

Friend or Enemy? A Case Study of Lexical Comparison between Italian, German and Japanese Bilingual Dictionaries

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This work aims to demonstrate with a case study of bilingual Italian-German, Italian-Japanese, and German-Japanese dictionaries, exactly to what extent lexical drifting can manifest itself. Through a few examples, the study will raise issues of gender and cultural problems in bilingual dictionaries, and the peculiar case of a distant language like Japanese in comparison to German and Italian. The importance of considering both cultural and background knowledge when both building and consulting bilingual dictionaries will be stressed, in order for one not to obtain an outcome contrary to expectation. Finally, suggestions about how to overcome these problems will be made, with consideration given to the difficulty of dealing with strongly culturally-bound terms and their meanings.

This work aims to show to what extent lexical drifting can manifest itself with a case study on bilingual Italian-German, Italian-Japanese and German-Japanese dictionaries. The dictionaries taken into examination for my research are the 小学館和伊中辞典 *Dizionario Shogakukan Giapponese-Italiano*, the 小学館伊和中辞典 *Dizionario Shogakukan Italiano-Giapponese*, 三修社新アルファ独和辞典 *Sanshusha New Alpha Deutsch-Japanisches Wörterbuch* and the *Sansoni Italian German, German Italian dictionary*. It must be kept in mind that the Japanese dictionaries are intended for Japanese learners of Italian. The study will raise the issue of gender and cultural problems in bilingual dictionaries, using a few examples, and the peculiar case of a distant language like Japanese in comparison to German and Italian. Eventually it will be stressed how cultural as well as background knowledge must be carefully considered in both building and consulting bilingual dictionaries in order not to obtain an outcome contrary to expectation.

Men and women, strong and weak?

Talking about differences between men and women could be risky. First of all the fact that in Italian, as well as in English, *man* can be used as a synonym for *mankind* must be taken into account. As a matter of fact the term is fully accepted and used, even though there have been attempts to change to a more politically correct *essere umano* (*human being*)¹. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the rightfulness of this usage. This meaning does not concern the comparison between the two entries *man* and *woman*. The fact that bilingual dictionaries unavoidably give *humankind/human being* as the first meaning under *uomo*, listing then *Mensch* in German and 人間、人類、人 in a Japanese, would not therefore be taken into consideration. The analysis must start from the second meaning found in the dictionary, *man* as *adult male*, considering it the first meaning in order to have a fair comparison between *man* and *woman*.

Comparing what dictionaries list under *uomo* ([*Mensch*], *Mann*, *Person*, *Dienstmann*, *Ehemann*) and *donna* (*Frau*, *Weib*, *Ehefrau*, *Geliebte*, *Mädchen* or *Dienstmädchen*) it is immediately clear how unbalanced these translations are. Omitting the meaning *Mensch*, as briefly discussed before, one finds that a *man* can be *adult* and *masculine*, or, generally speaking refer to a *person*, a *worker* and finally a *husband*. Curiously enough, *woman* on the other hand can be an *adult female*, an insult (!), a *wife*, a *lover*, a *servant*. As far as the German-Italian dictionary is

¹ This matter has been widely discussed in Bazzanella (2000) and Manera (2007) among others.

concerned even the backward reference² confirms that while a *man* is primarily *adult*, *masculine*, *strong* and even “*a lord*” before being *husband* or *worker*, a woman does not have many opportunities: the choices are between *adult female* and *wife*, if she does not want to be “an insult” or a *servant*. Fortunately this kind of unbalance is not reflected in Japanese, although unfortunately a different one is. Even though the parallelism *man-strong* and *woman-weak* is kept, due to a strong and well rooted cultural heritage still alive both in Europe and Asia, the translation 女、女性 (*onna*, *josei woman*) in Japanese does not go as far as being an insult by itself,³ simply shifting between *girl*, *wife* and the less flattering *lover* and *concubine* (which at least are not as insulting as *Weib* can be!).

As a matter of fact the German and Italian words *Frau* and *donna* both carry the cultural weight of the medieval idea of woman, therefore bringing up the parallelism *woman* - “weak”. This last less flattering meaning of the word is usually not mirrored in Japanese, whose correspondent 女 (*onna*) reads the stereotypical physical weakness emphasising more the *delicate* and *fragile* inflection, mostly excluding bad meanings, with the sole exception of *fearful*. On the other hand, Japanese absolutely reflects the association *man* - “strong”, connecting the image of *man* to *noble* and *soldier*, thus implying physical and moral strength.

Due to this kind of unbalance, while it is not a problem for *men*, careful attention must be paid when dealing with *women* going from Italian through German to Japanese. In that case, looking for a *woman*, picking the second meaning *Weib*, one could choose to refer to a あま (*ama*) only to discover that it means *woman*, *girl* and *lover* (first meaning) as well as *bitch* or “*ugly witch*”, leaving *female* and *wife* respectively as third and fourth meaning. The German-Japanese dictionary reads, in fact, *Weib* mostly as an insult, confining the possibility of the old meaning of *wife* to the last meaning of the list and committing itself to a very strong choice, even an insult, strengthening the bad meaning as a result of this commitment.

