

Phonosemantic Accuracy in Bilingual Dictionaries: English and Estonian Derogatory Words

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Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed considerable progress in the development of phonosemantic theory. Unfortunately, surprisingly little has been published about the application of these ideas to bilingual lexicography. The paper analyses dictionary equivalents for English and Estonian derogatory words in the light of the finding that derogation is often phonosemantically encoded by labio-velarity (Wescott; Voronin). As Estonian (a Finnic language) is rich in expressive vocabulary, search for phonosemantically encoded equivalents allows to improve the phonosemantic accuracy of a dictionary to a considerable degree. The principles can be applied to language pairs other than English and Estonian and are also of some help to compilers of monolingual dictionaries (especially with regard to the treatment of expressive synonyms).

1 Introduction

Fred G. Cassidy once wrote that “that phonosymbolism is a linguistic reality, however, can hardly be doubted. We need to examine many languages, lexeme by lexeme, and even phoneme by phoneme, to find and fully describe the places and the ways in which it functions” (1980: 85). Fortunately, the past two decades have witnessed considerable progress in the development of phonosemantic theory (see e.g. Wescott 1980; Voronin 1982; Dogana 1983; Malkiel 1990; Hinton et al. 1994, Magnus 2001, Mikone 2002). Unfortunately, surprisingly little has been written about the application of these ideas to bilingual lexicography (but see Veldi 1994, 1999, and 2001). On the positive side, we have witnessed the publication of a number of specialized dictionaries of onomatopoeic words, including a new French dictionary of onomatopoeic words (Enkell and Rézeau 2003).

The paper proceeds from the assumption that the application of phonosemantic theory to dictionary making should improve the treatment of expressive (i.e. onomatopoeic and sound-symbolic) words to a considerable degree. Also, a systematic knowledge of the expressive resources of a language enables lexicographers to provide better equivalents in bilingual dictionaries. The problem is more topical for those languages that are rich in this type of vocabulary. As is known, languages are unequal with regard to the size of their expressive vocabulary. Japanese, for example, is known for its richness of expressive vocabulary. Estonian (a Finnic language), too, can be regarded a language that is rich in expressive words because such words account for about twenty per cent of the vocabulary (Rätsep 1983, see also Leskinen 2001). The article is based on the analysis of the existing English–Estonian and Estonian–English dictionaries and my own lexicographic work.

2 Phonosemantic patterns

The structures of expressive words follow canonical forms or patterns that are specific to expressive vocabulary (Anttila 1977: 33). It is important to realize that phonosemantic patterns are stable in a language. Individual expressive words, on the other hand, can be short-lived and may reveal considerable variation. This can be explained by the fact that expressive words can, in principle, be created anew at any time in accordance with the phonosemantic patterns when the need arises. This is what Åsa Abelin had in mind when she wrote that “onomatopoeic or other sound symbolic neologisms come and go, but the phonesthemes, out of which neologisms can be created, are stable over a longer period of time” (Abelin 1999: 49–50). One might say that these patterns belong to psycholinguistic reality and are shared by members of a speech community. According to Cassidy, phonosymbolic patterns exist in the native speaker’s consciousness (1980: 83). It is important to point out that in phonosemantic analysis the basic descriptive unit is the phonemotype rather than individual phonemes. Voronin defined the phonemotype as “a ‘semantically loaded’ acoustic or articulatory type of phonemes” (Voronin 1987: 197). Therefore, phonosemantic equivalents have to be established on the phonemotype level. How can one establish expressive equivalents? In an ideal case there will be a phonosemantic database of the language pair we are working on. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge such databases have not been developed as yet. For the foreseeable future we can, however, establish phonosemantic synonyms for neutral words by applying the existing knowledge of phonosemantic theory. It is also true that the monolingual treatments of expressive words are not systematic enough, which further complicates the search of equivalents.

