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# THE BILINGUAL DICTIONARY - HELP OR HINDRANCE?

## Introduction

Throughout its history, the conventional bilingual dictionary has been based on a principle which is now being increasingly probed and called into question: that of interlingual equivalence. Until recently, the concept of equivalence was taken for granted, and it was for some years a focal concern in translation theory. It is however a highly problematic concept, and one may ask whether the expectation of equivalence does not hinder rather than further the processes both of translation and of language learning. In denoting equality of meaning, semantic equivalence involves the confrontation of lexemes as units in a vocabulary list, a starting-point which tends to falsify lexical relations within most language pairs, even with two such closely related languages as English and German.

In making these statements, I would however like to point out that they do not apply equally to all types of lexeme or to each type of dictionary. And secondly, I must stress right away that I am not a lexicographer, and that this paper is based on my experience in translating and language teaching at advanced university level, as well as on research in contrastive lexicology, whereby the emphasis falls heavily on the epithet 'contrastive' rather than on the study of isolated lexemes. Indeed, like Hartmann, Neubert and many others professionally interested in translation studies, I have - since carrying out the work described here - widened my scope of study from the word to the text; my rather uneasy relationship to the bilingual dictionary stems from the fact that it operates with lexemes in isolation but actually functions for words in individual texts and in varying contexts.

It is the purpose of my paper, firstly, to point out where the conventional bilingual dictionary can be a hindrance rather than a help to the user, and secondly, to suggest an alternative method of interlingual coordination of the types of lexeme concerned.

## The bilingual dictionary and its user

Hartmann's recent survey of the use of dictionaries by learners of German in Southwest England (Hartmann 1982 and forthcoming) indicates that the general bilingual dictionary tends to be the language learner's favourite tool, especially for checking meaning, grammar and use in context of the foreign lexeme. This means that the vocabulary of the foreign language is internalized and interpreted, not against its own social and cultural background, but in terms of suggested dictionary equivalents in the native language. Furthermore, the most popular activity for which the bilingual dictionary was used turned out in Hartmann's survey to be translation, both from and into the foreign language.

In contrast to that, I would like to point out that in the training of professional translators the general bilingual dictionary is rather discouraged, and in my experience only monolingual dictionaries are permitted for use in examinations.[1] This would indicate that the glib labelling of the general bilingual dictionary as the 'translator's dictionary' is erroneous. Indeed, bilingual lexicography requires a good deal of differentiation, as regards its varied purposes and types of user, and according to its lexical content. For tourists, for example, the small pocket dictionary will remain indispensable; for technical terminology and standardized concepts the bilingual dictionary seems the optimal solution; for the language learner, up to a certain level of competence, specially adapted bilingual dictionaries would be invaluable.

In this paper I would like to concentrate on an area which I have discovered by experience and confirmed by empirical research to be unsatisfactorily treated in the general bilingual dictionary. This is especially the case with those lexemes in everyday language that reflect the perception and evaluation of the speaker and involve culture-specific factors or relationships to personal or socially set norms. Such lexemes are usually distorted by approximate renderings in the form of rough equivalents and require a high degree of 'delicacy' (cf. Halliday 1976:72) in their analysis. Our envisaged user is therefore the translator, the foreign language teacher, or the advanced student at university level.

## The descriptive verb

As a prototype of this problematic area of vocabulary, I would like to take a type of verb immediately recognizable to the experienced translator as a chronic source of difficulty, which I have identified as the 'descriptive verb' (Snell-Hornby 1983). Typical examples in English are bustle, nag, prowl and gleam, and in German huschen, keifen and scheppern. The descriptive verb centres particularly on fields of human behaviour and activity, as well as on verbs expressing perception, mainly of sound, light, movement and speed. In semantic terms, it can be broadly defined as a structure focussing not on the verbal action itself, but on a complex of modifying elements describing the manner in which the action is carried out, evaluated or perceived, whereby one of the participants in the action is characterized by the speaker. This complex of elements expressing characterization or mode of perception is realized in the verb's basic definition by 'dynamic adjectives' which are, firstly, susceptible to subjective measure and secondly, gradable, expressing relative value that can be judged in terms of an implied and accepted norm (cf. Quirk et al. 1972:265). As examples let us take English bustle, characterizing human activity, and German huschen, expressing perception of movement. (My source texts are literary works by Böll, Durrell, Frisch, Heym, Isherwood, Masters and O'Brien.) In bustle, the type of verbal action is left open, as in the following example:

