Note

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Third International Conference on Language Awareness, Trinity College Dublin, July 1996.

References


Translation Competence and Language Awareness

Pamela Faber
Faculty of Translation and Interpretation, University of Granada, Spain

One of the most difficult things translators have to learn is how to extract conceptual meanings from source texts, so that they base their translations on reformulations of those meanings, rather than on the words or structures that codify them. This article describes an exercise in lexical analysis, involving verbs of sound in English and Spanish. Its aim is to enable students to discover underlying patterns of meaning which are representative of lexical-conceptual structure. Through this type of activity, students explore the relation between language and thought, while also increasing their dictionary skills and awareness.

Introduction

Language Awareness has been defined as ‘a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life’ (Donmall, 1985: 7). Such awareness is obviously a major asset for any foreign language (FL) learner, but for translation students, it is a vital necessity. Arguably, consciousness of underlying patterns of meaning in language (in its generic sense) stands in direct relation to the relative ease with which students acquire translation skills.

Translation can be seen as a cognitive process involving a considerable amount of problem-solving and decision-making (Wax, 1994). This process, when considered in its microcontextual or narrower sense, is that which leads strictly from source text analysis to the production of the target language text. In a wider or macrocontextual sense, the strategies translators use and the decisions they make are oriented to the totality of the target text and thus influenced by a great variety of factors, of which the most important is the intended purpose of the target text in the target culture (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984; Nord, 1991). Nevertheless, behind the translation process, whether macro- or microcontextual, lies the problem of the genuine reconstruction of utterance meanings (Nechet, 1991: 19).

One does not have to be explicitly aware of this to translate successfully. Evidently, people can translate in different phases without being conscious that they are dividing the text into translation-oriented units, searching for functional equivalence, or organising the resulting text in a theme/rheme configuration similar to the original. In fact, it is often the case that translators are blissfully unaware that any of the above even exist as concepts related to the process of translating.

Translation competence

The concept of Translation Competence (TC) can be understood in terms of knowledge necessary to translate well (Hatim & Mason, 1990: 326; Bybee, 1996: 91f). However, in the past, it has often been referred to as though it were a celestial
Exercise in lexical analysis enable translation students to discern the patterns underlying meaning. Their value lies in the fact that one of the most difficult things translators have to learn is how to extract conceptual meaning from a source text, and to base their translation on a reformulation of that meaning, not on the words or structures that codify it. The aim of such exercises is for students to discover the connection between language and thought. At the same time, this reinforces the intuition (which they as reasonably proficient speakers of at least two languages have already acquired) that language is a partial codification of how different language communities have interpreted reality. In certain basic areas of meaning, languages will coincide with their primary vocabulary, while in other areas there will be important differences.

When looking at meaning, the obvious place to go is the dictionary, an extremely important source for translators in general. Paradoxically, the words most likely to be looked up tend to be not so much unfamiliar items as those that are well-known, or account of the multi-faceted nature of meaning. It is important that students of translation have both dictionary skills and awareness.

Translators need to use a range of different dictionaries since there is no single dictionary that contains all the information necessary about word meaning and/or possible interlinguistic correspondences. Indeed, Nida (1996: 85) states that many dictionaries are inadequate and based on quite wrong concepts about the nature of meaning, and that bilingual dictionaries are often even less satisfactory because they usually provide only a list of glosses and have no definitions.

Nevertheless, when they start off, students naively regard dictionaries (both monolingual and bilingual) with exaggerated veneration, and consider the definitions and interlinguistic correspondences in them to be invariably reliable. This is evident in their readiness to accept even deficient examples of lexicographic practice as sacred scripture. An example of this can be seen in the exercise below in which first-year undergraduates in the Translation Faculty of the University of Granada were given the following question:

Does the lexical entry below offer sufficient information? In your opinion, why are there so many correspondences given for *bawl*?

*bawl* v. intr. gitar, chillar, vocear, rugir, vociferar, desgafitarse

Answers to this question included assertions such as the following:

(a) *Bawl* has many ‘definitions’ in Spanish, and almost any of them will do.

(b) Exact translation is seldom possible.

(c) Language varies according to specific socio-cultural contexts.

(d) Certain words are more difficult to translate than others.

(e) By looking at the text, the translator will automatically know which correspondence is the best one.

(f) *Bawl* has so many correspondences in Spanish because Spanish is a richer language than English with a greater variety of possible nuances, and a translator must inevitably accept this.

