

## Translation of Dictionary Examples – *Notoriously Unreliable?*

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### Abstract

The paper deals with one of the reasons why examples in a bilingual dictionary should not be translated. It is claimed that – in a corpus-based Lx-Ly dictionary which gives Lx examples and then translates them into Ly – only the Lx sentences can be fully typical; the Ly sentences, no matter how good *qua* translations, are bound to contain collocations and colligations which are, at best, merely possible. The troubled relationship between the English adverb *notoriously* and its Polish counterpart *notorycznie* is used as an illustration. The problem does not arise if examples (in both the L2-L1 and L1-L2 parts of a bilingual dictionary) are given exclusively in the intended user's L2 – a solution which is only feasible in directional bilingual dictionaries, and which thus constitutes an additional argument in their favour.<sup>1</sup>

### 1 The problem

Verbal exemplification in bilingual dictionaries is a far from simple matter. When one examines the metalexigraphic literature on the topic, it turns out that there is hardly an aspect thereof which has not generated discussion. For a start, there is considerable disagreement regarding the very definition of examples as a lexicographic category. Opinions differ as to what distinguishes an example from a sub-entry, what kind of combinations (free; free or partially fixed, etc) can be used as examples, which sources of examples should be favoured (language corpora vs lexicographers' invention), and how the choice of a source is related to the type of dictionary and its intended audience.

In the context of bilingual lexicography, one of the contentious issues is whether dictionary examples should be translated. Authors such as Al-Kasimi (1977) or Zöfgen (1991: 2898) consider translation to be indispensable. Jacobsen et al. (1991: 2786), whose views are shared by the present writer, believe that there is no need to translate examples, provided

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from dictionary titles, the following standard abbreviations are used in the text: L1 – native language; L2 – foreign language; SL – source language of the dictionary; TL – target language of the dictionary; E-P – English-Polish; P-E – Polish-English. Additionally, Lx and Ly stand for the object languages of a bilingual dictionary in contexts when their native/foreign status is not specified.

these are 'chosen so as to pose no problems for anyone with a basic knowledge of the target language'; if a particular example has to be translated, 'it is probably because the information in it should not be given in a formal example at all, but in a sub-entry or a gloss' (Jacobsen et al. 1991: 2787).

### 1.1 Examples in the source or target language?

Significantly, those in favour of translation take it for granted that examples are always given in the source language: L2 in the L2-L1 part of the dictionary and L1 in the L1-L2 part. By contrast, in Jacobsen et al.'s (1991) view, as in mine, examples in both parts of the dictionary should be given in the user's L2. One obvious reason is that it is not the task of a bilingual dictionary to show people how their native language is used; saving valuable space in a (printed) work of reference is another. However, if these arguments are disregarded, as they usually are, and if the decision is made to give SL examples in the L1-L2 section of a bilingual dictionary, the examples must, of course, be translated into L2 – otherwise they would serve no purpose at all.

### 1.2 Examples and (non)directionality

#### 1.2.1 When is translation justified?

Naturally, even in dictionaries whose examples are normally left untranslated, exception must be made for sentences or parts thereof which might be too difficult for the average user to interpret on their own.<sup>2</sup>

As far as systematic translation of all examples is concerned, I can see some justification for the practice in dictionaries targeted at beginners, e.g. at children with little or no dictionary-using experience. Consider the following two entries taken, respectively, from the Portuguese-English and the English-Portuguese section of LDE, a school dictionary for beginner and pre-intermediate Brazilian learners of English:<sup>3</sup>

**funcionar** v 1 (operar) to work: *O elevador não está funcionando.* The elevator isn't working. | *Como é que funciona isso?* How does this work? 2 (abrir) to open: *O parque de diversões não funciona aos sábados.* The amusement park doesn't open on Saturdays. 3 (dar bom resultado) to work: *A minha idéia funcionou.* My idea worked.

