Equivalents and Explanations in Bilingual Dictionaries

by

L. Zgusta

Linguistics Research Center

The University of Texas at Austin

and

Department of Linguistics

The University of Illinois

EQUIVALENTS AND EXPLANATIONS IN BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES.[1]

L. Zgusta

The task of the bilingual lexicographer is to find such lexical units in the target language as are equivalent to the lexical units of the source language, and to coordinate them. We call "lexical equivalent" a lexical unit of the target language which has the same lexical meaning as the respective lexical unit of the source language. The definitional requirement is that the identity should be absolute: the equivalent should have the same polysemy, the same stylistic value, etc. But such absolute equivalents are rather rare. In the majority of instances, the lexical meaning of the respective lexical unit of the target language corresponds only partly to that of its counterpart in the source language. If we wish to be very precise, we therefore speak about <u>partial equivalents</u>, but normally, we use the term "equivalent" knowing that the majority are partial.

Before starting the search for equivalents, we must compare the structures of the two languages in order to decide which grammatical categories will be considered reciprocal. This is easy in languages which have similar categories of lexical units, or, traditionally, similar parts of speech, e.g. there is no problem in deciding that the French equivalent of an English noun will first be sought among French nouns. But one must not stick to this principle too strictly. For instance, German *Handarbeit* (subst.) has a good equivalent in English *hand-work* (subst.), but if it is used as a label on wares, the English equivalent is *hand-made,* because the English substantive denotes only the process, not its results. Usually, there are not only such isolated points of trouble, but also discrepancies rooted in the system. It is easy to decide that English substantives and adjectives will be considered equivalent to Czech substantives and adjectives, and to indicate pairs like Czech *nebe* : English *heaven,* Czech *nebeský* (adj.) : English *heavenly, celestial,* in a Czech-English dictionary. But there will also be pairs like Cz. *cihla :* Eng. *brick*, Cz. *cihlovy* (adj.) : Eng. *brick* (as in a *brick wall*). The second pair of equivalents can be left without comment if the Czech user of the dictionary is supposed to have a fair knowledge of English. If this is not true, the entry of the second pair should contain an indication of how the equivalent is construed, e.g. by giving an example (*brick wall*). The example used here is easy to handle, but the real life of the lexicographer poses more difficult problems of this type. The main thing seems to be to see these discrepancies before one begins the concrete work and to decide on their solution in general, so that the individual instances are treated in a unified way in the whole dictionary.

The equivalent should be a real lexical unit of the target language, which occurs or can occur in real sentences. (We shall see later that this requirement must be limited, but it is valid for the majority of instances.) The usual procedure is for the lexicographer to collect a broad range of typical contexts in the source language in which the respective lexical unit occurs. (It goes without saying that this can be shortened by using native speakers as informants, or by using one's own competence; but at least some collections of contexts - not necessarily long ones - usually are essential.) The lexicographer then tries to translate all these typical contexts into the target language, using in each instance the prospective equivalent of the target language. If the prospective equivalent fits into all these contexts, it is an absolute one; if not, it is partial and the entry will have to indicate some other (partial) equivalent(s) to cover the whole range of the lexical meaning of the entry word. The way the lexicographer presents the data in the dictionary is largely governed by the purpose of the prepared dictionary. Let us discuss some examples.

German *heiraten, sich verheiraten* "to marry" are usually considered equivalents of Chinese *xu jia*. One of the differences between them is that the Chinese lexical unit is used in reference to women only. In a dictionary whose only purpose is to help native speakers of German to understand Chinese texts the entry could have the basic form

xu jia : "heiraten, sich verheiraten"

The two equivalents are applicable in all contexts, so that it is not necessary to state the restriction of the Chinese lexical unit; and the German user needs no information about the German equivalents. But if the dictionary is to be more descriptive, and is to give the German user more information about Chinese lexical units, the Chinese semantic restriction will have to be indicated:

xu jia (von Frauen) : "heiraten, sich verheiraten"

If, on the other hand, the dictionary is intended to help the Chinese user produce German texts, it is necessary to indicate the difference between the two German partial equivalents, so that the user can make the right choice:

xu jia : "heiraten" ("to take in marriage") ,
"sich verheiraten" ("to get married")

(The English words in quotation marks symbolize an indication which would have the form of a gloss or of an explanation, either in German or in Chinese, in a real dictionary.)

