SEMANTIC PROBLEMS IN BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

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(Synopsis)

Introduction

Before the 1970s, although lexicography was given serious thought by linguists, lexicographers did not make much use of the linguistic findings in their dictionaries. At present, emphasis has been put on valuable linguistic theories, especially semantic theories, which are directly related to bilingual lexicography. Furthermore, there has been a great deal of urging to integrate semantics in linguistic description and theory. In light of the importance of integration of semantics and lexicography, this thesis is devoted to the semantic problems of bilingual dictionaries. Several principal semantic issues are dealt with.

Chapter one:

The ways of monolingual definition and the choice of bilingual equivalent: a semantic device

It is universally agreed that monolingual definition as well as bilingual equivalent is a semantic device. On the whole, a semantic description should aim not at absolute definitions, but at definitions which delimit the meaning of a term from that of terms with similar meanings. To the ways of monolingual definition, each lexicographer has his own ideas. In fact, there are various methods of defining basically dealt with by lexicographers. I just choose some of them to discuss: (1) defining method of giving synonyms and some requirements; (2) phrasal definition and sentence definition; (3) defining by using a specified list of words; (4) definition and idiomatization.

The bilingual lexicographer's most important duty is to find in the target
language such lexical units as are equivalent to the lexical units of the source
language, and to coordinate the two sets. Absolute equivalence which have exactly the
same semantic and grammatical function in both languages are rare. Ten types of
non-equivalence at word level are discussed in this chapter.

Equivalents can be divided into translational (or insertible) and explanatory (or
descriptive). Insertible equivalents can help the user to generate sentences with the
headwords, and uninsertible equivalents, on the contrary, understand the headwords.
To most of the dictionary-users, insertible one is more helpful.

Chapter two:

Major problems in the choice of equivalents

Major problems in the choice of equivalents include: (1) the culture-bound words;
(2) the scientific and technological terminology; (3) the translation of idioms; (4) the
treatment of neologisms.

Language is a substantial but partial reflection of a culture. The culture-bound
words particularly contribute to a major problem which confronts the bilingual
lexicographer, that is, he does not always find the required equivalents in the target
language. Some causes or representative forms of lexical gap are discussed in this
chapter.

Some scientific and technology terminologies do not exist in the vernacular
languages of the developing countries. In the bilingual dictionary, the lexicographer
often translate those scientific and technological terminologies through various
means.

In a bilingual dictionary, idioms in the source language must as far as possible be
paralleled in the target language by idioms with the same content. Different methods
of translation can be used to translate idioms, such as literal translation, liberal
translation, restoring liberal translation, and the combination of literal and liberal
translation. Furthermore, there are two cases in which an idiom can
be easily misinterpreted if one is not clearly familiar with it — some idioms are misleading, and sometimes, an idiom in the source language may have a very close counterpart in the target language which looks similar on the surface but has a totally or partially different meaning.

Neologisms reflect current concerns and trends in society. In particular, they reveal which areas of activity are most fertile in the creating of new vocabulary. A new bilingual dictionary always boasts its presentation of neologisms. Lexicographers are more and more on the lookout for neologisms. New words may also enter a language in a variety of other ways. Some are created outright to fit some purposes; even more often formed by productive word formation processes from items that are already in the language, i.e. by derivational process. The bilingual lexicographers should take the types of new words into consideration firstly and then decide which word should be recorded, and which one discarded. New words and new meanings can be classified into the following types: politics and military affairs, medicine and health, culture and education, daily life, and economy.

**Chapter three:**

**Contrastive translation of the head entry word from a semantic perspective**

The essential aspect of a bilingual dictionary is the contrastive translation of the head entry word. All words, including English and Chinese words, are semantically related in one way or another. In this chapter, the sense relations between words of different languages are discussed and compared.

1. Pairs of interlingual complete synonymy includes: (1) one-to-one equivalence; (2) one-to-many equivalence; (3) many-to-one equivalence; (4) many-to-many equivalence.