**funny** adj (-nnier, -nniest) 1 engraçado: *I don't find his jokes funny at all.* Não acho as piadas dele nem um pouco engraçadas. 2 esquisito, estranho: *It's funny Brian didn't come.* É estranho que Brian não tenha vindo. | *There's something funny going on here.* Há algo estranho acontecendo aqui.

The examples in these entries take up twice as much room as they would without the L1 text. However, it can be argued that they give the young learner a sense of security: no effort

<sup>2</sup> This point is further illustrated in section 3.

<sup>3</sup> Information on pronunciation has been omitted from all dictionary entries quoted in this paper.

is required to interpret the L2 sentences, their meaning being made explicit by the L1 sentences which introduce or follow them. Except, of course, that when a Brazilian learner consults the Portuguese-English section of LDE because they want to produce an English sentence of their own, they will have to draw analogies from the English translations of Portuguese examples – a process not much different from making generalisations on the basis of English examples alone.

Still, authors of dictionaries such as LDE clearly have a choice: in the L1-L2 section they can give either L2 examples alone or L1 examples plus their L2 translations; in the L2-L1 section they can give L2 examples either with or without translations into L1. The choice is possible thanks to the fact that LDE is a directional dictionary, where by a directional Lx-Ly, Ly-Lx dictionary we mean a dictionary explicitly addressed either to native speakers of Lx or to native speakers of Ly.

A nondirectional dictionary, by contrast, is meant to serve native speakers of Lx and native speakers of Ly at the same time.<sup>4</sup> Authors of nondirectional dictionaries are in a less comfortable position in that they do not have a choice: the examples they give in both the Lx-Ly and the Ly-Lx sections of their dictionaries must be source-language (SL) syntagms accompanied by their target-language (TL) translations. This follows from the nature of the reference work at issue. Since the purpose of a nondirectional dictionary is to assist speakers of both the source and the target language, a technique of exemplification is required which ensures that the examples provided will be maximally useful to both groups of users (who, depending on their native language, will be more interested either in the SL sentences and phrases or in their TL translations).

### 1.2.2 The typicality requirement

Unfortunately, catering to both groups of users simultaneously comes at a price. In addition to swallowing up space, this way of presentation necessarily results in diminished credibility of the target-language material. A user consulting a contemporary dictionary has the right to expect examples which are as real (authentic) as possible. In practice, this means that the examples should be based on data extracted from a representative corpus of the foreign language, a corpus recording fragments of spoken and written texts which have been produced by native speakers of the language in question for the purposes of real-life communication. But in a dictionary which gives SL examples accompanied by their TL translations it is only the former that can be taken from a corpus; the latter, no matter how good *qua* translations, will never be more than just that. Given the nature of lexicographic translation – in particular, the requirement that the SL syntagmatic stretches and their suggested TL counterparts should be as close as possible in all imaginable respects, i.e. not just semantically, but also structurally – a certain proportion of not-quite-typical TL sentences is unavoidable.

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<sup>4</sup> The terms *unidirectional* or *monodirectional* (for our *directional*) and *bidirectional* (for our *nondirectional*) are also used in the literature.

This may not be a major problem for native speakers of the target language, who will (perhaps) automatically register any unidiomaticity and/or oddness, and proceed to make the necessary adjustments. It is, however, a problem for native speakers of the source language, who cannot be assumed to have recourse to intuitions regarding the foreign language, and who therefore should be presented with typical TL sentences to begin with, rather than with sentences which are merely possible.

The typicality of an example implies, among other things, that the patterns of co-occurrence it contains should be typical. This is easier said than done. As noted by Sinclair (1991: 103),

[a] complete set of typical instances should exemplify the dominant structural patterns of the language without recourse to abstraction, or indeed to generalization. The mass of instances each contain just a small element of typicality, but a few contain several typical features. In such circumstances, although it may sound paradoxical, examples which are typical are rather uncommon (...)