This exercise was given as part of an Applied Linguistics course, designed to familiarise students with basic linguistic concepts useful in translation. The class was composed of 44 students (age range 18-27), the majority of whom were native Spanish speakers with good communicative skills and acceptable fluency in English, having passed the university entrance exam, as well as a second language-specific exam given at the Faculty. About 20% possessed native-like...
fluency because they had either lived abroad and/or one of their parents was English-speaking.

Even though none of the students had any background in lexicography or semantics, one might have expected a greater awareness of the differences in meaning in the Spanish equivalents offered for bawl. However, the students seemed to feel that the authority of the dictionary was greater than their own as language users. Moreover, not one noticed the most obvious problem with the above entry: namely, that among the six possible correspondences given (itself an excessive number even for bilingual dictionaries of this type), there is no mention of terroar, which is arguably the 'best all-purpose' equivalent. Nor did anyone remark upon the fact that bawl could have different meanings, depending on whether the agent is a drill sergeant (shouting), a baby (crying), or a tone-deaf singer (singing). Although in answer (c), sociocultural contexts were mentioned, nobody showed any clear expectation that the dictionary might offer an explanation of the meaning differences between the various correspondences on the basis of different contexts. This result is indicative of the fact that until then, students had not reflected either on the importance of dictionaries, or on the different types of information a useful dictionary for translators might contain.

Given the incomplete and occasionally inaccurate information offered in certain bilingual dictionaries, a useful technique to increase dictionary skills and awareness is for students to learn how to establish interlinguistic correspondences by using the information found in monolingual dictionaries. An activity which opens many students' eyes to the relationship between language and the mind is the use of dictionary information to map out an area of the lexicon in two languages, or to construct parallel representations of part of a semantic field.

**Mapping Out Semantic Space**

Although in one respect beginner translation students hold dictionaries in great awe, in quite another, they do not give them the importance they deserve. Standard dictionaries contain the body of knowledge gathered by lexicographic tradition and their definitions have the status of referential authority for users of the language in question. Moreover, it invariably comes as a revelation to students that anything so mundane as a dictionary definition is in one sense a translation of perceptions of reality, and thus encodes how the dictionary makers perceive and categorise the world. In fact, each dictionary definition can be considered an example of a micro-knowledge representation, because definitional structure is iconic with how subjects and events are categorised on the basis of sensory data.

- **bawl** to sing badly in a very loud voice
- **warble** to sing pleasantly in a high-pitched voice with trills (like a bird).

For example, in the preceding definitions, we can see, that both bawl and warble are ways of *singing*. The fact that they share the same nuclear term or classifier (*sing*) locates them in a subdimension of the lexical field of verbs of *SOUND*. In both cases, the adverbial modification of *sing* in their respective definitions, encodes features which differentiate them from each other, as well as from the other verbs with the same nuclear meaning. Their definitions can thus be divided into the components in Figure 1.

Other lexicemes which fall in the same semantic field are *sing, hum, croon, yodel, chant, carol and trill*. A semantic field is defined here as 'the set of all lexical units that share an explicitly distinguished non-trivial semantic component' (Mel'cuk, 1988: 170). From this definition, it naturally follows that a semantic field can be conceived as a hierarchy of lexemes all of which share the same nuclear meaning. The classifier marks the semantic territory covered by a specific field and thus becomes the factor which determines field membership. This is also in consonance with Mel'cuk's Decomposition Principle which stipulates that the definition of a lexical unit must contain only terms that are semantically simpler than itself (Mel'cuk, 1988: 170). Wierzbicka (1992: 11) writes:

**Explicating involves reducing semantically complex words to semantically simple words, and hence the words used in an explication are not selected at random: there is a hierarchy among words, and a correct definition will reflect this hierarchy.**

Lexemes specify the nuclear meaning of the field they belong to in different ways. These minimal differences in content are the basis upon which the lexemes are interrelated and structured into meaningful configurations in the same area of semantic space. By using a variety of dictionaries as texts that embody our shared knowledge about words, students are asked to contrast and compare the definitions given for verbs within the same general area of meaning. In this way, they extract the meaning components of each lexeme through definitional analysis, identify the type of component, and learn how to construct their own definitions on the basis of this mini-investigation into meaning. For this type of analysis, three or more dictionaries are used in order to obtain a consensus of the meaning components for each term.

