

Is a Bilingual Dictionary Possible?

Liam Rodger

Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd

7 Hopetoun Crescent

Edinburgh EH7 4AZ

Scotland

lrodger@chambersharrap.co.uk

Abstract

In this presentation, I reflect on some aspects of my practical experience in bilingual lexicography (specifically in the production of general-purpose paper dictionaries) in the light of some of the provocative ideas proposed by the linguist Roy Harris. His rejection of the idea of translation equivalence between languages, however surprising it may appear at first, serves as a useful point of departure in examining a number of persistent problem areas in the practice of bilingual lexicography. Several examples are discussed, indicating the sort of problems which can be encountered even with the apparently unproblematic concrete noun, and, less surprisingly, with slang and vulgar language. The points emerging from this discussion are then related to the use of examples in bilingual dictionaries more generally. In conclusion I argue that Harris's ideas can serve as a useful corrective to the tendency towards "tunnel vision" which may be encouraged by lexicographical practice.

Introduction

The integrationist view of language propounded by Roy Harris rejects the Saussurean model of the linguistic sign, and with it the idea that words have invariant meanings ("the determinacy fallacy" Harris 1981:10). This strikes at the foundations of most of modern linguistic theory, whether structuralist or generativist, and certainly makes for exhilarating reading. I do not propose to discuss Harris's views on semiology here, however, nor do I present myself an adherent of them. What I would like to do is argue through my reactions as a lexicographer to some of his ideas. I find the most interesting aspect of his work is his skill at identifying and questioning (if not demolishing) the often unconscious preconceptions that underlie much of our thinking about language. In this connection, it is Harris's views on translation which I have found most provocative, for among the beliefs about language he calls into question is one which he acknowledges is built into the educational experience of most Europeans - that "the words of his native language... have their equivalents, more or less, in other languages" (Harris 1980:5).

How should a bilingual lexicographer respond to this scepticism, which appears to call into doubt the basis of the entire enterprise of making bilingual dictionaries? We could take a robustly Johnsonian approach and refute it "thus", not by kicking a rock, but by pointing to practical experience which bears out the validity of bilingual dictionaries - innumerable people have learned foreign languages, and translated texts with their aid. Again, we could point out that no one would seriously suggest that one language is a word set, let's say English, that maps neatly into another set, perhaps called Spanish or Greek, or Vietnamese, without residue. Of course there are mismatches, such as the classic example presented by Saussure of the relationship between "river" in English and "rivière" and "fleuve" in French.

The very structure and subdivisions of bilingual dictionary entries recognise the complexity of the semantic relations involved when two languages are compared.

Concrete nouns

We may concede that there are culturally-bound concepts which are hard to provide equivalents for, and that there are rarefied areas of connotation and allusiveness which all too often elude our grasp, but aren't concrete nouns at least pretty straightforward? A dog (in English) is a *chien* (in French), a *perro* (in Spanish), a *Hund* in German... and so on. Let's look at an example in context, which is where words - translated or otherwise - are always to be found, outside the realms of lexicography, linguistics and crosswords.

Here is the opening paragraph of a Spanish novel, *Doña Perfecta* by Benito Pérez Galdós, originally published in 1876:

Cuando el tren mixto descendente número 65 (no es preciso nombrar la línea) se detuvo en la pequeña estación situada entre los kilómetros 171 y 172, casi todos los viajeros de segunda y tercera clase se quedaron durmiendo o bostezando dentro de los coches, porque el frío penetrante de la madrugada no convidaba a pasear por el desamparado andén. El único viajero de primera que en el tren venía bajó apresuradamente, y, dirigiéndose a los empleados, preguntóles si aquel era el apeadero de Villahorrenda. [Pérez Galdós 1876]

Here is the equivalent paragraph from a recently published translation:

When the coast-bound, combined freight and passenger train number 65 (it is not necessary to specify the line) stopped at the small station between the 171 and 172 kilometre posts, almost all the second and third class passengers stayed inside the carriages, asleep or yawning, because the penetrating cold of the early morning was not conducive to strolling along the platform, open as it was to the elements. The only passenger who had travelled in the first class compartment got off quickly and, addressing the railway employees, asked if this was the Villahorrenda halt.

[Tulloch 2000]

This extremely effective opening seems less like a typical nineteenth century novel than like one of those films which start with a stranger getting off a train in the middle of nowhere.¹ There's no elaborate scene setting, no lengthy account of the hero's family tree or of the historical background to the story that is about to unfold. Here what is emphasised is the isolation of the station, its distance from the capital, and how unusual it is to have a passenger of this kind alighting here. And all this is entirely appropriate to the function of this passage in the novel as a whole. The young man has arrived, though he does not yet know it, in the heart of deepest, darkest reactionary provincial Spain, and the novel recounts how this ostensibly highly educated and thoroughly modern young man from the big city comes to grief at the hands of the ignorant and superstitious, but devilishly crafty, provincials.

