Problems of Word for Word Equivalence in English—Arabic Dictionaries and their Lexical and Cultural Implications

Assist. Lecturer Nadhum Raheem Ghurab
College of Arts- University of Kufa

1. Introduction

The basic principle underlying all bilingual lexicographical practice is word- for word equivalence. This principle is based on the belief that meaning is a universal concept found in all languages .The only difference is in the words provided by languages to convey it (Lado, 1957:77).

The aim of this paper is to examine the **University of** validity of this principle in detail and to refer it to some linguistic and cultural problems arising in the compilation of English-Arabic dictionaries.

It is often said that meaning is the attitude toward and the classification of the universe by a certain community and the words provided to convey it are no more than classifiers of that experience (Lyons, 1969:420).

There are no identical classifications of any two language communities (Lamb, 1985:47). Consequently, there is no exact word-for word equivalence between the words of any two languages owing to the lexical no less than the phonological and syntactical uniqueness of every language. It would not be out of place to recapitulate the nature and the function of the chief unit at the lexical level- the word. The word is the symbolic referential unit of language – the interface at which language and non-language meet. It performs its function by being a sound pattern which encapsulates the semantic features of the speech community physical, mental or emotional experience. It compresses the semantic complex into a phonological simplex. This semantic complex has become a part of the native speaker's intuition and habit. That is the reason why we find the native speaker able to use words in his production of his native language without knowing their definitions. The essence of the word then is the semantic compression which is the source of the word's denotative capacity and its connotative power. Words are symbolizers of socio-cultural experiences of the speech community of the language. Words are symbolic instruments for the control and interpersonal sharing of experience in a given society (Lyons, 1969:432).

In bilingual lexicography we face the fact that native speakers of languages have been inhabiting a mental world of words and seeking to familiarize themselves with the lexical classifying system of a second language. Gimson(1976:1) rightly noted that "the later in life that a second language begins, the more the learner will be subject to resistance and prejudice deriving from the framework of his original language. So it is natural for the foreign learners to expect to be provided with lexical equivalence. They expect to find word for word translations and not definitions in bilingual dictionaries. They will base their understanding of the word meaning on what they have shared and commonly sensed in their own language.

Non- equivalence instances which inhibit word for word equivalence fall into four major categories: the cultural void, the lexical void, grammatical words and polysemy.

2. The cultural void

Linguistic forms are social facts because they are created in the matrix of the speech community of the language (Zugusta, 1971:197). So it is inevitable that they will convey the culture and the social values of that community and the unique life of its speakers (Tomaszczyk, 1983:43). The community of the language has its unique activities, traditions, and ways of behaviour. So naturally there will be a lack of symbols standing for them in other languages. We do not expect a certain community to classify a concept or an object which is nonexistent in it and to give it a classifier.

Schnorr summarizes the fields where such a lack of equivalence exists:

1. Activities and festivities such as the concept of "Guy Fawkes Day "in the United Kingdom and "Arafat Day" in the Islamic World.
2. Clothing and national costumes such as "Sari "in India and "Uqaal" "a type of head garments in the Arab World".
3. Tools and objects like "Mugwar" "a tool for fighting in Iraqi Arabic".
4. Historical facts such as the restoration in England and Al-twabeen in the Islamic history.
5. Religious terms such as "minister, priest" in Christianity and "Ayatollah "in Islam.
6. Educational and specialist knowledge (Schnorr, 1986:56-59).

An important objection to this summary is that it has ignored two of the most important fields where the lack of word for word equivalence

exists. They are situational protocols (Mccreary, 1988:56) and foods and meals. There are words that are used especially for certain occasions. We greet, insult, congratulate and for each action there are special words and phrases whose functions are more important than their literal meanings. In Iraqi Arabic, the Iraqis use a special greeting for a person after shaving or having his hair cut. It is "naayeeman". In English the greeting "good afternoon" has no equivalent in Arabic.

Every community has its own food. We cannot find an equivalent for "masgoof" which roughly means fish toasted in a special way in Iraqi Arabic or "Mulukhia" which roughly means vegetable cooked with rabbit meat in Egyptian Arabic.

