when referring to many birds flying

together or *murivha* when referring to a group of people. Therefore, the lack of additional information to define the equivalents impedes the correct choice within a given context.

Example 14 is problematic to the dictionary user. The entry-word **act** has *mushumo* and *mulayo* as its equivalents in Venda. *Act* can be used as a noun or as a verb. However, this entry-word is shown as a verb, but all its equivalents in Venda are nouns, and their word category is not indicated. *Mushumo* refers to *work* or *function;* whereas *mulayo* refers to *rule of law.* The context in which the entry-word **act** is used will guide the dictionary user on the choice of the correct equivalent. But, without meaning discrimination it will be difficult for a dictionary user to make a correct choice. The equivalent verb stems of the entry-word **act** in Venda should have been *-tamba* (play), *-edza* (mimic or imitate). However, these equivalents are not included in the definition of the entry-word. The incorrect entries provided will therefore mislead the user in his or her choice of the equivalents. In example 15, *mukano* is a dividing line (boundary), whereas *thanganyoni* refers to the intersection (e.g. of rivers). The equivalent *thanganyoni* cannot be regarded as a boundary without considering the context in which it is used. In example 16, *mudededzi* refers to a teacher who teaches pupils or students in class, whereas *mufunzi* is a preacher in the church. All are equivalents of the entry-word **teacher**, and are near synonyms. Like in the example given above, it would be difficult to make a correct choice of an equivalent without the necessary information about the two equivalents. For the dictionary user to make a correct choice in the above-mentioned examples, meaning discrimination is important.

Like in the dictionaries looked at above, co-ordination of source and target language items can impede the correct choice of a translation equivalent in the *Afrikaans - Venda Vocabulary and Phrase Book.* Users of this bilingual dictionary do not encounter difficulty in the choice of translation equivalent in example 18 because the relation is characterised by one entry (i.e. **berg** which means 'mountain') and one equivalent in Venda (i.e. *thavha*). There are no synonyms or near synonyms of the equivalent *thavha.* However, the user can find it difficult to make a correct choice in example 17. The entry-word **baard** has its corresponding equivalents as *dzindebvu* and *vhutambo* in Venda. All are nouns and near synonyms. *Dzindebvu* is the plural form of *ndebvu*, which refers to *beard* (hair growing on the lower part of a man's face). On the other hand, *vhutambo* is a polysemous word which in this instance refers to pubic hair. No additional information which would enable the dictionary user to discriminate meanings has been provided for these equivalents. Without this additional information on the Venda equivalents, the dictionary user may make a wrong choice of the equivalent of the entry-word **baard.** Both equivalents refer to hair, but hair found in different parts of the body. Further, *dzindebvu* is a characteristic of males, whereas *vhutambo* is a characteristic of both females and males. The dictionary user may choose the equivalent *vhutambo*, while the context in which he or she wants to use it is that of the lower part of man's face. This would be a wrong choice. Likewise, without additional information the user may choose *dzindebvu* whereas the intended meaning in the particular context is that of pubic hair. The above reveals that meaning discrimination is very important in a bilingual dictionary. As Gouws (2000:99) writes, the more target language information included in a dictionary, the better the chances should be of an unambiguous transfer of information.

3. Possible Solutions

Dictionary users need entries which cover all the meanings they require, i.e. meanings which provide them with the necessary information to make appropriate well-informed lexical choices (Scholfield 1999). The ideal bilingual dictionary would anticipate every conceivable need of the prospective user. It would provide for each word or expression in the source language (SL) just the right target translation in the target language (TL) including most importantly, the one needed for the passage in hand (Hartmann 1999:7). As indicated above, Venda bilingual dictionaries are not helpful in this regard. The treatment of meaning discrimination in Venda bilingual dictionaries is unsatisfactory. In order to understand sentences, users need to know the meaning of words. The provision of more information about the equivalents in the target language is important. As Gouws (2000:104) writes,

> The average user of bilingual dictionaries needs much more information in the comment on semantics to utilise the dictionary as a practical instrument. Lexicographers will have to enhance the possibilities for equivalent discrimination.

This additional information will enable dictionary users to interpret the meaning of utterances in the context in which they are made.

According to Al-Kasimi (1983) meaning discrimination is necessary in the following:

(a)   When the source language has one meaning for which the target language has a polysemous equivalent.

(b)   The source language is polysemous, and for each of its senses the target language has two or more polysemous words.

The additional information can be provided in different ways. Devices such as definitions of the equivalents by making use of parts of speech, punctuation, etymology, usage labels, context words and phrases, and illustrative examples can be used to achieve meaning discrimination. The devices of illustrative examples, parts of speech and etymology are vital in meaning discrimination in a bilingual dictionary. Illustrative examples can be used to illustrate the meaning of the word defined. According to Al-Kasimi (1983:91), the primary function of the illustrative examples in dictionaries in general and bilingual dictionaries in particular is to contribute to the user's interest by showing the word in a live context, and to enhance his understanding of the grammatical and semantic rules governing the usage of the word by showing these rules in action. These illustrative examples can further give the dictionary user some notions of the foreign culture he or she is dealing with. In illustrative examples, sentences and phrases can be used to show how the equivalents are used in context. The designation of the part of speech in both the entry word and the equivalents can also help to distinguish between the equivalents. Jackson in Ilson (1985:55) says the following:

> If a dictionary gives no other information of grammatical nature, it is expected to indicate which part-of-speech or word class a lexical item belongs to, i.e. whether it is classed as   a noun or as a verb or adjective, etc.

Although the word-class label does not provide sufficient information of grammatical kind, It provides basic information about the syntactic operation of a lexical item. The grammatical identity of words as noun, verb, adjective, and so on, is given for all entries and

derivatives to aid clarity. Etymology is another device which can also help the users of bilingual dictionaries to have a clear understanding of today's meanings of the words. In this case, the historically variable sources of the formation of a word and the development of its meaning are provided.

Conclusion

With the introduction of lexicography units in the indigenous languages in South Africa by the Pan South African Language Board, it is hoped that future indigenous language lexicographers in general and Venda lexicographers in particular will attend to the problem of meaning discrimination in bilingual dictionaries to make them more useful to the users. This could be achieved by training lexicographers to compile user-friendly dictionaries which will be of value to both students, travellers and linguists. As indicated above, the present Venda bilingual dictionaries are not user-friendly. As Al-Kasimi (1983:68) writes:

> The bilingual dictionary should provide meaning discriminations which enable the user to select the appropriate equivalent or the proper sense of an equivalent. And unless the problem of meaning discrimination is solved systematically, the bilingual dictionary cannot be a dependable guide to the proper equivalents.

Attempts to achieve equivalent discrimination will increase the communicative success of the bilingual dictionary.

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