

EQUIVALENCE AT WORD LEVEL IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the bottom –up approach of translation, on micro level, on meanings realized through wordings which make explicit the interpretation of the meaning of a text. It is non-sense to translate words and phrases out of context, but a student should appreciate translation decisions made at the level of text only if s/he understands how the lower levels, the individual words, phrases and grammatical structures control and shape the overall meaning of the text. Those who are not trained linguists can easier follow this approach in order to interpret the meaning of the text as a whole. I have opted to write this article on equivalence at word level to highlight the fact that one of the most difficult tasks of a translator is to perceive the meanings of words as precisely as possible in order to render them into another language.*

Keywords: *translation, equivalence at word level, lexical meaning, non-equivalence, source language, target language.*

Motto: *“There is no one-to-one correspondence between orthographic words and elements of meaning within or across languages.”¹*

1. Introduction

This article has taken shape as a result of translation activity when, as a translator, I encountered difficulties in finding the right equivalent for a word in the target language. Equivalence is always relative, it can be obtained only to some extent as it is influenced by linguistic and cultural factors. The text is situated in its context of culture and the translator does textual analysis, an essential preliminary to translation, and wordings analysis, in order to understand the meanings of individual forms and to interpret the meaning of the text as a whole. There are lots of theoretical arguments in specialized literature which suggest that translation is an impossible task, that it is doomed to failure because languages are never sufficiently similar to express the same realities. We live in a world of

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¹ Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Coursebook on Translation*. London, Routledge, 2011, p.10.

globalization and translation has brought people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds closer together and has built bridges of understanding and appreciation among different societies.

There can arise translation problems from lack of equivalence at word level; what does a translator do when there is no word in the target language which expresses the same meaning as the source language word? Before we discuss about non-equivalence let's have a look at the significance of the main unit of meaning in language, the word. It is defined as the smallest unit of language that can be used by itself.

2. The relationship between word and meaning.

In all languages there are words that can be rendered in one orthographic word in another language, and vice versa. For instance the word *ö* in Swedish means *insulă* in Romanian or the word *type* is rendered by three words in Romanian language: *a bate la mașină*. For example in *I type a letter*, in Romanian language we use more words: *Eu scriu o scrisoare la mașină*. The same situation is for German language, for example *die Schreibmaschine* = *mașină de scris*, where in Romanian language there are three words for the same word in German language.

We can conclude that "there is no one-to-one correspondence between orthographic words and elements of meaning within or across languages."²

3. Lexical meaning

The linguist Ladislav Zgusta³ wrote about the lexical meaning of the words the following definition:

"every word (lexical meaning) has something that is individual, that makes it different from any other word. And it is just the lexical meaning which is the most outstanding individual property of the word".⁴

Zgusta meant by lexical unit the *word* that has a specific value in a particular linguistic system and acquires a certain 'personality' through usage within that system. Language works in a very complex way and it is very rarely possible to analyse a word, pattern or structure into distinct components of meaning. Cruse⁵ considered that there can be distinguished four main types of meaning in words and utterances (utterances being

² Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Coursebook on Translation*. London, Routledge, 2011, p.10.

³ Zgusta, Ladislav. *Manual of Lexicography*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

⁴ Zgusta, Ladislav. *Manual of Lexicography*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971, p.67.

⁵ Cruse, D.A. *Lexical Semantics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 51-75.

stretches of written or spoken text):

- Propositional meaning
- Expressive meaning
- Presupposed meaning
- Evoked meaning.

3.1. Propositional meaning

The relation between a word and what it refers to or describes in a real or imaginary world is propositional meaning. This type of meaning provides the basis on which we can judge a word as true or false. For instance, the propositional meaning of *shoe* is 'something that you wear to cover your feet, made of leather or some other strong material'.⁶ If we use *shoe* to refer to a piece of clothing worn on the upper part of the body it would be inaccurate. When we say that a translation is inaccurate we refer to the propositional meaning, we can judge the meaning of words in context as true or false.