3 Derogation from the phonosemantic perspective

As is known, in English derogatory meaning is often encoded by means of labio-velarity (Wescott 1980: 362–377; see also Voronin 1982: 94–98). In Estonian, too, labio-velarity is a means of expressing derogation.

Roger W. Wescott presented the following four patterns for English derogatory words (1980: 365):

1. labial onset, velar coda (*wog, fuck, puke, punk, fink*)
2. velar onset, velar coda (*kike, cock, cack, kook, crook*)
3. velar onset, labial coda (*wop, quiff, crap, creep, guff*)
4. labial onset, labial coda (*pimp, boob, poop, flub, fop*).

Wescott’s patterns are instructive in a number of ways. First, the order of labials and velars can be reversed. Second, some words reveal additionally a labial nucleus. Third, the basic pattern can be extended (e.g. by the use of liquids and nasals).

4 In search of equivalents

The task of a bilingual lexicographer is to establish the corresponding expressive patterns in the two languages, to come up with a range of suitable equivalents for inclusion, and to match them across languages. Unfortunately, expressiveness tends to be lost in bilingual dictionaries because lexicographers are not familiar with the expressive resources of the respective languages and tend to provide neutral equivalents for informal words. This is the

case, for example, with the treatment of the verbs *barf* and *puke* in the fourth edition of the “English-Estonian Dictionary” by Johannes Silvet (henceforth SILVET4). The first edition of Silvet’s dictionary was published in 1939, and so far it has remained the best English-Estonian dictionary. The fourth edition of this dictionary came out in 2002.

barf *peam Am fam oksendama*

puke *fam oksendama*

Here the lexicographer has taken the path of least resistance and provided the neutral verb *oksendama* ‘vomit’ as the only equivalent. As a consequence, the expressiveness of the English *barf* and *puke* is neutralized on the Estonian side of the dictionary (though the label *fam* = *familiarne* ‘informal’ indicates informality of the English terms). Thus, the lexicographer neglected the fact that there may exist also numerous informal synonyms that denote vomiting and that some of them would be appropriate for inclusion as dictionary equivalents. In this case the Estonian side can be improved by providing the informal Estonian equivalents *ropsima*, *pakkima*, and *öökima*. Actually, the suggestion is not to omit the neutral word altogether but to provide the informal equivalents first followed by the neutral term as an explanation.

The English *puke* belongs to the first pattern (labial onset, velar coda). The Estonian *pakkima* is similar to the English *puke* in that it follows the same pattern. It is natural that the cross-linguistic equivalents belonging to the same pattern are more easily noticeable. The English *barf* represents pattern four (labial onset, labial coda). The Estonian *ropsima* and *öökima* represent sub-patterns with \emptyset onsets (\emptyset onset, labial coda; \emptyset onset, velar coda, respectively). In addition, the verb *öökima* represents a language-specific phonosemantic feature in that in Estonian, similarly to Finnish, *ö* is often associated with derogatory meaning (see e.g. Sivers 1962). Actually, there is nothing unusual in this fact because the Estonian *ö* is a labial vowel; one should also point out labiality of the vowels in the English *puke* and the Estonian *ropsima*.

We could look at another example belonging to the same category.

SILVET4

gob *vulg (sülje, tati) larakas; molu, suu*

According to SILVET4, the English noun *gob* has two meanings (actually, there are more). In British English *gob* is an impolite designation of the mouth as in *shut your gob* ‘shut up’. SILVET 4 provides *molu* and *suu* as possible equivalents for this sense. The first word *molu* is expressive and derogatory; unfortunately, this equivalent is unsuitable because its current meaning is *face* rather than mouth. In this case the dictionary does not reflect current usage. The second equivalent *suu* is the Estonian neutral word for *mouth*. In fact, as is often the case, the best expressive equivalent *suumulk* (‘mouth + hole’) cannot be found in the dictionary. The Estonian equivalent for *shut your gob* is *hoia oma suumulk kinni*.