Given the admission (by one of the leading promoters of corpora in lexicography!) that typical examples are hard enough to find in a corpus of a particular language, I think it is unrealistic to expect them to emerge effortlessly from lexicographers' translations of syntagms originally produced in another language.

## 2 An illustration

In order to see more clearly what the problem is, let us look at a couple of entries from a recently published pair of dictionaries: a Polish-English and an English-Polish one (henceforth PWNOP and PWNOE). Our purpose will be to compare the treatment by those dictionaries of a pair of etymologically related adverbs: Polish *notorycznie* and English *notoriously*.

### 2.1 The treatment of *notorycznie* in PWNOP

First, consider the following entry for Polish *notorycznie*:

**notorycznie** *adv.* notoriously; ~ **się spóźnia** he's notoriously late; ~ **się upija** he's a notorious drinker

The English equivalent following the Polish lemma clearly indicates the PWNOP lexicographer's belief in the cognitive equivalence of the Polish adverb *notorycznie* and the English adverb *notoriously*,<sup>5</sup> a belief which is further illustrated by the first example and its translation. Next, another Polish example of the use of the lemma is given, but this one is

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<sup>5</sup> Three levels of equivalence are distinguished here: *cognitive* (also called *semantic*, *systemic*, *conceptual*, *decontextualised*, or *prototypical* in the literature), *translational* (*insertable*), and *functional* (*situational*). The terms denoting the first vs the second type should be self-explanatory. The main distinction between the second and the third type is that in translational equivalence the equivalent must be the same part of speech as the lemma. A detailed discussion can be found in Adamska-Sałaciak (2006: Chapter Three).

translated using the English adjective *notorious* rather than the expected adverb. As we shall see, the treatment of the second example thus shows a degree of linguistic sensitivity on the part of the lexicographer.

But first, what can be said about the examples themselves and about their potential to help, respectively, the English-speaking and the Polish-speaking users of the dictionary? According to monolingual dictionaries of Polish, *notorycznie* typically collocates with verbs such as *spóźniać się* “be late”, *kłamać* “lie”, or *upijać się* “get drunk”. This is confirmed by the 70-million-word sample of the largest corpus of Polish,<sup>6</sup> where 22 of the 25 instances of *notorycznie* are combinations with verbs or verb phrases (e.g. *mylić* “confuse”, *mylić się* “be wrong”, *spóźniać się* “be late”, *łamać prawo* “break the law”, *łupić* “rip off”, *nie płacić podatków* “not pay taxes”, *parkować na zakazach* “park illegally”, *sięgać po kieliszek* “hit the bottle”, *blokować wyjazd* “block the exit”). The PWNOP entry is thus faultless with regard to the way it exemplifies Polish, which makes it a reliable source of information for the English-speaking users of the dictionary.

Things do not look so good for speakers of Polish (who, incidentally, constitute a vast majority of the PWNOP usership). The typical collocates of *notoriously* are adjectives, the most frequent among them being *difficult*, *bad*, and *unreliable*, with, respectively, 7, 3, and 5 out of the 74 instances in the 40-million-word Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (henceforth LSWEC),<sup>7</sup> or 309,000, 64,000, and 48,900 Google hits.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, Google shows a mere 3,430 hits for *notoriously late*, and only 940 for *notorious drinker*. Hence, what we find in the English translations of Polish examples given by PWNOP are possible, but not the most typical uses of *notoriously*.

## 2.2 The treatment of *notoriously* in PWNOP

The entry for *notoriously* in the English-Polish part of the same dictionary looks as follows:

**notoriously** *adv.* **he's ~ lazy/stupid** jest znany z lenistwa/głupoty; **he drinks ~** on notorycznie się upija; **it's ~ difficult** wiadomo, że to bardzo trudne

It is evident that the author of the PWNOP entry quoted earlier must either have failed to consult the PWNOP entry or disregarded the results of the consultation.<sup>9</sup> The content of the PWNOP entry implies that *notorycznie* cannot be regarded as a cognitive equivalent of *notoriously*; one can only guess that the lexicographer assumed the two lexemes to be false friends. What is more, no cognitive equivalent of *notoriously* is suggested at all.