3.2. Expressive meaning

This meaning can not be judged as true or false. Expressive meaning relates to the speaker's feelings or attitude and not to what words refer to. Some words can have the same propositional meaning but differ in their expressive meanings. Those words that contribute to expressive meaning can be removed from the context without affecting its information content. In Tina Turner's song "You're simply the best" the expressive item *simply* has a totally expressive function, it expresses love and admiration of the lover. If we remove this word the information content of the message will not be altered but its expressiveness will be diminished.

3.3. Presupposed meaning

Stretches of language (words and expressions) in a context are connected to each other, they form a network of relations which link words and expressions to other words and expressions in a text. There are some restrictions regarding the proximity of words, which comes before or after a particular lexical unit. In her translational studies Mona Baker⁷ makes a classification of these restrictions as follows:

Selectional restrictions: these are a function of the propositional meaning of a word. We expect a human subject for the adjective *shy* and an inanimate one for *bright*. For instance we say *a shy girl/ a shy smile*, but *bright colours/future*.

⁶ *Dictionary of Contemporary English*, London: Longman, 2012.

⁷ Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Coursebook on Translation*. London, Routledge, 2011, p. 13.

Collocational restrictions: „these are semantically arbitrary restrictions which do not follow logically from the propositional meaning of a word”, says the author and we can add that in many languages there are certain words which co-occur regularly and form collocations. In English, teeth are *brushed*, but in Romanian and German they are *washed*: *a se spăla pe dinți, și die Zähne putzen*. We shall give some examples of the verb *deliver* which collocates with some nouns in English, but in Romanian there is used a different verb for each collocation:

English

deliver a letter
deliver a speech
deliver news
deliver a verdict
deliver a baby

Romanian

a livra o scrisoare
a ține o prelegere
a transmite știrile
a da un verdict
a moși la nașterea unui copil

3.4. Evoked meaning

In each domain there is a specific kind of language which is appropriate to particular situations, for instance in court, policy, sport, education, etc. The linguistic choices are made by speakers according to the field of discourse. The propositional meaning is the only one which relates to the truth of an utterance. In practice it is rarely possible to separate the various types of meaning in a word or utterance. The nature of language is complex, words have ‚blurred edges’, their meanings are negotiable and are only realized in specific contexts. The translator is constantly faced with the situation when he or she must attempt to perceive the meanings of words and utterances as precisely as possible in order to render them into another language. The translator must first understand the source text on its own terms, and go beyond what the average reader has to do in order to reach an adequate understanding of a text.

4. The problem of non-equivalence

There are some types of non-equivalence that pose difficulties for the translator. The choice of a suitable equivalent in a given context depends on a wide variety of factors. Some of these factors may be strictly linguistic (for instance collocations and idioms). Other factors may be extra-linguistic. When a translator makes a choice of a suitable equivalent s/he will always take into account not only on the linguistic system or systems being handled by her/him, but also on the following factors:

- The way the translator chooses to manipulate the linguistic systems in question;

- The expectations, background knowledge and prejudices of readers within a specific temporal and spatial location;
- The translators' own understanding of their task, including their assessment of what is appropriate in a given situation;
- A range of restrictions that may operate in a given environment at a given point in time, including censorship and various types of intervention by parties other than the translator, author, and reader.

4.1. Non-equivalence at word level

What means non-equivalence at word level? It means that the target language has no direct equivalent for a word which occurs in the source text. There are some common types of non-equivalence at word level as follows:

a) Culture specific concepts

There are situations when in the source language a word may express a concept which is unknown in the target culture. The concept may be abstract or concret, it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom or even a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as 'culture-specific'. For instance when Viorel Catarama, a Romanian businessman in the field of furniture returned from America said in a talk-show on TV that he liked "Mc Donald's food" very much. Personally, I didn't understand this type of food, which is American junk food, until there was built such a restaurant in Bucharest and I ate a hamburger there. This is an example of concrete concept. An abstract English concept which is difficult to translate into other languages is that expressed by the word *privacy*. This English concept is rarely understood by people from other cultures. *Speaker* (of the House of Commons) has no equivalent in Romanian or German and it is often translated as 'Chairman', which does not reflect the role of the Speaker of the House of Commons as an independent person who maintains authority and order in Parliament.