2. There are several kinds of antonyms: (1) contradictory terms (complementary pairs); (2) contrary terms (gradable opposites); (3) converse terms (relational
opposites).

3. In order to find a good equivalent, a bilingual dictionary-compiler needs to know what the specifics are which are included in a generic term, both in the source language and the target language. So, the definer can define the headword through contrastive study of superordinate terms or hyponyms in the source and target languages in the lexical field.

Chapter four:

Meaning discrimination in bilingual dictionaries

This chapter mainly deals with meaning discrimination in bilingual dictionaries. And the chapter provides a formula indicating which polysemous word needs meaning discrimination, and suggests 11 devices for achieving that discrimination: (1) by part of speech; (2) by punctuation; (3) by synonyms; (4) by usage, subject field and register labels; (5) by long formal definition; (6) by illustrative examples (7) by context words or phrases; (8) by cultural notes; (9) by superordinate and subordinate concept; (10) by encyclopedic information; (11) by pragmatic notes.

Conclusion

The ideal bilingual dictionary would anticipate every conceivable need of the prospective user. Definition as a process is a language act entailing several social activities, which can be studied in a semantic perspective. The most important aspect of a bilingual dictionary is the contrastive translation of the head entry word. In a bilingual dictionary, except some technical terms, the cases of semantic coincidence are rare. Even those borrowed words become wider or narrower in meaning. As the soul of a bilingual dictionary, equivalents come first to reflect differences of the two languages. In order to get a good equivalent in a bilingual dictionary, emphasis should be put on the analysis and treatment of the culture-bound words, idioms, scientific and
technological terms, and neologisms. Furthermore, meaning discrimination should be provided in a bilingual dictionary. It will enable the user to select the appropriate equivalent or the proper sense of an equivalent. A bilingual equivalent is intended to exemplify the set of semantic correspondences between the two languages. A bilingual lexicographer should devote himself to solve the semantic problems of bilingual dictionaries.

Key words: semantic problems    bilingual dictionaries
SEMANTIC PROBLEMS IN BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

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People use bilingual dictionaries whether language teaching methodologists like it or not. Indeed, to many people the word “dictionary” means “a bilingual dictionary” (Hartmann, 1983:46). This thesis also mainly deals with bilingual dictionaries, and I take English-Chinese dictionaries and Chinese-English dictionaries as illustrations.

The basic purpose of a bilingual dictionary is to coordinate with the lexical units of one language those lexical units of another language which are equivalent in their lexical meaning (Zgusta, 1971). In 1983, Al-Kasimi pointed out that lexicographers did not make much use of the linguistic findings in their dictionaries. But lexicography is given serious thought by linguistics. Ten more years later, Emphasis has been put on valuable linguistic theories, especially semantic theories, which are directly related to bilingual lexicography. Lexicography and linguistics are now inextricably mixed. No modern lexicographer can afford to ignore what linguistics has to offer (Bejoint, 1994:177). Furthermore, from the 1970s, there has been a great deal of urging to integrate semantics in the linguistic description and theory (Al-Kasimi, 1983:5). In light of the importance of integration of semantics and lexicography, this thesis is devoted to the semantic problems of bilingual dictionaries. Several principal semantic issues are dealt with.

Chapter 1 presents a survey of the ways of monolingual definition and the choice of bilingual equivalent. The explanation in a monolingual dictionary takes the form of definition. The explanation of a headword in the bilingual dictionary takes the form of an equivalent, or series of equivalents, in the target language. The monolingual definition as well as bilingual equivalent is a semantic device. Absolute equivalence which have exactly the same semantic and grammatical function in both languages are rare. There is usually complete mismatch between the secondary senses and figurative senses of lexical items between the languages. In light of the tremendous diversity in the lexicon of various languages, non-equivalence at word level is unavoidable. In this
chapter, altogether 10 types of non-equivalence at word level are discussed.

