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TRANSLATIONAL EQUIVALENCE IN THE BILINGUAL DICTIONARY

Introduction

The purpose of this paper¹ is to discuss the so-called translational equivalent and its relation to different types of bilingual dictionaries. To get the proper contrast, various forms of explanatory equivalents will be mentioned as well.

The notion of the translational equivalent is well illustrated by the following quotation from an article by Lissance (1949:134):

Integration of reading matter is blocked when the dictionary gives linguistic museum pieces or, at a loss itself, merely defines the idea rather than furnishing the contemporary English equivalent with all its dynamic associations. Words like Lebensfrische and Entschlusskraft are good illustrations in point. Bilingual dictionaries render them with "freshness of life" and "ability to make up one's mind (make decisions)". These renderings evoke no familiar language patterns. If the dictionary gave 'vigor' and 'initiative' instead, the context would immediately be clear because these are words associated with concepts the reader is accustomed to manipulate in his everyday pursuits. Translations must be in the idiom of the reader. If they are not, the information, if remembered at all, becomes peripheral to his mind. Readability of a translation, therefore, is of more than academic interest.

The main requirement is well expressed here; the dictionary should offer not explanatory paraphrases or definitions, but real lexical units of the target language which, when inserted into the context, produce a smooth translation. This is a perfectly natural requirement. Lexicographers have followed it since time immemorial, but we also know that they have not succeeded in each and every case.

From a study of the major landmarks in the history of the bilingual dictionary we learn that an equivalent may have two different properties, which we can label¹ translationality (or insertability) and explanatory paraphrase.² These are not mutually exclusive. Let us consider the following example E₁ from Steiner's NEW COLLEGE FRENCH AND ENGLISH DICTIONARY:

E₁: tutoyer ... to thou, to address familiarly

Only "to address familiarly" is a real translational, insertable equivalent. It has, however, no explanatory value, because such a familiarity of address can have many different forms. Since the author does not wish to give an explanation of the form, say "(by using the second person sing.)", he gives the obsolete verb to thou, which conveys this information but which cannot be inserted into any context in contemporary language. This is, then, a purely explanatory equivalent. In another entry of the same dictionary we read:

E₂: kneehole ... trou, évidemment pour l'entrée des genoux

Here trou is the truly translational or insertable equivalent. The explanatory information is supplied by "évidemment pour l'entrée des genoux": this paraphrase may be inserted in at least some possible contexts. To anticipate, we can say that equivalents that are both translational and explanatory are the bilingual lexicographer's best friends.

Types of equivalence

An explanation is important in cases where the mere translational equivalent, exact as it may be, might remain only poorly intelligible. An example, E₃, comes from the OXFORD LATIN DICTIONARY:

E₃: pugnaculum ... a place from which one fights,
bulwark or fortification

The explanation "a place from which one fights" is necessary, because the translational bulwark and fortification have either a mediaeval connotation or they usually denote some masonry, something built or constructed etc., whereas a pugnaculum could simply be an earthen embankment which gave the advantage of an elevation.

Sometimes, the etymology or derivation seems to play a role. This stems, at least partly, from the fact that there is a vast overlap between the indication of a derivation, or etymology, on the one hand, and the notional explanation on the other. This is the case in the following entry E₄, from Smirnitskij & Akhmanova's RUSSKO-ANGLIJSKIJ SLOVAR':

E₄: Mjasopust ... Shrovetide (when it is not allowed
to eat meat)

Shrovetide is the exact translational equivalent of the Russian entry word. Both compilers were disciples of Professor Ščerba, an important theoretician of lexicography and practical lexicographer who strongly advocated the principle of the absolute predominance of the translational equivalent (the so-called translational principle) and thus would not admit any explanations in his dictionaries (cf. Zgusta 1971:318). However, in spite of this the parentheses do contain an explanation of the morpheme-to-morpheme meaning of the Russian word. Such an etymological or derivational explanation is admissible if it is done in such clear-cut and informative cases and not in too many entries.

There is a type of dictionary whose way of presenting the meaning of the entry-word must be further discussed. Let us take another example, E₅, from the OXFORD LATIN DICTIONARY.