b) The source language concept is not lexicalized in the target language

It may happen that a source language word expresses a concept which is known in the target language but simply not lexicalized, that is not 'allocated' a target language word to express it. For instance the word *fax* was unknown before revolution in Romania and was not lexicalized. There are many examples such as *handy, mobile phone, software, bit, remote-control*, etc.

c) The source language word is semantically complex

A single word which consists of a single morpheme can express a more

complex set of meanings than a whole sentence. Translators do not usually realize how semantically complex a word is until they have to translate it into a language which does not have an equivalent for it. For example in *The peasant sings doina* the translator has to know that *doina* is a Romanian sentimental popular song. Words do not have to be morphologically complex to be semantically complex.

d) The target language lacks a specific term (hyponym)

Languages tend to have general words, superordinates, but lack specific ones (hyponyms) since each language makes only those distinctions in meaning which seem relevant to its particular environment. For example the English words *bungalow, cottage,croft, chalet, lodge, hut, mansion, manor, villa, hall* mean all *house* but not all of them have equivalents in Romanian and German.

e) Differences in form

Certain suffixes and prefixes which convey propositional meaning in English often have no direct equivalents in other languages. For example *employer/employee, trainer/trainee, payer/payee, boyish, hellish, greenish, conceivable, drinkable, retrievable*, etc. Then affixes contribute to expressive meaning, for instance by creating buzz words such as *washateria, carpeteria and grocetaria*, which are new created words for various reasons, such as filling temporary semantic gaps in the language and creating humour. It is important for translators to understand the contribution that affixes make to the meaning of words and expressions in the source language and render them creatively in the target language too. Examples of creative use of affixes can often be found in advertisements and other types of promotional literature.

f) The use of loan words in the source text

Loan words have propositional meaning and add a special, sophisticated air to the text; for example loan words such as *chic, auf Wiedersehen* have a prestige value and are often used in English. The linguist Jüngst Heike⁸ said that the Japanese use loan words widely „just for effect, for example because they sound beautiful or look elegant.”⁹ Translators lose this effect in the target language as they cannot find a loan

⁸ Jüngst, Heike. ‘Translating Manga’, in Federico Zanettin (ed.) *Comics in Translation*, Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2008, pp. 50-78

⁹ Jüngst, Heike. ‘Translating Manga’, in Federico Zanettin (ed.) *Comics in Translation*, Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2008, p. 61.

word with the same meaning . Professor Mona Baker¹⁰ gave an example of loan word in English, such as *dillettante*, which in Arabic has no equivalent loan word: „This means that only the propositional meaning of *dillettante* can be rendered into Arabic; its stylistic effect would almost certainly have to be sacrificed.”¹¹

In the same category of loan words are false friends, words or expressions which have the same form in two or more languages but convey different meanings. They also pose problems for translators. The English word *sensible* is often confused with the Romanian word *sensibil*, meaning 'sensitive', or *sympathetic* with *simpatic*, meaning 'nice/likeable', or *eventually* with *eventual*, meaning 'possibly'.

5. Conclusion

The examples mentioned above highlight the fact that there is non-equivalence among languages and translators have to deal with this problem. First of all the translator has to assess the significance and implications of non-equivalence in a given context, because not every instance of non-equivalence is significant. The translator must not reproduce every aspect of meaning for every word in a source text. It is desirable to convey the meaning of key words which are focal to the understanding and development of the text. The translator should not distract the reader by looking at every word in isolation and attempting to present her/him with a full linguistic account of its meaning.

Professional translators use some strategies for dealing with various types of non-equivalence, such as translation by a more general or neutral word, by cultural substitution, or translation using a loan word, or translation by paraphrase using a related word, or by omission and by illustration. There are very many strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at word level. It is the translator who must decide which strategy to use in order to render the proper and suitable meaning of non-equivalence in the target language.

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¹⁰ Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Coursebook on Translation*. London, Routledge, 2011, p. 22.

¹¹ Baker, Mona. *In Other Words. A Coursebook on Translation*. London, Routledge, 2011, p. 22

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