(1a) He recalled an aimless bustling in the night, but now all was in order.

This must where necessary be specified by the context:

(1b) The once cavernous and deserted kitchens were now full of the echoing bustle of servants preparing for a new feast or clearing up after one which had ended.

Focal in bustle is the descriptive element of energetic, feverish or noisy activity, often to no apparent purpose. German huschen focusses on rapid and usually silent movement typically experienced by the speaker as being somewhat uncanny. It can describe the movement of a small animal, as in (2a).

(2a) Mit einem kleinen und fast liebevollen "Flapp" raschelte das Geschoß in die spröde Erde. Es erinnerte mich oft an das bescheidene und fast lautlose Huschen einer Feldmaus, die an einem stillen Nachmittag über den Weg läuft.

or of shadows or objects in the distance:

(2b) Reinhardt fuhr gern durch die Stadt. Über Moenkebergs breiten Rücken hinweg konnte er die alten Häuser Prags vorbeihuschen sehen. Moenkeberg fuhr immer mit überhöhter Geschwindigkeit.

A problem for bilingual lexicography is that, like most other descriptive verbs, neither bustle nor huschen have a satisfactory lexical equivalent in the other language. In the traditional bilingual dictionary this problem is solved basically in two ways: either by general paraphrase - for bustle LANGENSCHEIDT'S HANDWÖRTERBUCH offers geschäftig tun and Betrieb machen - or by a list of frequently uncommented synonyms - for schleudern, for example, CASSELL'S DICTIONARY suggests sling, catapult, fling, throw, hurl, toss, project, send, shoot, dart, reminding one of Samuel Martin's scathing comment made over twenty years ago:

> And sometimes the uncritical heaping up of near-synonyms is simply an evasion of responsibility on the part of the dictionary-maker: unable (or too little informed) to make up his own mind, he shifts the burden of choice to the user of the dictionary. (1962:156)

With these words of criticism I by no means wish to belittle the effort and the years of hard work that go into making a dictionary, but I would plead for new concepts and new methods of description and presentation. And in all fairness I must add that more recent dictionaries, such as COLLINS GERMAN-ENGLISH ENGLISH-GERMAN DICTIONARY, do provide more examples and more precise indications of context than the older dictionaries did, although this tends to inflate the size of the work considerably.

## Paradigmatic analysis and extent of coverage

Before going into these problems, I would like to refer briefly to some results of a pilot study I carried out at Zürich University, testing the competence of 12 German-speaking students of English in translating descriptive verbs from German to English under varying conditions (Snell-Hornby 1983:216 ff.), whereby the number of translation errors varied, not so much among the students as with the semantic relationships existing between the

German and English lexemes concerned, and also with the function of the verb in the text. Furthermore, and for this paper most significant: the number of errors did not depend on whether the use of a dictionary was permitted, although the type of information found in the dictionaries was crucial. The monolingual dictionaries were found to provide reliable, if sometimes incomplete information, while the bilingual dictionaries proved unsatisfactory. This was due especially to the uncommented lists of synonyms mentioned above, which only provide real help in jogging the memory of the bilingual user already familiar with them. In this case the suggested English equivalents were usually unknown to the students, who said they often chose at random. Far more successful was a specially worked out form of guided help, whereby the English verbs were arranged in paradigms and their components analyzed to reveal the crucial points of differentiation between them and indicate their typical collocations or realization in a context.

