

Reversing a Bilingual Dictionary: a mixed blessing?

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The presentation focuses on the experience of reversing a general Estonian-English dictionary of about 49,000 entries and 93,000 equivalents by means of the Tshwanelex dictionary compilation software. The reversal served two purposes. First, it seemed appropriate to reuse the established cross-linguistic equivalents in the Estonian-English dictionary for the B part of a new English-Estonian dictionary. Second, one also expected to enlarge and improve the reversed Estonian-English dictionary in the course of the post-editing phase. So far the post-editing phase of the English-Estonian dictionary has been highly rewarding. In fact, it could be regarded as simultaneous cross-fertilization of both dictionaries, especially with regard to additional meanings and a more balanced treatment of synonyms. On the other hand, the post-editing phase of a general dictionary has been more time-consuming than expected. It is also argued that, on the one hand, the reversal mercilessly reveals the drawbacks of the B part of a bilingual dictionary, such as explanation-like equivalents, inaccurate equivalents, lexical poverty, etc. In fact, it appears that many dictionaries are not actually suitable for reversal. On the other hand, in the case of reversibly oriented dictionaries the post-reversal editing process may result in enriched target and source dictionaries – and will considerably reduce asymmetry in bilingual dictionaries.

1. Introduction

The advent of dictionary compilation software has made the reversal of a bilingual dictionary technically much easier than ever before. Moreover, bilingual lexicographers are often expected to compile dictionaries for both directions of a language pair. The study of what happens during the reversal process is instructive in that it brings to prominence a number of possible shortcomings in the previously compiled bilingual dictionaries that are used as source dictionaries for reversal (see e.g. Geisler 2002; Krek et al. 2008; Newmark 1999; Prinsloo and de Schryver 2002; Tamm 2002; Varantola 2004; Veisbergs 2004). It appears that, if possible, rather than reversing a previously compiled dictionary, one has to think how to design first a reversibly oriented bilingual dictionary that could at a later stage be reversed with maximum benefit (for the Dutch experience see Martin 2007). Moreover, the hunt for appropriate equivalents may involve a considerable amount of work; thus it is highly desirable that the work already done should be reusable. It is more important for medium- and large-scale dictionary projects where the amount of work needed to retype any material is considerable. However, before turning to the reversal of an Estonian-English dictionary, it is appropriate to analyse some of the existing Estonian bilingual dictionaries from the perspective of reversibility.

2. A few factors that lower the degree of reversibility

When studying the existing English-Estonian bilingual dictionaries from the perspective of reversibility, it appears that more often than not they reveal a low degree of reversibility. To this day, the most important English-Estonian dictionary in the Estonian lexicographic environment is the one compiled by Johannes Silvet originally in the 1930s (see Silvet 2002). While this dictionary has generally been held in high esteem for decades for the purpose of decoding, its B side (or the Estonian section) makes it unsuitable for reversal. One of the reasons is the frequent use of explanations instead of equivalents, as in

- (1) **walkabout** *s* tähtsa tegelase jalutuskäik rahvarikkas kohas (Silvet 2002)
'walk by an important person in a crowded place'

While Veisbergs (2004: 328) claims that 'smaller languages (like Latvian) normally have better bilingual dictionaries *from* than *to* other languages', one could argue that from the Estonian perspective, it could be true only as far as the A side of the dictionary is concerned (in this case English). Apart from definition-style equivalents that are useless for reversal, the B side of the dictionary suffers from two more drawbacks. One drawback is that a proportion of the provided equivalents are inaccurate or vague and thus unsuitable for reversal.

- (2) **as white as a sheet** *kahvatu kui voodilina* (Silvet 2002)

In example (2) the suggested Estonian equivalent *kahvatu kui voodilina* 'lit. as pale as a sheet' is a translation loan from English. Actually, Estonian has a set of excellent synonyms for this condition, such as *surnukahvatu*, *lubivalge*, *kriitvalge*, *näost ära*. Unfortunately, they are not listed.

- (3) **small change** *peenraha; piltl* tühised mõtteavaldused (Silvet 2002)

Here the equivalent of the first sense *peenraha* is accurate while that of the second figurative meaning *tühised mõtteavaldused* 'lit. unimportant statements' is too vague to be included as a candidate for reversal. The second drawback is lexical poverty with regard to the range of possible equivalents. Characteristically, some words that are common in Estonian do not occur in the B part of an English-Estonian dictionary at all. A good example of this problem is the following set of false friends between English and Estonian: *sympathetic*, *unsympathetic*, and *sympathy*. The corresponding Estonian false friends require totally different English equivalents. The words *sümpaatne* can be rendered as 'nice, agreeable, likable, pleasant; appealing', *sümpaatia* is 'liking', and *ebasümpaatne* means 'unpleasant, disagreeable, not very nice; unappealing'. The words *sümpaatne*, *ebasümpaatne*, and *sümpaatia* are common words in Estonian, and yet they do not occur at all in the B part of Silvet (2002). While the dictionary does not even list adjective *appealing* in the A part of the dictionary, the entry for *unappealing* is as follows:

- (4) **unappealing** *a* *ebameeldiv*, *mitteahvatlev* (Silvet 2002)

The first equivalent *ebameeldiv* is appropriate; the second one *mitteahvatlev* 'lit. non-attractive' is unnatural and marginally possible but unsuitable for reversal.