People use the words dinner, supper, lunch, and tea in different ways depending on which English-speaking country they come from. In Britain, it may also depend on which part of the country or which social class a person comes from (Whemeier, 2005:793). In British English "tea", which is a light meal in the afternoon with sandwiches and cake….etc and a cup of tea or the meal "brunch"which is a combination of breakfast and lunch especially a meal you eat outside has no equivalent in Arabic. The cultural focus is present in the source language since there is a word symbolizing it but it may be missing in the target language and it is natural that it lacks the compressed symbolic expression of that focus which we call a word.

If we attempt at one-to-one equivalence, we shall indeed try to set up a cultural equation which does not in fact exist. The possibility of finding accurate one –to-one equivalence implies either a shared culture or a large degree of acculturation

3. The Lexical Void

As mentioned earlier, meaning is the attitude toward and the classification of the universe by a certain community. This classification requires a symbolic referential unit of the language of that community to represent it. The unit used to convey meaning performs its function by its compression of the semantic complex. There is no universal classification of the universe. Therefore there will be a lack of equivalence since we do not expect a community to classify something which is nonexistent. If there is a certain degree of equivalence between the classification systems of any pair of languages in a bilingual dictionary, we cannot guarantee that the attitudes toward the universe are identical. Therefore we definitely find differences between the denotations, connotations, and the range of application of words of the two languages involved in a bilingual dictionary. Foreign learners who have grown up with their native language expect to find translational equivalents when they refer to a bilingual dictionary. This will facilitate their use of the foreign language for communication. We cannot deny the fact that foreign learners start learning a foreign language after they have built deep rooted linguistic habits of their own language. They usually make use of the positive interference of their mother tongue.

When there is a lexical void lexicographers usually have recourse to coining words in the target language or borrowing words from the foreign language. Whatever the choice they make, the user of the dictionary finds himself ill-equipped with the necessary information about the semantic features of the coined and borrowed words.

Fortunately, the lexical voids are constantly disappearing by being filled as a result of the dominating position that English has come to occupy in relation to Arabic and other languages due to its being a universal language. Compilers of more recent bilingual dictionaries face fewer lexical voids than those faced by compilers of old bilingual dictionaries owing to the advances of information technology. But the lexical void still constitutes a formidable problem facing the process of word for word equivalence. Here are some examples.

We have more than three hundred types of dates in Iraq with one word “date” standing for them in English. Arabic has given a classifier for each stage of date growth and for each type with no equivalent in English.

In Arabic we have many words to classify camels while we have one word in English which is supposed to be their equivalent. What is even worse we have few names for a female in English e.g. girl, woman, spinster, widow or adjectives like pregnant while in Arabic, beside the equivalents of the English words and the feminized words, there are 85 words describing woman in particular(Abdulbaqi,1978:78).

In Arabic we have one word standing for "pig" While we have eight words standing for it in English.

4. Grammatical Words

Grammatical words constitute another lexical problem facing the process of word for word equivalence. Their function is more important than their lexical meaning. Bilingual lexicographers try to provide equivalents for such words without paying any attention to their function and distribution in the source language. There is no use for example to look for an equivalent for "verb to be" in Arabic since there is a lexical void in Arabic. Sometimes we may find a lexical equivalent in the target language but the alleged equivalent may have a different distribution in both languages. It is no use for example to say "the" means /lam al taareef/ in Arabic since the two words have different distributions in both languages (Al-salami, 1988).

Al-baytu l-kabeeru
The house the large
"The large house"

5. Polysemy

Polysemy is the case when a word has a set of different meanings (palmer, 1976: 67). Polysemy constitutes another formidable problem. There may be a word which is polysemous in the source language with one equivalent in the target language or it may be polysemous in the target language while it has one meaning in the source language. What is even worse is the case when it is polysemous in both languages and there is no equivalence among the different senses:

Inhabitant
Calm /sakin/
Motionless

/anta/ for masculine singular /you/
/anti/ for feminine singular
/antum/ for masculine plural
/antunna/ for feminine plural

If the dictionary is to be a teaching aid and not a mere reference book, it should clarify the polysemous nature of the word and its alleged equivalent. The lexicographer should bear in mind that the bare use of word for word in bilingual dictionaries is quite defective owing to the polysemous nature of words in the two languages involved in a bilingual dictionary. The process of equivalence needs underpinning if the whole practice of bilingual lexicography is not to seem to rest on a shaky unproven theoretical foundation. This underpinning may take the form of definitions, encyclopedic information and illustrative examples which may help the user of the dictionary to be aware of the accurate denotation, connotation and the range of application of words.