We could easily spend more time than we have available in analysing the original passage, and discussing its relationship to the translation, but I'd like to look at just the first noun phrase, "el tren mixto descendente" (let's leave "número 65" to one side). If we consult the best known general-purpose bilingual dictionaries for help we will find this:

	(un) tren mixto	(tren) descendente
Collins	passenger and goods train	down train
Harrap	passenger and goods train	****
Larousse	passenger and goods train	down train
Oxford	a train carrying passengers and freight	****
Simon & Schuster	****	said of the train going from the interior to the coast

Table 1: Dictionary data - tren mixto descendente

As far as "descendente" is concerned, this translation rejects "down train" – it does sound somewhat old-fashioned – and translates it along the lines of Simon and Schuster's gloss as "coast-bound", while falling in with the consensus on "tren mixto" by giving us both the passengers and the goods.

In one of his provocative asides, Harris has asserted [1999] that you can't say a translation is "wrong", only that *you* would have done it differently, so I'll simply say I would have translated "el tren mixto descendente" as "the stopping train from the capital". I'd reject the mention of the coastal destination not so much because it's entirely speculative (the line, like the station, after all, is not on any map) but because to say "coast-bound train" suggests a national rail network spanning the country, and linking regions together. Again, the precise composition of the train is not, I think, important to the contemporary reader, who is unlikely to have a detailed knowledge of the various categories of nineteenth century Spanish train service. What is important, as I read the text, is that the station is in the middle of nowhere (in fact the town itself is some way from the station), and that not many people get off at it, especially not smart folk from Madrid, and I think this is better conveyed by "the stopping train from the capital".

Now anyone is of course at liberty to object to my alternative translation, and the assumptions and reasoning behind it, just as I have questioned the published translation. But the debate would refer to interpretation of the source text, and reception of this particular translated text by the intended or assumed audience, based on what we take to be their likely cultural knowledge and presuppositions. It's not about what would be a more accurate dictionary translation. I'd certainly never dream of giving "stopping" as a translation of "mixto" in a dictionary. In some contexts the dictionary offering of "passenger and goods train" might work perfectly well, while in others we might want to use "slow", "uncomfortable", "that lets you enjoy the wonderful scenery" or... well, the possibilities are, if not limitless, at least hardly enumerable. Despite the remarkable consensus shown by the dictionaries, then, this is not such a straightforward case after all.

Interpersonal Focus

It obviously requires some time and space to present and discuss contextualized examples of the kind just examined. However, it can be more briefly noted that similar problems are frequently encountered with phrases which foreground what Halliday [1973] has called the interpersonal function of language, where issues of audience and intention arise when we assess the best translation to offer. Take, for example, the Spanish idiomatic phrase "no caerá esa breva" (literally "that young fig won't fall") - used as a rueful assertion that something will not happen. Here are the offerings from the dictionaries referred to earlier:

Collins	no such luck!
Harrap	some chance (of that happening)!
Larousse	no such luck!
Oxford	chance would be a fine thing, I/you etc should be so lucky...
S & S	****

Table 2: Dictionary data - ¡no caerá esa breva!

Even these alternatives are not completely mutually interchangeable, but there are other equivalents which might work equally well or better in given contexts, depending on the relationship between speaker and addressee, and the general tenor of the conversation, among other factors : that's just *not* going to happen, in your dreams, pigs might fly, you wish, never in a million years, etc. Even if we had the luxury of presenting an extensive set of such possibilities in a dictionary, there remains the further difficulty of clearly differentiating between them for the user.

Slang and Vulgar Language

These issues come into even sharper focus in the case of slang and vulgar language. More up-to-date dictionaries have got past the stage where a given "taboo" word or expression was translated (as it were "at arms length") by a literal equivalent of the relevant body part or physiological function, but this development, while welcome, introduces a host of problems when it comes to speaker's intention and hearer's reception. To give a concrete example, it is not so long ago that the norm in Spanish-English dictionaries was to translate "coño", if it was given at all, simply as "cunt" (with appropriate hazard signs of one sort or another). I imagine most people working on Spanish-English dictionaries nowadays would find this more than just inadequate, and in fact seriously misleading. The typical intentions and effects associated with each word have little correspondence with those of the word in the other language – just to start with, the Spanish word is not used as a direct insult, no matter how politically incorrect the speaker wants to be. Once we have accepted the problem, however, it's a tricky business to find an appropriate target language equivalent for a given case.² I recall one discussion of the use of the Spanish word as an exclamation where the context was "what you say when someone has just stood on your foot". It was ingeniously, if a little perversely, argued by a colleague that the British English equivalent of "coño" in this context, for some speakers at least, might be an apologetic "sorry!". That would be taking

things to extreme, I think, but it makes a valid point about the contrasting cultural assumptions and practices which underlie much of language use.

