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Synonymy and Bilingual Lexicography

Abstract

In this paper three procedures are described in which synonyms and bilingual dictionaries are involved. The first procedure makes use of sets of synonymous translation equivalents in bilingual dictionaries in order to find basic materials for a monolingual dictionary of synonyms. The second procedure uses a dictionary of synonyms to check the internal consistency of sets of translation equivalents in a bilingual dictionary. In the third procedure a monolingual dictionary of synonyms is used as an aid in creating more coherence in the two parts of a set of bilingual dictionaries for a given language pair.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the concept of synonymy has not been of central interest to those who are working in the field of bilingual lexicography. Their principal concern has always been what is mostly called equivalence, that is to say the semantic correspondence between the meaning of a word in the source language and the meaning of its translation in the target language. Whereas both synonymy and equivalence have to do with 'having (approximately) the same meaning', the former seems to be restricted to one language, while the latter is mostly used when more than one language is involved. The *Concise English Dictionary* (1990), for instance, defines 'synonym' as "a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another in the same language (e.g. *shut* and *close*)" and 'equivalent' as "(of words) having the same meaning".

I want to follow this use of the terms, although at a theoretical level it might be rather hard to defend a strict difference between these two cases of sameness of meaning. It is not now my intention to go into this debate. I would rather like to show in what ways synonymy and bilingual lexicography may mutually enrich monolingual as well as bilingual dictionaries.

In this article I want to describe three procedures in which synonyms and bilingual dictionaries are involved. A first procedure makes use of sets of synonymous translation equivalents in order to find basic materials for a monolingual dictionary of synonyms. The second procedure uses the dictionary of synonyms to check the internal consistency of sets of translation equivalents in a bilingual dictionary. In the third procedure the dictionary of synonyms is used as an aid in creating more coherence in the two parts of a set of bilingual dictionaries for a given language pair.

2. From bilingual dictionaries to a dictionary of synonyms

Al (1983) has convincingly argued in favour of a distinction between two types of bilingual dictionaries, one from the mother tongue into the foreign language and one the other way round. This distinction, which is also known as the Scerba concept, leads to different structures of articles in the productive dictionary ('dictionnaire de thème') and in the receptive dictionary ('dictionnaire de version'). One of the distinctive features is that, whereas the number of translations in the productive dictionary has to be limited for a number of reasons, the receptive dictionary has to be generous on that point (see Bogaards 1990).

Indeed, the latter type of dictionary has to give as much translation equivalents as possible, for three reasons. First, the receptive dictionary should give as complete an image as possible of the semantic riches of the foreign element. In many cases a single translation will not suffice to do that job. Second, because the receptive dictionary is mostly meant as an aid to translation, it should list as many acceptable translations as possible, so that the user can choose from as large a set of mother tongue synonyms as possible the one element that best fits the context. Third, synonyms are an attractive and effective means to disambiguate translation equivalents in the mother tongue. So, if French *arme* was only translated by English *arm*, the English dictionary user would keep wondering which sense of *arm* was meant: a weapon or a part of the human body. By adding one or more synonyms (*weapon*, *gun*), rather than or in addition to giving some sort of comment (e.g. <mil.>), the lexicographer can exclude other senses of the polysemous word *arm*. So, in theory at least, the receptive dictionary should contain many sets of words having (approximately) the same meaning.

In another article, Al (1988) has demonstrated that these sets of (quasi-)synonyms constitute a good base for compiling a dictionary of synonyms. To give an impression of the procedure, consider the translations of a number of words having the meaning of 'to fail' as they appear in three receptive dictionaries which were compiled along the lines described above. The French-Dutch, English-Dutch and German-Dutch *Van Dale* dictionaries give respectively:

échouer	I 0.2 mislukken => verkeerd lopen, verkeerd gaan, schipbreuk lijden
manquer	I 0.4 mislukken => falen
rater	I 0.1 mislukken
fail ²	I 0.6 mislukken => het niet halen, falen
miscarry	0.1 mislukken => niet slagen, falen
break down	I 0.2 mislukken <v. besprekingen, huwelijk e.d.>
misslingen	0.1 mislukken, mislopen
missglücken	0.1 niet lukken, mislukken

fehlschlagen	0.1 mislukken => verkeerd uitvallen, falen, geen succes hebben
scheitern	0.1 mislukken, schipbreuk lijden => falen, stranden
sich zerschlagen	0.1 niet doorgaan, mislukken, afspringen => schipbreuk lijden, op niets uitlopen

These sets of synonyms and quasi-synonyms have a considerable overlap. Apart from what seems to be the neutral or central term *mislukken*, several words and expressions appear several times. The following series can be seen as a first approximation of terms describing the concept 'to fail' in Dutch:

mislukken	=> afspringen, falen, geen succes hebben, het niet halen, mislopen, niet doorgaan, niet lukken, niet slagen, op niets uitlopen, schipbreuk lijden, stranden, verkeerd gaan, verkeerd lopen, verkeerd uitvallen.
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By putting together all the sets of Dutch translation equivalents which have one or more items in common, the computer gives a fair amount of possible synonym clusters. I will not go into the detail of the editorial process. This has been described by Van Sterkenburg (1992).

3. Checking translation equivalents with the help of synonyms

As soon as the dictionary of synonyms (Van Sterkenburg et al. 1991) had been published, it was possible to use the material the other way around. As mentioned above, the receptive dictionary has to be as generous as possible with regard to translation equivalents. Having the clusters of Dutch synonyms available, it soon became clear that in many cases the number and the choice of Dutch equivalents given for some particular French word were more or less haphazard.

As an illustration, we can again take the translations of *échouer*, *manquer* and *rater* in the French-Dutch dictionary (see above). Why is it, one may ask, that next to the central term *mislukken*, the first verb has three synonyms, the second one only one, and the third one no synonym at all? It does not seem that *échouer*, taken in the sense of 'to fail', has a more elaborate meaning than the other verbs, or that this verb is more important or more frequent. So, the dictionary of synonyms can help to find inconsistencies in the way similar meanings have been treated at different places.

As a second possible application, the dictionary of synonyms may be helpful in tracing translation equivalents which are incorrectly given in some set. As is well known, the receptive dictionary has to present the meanings of the foreign words in the light of the semantic system of the native language. This means that if a monosemous word or a given meaning of a polysemous word of the foreign language can be translated by words which are not synonymous in the mother tongue, distinct sets of translation equivalents will

have to be presented. The implication of this rule is that sets of translation equivalents should contain only synonyms.

So, when we find

avide 0.1 *gulzig* => *begerig, inhalig, gretig* 'eager'

the dictionary of synonyms tells us that *begerig* and *gretig* 'eager, keen' are close synonyms which include the somewhat more specific meaning of *gulzig* 'greedy', but that *inhalig* 'grasping' points to a much more egoistic kind of desire. In the same way in

déprécier 0.1 *geringschatten* => *onderschatten, kleineren, afkammen* 'disparage'

all verbs express a form of 'having a poor opinion of' except for *kleineren* 'belittle', which has the meaning of 'treating in a negative way'. In both cases, the allosemous word has to be removed.

Sometimes, this procedure may suggest that more meanings have to be distinguished than are now in the dictionary. This is the case in

précis 0.1 *nauwkeurig* => *precies, duidelijk, specifiek*
'precise, exact'

where only *nauwkeurig* and *precies* are close synonyms, and where *duidelijk* 'clear, distinct' and *specifiek* 'particular, specific' both reflect different aspects of the meaning of the foreign word. This becomes clear also in examples like *une description précise* 'a precise, exact description', *des contours précis* 'clear, distinct outlines' and *sans raison précise* 'for no particular reason'. So, this lemma should be rewritten something like:

précis 0.1 *nauwkeurig* => *precies, nauwgezet, stipt*
0.2 *duidelijk* => *duidelijk waarneembaar*
0.3 *specifiek*

This last translation leads to an interesting question: how should we consider cases where some translation equivalent (*specifiek*) does have synonyms in the target language (*karakteristiek, kenmerkend, typisch*, etc.) but where these synonyms do not seem to be possible translation equivalents of the foreign element? Here we seem to arrive at the dividing line between (monolingual) synonymy and (interlingual) equivalence.