<sup>6</sup> 300 million words (for details, see <http://korpus.pl>).

<sup>7</sup> The Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus, best known for its use in Biber et al. (1999), was consulted in the preparation of LSW, a learners' dictionary of Polish which I have co-authored. I am grateful to Pearson Education Limited for letting me use the corpus for my research.

<sup>8</sup> All searches were conducted on 11 May 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Published two years later than PWNOP, PWNOP is supposed to be its exact counterpart.

This is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Although *notoriously* and *notorycznie* clearly differ in terms of their colligation patterns,<sup>10</sup> and are therefore not automatically substitutable in translation, they nevertheless have far too much in common to be denied the status of equivalents. In addition to etymology, they share the same (negative) semantic prosody,<sup>11</sup> and can sometimes – as correctly shown in the PWNOP entry quoted in 2.1 – function as situational equivalents. Moreover, a speaker bilingual in English and Polish, when asked to translate *notorycznie* (or *notoriously*), will no doubt answer: *notoriously* (or *notorycznie*), as this is what immediately comes to mind. If we allow, as I think we should, for bilingual speakers' intuitions as (one type of) evidence in bilingual lexicography, then the two adverbs must be treated as cognitive equivalents.

Coming back to the PWNOE entry, since the lexicographer did not suggest any decontextualised equivalent for the lemma, they had to resort to one of the repair strategies used in situations of nonequivalence, namely, extending the syntagmatic scope of the SL unit so that interlingual equivalence can be reached at the phrase/sentence level. Of the three longer syntagms given in the PWNOE entry, only one has been translated using *notorycznie*. Ironically, it is precisely this Polish sentence (*on notorycznie się upija*) which, according to the PWNOP entry quoted earlier – an entry, as will be remembered, consonant with corpus data – does *not* correspond to an English sentence with *notoriously*.

Further, it seems obvious that examples in an English-Polish dictionary which, like PWNOE, is based on a corpus, should come from that corpus. Examining the relevant co-occurrence patterns, we find that two of the three sentences given by PWNOE do agree with what we find in corpora but one does not. The phrase *it's notoriously difficult* is a perfect choice in the light of the LSWEC and Google data cited earlier. The collocations in *he's notoriously lazy/stupid*, although not overwhelmingly frequent, are definitely possible: neither appears in LSWEC, but there are 769 Google hits for *notoriously lazy* and 5,260 for *notoriously stupid*. Most importantly, *notoriously* is here presented as co-occurring with adjectives, so the lexicographer certainly got the colligation right. The remaining sentence is highly untypical: searched for the strings *drink notoriously*, *drinks notoriously*, *drank notoriously*, Google shows fewer than 5 instances that might qualify. The inevitable conclusion is that *he drinks notoriously* could not have been derived from an English corpus. The lexicographer's reason for including it in the PWNOE entry must have been an attempt to show at least one context in which *notoriously* corresponded to *notorycznie*. Unfortunately, the context chosen has turned out to be wrong.

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<sup>10</sup> It should, perhaps, be stressed that this is a fact about the behaviour of this particular pair of adverbs, not an instance of systematic contrast between the two languages (i.e. one involving differences in the behaviour of Polish and English adverbs in general).

<sup>11</sup> The notion is taken from Louw (1993). In view of Whitsitt's (2005) thought-provoking critique of the concept of semantic prosody, it might be safer to replace it by the time-honoured concept of connotation. Either way, the argument being made remains unaffected.

### 3 A solution

The previous section has, I hope, demonstrated that giving SL examples and providing them with TL translations – which is a necessary consequence of a dictionary's nondirectionality – generates a basically insoluble problem: there is no way of providing only typical, authentic examples simultaneously (i.e. in the same entry) for both the lemma and the equivalent(s).