E₅: puella ... (1a) female child, girl (1b) daughter
(2a) young woman (married or otherwise),
girl, maiden (2b) (applied to nymphs, goddesses)
(3a) young woman as an object of sexual interest
(3b) (spec.) one's girl, sweetheart
(4) a slave-girl

The correctness of the indications the entry comprises is unimpeachable, of course. However, is what we read under (3) really an explanation of a sense of the word puella? One of the best contexts quoted as an example in this section is taken from Propertius 1.1.5: (Amor) me docuit castas odisse puellas "(Love) taught me to hate chaste girls". It may be that we learn from this much about Propertius, or the society in which he lived, or at least about the topics of such gallant poetry; but as far as the word puella goes, the only thing that we learn is that it collocates with casta: there is no perceivable semantic effect present here which would deserve a treatment by a separately numbered sense, plus explanation. In a similar way, if we take (2b), we see that it has to do with antonomasy, not with any semantic effect: if I refer to the goddess Venus as, say, the divine girl, the source and ruler of love, it is the same antonomasy as if Elizabeth II is referred to as the present Queen of Great Britain. Clearly, we are much more in the domain of the philosophy of language than in the field of semantics. We shall avoid falling into this snake-pit; may it suffice to repeat that this does not seem to have anything to do with the word puella and its meaning. The reason for presenting the meaning of the entryword in this way seems to consist of the fact that this is a dictionary which is closely attached to the interpretation of Latin texts: it helps the reader to understand them by grouping the attested contexts according to their contents.

It is only natural that such text-oriented dictionaries are most frequently found in the field of the classical languages and their largely literary texts. However, any dictionary that is closely connected with a recorded corpus of texts can operate on this principle.

What can the lexicographer do when there is absolutely no equivalent in the target language? One of the possibilities is to try to create an equivalent, frequently by borrowing the expression from the source language. An explanation then gives the user an understanding of the meaning. This is the way Smirnitskij & Akhmanova construct entry E₆ in their RUSSKO-ANGLIJSKIJ SLOVAR':

E₆: essentuki ... essentuki (kind of mineral water)

In this case, they adhere more strictly to the translational principle than they do in E₄ above; they do not give the explanation that Essentuki is the place close to the Caucasus where this mineral water is found.

The absence of an equivalent is frequently connected with differences in culture and in the surrounding world. An interesting group of words that often have no equivalents in other languages includes onomatopoeias, interjections, functional words, particles and similar lexical units. Two entries from Lambrecht's IFUGAW-ENGLISH DICTIONARY (1978) illustrate this.

E₇: hukhuk ... onomatopoeic word used by gamblers
when they shuffle the cards

E₈: uga ... squealing of pigs

Let us now turn back to the translational equivalent. When the mere glossaries developed into real dictionaries, the extensive use of the translational equivalent had some typical consequences. One of these is the tendency to indicate many equivalents as if they were synonymous, another the superabundance of many different collocations, with yet other translations. This is well illustrated by the partial entry E₉ from the venerable DICTIONNAIRE FRANÇOIS-LATIN (1539) of Robert Estienne, or Robertus Stephanus.

E₉: Abonder. Abondant. Abondance. Abondamment.
Abonder de toutes pars, Praescatere.
Qui abonde en quelque chose, Dapsilis.
Abondant, Affluens, Huber, Hubertur, Profusus.
Abondante nourriture, Alimentum largum.
Homme abondant & riche, Copiosus.

It is natural that a dictionary whose purpose is to help the user write good Latin should offer him as many equivalents as possible. This is a dictionary for someone who already knows much but wishes to improve his Latin style, a reasonable purpose for a dictionary published at that time and in that sociolinguistic and cultural situation, but not to be imitated by every bilingual lexicographer.

Another early dictionary, Cotgrave's DICTIONNAIRE OF THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH TONGUES of 1611, already shows some differentiation:

E₁₀: Fin: f. A fine, end, issue, conclusion, successe;
also, a finishing, ceasing, ending; also,
a seame, or veine, in a quarrey of stone;
also, a barre, exclusion, refusall, or exception,
urged, or pleaded in issue; & sometimes th'issue
it selfe. Fins de non proceder. Are no better
then dilatorie pleas; as an exception, against
the iurisdiction of the Court, or by reason of
the qualitie of the person unfit to be impleaded
therein, &c.
Fins de non recevoir. Looke Recevoir.

We see from E₁₀ that many equivalents or purported equivalents are offered, without a discrimination of their meaning. However, the juridical term fins de non proceder is treated by an explanation, and a strongly encyclopaedic one at that. This is because the dictionary is intended for an English speaker who wishes to understand French texts. One of the greatest dangers of the translational equivalent consists of the possibility or even necessity of using many different expressions of the target language to generate a really smooth translation in varying contexts. However, if such an equivalent has no explanatory power by itself, its value is limited to the context(s) or collocation(s) to which it applies.