4. A dictionary of synonyms for the improvement of the coherence in bilingual dictionaries

The materials of the same dictionary of synonyms (Van Sterkenburg et al. 1991) are being used also for the improvement of both the productive and the receptive bilingual dictionaries. In a first attempt I have been working on Dutch and French words and expressions meaning 'to leave a place' (Bogaards 1992). The Dutch dictionary of synonyms allowed me to find about 30 items, from *heengaan* 'depart' through *z'n biezen pakken* 'pack one's bags' and *ophoepelen* 'get lost' to *oplazeren* 'bugger off' and *opsoedmieteren* 'fuck off'. I have checked the exact meaning as well as the register of all these items in two dictionaries of modern Dutch.

I have also listed all the translations of these items in the Van Dale Dutch–French dictionary. This produced a list of more than 40 French words and expressions having all about the same meaning of 'to leave a place', from *s'enfuir* 'run away' through *déguerpir* 'clear off' and *lever l'ancre* 'make tracks' to *mettre les bouts* 'hop it' and *foutre le camp* 'bugger off'. I have done the same check on meaning and register as I had done for the Dutch items, using now two French dictionaries. After having completed both lists with information on the idiomatic character and the colourfulness of the items as well as on their possible use in the imperative mood, I was able to compare the two lists and to pick out the best equivalents in both directions.

Since up to that very moment the compilers of the dictionaries had always been working in alphabetical order, it was no wonder that many articles had to be partially rewritten. To get an idea of the improvements that were possible, consider the following examples (to the left the translations in the actual dictionary, to the right the corrections which will appear in the next edition).

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| a. opstappen 'get along' | |
| <i>s'en aller => partir</i> | <i>lever l'ancre => mettre les voiles</i> |
| b. afnokken 'buzz off' | |
| <i>se barrer => se tirer,</i> | <i>se tirer => se barrer, se</i> |
| <i>se tailler, se casser,</i> | <i>tailler, <rapidly> se</i> |
| <i>caleter</i> | <i>casser, détalé, caleter</i> |
| c. oprotten 'bugger off' | |
| <i>ficher le camp => se barrer</i> | <i>foutre le camp => se</i> |
| <i>se casser, se tirer</i> | <i>tailler</i> |
| d. fiche(r) le camp | |
| <i>'m smeren, maken dat men weg</i> | <i>opduvelen, ophoepelen,</i> |
| <i>komt</i> | <i>opkrassen</i> |
| e. lever l'ancre | |
| <i>ertussenuit knijpen, weggaan</i> | <i>opstappen, z'n biezen pakken</i> |

After this procedure had proved to be fruitful, part of it has been automatized. Taking as an example the cluster *woedend* 'furious, very angry', which includes words like *driftig*, *woest*, *ziedend*, *hels*, etc., it is now possible to get an alphabetical list of all the French words of the French–Dutch dictionary which have been translated by one of the words of the cluster. This type of list looks like this:

woedend	bile	3.2; échauffer la – de, à qn. \ iem. nijdig, woedend maken
	colère	6.1; être en – \ woedend zijn
	colère	6.1; en – \ woedend
	colère	3.1; schr. être – \ woedend zijn
	furie	6.1; en – \ woedend, woest, onstuimig, razend
	oreille	3.1; chauffer, échauffer les oreilles de, à qn \ iem. nijdig, woedend maken
	...	
woest	barbare	0.3; woest, wild, meedogenloos, wreed, barbaars
	déchaîné	0.1; onstuimig, woest, woedend, stormachtig, wild
	furieux	0.1; woedend, razend, woest, wild
	...	
ziedend	écumant	6.2; – de rage \ ziedend van woede
	fumant	0.3; inf. ziedend

Although these lists still have some drawbacks (they are not free from noise), they are very useful because they contain all synonyms of a cluster and their translations in the other language, and they allow to work on the receptive as well as on the productive dictionary of a language pair.

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