I would like to illustrate this by analyzing the three close English synonyms hurl, fling and toss, all of them equated in the five bilingual dictionaries I checked[2] with schleudern and werfen. In their transitive usage, hurl, fling and toss all describe specifically modified acts of throwing, the main differences between them being seen in the force of the movement and in the weight of the object thrown. Hurl focusses on violent movement, usually of a heavy object:

(3a) Bedsteads, cupboards, sofas were propelled out upon the balcony and hurled from there into the courtyard.

Fling indicates impulsive or angry movement without specification of the object:

(3b) (i) Meanwhile, Otto had flung himself upon Arthur like a young bear.

(ii) He tugged the ruby from his finger and flung it at her.

Toss focusses on careless or nonchalant throwing, typically of a light object:

(3c) They drank. They smoked. All twelve smokers tossing the butts on to the tiled roof that sloped towards the farm buildings.

German schleudern, on the other hand, expresses vehement movement and focusses on the sweeping movement of the arm, typically designed to send the object, whose size and weight is left open, over some distance:

(3d) Offenbar hatte sie erwartet, dass ich aufspringe und Steine schleudere, um die Leute zu vertreiben wie eine Gruppe von Ziegen.

Having stressed these common components and points of differentiation, described by Leisi (1962) as "Zonen der Deckung" and "Zonen der Verschiedenheit", we can see that such lexemes are

more adequately compared in terms of extent of coverage than confronted as suggested equivalents: indeed, if we can talk of lexical equivalence here, then only in concrete terms as specified by the function of the lexeme within a particular co-text. For example, in (3d) above, fling may be seen as a satisfactory functional or working equivalent of schleudern, also schleudern of hurl in (3a), but not of fling in (3b). It cannot however be the realistic aim of the general bilingual dictionary to anticipate all the possible functions and usages in context of the lexemes listed, although ironically this seems to be what a long list of synonyms vainly attempts to do.

Model for a contrastive dictionary of synonyms

I would therefore propose that the conventional bilingual dictionary be supplemented by segmental, purpose-specific contrastive dictionaries of synonyms, whereby the alphabetical system gives way to arrangement in semantic fields (cf. Hayakawa 1971; Martin 1984 in this volume). The underlying principle would be definition by comparison and contrast, both paradigmatically or intralingually (as I have attempted to do above with the paradigm hurl/fling/toss), and contrastively or interlingually, as attempted above with the introduction of schleudern. The definitions should be supported by examples from authentic texts. In an analysis of 1100 German and English descriptive verbs (617 in English and 483 in German) arranged in 53 semantic fields, I have presented such a contrastive study of synonyms as reference material for translators, language teachers and students (Snell-Hornby 1983).

I would now like to outline a model for comparing and contrasting synonyms in the way I envisage, but due to the limited space, I shall take some relatively simple and extremely common lexemes: some basic adjectives in English and German denoting physical size. The analysis of each field in the proposed model would consist of four parts:

(1) a graphic representation of the field;

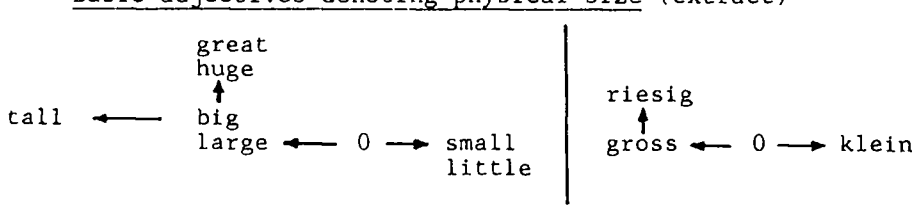
(2) a brief survey of the structure of the field;

(3) a description of the lexemes by contrastive definition;

(4) examples from authentic texts (not translated and not involving idiosyncratic usage).