Conclusion

We have seen that it is not an easy task to find exact equivalents for words of the source language in the target language owing to the cultural and lexical voids that exist between the two languages involved in a bilingual dictionary in addition the grammatical words and polysemy in both languages. The lexicographical principle of word for word equivalence exerts a powerful psychological influence on lexicographers. Though they know that this process is defective, they keep on making attempts to provide alleged equivalents. Their knowledge of the inadequacy of this process is shown clearly through the use of glosses in the entries of the dictionary. Sometimes and in their attempt to provide one word for word equivalence, they provide the user with a run of partial equivalents. Thus they increase his knowledge of synonymy in his own language and he has to decide which one to choose.

This situation may be improved by providing the user with definitions, encyclopedic information and illustrative examples, a process which is still in its infancy. Bilingual lexicography often sacrifices accuracy for simplicity.

Bibliography

- Abdulbaqi, k. (1978) Semantic Field Theory As Applied To Arabic Language. IDELTI Journal NO 10, p 78.
- Al-salami, N. (1988) The Role of the Dictionary in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Unpublished MLitt Thesis, University of Glasgow
- Gimson, A. (1976) an Introduction to the Pronunciation of English. London: Edward Arnold.
- Lado, R. (1957) Linguistics Across Culture. Anne arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Lamb, S. (1985) Lexicography and Semantics. Papers in Linguistics, 18:1, 40-49.
- Lyons, J. (1969) Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics. Cambridge University Press.
- Mccreary, D (1986) Improving Bilingual Japanese-English Dictionaries. Papers in Liguistics, 19:1, 55-65.
- Palmer, F. (1976) Semantics. A New Outline. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Schnorr, V. (1986) Translational Equivalence. Lexicographica, 2, 53-60.

- Tomaszczyk, J. (1983) The Case for Bilingual Dictionaries for Foreign Language Learners. In Hartmann, R.R.K. Lexeter (1983):43.
- Zugusta, L. (1971) Manual of Lexicography. Prague: Prague Academia
- Whemeier, S. (2005) Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary. Oxford :Oxford University Press

الخلاصة :

يلاحظ المتتبع لتاريخ القواميس الثنائية اللغة منذ نشأتها وحتى ظهور القواميس الحديثة بان الغرض من معظمها كان تعليميا ومن الموسف إن نلاحظ أنها ضعيفة التأهيل للإرضاء حاجة المتعلم فهي تلبي الحاجات العمومية فقط إما إذا قمنا بفحص أدائها بالنسبة للحاجات الخاصة للمتعلم فإننا نلاحظ أنها غير كافية.

تطرق الباحث في بحثه هذا إلى طريقة تعامل تلك القواميس مع المعنى وقبل الخوض بالأعماق علينا إن ندرك بان المعنى قد نشا من تصنيف الكون والموقف منه من قبل مجتمع معين ولما كانت المجتمعات تختلف كثيرا فان المعنى يكون غير متطابق في جميع اللغات حيث إن للمعنى ثلاثة عناصر أولهنا الإشارة أو الدلالة إي ما تشي ر له الكلمة وثانيهما ارتباطات تلك الكلمة وتأثيرها على السامع وثالثهما مدى استعماله أي في أي المناسبات والمجالات تستخدم .

قد يكون هناك تشابها بين اللغات في ما تشي ر إليه الكلمة ولكننا لانضمن تطابق ارتباطات تلك الكلمة وتأثيرها الإيحائي ومدى استعمالها في اللغتين. لذلك نجد إن مقابل الكلمة في لغة أخرى ماهو إلا مرادف جزئي وهذا يودي إلى كثير من الأخطاء حيث يشكل هذا التقابل اللغوي المزعوم عائقا وليس عونا لتعلم اللغة الأجنبية بشكل صحيح بسبب الفراغات اللغوية والثقافية بين اللغتين والكلمات القوا عديق المتباينة وطبيعة تعدد معاني الكلمات في اللغات.

وهذا يقودنا إلى استنتاج إننا نحتاج في الصناعة القاموسية إلى معرفة نابعة من الخبرة في التحليل اللغوي وطرائق التدريس حيث إن هناك علاقة خاصة بين تصنيف القاموس وطرائق التدريس على إن يتم التركيز على الحاجات الخاصة للمتعلم الذي اعد له القاموس.