Chapter 2 is devoted to discuss major problems in the choice of equivalents: (1) culture-bound words; (2) the treatment of scientific and technological terminology; (3) the translation of idioms; (4) the treatment of neologisms. Some solutions to these problems are suggested.

The essential aspect of a bilingual dictionary is the contrastive translation of the head entry word. In chapter 3, emphasis has been put on the contrastive translation of the head entry word from a semantic perspective. The sense relations between words of different languages, synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy, are also discussed and compared in this chapter.

Some lexicographers have pointed out even in the best bilingual dictionaries we find many entries, sometimes very long ones, with no discrimination at all. Chapter 4 mainly deals with meaning discrimination in bilingual dictionaries. And the chapter provides a formula indicating which polysemous word needs meaning discrimination, and suggests 11 devices for achieving that discrimination.
Chapter one

The ways of monolingual definition and the choice of bilingual equivalent: a semantic device

1.1 A brief introduction to monolingual definition and bilingual equivalent

Definitions are descriptions of meaning in dictionaries. A monolingual dictionary involves only one system of linguistic signs. In a monolingual dictionary, a good definition is one that gives an unambiguous explanation or description of the meaning or a meaning of a word. In other words, the explanation in a monolingual dictionary takes the form of definition. A bilingual dictionary, such as an English-Chinese dictionary or a Chinese-English dictionary, deals with two systems of linguistic signs. It is universally acknowledged that Chinese and English belong to different language families, the former belonging to Sino-Tibetan Language Family, and the latter Indo-European Language Family. The explanation of a headword in a bilingual dictionary takes the form of an equivalent, or series of equivalents, in the target language. In fact, it is universally agreed that monolingual definition as well as bilingual equivalent is a semantic device.

1.2 Methods of definition in a monolingual dictionary

In the view of Donna Lee Berg (1993), at least three types of definitions may be encountered in a dictionary, either in combination or singly: explanatory, structural, and cross-reference. An explanatory definition is the traditional explanation of the meaning of a sense or word. A structural or functional definition is one that describes the use of head word in terms of some grammatical or syntactical structure.
A cross-reference definition is one that contains, or consists entirely of, a cross-reference to another part of the same entry, to another headword, to a specific sense within an entry, or to a quotation. According to Householder and Saporta (1975), definitions can be classified into: (a) the method of synonyms; (b) the method of analysis; (c) the method of synthesis; (d) the denotative method; (e) the ostensive method; (f) the implicative or contextual method; and (g) the rule-giving method. In the view of Alain Rey (1989), definition can be described as a phrase added to a headword (word or idiom) in a given language which is listed in a one-language dictionary, with the intention of producing a paraphrastic synonymy with a didactic effect. That is to say, the definiens, usually a phrase, intended to be synonymous with the meaning of the definiendum. So, giving synonyms is one of the most important methods of defining a word. In the view of Henry Bejoint (1994), a true definition means that decomposing the meaning of a word and spreading it out on a longer and syntagmatically meaningful sequence of words makes it more accessible. He also believed that the most prestigious types of definition is the analytic, intensional definition. Weinreich (1962, see Bejoint, 1994:198) insisted that the use of a synonym or of an antonym is not even a definition at all; it is used because it is economical, but it only sends the user back to another entry. The explanation of the meaning of a sense or word may also be supplemented by a series of synonyms or antonyms as an aid to understanding. Ilson (1986) believed there are three basic types of lexicographic definitions: synonym definitions, referential definitions and formulaic definitions. On the whole, a semantic description should aim not at absolute definitions, but at definitions which delimit the meaning of a term from that of terms with similar meanings. To the ways of monolingual definition, each lexicographer has his own ideas. In fact, there are various methods of defining basically dealt with by lexicographers. I just choose some of them to discuss.

1.2.1 Defining method of giving synonyms and some requirements
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