A combination of the intentions mentioned requires, then, an entry of a form like

xu jia (von Frauen) : "heiraten" ("to take in marriage"), "sich verheiraten" ("to get married")

Another type of entry can be discussed with the help of the following example: *beinahe*, *fast* "almost, nearly" can be considered the German equivalent of Chinese *xian* xie. The Chinese contexts are roughly of the type: He nearly stumbled, fell, starved, died, knocked someone down, poisoned someone, etc. Let us, therefore, suppose that a Chinese-German dictionary is prepared which should also have some descriptive power. The entry then would have to contain a gloss stating the applicational restriction, for instance of the following form:

xian xie (bei negativen Ereignissen) "beinahe, fast"

In a Chinese-English dictionary, the entry could have the form

> *xian xie* (referring to negative events) "almost, nearly"

The applicational restriction could be stated in the form of an example or of some examples; the advantage of this method of presentation is that the information is more immediate, and, additionally, that it is less explicit than the gloss.

Let us now consider the English equivalents. They both have multiple meaning. If we accept Hornby's description of their meaning, we see that *almost* has two senses, viz.: (1) as in *He almost fell (almost* is replaceable by *nearly*), (2) as in *Almost no one believed her (almost* is not replaceable by *nearly)*. The other equivalent, *nearly,* has (according to Hornby again) three senses, viz.: (1) as in *It is nearly 1 o'clock* (replaceable by *almost)*, (2) as in *I have $20, but that will not be nearly enough for my journey* (not replaceable), (3) as in *nearly related* (not replaceable).

If we quote *almost, nearly* together as equivalents of the Chinese lexical unit, they disambiguate each other, because every user will assume that only that sense applies which is common to both of them.

On the other hand, if we consider the German equivalents *beinahe, fast,* we find that they are as close synonyms as possible, because a difference in their meaning is almost imperceptible. If this is so, we can ask why both of them should be quoted. There are two arguments in favor of citing both. First, the indication of synonyms in the target language helps the user to find various expressions he can use, if only for stylistic variation. And second, imperceptible as the difference is, there usually is some slight difference between the meaning of even such close synonyms, so that if both are indicated, the information is richer and the user is inspired to imagine yet other possible translations and synonyms. But in any event, even a large dictionary should not indicate too many synonyms of this type, and a small one can omit them.

In sum, we have discussed three types of indication of partial equivalents and synonyms:

(1} *heiraten; sich verheiraten* : a rule (semantic or grammatical) of the target language makes it predictable which of the two will be used;

(2) *almost, nearly :* both can be used, but only in those senses of their multiple meaning which overlap;

(3) beinahe, *fast* : either can be used, and the two taken together make the information somehow richer.

Although there are many borderline cases between these types, it is useful to know them; but it is above all types (2) and (3) which are difficult to distinguish. In type (1), it is preferable to put a semicolon between the two partial equivalents; in types (2) and (3), a comma is generally used.

Another type of problem can be illustrated by the following example. The German equivalent of Chinese *jin* is *alt* "old". When the lexicographer analyzes the contexts of the source language, he will perceive that they belong roughly to the three following groups: (1) old edition of a book, an old malady recurs, old society, old ideology, old dwelling, old job; (2) old method, old custom, old dream, old archive; (3) old equipment in industry, old material, old clothes. Unless the dictionary belongs to the smallest type, without any generative power in the target language, it will not be sufficient to state simply *jin : alt,* but it will be felt necessary to give richer indications. It will also be essential to indicate that the German equivalent must not be taken in one of its senses as in *Er ist 10 Jahre alt* "He is ten years old". If the dictionary proceeds, as usual, by the indication of synonyms, one can suppose an entry of approximately the following type:

> *jin :* (1) "alt, früher, ehemalig" (that is, say, "old, former, previous");
> (2) "alt, schon lange bestehend" ("old, existing for a long time");
> (3) "alt, gebraucht, durch langen Gebrauch abgemacht" ("old, worn out by long use").

When we consider these indications, we see that an equivalent like *alt* "old" undoubtedly is a lexical unit which can be immediately inserted into a German sentence, whereas *schon lange bestehend* or *durch langen Gebrauch abgemacht* are somehow felt as non-minimal, as expansions of what the simple *ait* can convey. But these non-minimal expansions have the advantage that they, when we see them in isolation, give more information about the lexical meaning of the source language. Equivalents of the first type are usually called translational equivalents, those of the latter type explanatory or descriptive ones. Naturally there are many equivalents which combine both advantages; for instance *gebraucht* "used" seems to be, in the example given, a good translational equivalent with great descriptive power.

Very frequently, it is necessary to give a translational equivalent and an explanatory one, or only an explanatory one. For instance, an English-French dictionary can hardly proceed by giving a simple equivalent of English *boyhood,* because there is no really good one. The explanatory equivalent would probably be something like *état de garçon.* But this cannot be inserted into sentences (or translation of sentences) like *In his boyhood, he. . . . .* A more translational equivalent like *adolescence* or *jeunesse* is indicated. But these words are not restricted to male children in French, as the English word is. And so the entry would probably have to make a compromise and indicate, say,

boyhood : "adolescence, période de jeunesse" (d'un garçon)

The explanatory equivalent has the advantage of being very general, because it is situated rather on the notional than on the purely linguistic level. If the user grasps what is indicated, and if he knows French well, he will be able to understand many different English sentences, and he will feel free to adapt his French translations as need be. In various contexts, he may say, "Au temps d'adolescence ...", "Dans sa période de jeunesse ...", "Quand il était jeune garçon ...", but possibly and simply also "Quand il était jeune ...", etc.