The English *gob* represents pattern three in Wescott’s scheme (velar onset, labial coda); the Estonian *mulk*, however, represents pattern one (labial onset, velar coda). One should also point out that in both words the derogatory meaning is further reinforced by labial vowels.

The word *gob*, however, has another meaning ‘a small amount of a thick wet substance’ as in *a gob of spit* for which *larakas* is provided as an equivalent. The equivalent is correct, but a lexicographer can further refine the treatment by exploring sets of variants. The “Explanatory Dictionary of Estonian” (EKSS) offers a choice between *süljelarakas*, *süljelärakas*, and *süljeplarakas*. The words *larakas* and *lärakas* represent vowel apophony, and *plarakas* has an

initial consonant cluster. It is clear that a bilingual dictionary should not pile up all the possible equivalents (they can be numerous). The criterion for inclusion is cruciality. For this reason the compound *süljelärakas* 'spit + gob' is the best equivalent for *a gob of spit*. However, in order to reach this conclusion, one has to explore the full range of possible equivalents.

Another interesting fact is that Estonian uses different phonosemantic patterns to encode the concepts 'mouth' and 'a gob of spit'. While the sense 'mouth' follows the labio-velarity pattern, *süljelärakas* 'a gob of spit' is encoded by a pattern expressing the spit through the feature of wetness.

The contrasting words *larakas / lärakas* reveal vowel apophony.

One should point out, however, that consonant alternations are common, too.

SILVET4

goof *fam* *tobu, tola*

Here both the Estonian equivalents are correct. However, the treatment could be further improved by adding an expressive synonym *jobu*, which is an alternation of *tobu*.

The next example represents a somewhat different derogatory pattern in English: labial onset, affricate coda (*botch, bodge*). Note that the English word reveals consonant variation and that derogation is reinforced by the labial vowel. According to ODE, *bodge* is a variant of *botch*.

SILVET4

botch 1. *v t fam* ülesannet kehvasti täitma, vusserdama, soperdama; 2. *s (ka botch-up)* vusserdis, soperdis

The first equivalent *ülesannet kehvasti täitma* 'carry out a task badly' is an explanation rather than an insertable equivalent. The provided Estonian equivalents *vusserdama* and *soperdama* are at first sight reasonably good. Both verbs belong to a group of Estonian expressive verbs with the iterative suffix *-rda-*, which often carries a derogatory meaning. The nouns *vusserdis* and *soperdis* are derived from the verbs *vusserdama* and *soperdama*. However, the application of phonosemantic analysis usually turns up previously neglected phonosemantic equivalents that deserve inclusion in dictionaries. In this case there were three excellent equivalents for *botch job*: *käkk, plötserdis* and *plätserdis*.

The translation of example sentences in monolingual dictionaries may also turn up good equivalents, for example,

the door was bodedged together from old planks ODE 'uks *klopsiti kokku* vanadest laudadest'

a botched attempt to kill them ODE 'käpardlik / äpardunud katse neid tappa'

the builders really botched up our patio LDOCE4 'ehitajad *keerased* meie terrassi *kihva / tuksi*'.

The expression verb *kihva keerama* shows alliteration, an example of sound repetition, which is common in Estonian idiomatic expressions.

SILVET4 does not list the nouns *botcher* and *bodger* (Br), which can be found in ODE. Both of them could be rendered into Estonian as *käpard* and *sooss-sepp* ('botch + smith').

5 Conclusion

The analysis of the treatment of English and Estonian derogatory words in bilingual dictionaries shows that the awareness of phonosemantic patterns in the respective languages enables lexicographers to enhance phonosemantic accuracy in bilingual dictionaries to a considerable degree. The principles can be applied to language pairs other than English and

Estonian and are also of some help to compilers of monolingual dictionaries (especially with regard to the treatment of expressive synonyms and variation in informal vocabulary). Phonosemantic awareness is comparable to metaphor awareness in cognitive semantics (see e.g. Boers 2000).

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