It is difficult in case like these to offer a solution. Cases like *Weib* do not even allow to simply add the note “derogative” in the dictionary since the part of the meaning is relatively new. One possible solution could be to mark the word as “recently derogative” at the beginning of the explanation, avoiding this way to confine the bad meaning to the last usage example. *Weib* remains one of the most controversial issues for Japanese users. As for comprehension, the few students I interviewed were not aware of the recently derogative meaning of the word due to the influences of compound swearwords in which *Weib* is used with the meaning of *Frau*. Looking in up to date German dictionaries synonyms of *Weib* are: *Vettel*, *Scharteke*, *Luder*, *Aas*, *Hexe*, *Drache*.

The only example of this problem is a conversation with a Japanese student:

Er spricht wie ein Weib. (Intended meaning “He speaks like a woman”)

Normally students tend to solve the problem by simply avoiding to use it, sticking to *Frau* since the beginning. The Example before is a special case in which the Japanese student was speaking about a pair (*Mann* and *Frau*) and thought better to use a synonym for woman that could not be mistaken for wife.

Boys and girls, duds and servants?

It is worth noticing that turning the attention to younger people, a sort of opposite effect arises. While the Italian *ragazza* brings up *Mädchen*, *junge Frau* and *Freundin*, it is the boy’s turn to have the worst image, listing under *ragazzo* *Junge*, *Kerl*, *Knabe*, *Bursche* and even *Kindskopf* before *Sohn* and *Freund*. The semantic field for the female part does not go far away from what the dictionary listed for *woman*, giving the meaning *Mädchen* before *Freundin* and putting *girl* and even *virgin* before *girlfriend*, but at least the image it carries is not weaker than its male

² I call here *backward reference* the meaning listed in the German Italian section for the words found in the Italian German section. It holds as well for German Japanese and Italian Japanese further on.

³ If we exclude the case of “do not behave like a woman!” for “be strong, courageous”.

counterpart. As a last meaning one also finds *waitress* or *chambermaid*. Unfortunately for the boys this time the male side is not supported by the “masculine strong image” and suffers from being young and inexperienced. Starting from *Junge* (also as *boy*, *apprentice*) we have a way long down through *Kerl*, *Knabe* and even *Kindskopf* (mildly insulting), before we can finally find *Sohn* and *Freund*.

This time the cultural explanation is not enough to explain this choice. It could come from an older meaning because as a matter of fact the nowadays meaning of the Italian *ragazzo*, according to De Mauro Italian dictionary, does not have a bad meaning.

As for the Italian Japanese dictionary the translations are again different, due to a different viewpoint. While *ragazzo* lists 少年 (*shōnen*, teenager), 男の子 (*otoko no ko*, boy), followed by 未熟者 (*mijukusya*, young immature), 息子 (*musuko*, son) is already the third entry. *Boyfriend* and *apprentice* appear at the fourth and fifth place respectively. *Son* appear far earlier than in the Italian German dictionary. The German Japanese seems to agree with the choice of putting 少年 (*shōnen*, teenager), 男の子 (*otoko no ko*, boy), then 息子 (*musuko*, son) and *apprentice* as third meaning.⁴

Problems in this pair could arise because of the Italian double value of *ragazzo*, meaning both *boy* and *boyfriend*, mirrored and somehow shifted by the German *Freund* (*friend* and *boyfriend*). Trying the experiment of going through the three dictionaries again, from either *amico* or *ragazzo* could be dangerous, and could lead through *Freund* to a *lover* or, even worst, a *ファン*, literally a *fanatic*. The case of the meaning *amico* could lead even further away as the next section examines.

In this last case taken into examination the discriminating difference between male and female is not carried on any more, listing *ragazzo* and *ragazza* in Japanese only *girl* or *girlfriend* and adding in German *chambermaid*.

Once again it is interesting to see that we could start in Rome with a *girl*, move to Berlin having a *lover* and end up in Tokyo with a *fanatic* or a *chambermaid*.

Even though the intended users are Japanese, a better organization of the word meanings could turn out to simplify matters and clarify. One of the sources of the lexical drift is in this case the multiple meaning of the Italian *amante* (true also for *lover* and *Liebhaber*), all listed as meaning for *ragazzo*. Dividing the meaning into two different entries would definitely help Japanese users understanding the two different field of usage of the words and German users⁵ choosing the right one.

Foreigners: friends or enemies?

The last pair analysed is actually a triplet, since to *friend* and *enemy*, a third term had to be added. The word *amico* (*friend*) was at first taken into consideration because of the possible implications with the German *Freund* and the Italian *ragazzo* but eventually turned out to be even more interesting.