The search for a really natural-sounding translation in the target language can result in a movement away from the central meaning of the entry-word. Compare the entries E₁₁ and E₁₂ in Wilson's MODERN RUSSIAN DICTIONARY FOR ENGLISH SPEAKERS. The purpose of this dictionary is to provide for an English speaker the vocabulary he might want to use in speaking or writing Russian. The editor is a lexicographic disciple of O.S. Akhmanova, so that she continues the line of Ščerba's doctrine. True to the expectation, her dictionary is fully based on the translational principle.

It is the practice of perhaps all dictionaries based on the translational principle that an entry word for which there is no good equivalent that would cover many possible contexts is followed by a colon. The meaning of the colon is: what follows is a mere exemplification of the entry-word's use(s), with translation(s); a generalization is impossible or too complicated.

E₁₁: admittedly: admittedly it's not easy priznat'sja,
eto nelegko

The literal meaning of the Russian translation is "to confess" (i.e., to tell the truth), "this is not easy". There is no doubt that the choice of this example is an adroit one, because this use of admittedly is most frequent. The translational equivalent offered here has, then, the advantage of being statistically central, so to speak: there will be many English contexts directly parallel to this example. But the chain of translational equivalents can get too far away from the entry-word, as in E₁₂ from Wilson's dictionary.

E₁₂: upheaval: social/political upheavals
social'nyje/političeskije sdvigi;
I don't want to move again -
it's such an upheaval ja ne khocu
bol'se pereezhat', eto očen' tjaželo

The literal meaning of the Russian translation of the example is "I don't want to move again, it is very difficult". This is an example of a Russian colloquial sentence rather than a translational equivalent of the entry-word.

Towards functional equivalence

No-one will fail to perceive that all this is connected with the problem of the functional equivalence of a translation. A translation should convey to its reader the same message with the same aesthetic and other values which are conveyed by the original text. Since languages differ in all imaginable respects, the translator-lexicographer must sometimes use means quite different from those used in the original in order to obtain the same results. If the different means do produce the same effect, the texts are considered functionally equivalent.

Functional equivalence can be achieved by various means. Let us compare the treatment of the same entry-word in four different dictionaries. Under Pumpernickel we find E₁₃ in COLLINS GERMAN-ENGLISH DICTIONARY (Terrell et al.), E₁₄ in Wildhagen & Héraucourt's ENGLISCH-DEUTSCHES, DEUTSCH-ENGLISCHES WÖRTERBUCH, E₁₅ in LANGENSCHIEDT'S ENZYKLOPÄDISCHES WÖRTERBUCH DER ENGLISCHEN UND DEUTSCHEN SPRACHE, and E₁₆ in OXFORD-HARRAP STANDARD GERMAN-ENGLISH DICTIONARY.

E₁₃: Pumpernickel ... pumpernickel

E₁₄: Pumpernickel ... Westphalian rye bread

E₁₅: Pumpernickel ... (gastr.) pumpernickel, Westphalian rye bread

E₁₆: Pumpernickel ... (comest.) (bread) pumpernickel

Thus we have a purely translational equivalent without explanation, an explanatory paraphrase, a translational equivalent with explanation and register label, and an equivalent with register label and semantic gloss.

Other possibilities exist for supplying information necessary for the user's orientation. The entry E₁₇ from Wolff's DICTIONARY OF CEBUANAO VISAYAN illustrates this.

E₁₇: pyāit ... squeal to the authorities,
betray a secret about a crime

The simplest translational equivalent here would be just squeal; betray a secret can also be considered a translational equivalent, while to the authorities and about a crime are explanatory additions.

Conclusion

A dictionary designed on the pure translational principle is best suited to a user who is trying to understand a given text; any polysemy of a particular word will be disambiguated by the context in which the reader finds it. It is perhaps less suitable as an aid to writers in the production of text; there is no indication as to which translational equivalent belongs to which sense of a word with multiple meanings.

A translation dictionary designed for the production of texts in a foreign language, as exemplified by entries E₉, E₁₁ and E₁₂ above, can achieve much by the excellence of its translations in so far as the exemplifying collocations are well selected; but it tends to restrict its applicability to the data indicated in it.

Let us compare a larger entry from a translation dictionary with one in a dictionary with a more explanatory orientation. E₁₈ is taken from the CAMBRIDGE ITALIAN DICTIONARY, E₁₉ from the SANSONI/HARRAP STANDARD ITALIAN AND ENGLISH DICTIONARY.