In a directional dictionary, things are incomparably easier. Since in a reference work addressed to Poles the authenticity/typicality of the Polish material is less important than that of the English, in both the English-Polish and the Polish-English part of the dictionary one can offer as examples corpus-based English sentences, thereby always illustrating L2: the lemma in the English-Polish part, and the equivalent in the Polish-English part. In particularly difficult cases, for instance when there are differences in co-occurrence patterns such as those illustrated by *notoriously* and *notorycznie*, the examples can additionally be supplied with their L1 translations. Note that this does not run counter to this paper's argument against translation: since the examples are authentic L2 sentences, the fact that the resulting translations are not themselves authentic L1 sentences is of less consequence for the native speaker of L1.

Accordingly, the relevant entries in a directional English-Polish-English dictionary for Poles might look something like this:<sup>12</sup>

#### E-P

**notoriously** *adv.* notorycznie; **it is ~ difficult to predict the costs** przewidywanie kosztów notorycznie nastręcza trudności; **long-term weather predictions are ~ unreliable** długoterminowe prognozy pogody notorycznie zawodzą; **she had ~ poor organizational skills** było powszechnie wiadomo, że brak jej zdolności organizacyjnych

#### P-E

**notorycznie** *adv.* notoriously; **it is notoriously difficult to predict the costs** przewidywanie kosztów notorycznie nastręcza trudności; **long-term weather predictions are notoriously unreliable** długoterminowe prognozy pogody notorycznie zawodzą; **she had notoriously poor organizational skills** było powszechnie wiadomo, że brak jej zdolności organizacyjnych

The central collocations in the above sentences have not been translated word for word: in the first two cases, Polish verb phrases have been used as collocates of *notorycznie* where English has adjectives as collocates of *notoriously*. The careful user should thus see that, although some sentences containing *notoriously* can be translated with the help of *notorycznie*, structural modifications are needed to make this possible. The last example shows that there are also cases where a sentence containing *notoriously* cannot be translated using *notorycznie*. *Notorycznie* is thus presented as a cognitive and, on occasion, a situational equivalent of *notoriously*, but not as its translational (insertable) equivalent.

<sup>12</sup> For the sake of simplicity, identical examples (all based on sentences found in LSWEC) have been given in both entries.

Naturally, the content of 'the same' entries in a directional dictionary aimed at English speakers would need to be different. The PWNOP entry, which we have accepted above as basically adequate (cf. 2.1), could serve as a starting point. Expanding it slightly with data from the Polish corpus, we might end up with something like this:

E-P

**notoriously** *adv.* notorycznie; **ona notorycznie się spóźnia/myli** she's notoriously late/wrong; **on notorycznie kłamie/się upija** he's a notorious liar/drinker

P-E

**notorycznie** *adv.* notoriously; **ona ~ się spóźnia/myli** she's notoriously late/wrong; **on ~ kłamie/się upija** he's a notorious liar/drinker

It is visible at a glance that less effort has been put into the construction of these entries than into the ones meant for a dictionary addressed to Poles. The reason is very simple: I have only ever worked on E-P-E dictionaries meant for speakers of Polish. If I were actually compiling an E-P-E dictionary targeted at the other audience, I would need to spend considerably more time on these items. The above proposal should thus be treated as no more than a first approximation, included here primarily for reasons of symmetry.

#### 4 Concluding remarks

Summing up, the (current) impossibility of giving authentic, typical examples in two languages at once provides one more argument in support of the frequently made claim that a bilingual dictionary cannot serve speakers of both languages equally well. It has to be stressed that the problem identified in this paper does not disappear in electronic works of reference. Although many undesirable consequences of non-directionality are less acute in electronic than in printed dictionaries (space is less of an issue, users have more control over what information they want to appear on the screen, etc), the electronic medium offers no principled improvements in the authenticity/typicality department. Unless (until?) parallel corpora are used as a matter of course for example extraction, only one of the two object languages of a bilingual dictionary can systematically be illustrated by fully typical examples.

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