Under the word *amico* the Italian Japanese dictionary lists 友達 (*tomodachi*, *friend*) as first entry and 仲良し (*nakayoshi*, *mate*), 仲間 (*nakama*, *colleague*), right afterwards. Considering Japanese structured society, where work relationships often go side by side with personal life, it should be clear why *colleague* and *friend* are almost on the same level. Actually it is quite normal for the term to be interchangeable.

The second member of the couple is *nemico*; the Italian Japanese dictionary lists 敵 (*teki*, *enemy*), 敵対者 (*tekitaisha* *opponent*), 相手 (*aite*, ?) all three as first meaning, so presumably

⁴ It is also important to notice that the *boyfriend* meaning does not belong to the usage of *Junge*.

⁵ Even though not Japanese users are not the first intended users it is important to notice that there are no valid alternative for German and Italian users.

synonyms⁶. What could give troubles is 相手 (*aite*) since the back reference lists, strangely enough, *l'altro, compagno, socio, collega* (*the other, mate, colleague*) as first meaning. Practically a synonym of 仲間 (*nakama, colleague*)! According to the dictionary it must be understood that 相手 (*aite*) could actually translate both *friend* and *enemy*. This holds for the German Japanese dictionary as well, although 相手 (*aite*) does not appear under *Feind*, but under *Gegner* (*opponent*).

Things tend to become even more complicated if a third member is added, as promised, to this pair: namely *straniero* (*foreigner*). The reason will soon be clear. The first occurrence of *straniero* in the Italian Japanese dictionary is 外国人 (*gakokujin, foreigner*), followed by 敵 (*teki, enemy*). In this particular case the word meaning drifts too far, leaving the decision to the user whether a *foreigner* must be categorised as an *enemy* or a *friend*. This sort of misunderstanding could be even worse than calling your *wife* your *chambermaid*.

Here even the knowledge of Japanese culture and habits might not be sufficient to understand, why 相手 (*aite*) both refers to friend and enemy. Neither it is a fault of the dictionary itself nor a mistake originated during the composition. After all both the Shogakukan dictionary and the Sanshusha dictionary are made by Japanese and intended for Japanese, who most certainly do know in which contest 相手 (*aite*) has the meaning of *enemy* or *friend*. The explanation why 相手 (*aite*) is listed both under *friend* and *enemy* is only to be found in the meaning of 相手 (*aite*) itself consulting a Japanese dictionary from a Japanese point of view. The monolingual dictionary 広辞苑 gives the following explanation:

相手 ①事をいっしょに行う人。また、はたらきかける対象。 [...]

aite: 1) The person you are doing/making/performing something with. Also, the object/subject you are working on. [...]

So, seen from the Japanese point of view, an 相手 (*aite*) is simply someone who takes part in an action you are performing. It is now clear how it can be both a *friend* or *colleague* and even an *enemy* or an *opponent*. The Japanese word does not stress the point of view of the speaker, it just considers who takes part in the action. Confusing as it might seem from a western point of view, we still have to admit that our *enemy* is usually sure **we** are the *enemy*.

The case of 相手 (*aite*) is arguably one of the most complex and cultural-bound. Trying to disambiguate the meanings with usage examples would probably need many of them, risking to obtain the opposite effect of confusing things even more. A more practicable way would be to integrate the explanation with cross references to *enemy* and *friend* in order to give a more complete point of view on the term. Finally, for cases like this could be decided to give the term explanation as in the monolingual, in order to warn the user about unintended meaning drifting.

As a matter of fact these issues are fortunately not so common. Due to the fact that they concern frequently used words, learners tend to have trouble only at a early stage of acquisition. The problem arises from the foreigner point of view. Even though these dictionaries are intended for Japanese users, according to my research (Torino University and Goettingen University) there is not a valid alternative available for either Italian or German students. As for 相手 (*aite*), as a matter of fact almost all the students, both in Italy and Germany tend to use it only with the meaning of *business counterpart*, actually a very specific meaning, completely avoiding the friend/enemy problem just by not using it. This brings usually to a broader usage of synonyms and, moreover to problems in understand the word itself out of the business context. The student who answered my questions admitted to avoid on purpose the use of *aite* because of the ambiguity.

⁶ It does not necessarily mean that they are synonyms, but as a matter of fact this is the most probable assumption a learner is tempted to make.

Conclusion

As a matter of fact the issues that brought me to this paper cannot be seen as overall problems, due to the fact that actually students tend anyway to avoid ambiguity and, moreover to use the first meaning they learned for a word (or they find in the dictionary). The data I was able to collect started from my experience of Italian speaking both Japanese and German were collected between friend and colleagues at the University in Italy (Turin) and Germany (Goettingen), so no attempt of statistics relevance is to be inferred.

The goal of this paper was to point out some of the issues that could come out between three fairly different languages. My hope is for it to be a start of a broader development that could aim to a better treatment of the ambiguity in bilingual dictionaries, possibly with monolingual explanation and entry differentiation.

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