E₁₈: *spirit-o m.* breath of life; spirit; ghost; mind; soul; wit; uomo di —, witty man; courage; temper; boldness; prontezza di —, ready wit; presenza di —, presence of mind; — depresso, low spirits; humour; head, leader, inspiration; egli fu lo — della rivolta, he was the leading spirit of the rebellion; — d'osservazione, power of observation; (theol.) — santo, Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost; lo — di Dio, the Spirit of God; spirituality; darsi allo —, to devote oneself to spiritual things; filosofia dello —, mental philosophy; nutrire lo — con buone letture, to nourish (improve) one's mind by good reading; uomo povero di —, humble. (pop.) stupid; opinion, feeling; — di corpo, *esprit de corps*, corporate feeling, loyalty; — di parte, party spirit; lo — pubblico, public spirit; alcohol; una tassa sugli —, a tax on spirits; lampade a —, spirit lamp; — di legno, methyl alcohol; — denaturato, methylated spirits; (Gk. gramm.) breathing; †(naut.) — della corrente, strongest part of the current. -ate *adj.* spiritual, holy, divine; inspired; soulful. -are [A1S] *intr.* (*aux.* essere) to be possessed (by a demon, etc.); -are dalla paura, to be beside oneself with fear; (colloq.) -are dalla fame, dal freddo, to be shivering with hunger, cold. -ato *part. adj.* possessed (by an evil spirit); crazy, mad; terrified; (colloq.) ragazzo -ato, imp of mischief; *n.m.* one possessed by an evil spirit; entro come uno -ato, he entered like one possessed. (-atamente *adv.*) -ello *m. dim.* sprite, elf, goblin; (of a child) imp; (liter.) spirit; power; soul; (ent.) plume moth. *Pterophorus* spp.

E₁₉:

spirito *m.* 1. spirit: *Dio è puro* ~ God is pure spirit. - 2. (*anima*) spirit, soul: *-i dei morti* souls of the departed (o dead). - 3. (*animo*) mind, spirits *pl.*, thoughts *pl.*, *a volte non si traduce: condizione (o disposizione) di* ~ state (o frame) of mind, mood, humour; *calmare gli -i della folla* to calm down the crowd; *avere lo* ~ agitato to be upset, to have troubled thoughts; *sollevarlo lo* ~ di *qd.* to raise s.o.'s spirits, to boost s.o.'s morale; (*centro della personalità morale*) spirit, mind: *piccolezza di* ~ smallness of mind. - 4. (*essere immateriale*) spirit: *-i maligni* wicked (o evil) spirits. - 5. (*genio, folletto*) elf, sprite, (elfin) spirit, fairy, goblin: ~ *del bosco* wood sprite. - 6. (*spettro, fantasma*) ghost, spirit, phantom, spectre, wraith, apparition, (*fam*) spook: *credere agli -i* to believe in ghosts; *nel castello ci sono gli -i* there are ghosts in the castle, the castle is haunted; (*ombra di morto*) shade, spirit, ghost. - 7. (*persona*) spirit, person: *essere uno* ~ superiore to be a noble (o lofty) spirit. - 8. (*vivacità d'ingegno*) quick-wittedness, liveliness, esprit, lively wit: *persona che è tutto* ~ person who has a lively wit; (*sensò dell'umorismo*) wit, sense of humour; *avere dello* ~ to have great sense of humour. - 9. (*disposizione d'animo, senso*) spirit, disposition, outlook, frame of mind, attitude: ~ *di sacrificio* spirit of sacrifice; ~ *pratico* practical disposition; *con* ~ *vendicativo* in a spirit of revenge; (*inclinazione, attitudine*) spirit, disposition, bent, acumen, flair: *avere lo* ~ *dell'affarista* to have business acumen, to have a flair for business. - 10. (*situazione spirituale*) spirit: *lo* ~ *di un'epoca* the spirit of an age. - 11. *pl.* (*orientamento*) views *pl.*, thought, persuasion, attitude: *uomo di -i rivoluzionari* man with revolutionary views. - 12. (*significato intimo, parte essenziale*) spirit, inner meaning, sense: *lo* ~ *di una legge* the spirit of a law. - 13. (*alcool*) spirit, alcohol. - 14. (*letti, respiro*) breath, gasp: *esalare lo (o l'estremo)* ~ to give one's last breath, to breathe one's last. - 15. (*Filos. Occult.*) spirit. - 16. (*Gramm.*) breath₂, aspiration. - 17. (*lett. aut.*) (*stufio, alito*) breathing). - 18. (*ant.*) (*aspirazione*) spirit, prompting, inspiration; (*virtù, facoltà*) power. - 19. (*Fisiol. aut.*) spirit. - Spirito *m.* (*Teol.*) (*Spirito Santo*) Holy Ghost (o Spirit).
 □ *a* ~ spirit: *fornello a* ~ spirit-stove; ~ *angelico* angel; (*Filos.*) *-i animali* animal spirits; ~ *da ardere* methylated spirit; (*Gramm.*) ~ *aspro* rough breathing; (*Teol.*) *-i beati* blessed spirits, spirits of the blessed; *bellu* ~ wit, witty person, bel-esprit, wag; (*Farm.*) ~ *canforato* camphorated spirits *pl.*; *con* ~: 1. wittily, cleverly; *rispondere con* ~ to give a witty reply; 2. (*Mus.*) with spirit (o animation); *essere nelle migliori condizioni di* ~ to be in good (o the best of) spirits; *non sono in condizioni di ~ tali da poter uscire* I feel too depressed to go out; ~ *di contraddizione* spirit of contradiction; ~ *di corpo* esprit de corps, team spirit; (*Teol.*) *gli -i dannati* the damned (*costr. pl.*), the damned souls; *di* ~: 1. (*spirito*) witty; *battuta di* ~ witty remark, witticism, quip, (*fam.*) wisecrack; 2. (*che sta allo scherzo*) who can take a joke; *un uomo di* ~ a man who can take a joke; (*fam.*) a good sport; 3. (*dedito alle cose dell'anima*) spiritual; *un uomo di* ~ a spiritual man; (*Gramm.*) ~ *dolce* smooth breathing; *entrare nello* ~ *di qd.* to enter into the spirit of sth.; *fare dello* ~ to be witty, to crack jokes; *credi di fare dello* ~? do you think you're being funny?; ~ *farmaceutico* alkoxide, alcoholate; ~ *folletto* elfin spirit; ~ *forte*: 1. strong-minded person; 2. (*Rel.*) free-thinker; (*Rel.*) *lo* ~ *è forte ma la carne è debole* the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; (*Rel.*) *-i infernali* powers of darkness, fiends (o spirits) of Hell; (*Chim. aut.*) ~ *di legno* wood spirit; ~ *lento* - spirito dolce; *mancare di* ~ to be lacking in wit, to have no sense of humour; (*trif. a barzellette e sim.*) not to be funny; ~ *d'osservazione* spirit of observation, ~ *di parte* partisan