Firstly, the graphic representation (Part 1 of the model):

Basic adjectives denoting physical size (extract)[3]



This basic system aims at maximum simplicity and flexibility: the paradigms are represented in columns, the gaps with arrows indicating a transition or shift in perspective; horizontal arrows between the columns indicate a change in physical dimension. The structure of the field of size (Part 2), as represented by this sample, can be described as follows:

> The adjectives presented here all denote size relative to a hypothetical norm represented on the diagram by 0: lexemes to the left of 0 denote size exceeding this norm, those to the right, size falling short of it. The columns are arranged in descending order of size.

The main section with the contrastive definitions (Part 3) would run as follows, and for clarity and brevity I have here included a few very simple examples (Part 4) within the text - authentic examples with the necessary co-text are usually longer and more complex, and hence should normally be listed separately as footnotes (cf. Snell-Hornby 1983:89 ff.):

> Large and small are antonyms indicating objective measure of size in excess of and in default of 0 respectively; these are the terms used in trade and official reports. Big and little are likewise antonyms indicating subjective impression of size; these are the words used in everyday language, by small children, in an emotive context, or to indicate a general impression. In an unstressed position, big can have an augmentative function ("Look at that great big dog!"), and little a diminutive function ("Look at that dear little puppy!"). In contrast to English, German has only one pair of antonyms, groß and klein, expressing both objective measurement and subjective impression of size. Groß has no augmentative function; this is expressed in German by compounds, e.g. Riesen- or riesengroß. Groß also extends to tall in expressing measurement of human height. Great on the other hand indicates a subjective impression of extreme magnitude, either concrete ("He felt lost in the great city") or abstract, indicating evaluation ("Shakespeare was a great dramatist"). German riesig expresses the subjective impression of extreme magnitude only in the concrete sense ("Tokio ist eine riesige Stadt"), whereby it has the emphatic colloquial function of English huge. The abstract sense of extreme magnitude, on the other hand, is expressed by groß ("Er war ein großer Schriftsteller").

## Conclusion

This short description obviously could not aim at exhausting all the semantic and syntactic properties of the lexemes concerned, and the problem of maximum economy in presentation also remains to be solved, but I hope to have given some evidence for my conviction that the bilingual dictionary will not fulfil its function completely if it remains merely a repository of isolated lexemes and static equivalents - it also needs to reveal the dynamic system of relationships within and between languages, the function of words in their contexts, and the interdependence of language, culture and social interaction.

In browsing through some of the conventional bilingual dictionaries now on the market, I am frequently reminded of Hamlet's famous answer when Polonius asks him (Act II, Scene 2) "What do you read, my lord?", and it runs, "Words, words words". And when Polonius insists, "I mean, the matter that you read, my lord", Hamlet replies, "Slanders, sir", and with those two rejoinders he highlights the difference between the (empty) word and the meaningful text. Fortunately of course, by no means all texts are slanderous, but a text is essentially a unit of communication and expression made possible by the infinite potential and the sometimes overwhelming complexity of language. And though there may often seem to the translator and the language student to be madness in that complexity, it is surely the main task of the lexicographer to elucidate the method in it.

Notes

1 I am here referring specifically to the Institut für Übersetzen und Dolmetschen, University of Heidelberg, but a similar practice was confirmed by other institutions at the AILA colloquium on Translation Studies (Saarbrücken, July 1983).

2 These dictionaries were: CASSELL'S DICTIONARY (1978), COLLINS GEM DICTIONARY (1978), Schöffler-Weis KLETT/HARRAP DICTIONARY (1969), Langenscheidt's HANDWÖRTERBUCH (1977), and Wildhagen BRANDSTETTER/ALLEN & UNWIN DICTIONARY (1972).

3 This is an extract from work done with students at the University of Berne, as described in Snell-Hornby (forthcoming). Contrast these findings with statements made by Teller (1969: 205 f.).

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