The explanatory equivalent works particularly well if the target language is the user's native one, because it makes considerable demands on his knowledge. The advantage of the translational equivalent is that it is purely linguistic and that it offers the user directly an expression that can be used. But apart from the fact that it frequently conveys less information, the translational equivalent can cause a good deal of trouble to the lexicographer. Let us discuss an example. We said that Chinese *jin* has a good equivalent in German *alt* "old". The subsequent discussion has shown that the lexicographer will probably feel it necessary to add some further equivalents. This can be pushed too far. For instance, the lexicographer may find Chinese contexts in which the best translation would be "preceding, foregone, past, obsolete"; there will be contexts in which "ancient, antique, archaic" seem to fit well, etc. But to indicate all this would mean that the bilingual dictionary would grow into a synonymic dictionary of the target language. The lexicographer's task is to indicate the most general translational equivalents which have a broad range of application. And so the explanatory equivalent and the translational one are not so much opposed as one would think: they both act as representatives of groups of synonyms and near-synonyms, out of which the user may choose the most suitable one (if he knows them, or if he is able to use a monoglott or a synonymic dictionary of the target language). The difference between the two types is that the translational equivalent is always a possible choice for application in a sentence and sometimes the best one.

But while the lexicographer tries to indicate the best equivalents, he frequently is faced with the fact that he does not find any. For instance, it is hard to find an English equivalent for the Russian preposition *po* in such everyday expressions as Russian *po pribytii ego* "on his arrival", *po ukhode* ego "after he had gone, after his departure", *po okončanii* "as soon as he had finished". Grammatical information must be supplied instead of lexical equivalence, or in combination with it.

The so-called culture-bound words pose another problem, because they frequently have no lexical equivalent in the target language. There are basically three types of solution: (a) The lexicographer may try to create a translational equivalent by borrowing the respective word into the target language, frequently in a phonemically adapted form. (b) He may try to create a translational equivalent by coining a loan-translation, or by coining a new expression in the target language. (c) He may try to find an explanatory equivalent in the target language (with the eventual hope that it may become a translational one, if used frequently in future). If we take examples from a less known language, the three types are:

(a) Ossetic *alam :* Eng. "alam" (borrowing)
(b) Oss. *ironvandag :* "Ossetic way" (new coinage by loan-translation)
(c) Oss. *ziw* : "collective help" (explanatory equivalent)

It is clear that the explanatory equivalent (c) gives the richest information; types (a) and (b) can be chosen only if it is expected that the respective words will have a high frequency in translated texts (where there will be explanatory notes, etc.). But for a real understanding, we need an explanation in all three types, for instance:

(a) *alam :* "alam" (fruit and candy bound on a twig and carried by mounted participants at a funeral feast)
(b) *ironvandag* : "Ossetic way" (an ancient Ossetic funeral ritual)
(c) *ziw* : "collective help" (socially expected help, above all in agricultural work, organized within or by a group of people)

It depends on the lexicographer's decision (and this, in its turn, on the type and purpose of the dictionary), whether his explanations will be minimal (as here, type b), or whether they will verge on the encyclopedic types a, c); but they should have a uniform style through the whole dictionary.

The difference between what we call an explanatory (or descriptive) equivalent and an explanation is that the explanatory equivalent tends to be similar to a translational equivalent. If stabilized and accepted into the language, it can become a lexical unit of the target language. But an explanation tends to be very similar to a lexicographic definition (or is even identical with it) as used in monoglott dictionaries, and usually cannot aspire to becoming a lexical unit. But there is no need, I think, to stress that there are a great number of borderline cases.

And so we see that the bilingual lexicographer works basically with translational equivalents, synonyms, mutually disambiguating synonyms, mutually complementing synonyms, explanatory equivalents, and explanations. All of them have the purpose of informing the user about the meaning of the lexical unit of the source language, of supplying him with lexical units of the target language which can be used in source-language sentences, and of inducing in him a recollection of other suitable, near-synonymic lexical units of the source language even if they are not directly indicated.

A good entry of a bilingual dictionary also needs information usually supplied by illustrative examples (quoted or coined), by glosses, labels and similar means; but a discussion of this type of information would require another paper.

FOOTNOTE

This article is based on a section of my *Manual of Lexicography* (forthcoming). I wrote that book in co-operation with several colleagues who supplied material and examples from various languages. Full acknowledgement of those examples will be found in the book itself.