

## Cross Language Equivalence: Between Lexical and Translation Equivalents in the Case of English-Japanese Dictionaries

### Abstract

In English-Japanese dictionaries, word senses are mostly given as Japanese equivalents. If the source word is a thing word like *sun*, the equivalent 'taiyo' or 'hi' is fixed in whatever context it occurs, that is, the lexical equivalent is also the translation; while for a word like *informal*, lexical equivalents often merely suggest translations. There is a gradation in the degree of context-dependency of equivalents. This paper discusses the limited relevancy of the lexical equivalents in English-Japanese dictionaries.

### 1. Introduction

From the viewpoint of English-Japanese dictionary-making, the headwords can be roughly divided into two groups, that of function words, and that of content words. The function words are limited in number, and more or less of syntactic nature, and though Japanese equivalents are generally given for these words, too, they are rather to help explain the grammatical function of these words, and are more or less fixed, with little room for alternative expressions. E-J dictionaries play only a subsidiary role with regard to this group.

Those words which users most often look up in E-J dictionaries are content words, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Meanings of these words are generally given as Japanese equivalents, and the editors try their best to offer adequate ones. But how close to the source words are these equivalents? How easy or difficult is it to cross the barriers between the two languages? This paper is a tentative attempt to look into the matter and see what is involved in the process.

One of the major points to be taken into consideration in handling content words is how context-free their equivalents are. For example, in Japanese *sun* is 'taiyo', or 'hi' in whatever context the word occurs, as long as it is used in its primary sense. What matters with such a thing word is its factual identity and how different the thing is in nomenclature from language to language. And then, *Go* is 'iku' when it means "move from one place to another", but in *go mad*, 'naru'; in this case the

equivalents are fixed according to the context. On the other hand, *sublime* is about a spiritual value for which the criteria are highly subjective, so that the equivalents vary from 'sukona' to 'sogon na' to many others, depending on subtle nuances of the context.

In this way, content words form a continuum in relation to context-dependency of equivalents, from *sun* to *go* to *sublime*, and higher context-dependency makes the selection of appropriate equivalents more complicated. This paper will take up *informal* as an example of words which present difficulty to editors in this respect.

## 2. Two problems concerning the equivalents of *informal*

*Informal* poses two problems. One is that it is a negative word. Though it is not entirely identical with *not formal* the word is still pregnant with potential meanings. And unfortunately, there is no Japanese expression as inclusive in meaning as *informal*. 'Hikoshikino' is found in all major E-J dictionaries as an equivalent; it is also negative in meaning, but basically it is closer to *unofficial*. In some dictionaries, *an informal party* is translated as 'hikoshikino atsumari', which, however, merely implies, for instance, a private party given to a state guest, and does not cover all the variety of informal party. There is no equivalent entirely coextensive in meaning with *informal*.

The second problem is cultural. *Informal* is concerned in many cases with norms that are cultural in nature. Every culture has various norms, and to conform to them or not comprises a large part of our daily concern, but how norms are set in the real world depends on the particular culture. Therefore, 'what is *informal* in English-speaking countries does not necessarily have a counterpart in Japan. This poses a problem in E-J dictionaries. Let us discuss this point first.

## 3. Cultural involvement

*Informal* is very often used about the manner of dressing. Most English dictionaries published in Britain and the US cite "informal dress/clothes", the representative definition being 'appropriate to everyday life or use' (Collins 1994). Webster's New World (1988) is more detailed and points out the dual implication of the epithet:

- (c) designed for use or wear on everyday occasions;
- (d) not requiring formal dress.

The more difficult one is definition (d), which presupposes “formal dress”. In E-J dictionaries, *formal dress* is ‘seiso (correct style) or reihuku (ceremonial dress)’, and *informal dress* ‘ryakuso (simple style) or heihuku (ordinary clothes)’. But these words were coined when Japan encountered Western civilization over a century ago. Conceptually, distinction between formal and informal styles must exist in any culture but Japanese terms did not correspond suitably with the English ones because of difference in dressing style at that time. Hence the coinage of new terms. Since then Japanese dressing style has become very extensively Westernized and most of the time we dress that way both at home and outside the home, but we have not completely identified ourselves with the Western dress code. Therefore the above-mentioned newly-coined terms are still vague in Japanese.

One recent popular outfitting practice among men will illustrate this point well. In Japan ceremonies are very important social functions, and people make a point of attending them. Some clothing manufacturers have been clever enough to take advantage of this custom, and put on the market a suit made of shiny inexpensive black cloth, calling it “formal dress” in English. Japanese tend to conform, and when a good number of men are dressed in this way on ceremonious occasions, both congratulatory and sorrowful, others quickly follow suit, to be on the safe side. Frankly this is a very economical way of dressing since only one inexpensive black suit serves many kinds of social functions. But it is more like a uniform for the sake of conformity, and is quite different from, for example, a dinner jacket, which is for formal evening wear, perhaps at elaborate parties attended by dressed-up people.

*Informal* as a positive statement, meaning ‘designed for use or wear on everyday occasions (New World)’ can include a great variety of dressing styles, from ordinary workaday clothes, such as lounge/ business suit to jeans or shorts.

According to COD (1995), a *lounge suit* (Brit) is ‘a man’s formal suit for ordinary day wear’; distinction between formality and informality is a relative concept, so a lounge suit is informal compared to evening dress but, compared to jeans, looks formal. Apart from the social dress code, we have a natural sense of the distinction. In this sense, the Japanese equivalent is ‘aratomatta (formality-conscious)’.