Contextualised Examples

I don't think the factors involved here are restricted to the fruitier areas of vocabulary. As I suggested above, questions of intention and effect almost inevitably arise whenever the focus is on the interpersonal function of language. The development of bilingual dictionaries over recent decades, whether through entirely new books or revisions of veteran titles, has seen an increasing use of examples to back up or even supplant direct translations. These include examples which are not just grammatical frames, fixed phrases or what are loosely called "idioms", but also those which aim to serve as examples of use, whether they are taken unedited from a corpus, or are adapted or invented. The best examples of this kind will have what J.R. Firth called a strong "implication of utterance" [Firth 1957:226], and will suggest the typical situations in which they would be used, though such examples are not always easy to find. When we translate contextualised examples, we have to weigh the relative merits of idiomaticity and generativity, and often the tricky balancing act between these two demands cannot be sustained. We may have to settle for a translation which conveys the bald "literal" sense of the original, but little or none of its connotations of irony or understatement, or suggestions of speaker characteristics such as age or class, and so forth. In other cases, we may have to regretfully dismiss a tantalisingly appropriate target language idiom because the source language would have to be manipulated into an implausible shape (given in the passive, or the negative, for example) to allow it. Another familiar crux is when the source language example makes explicit reference to speaker or addressee, while the most promising target language equivalents are impersonal (or vice versa). I don't have a typology of the commonest of such "lexicographical conflicts of interest", though it would be useful as an aid in discussing how we deal with them, but there's no denying that they're a persistent feature of work on general-purpose bilingual dictionaries.

It seems to me that the machinery of the typical general-purpose bilingual paper dictionary is currently under-equipped when it comes to making clear to the user the range of the variables which might be involved in some of these brief "contextualised" examples. We will have a relatively small set of labels or codes indicating register, or, say, euphemistic, pejorative or ironic use - though what information these convey to the dictionary user is another matter. For the rest, we're dependent on our skill (not to mention luck or inspiration) in selecting, editing or inventing examples, and in distinguishing succinctly and clearly between different senses, where this is appropriate. The trend in bilingual dictionaries (certainly Spanish-English ones) towards fuller treatment of colloquial language only serves to underline shortcomings in this area.

Conclusion

To return to the title of this paper: of course bilingual dictionaries are possible - they're what we do every day. However, I find Harris's criticism of the idea of translation equivalences between languages useful to keep in mind, as it reflects much that is true about language, and which is daily borne out in my experience of bilingual lexicography. I also find it helpful as a counter to any tendency towards "tunnel vision" which I often suspect the process of dictionary-making may encourage, as we seek to home in on the bull's-eye of the "right" or

"best" translation. This tendency is likely to be particularly persistent when working in the format of the paper dictionary, with its inevitable limitations of space and the relatively limited indicating material which is available. The historical "mental model" of the dictionary is, at bottom, that of one-to-one equivalence, no matter how many exceptions there may be in practice. Concordances of corpus examples, and access to widely-varied language samples through the Internet can certainly offer a richer view of language, but not one many users of general-purpose dictionaries would have the time or skills to avail themselves of. It's our job to work out how to mediate that information to them as effectively as possible.

To look ahead positively, I think the preceding discussion has indicated some areas which are ripe for development. I would be particularly interested to consider how colloquial and slang language might be better presented, as this is an area where the issues of speaker intention and hearer reaction are most obviously to the fore, though they run through all language use. Despite the inevitable constraints of space in a one-volume dictionary which seeks to give an overall picture of the relationship between two languages, even a modest start which, so to speak, gets the issues "onto the page" would be a useful advance. One avenue of approach might be through special treatment of selected examples, with brief commentary, in a box in the text.

Endnotes

1. John Sturges' 1955 *Bad Day at Black Rock*, springs to mind.
2. When it comes to slang and vulgar language, the best practice of translators producing film subtitles is often somewhat in advance of the content of most bilingual dictionaries, and a bilingual corpus of film scripts and subtitles would certainly be a useful resource here.

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