There is no way of measuring in a really exact manner the density of the information offered. Given the assumption that it is roughly the same in both entries, we can see that E₁₈ is more compact. Opinions may differ on whether it is easier to locate a collocation, or a sense, in a presentation like E₁₈ or E₁₉; in any case, dictionaries built on the translational principle tend not to separate numbered senses because they treat multiple meaning as a continuum. It is interesting to observe, however, that the two entries show some overlap, e.g. the accumulation of translation equivalents in senses 5 and 6 of E₁₉ clearly shows the influence of the translational principle. However, the semantic disambiguating gloss that precedes these equivalents in parentheses makes the presentation nearly as useful for the Italian user's production of English texts as for the English user's comprehension of Italian. On the other hand, the presentation in E₁₈ contains explanatory components as well: notice that the label of sense 16 in E₁₉ indicates only 'grammar' as the register in which the translation breathing, aspiration applies, whereas E₁₈ ties it more specifically to 'Greek grammar'.

The reason for this overlapping is clear: the statistically 'normal user' does not wish to buy several dictionaries of the same language, and therefore many dictionaries are designed to serve more than one purpose. Observably, one of the purposes taken care of in such a multi-purpose dictionary usually enjoys a degree of preference; nevertheless, the chance of being useful to more sets of users and therefore appealing to a broader public (i.e. more buyers) proves to be attractive to many editors and to most publishers.

Since no dictionary will ever contain every piece of information that may be needed, the important thing seems to be that the entry-word should give the user, either by the concatenation of the equivalents or by other means, a notional understanding of the entry-word so that he will be able, in so far as he knows the target language, to choose from the equivalents and translated collocations offered and if necessary to go beyond that.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Reinhard Hartmann for suggesting ways of cutting the original paper down to an appropriate size by removing many additional examples while keeping the overall structure intact.
- 2 In the monolingual dictionary these aspects of meaning specification correspond to the synonym (paraphrase and definition).

References

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