The absence of *appealing* from Silvet (2002) showed that in addition to the B part of the dictionary, there can also be problems with the A part of bilingual dictionaries. Apart from possible gaps, another problem related to the A part of a dictionary is the lexicographers' wish to cover every possible variant. This phenomenon is characteristic of the English-Estonian dictionary of idioms by Hanko and Liiv (1998).

- (5) CLOUD
on cloud seven (*või nine, ka Cloud Nine või on Cloud 9*) *sl.* seitsmendas taevas
(Hanko and Liiv 1998)

While the Estonian equivalent *seitsmendas taevas* ‘in seventh heaven’ is accurate, the range of the provided English equivalents calls for elimination of less common variants.

A third problem concerning the A side of the existing English-Estonian dictionaries is the inadequate coverage and labelling of differences between British and American English. The shortcomings of the existing English-Estonian dictionaries, especially the ones related to the B part of the dictionary, led me to the conviction that the above-mentioned dictionaries are, in fact, unsuitable for reversal. It appears that reversibility is a property that should be anticipated in the design of a bilingual dictionary. Nowadays it is easier to compile a new dictionary from scratch than modify a previous dictionary, especially if it is also out of date.

3. Reversing an Estonian-English dictionary

The dictionary used for reversal was a new general Estonian-English dictionary, which is based on the first edition of Veldi (2002) and is now stored by means of the Tshwanelex dictionary compilation software. The first edition of the dictionary in question was compiled on the basis of a database of observed insertable equivalents. The focus was on semantic precision, and the degree of vagueness was kept to the minimum. At the moment of reversal the English-Estonian dictionary had 48,786 lemmas and 93,346 equivalents. The reversal served two purposes. First, it seemed appropriate to reuse the established cross-linguistic equivalents in the Estonian-English dictionary for the B part of a new English-Estonian dictionary. The post-editing of the new English-Estonian dictionary is augmented by the printout of a privately owned English-Estonian dictionary of about 50,000 entries, which was created in Word in 2000–2004. As this English-Estonian dictionary needed to be stored by means of a dictionary compilation software program anyway, it was hoped that the reuse of the cross-linguistic equivalents could improve this dictionary considerably. Second, one also expected to enlarge and improve the reversed Estonian-English dictionary in the course of the post-editing phase.

The post-editing of the English-Estonian dictionary, which is in progress, has been highly rewarding. The first reassuring fact after reversal is that the entire dictionary from A to Z is there. It appeared that most cross-linguistic equivalents are reusable also in the case of a general dictionary. Previously, the author of this paper had experienced the value of reversal for a terminological dictionary. The reversal of ‘English-Estonian and Estonian-English Dictionary of Tourism’ (Tooman and Veldi 2006), which covers about 8,000 entries in both directions, went smoothly and did not pose any serious problems worth mentioning. On the other hand, while the post-editing phase of a general dictionary is highly rewarding, it has been time-consuming. In fact, it could be regarded as simultaneous cross-fertilization of both dictionaries. On the one hand, the new English-Estonian dictionary shows an enriched B part by comparison with the original manuscript, for example,

- (6) above *adv*, *prep* 1 üleval, ülal 2 (*tekstis*) eespool
(manuscript of an English-Estonian dictionary)
- (7) above *adv*, *prep* 1 kohal, pealpool, ülal, ülalpool, üleval above the table laua
kohal 2 (*tekstis*) eespool 3 üle above sea level üle merepinna above the water’s surface üle veepinna
above zero üle nulli 4 väljaspool above suspicion väljaspool kahtlust
(post-edited English-Estonian dictionary)

On the other hand, the post-editing of the English-Estonian dictionary has also provided a wealth of material for the enlargement of the Estonian-English dictionary. Apart from the missing entries it is especially true of the balanced coverage of synonyms in both dictionaries. The main complaint is that while the post-editing phase is rewarding and both dictionaries benefit from it, it is also time-consuming.

4. Conclusion

The present study showed that bilingual dictionaries vary greatly with regard to their degree of reversibility and not each dictionary is worth reversing. While a specialized dictionary can be reversed rather smoothly, in principle, the post-editing of a general dictionary is a time-consuming undertaking. At the same time, the post-editing phase of a general dictionary is highly rewarding. It will result in the cross-fertilization of both the target and the source dictionaries with regard to the listed meanings and entries and the treatment of synonyms. It will also reduce the degree of asymmetry between bilingual dictionaries.

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