In any case, this second sense is applied to a variety of dressing styles and here again we have no term as inclusive in meaning, and a number of separate equivalents are required. A lounge/business suit for men is ‘sebiro’, in private life we wear ‘hudangi’, when we are relaxing at home, we are in a ‘kinagashi or kuturoida’ style, when we feel athletic in shorts or a baggy sweatshirt we are in ‘rahuna or muzosana’ style, and so

on. Still, this category is easier to handle, because what matters is the concept itself, not specific kind of wear, and the context in which the word occurs generally suggests an appropriate equivalent. Here editors will be excused by giving some representative ones.

#### **4. Language-related use**

*Informal* also refers to register or levels of usage in “informal English/style etc.” Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage (1989) comments on this use as “often used as a replacement for ... colloquial”, but “of vague application” and “its meaning is rather elusive.” Though the concept of formal/informal style itself may be shared by most languages, how to tell one from the other in actual use will be no easy task at all in any language, and much less so to match the English term with that in Japanese.

Most E-J dictionaries give ‘kogotai no (in colloquial style)’ as a standard equivalent. The problem here is that ‘kogotai’ means not only colloquial Japanese but also modern Japanese itself. Before Japan opened up to the world more than a century ago, the bulk of written Japanese was made up of “kanji = Chinese characters (ideogram)” of the words which were often too literary to be used in spoken form. Then under the influence of Western languages, we are now advised to write as we speak, and ‘kogotai’ means modern Japanese as well. Thus it is not quite correct to use ‘kogotai’ as an equivalent of *informal*, which only refers to one aspect of modern English.

E-J dictionaries generally add ‘kaiwatai no (conversational style)’, or ‘hanashikotoba no (spoken-language style)’. All these terms combined convey the overall nuances of the source word fairly well, but the emphasis is still too much on spoken language. Regardless of spoken/written forms, we say ‘kudaketa (unstilted)’ or ‘katakurushiku nai (not stiff)’, but these sound too informal to qualify as dictionary terms to denote a level of usage. Here again no single equivalent will do.

#### **5. General application**

So far the discussion has been about equivalents of a source word in specific areas such as dressing style and language register. There are still numerous applications to be considered. In *informal talks between the two leaders* (LDOCE 1995), we have an exact equivalent ‘hikoshikino’, which was perhaps coined for this sense. In *The house has an informal*

*atmosphere* (COBUILD 1995), 'kutsuroida or kirakuna' will be appropriate.

However, everything is not this easy. For example, in *informal meeting* what is the implication of the epithet? It can mean 'hikoshikino (unofficial)', 'kirakuna (relaxed)', 'uchiwano (of friends)', 'shinbokuno (social)', etc.

This kind of list can be very long, so two more citations must suffice. They are from Time magazine. 1. *And we are much less dependent on informal social controls, which, when they work, are the most powerful control.* (Aug. 27, 1993). I would suggest 'meni mienai (implicit)' as an equivalent, but that alone would not be adequate enough. 2. *Variiously called the 'informal sector' or the 'parallel economy', it is the rare engine of life.* (Sept. 7, 1992). This is more specific, meaning not regular or approved form of business, and in Japanese perhaps 'urano (backstage)'.

## 6. Conclusion

As is shown in the previous chapters, the equivalents of *informal* found in current E-J dictionaries are varied in nature: those of wide as well as more limited application, and those which are merely explanatory; but with all the variety, they are not sufficient to cover all the cases, the equivalents being heavily dependent on the context.

Unlike *sun*, *informal* functions as an integral part of a word group, contributing to form a higher conceptual unit. Concerning such a word, an extensive study of translation equivalents is necessary in selecting lexical equivalents. It is true that some of the equivalents of *informal* resist improvement on account of the difference in social customs and language structure. Even so it seems that there is much to be desired with regard to lexical entries of *informal*.

Fortunately, access to relevant citations in large database corpora is now possible, and trying to find adequate translation equivalents for them in Japanese is something like witnessing cross sections of the whole linguistic, semantic, conceptual and cultural network of English pitted against that of Japanese. Times and things change constantly, so this is an ephemeral encounter, but in order to improve on the quality of E-J dictionaries, editors are required to be vigilant regarding the actual use of entry words, especially such a key word as *informal*, which is placed in the band of 3200 basic words according to COBUILD. It is impossible to list all the translation equivalents in the limited space of E-J dictionaries, and even if it were possible, users would prefer quick

reference, and yet lexical equivalents chosen out of a large number of translation equivalents would be more adequate and to the point.

Good E-J dictionaries are of invaluable help to learners of English in Japan. In this ever-shrinking world, some common language is needed for international communication, and bilingualism is considered to be one of the most important accomplishments in Japan. For us bilingualism usually means coexistence of the common language and our own vernacular in one person. We find this no easy task, and the effort consumes a good deal of time and energy. However, we believe lingual diversity is as important as biodiversity, and should be preserved. Otherwise, the rich variety in verbal expression, the way of thinking and culture itself in today's world would be irretrievably lost. Bilingual dictionaries, of which the E-J dictionary is one, offer a help to prevent such impoverishment. E-J dictionaries would not be entirely free from imperfections, since lexical equivalents are after all mere approximations of the source words, and yet carefully-edited E-J dictionaries are an important asset for us in today's world.

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