A thesaurus can be used as the source for the initial group of verbs. However, as the meaning relationships among these lexemes are specified, the members of the lexical set which finally appear in the hierarchy may vary somewhat.

To justify the inclusion of a verb in the meaning area in question, each term is
lexically decomposed so that its definition consists of a nuclear word (or a previously defined non-nuclear one), and one or more features which differentiate it from the preceding members of the hierarchy. For example in the lexical dimension, to make a musical sound, the nuclear word, sing, is the superordinate in terms of which all the other words are defined. The adverbial modification within the definitions encode features (senses) which differentiate the lexemes from each other within each meaning area. Lexemes are distinguished from each other by one sense or minimal distinctive feature. The various kinds of features of semantic differentiation show us the divisions and distinctions that each language makes in the semantic continuum (Faber, 1994; Faber & Mairal, 1994; 1997).

For example, in the case of bawl, definitional analysis would be carried out by using information from the following dictionaries:

- **bawl**
  - to shout in a loud, rough voice; to cry noisily (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture).
- **bawl**
  - to shout or cry loudly (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary).
- **bawl**
  - If you bawl, you shout or sing something very loudly and rather harshly. If a child is bawling, it is crying loudly (Collins Cobuild).
- **bawl**
  - to shout or sing in a very loud voice; to cry loudly (Cambridge International Dictionary of English).
- **bawl**
  - to cry or sob loudly; wail; to cry out loudly and vehemently; shout (American Heritage).

Once it is ascertained, that bawl is in reality not one lexeme, but three, the students would then proceed to insert sense components (derived from the preceding dictionary definitions) as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Activity Sheet 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifier</th>
<th>bawl1</th>
<th>bawl2</th>
<th>bawl3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
<td>shout</td>
<td>sing</td>
<td>cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loudly</td>
<td>loudly</td>
<td>very loudly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voice</td>
<td>voice</td>
<td>voice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harshly</td>
<td>badly</td>
<td>unpleasantly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indicator</td>
<td>(indicative of speaker authority and/or strong emotion)</td>
<td>(negatively evaluated by the perceiver)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within each of the following meaning dimensions, arrange the verbs listed in lexical hierarchies in terms of their definitional structure.

**VERBS OF SOUND**
- sound to make a particular noise.

**SOUNDS PRODUCED BY HUMANS**
- To make a sound by speaking
  - **To make a loud sound by speaking**
    - bawl1, roar, shout, shriek, bark, holler, whoop, scream, bellow, howl1, yell, vociferate, screech, cry out
  - **To make a sound expressing unhappiness**
    - cry1, cry2, moan, wince, groan, whimper, bawl2, yowl, sob, weep, wail, blubber, howl2
  - **To produce musical sounds**
    - sing, bawl3, hum, troll, croon, yodel, warble, chant, carol

The components in Figure 2 allow them to construct new definitions, something like the following:

- **bawl1** to shout loudly and harshly
- **bawl2** to sing badly in a very loud voice.
- **bawl3** to cry very loudly in an unpleasant way (of children).

The meaning components used are natural language phrases found in definitions, and thus differ from componential analysis (Nida, 1975). In componential analysis, the meaning of a word is the sum of the binary features it possesses, such as +/human, +/-male, +/-concrete, etc. When componential analysis was most popular in the 1950s, linguists hoped that it would enable them to arrive at the set of universal semantic features. However, it soon became clear that this type of analysis is only applicable to a small sector of vocabulary (e.g. kinship), and that word meaning is much too complex to be expressed purely in terms of binary oppositions. Varieties of componential analysis have been proposed by various authors both as an aid to translation (Newmark, 1981; 1988) and vocabulary learning (Rudzka et al., 1981, 1985). However, in translation, its use has always been somewhat limited because the translator must inevitably give priority to correspondence at higher levels of the text, and words must be considered in context.

Nevertheless, the elaboration of lexical hierarchies is a valuable exercise because it more generally helps students acquire dictionaries of skills and awareness, and more specifically shows them how the polysemy of lexemes such as bawl can be resolved. The next step after elaborating the definitions for each verb in the activity sheet given to students for this task.

When completed, the hierarchies would be similar to the ones in Figure 4. As can be observed, within verbs of SOUND, bawl would appear in three different subdimensions, depending on the type of agent producing the sound.

The completed version of Activity Sheet 2 shows that bawl falls within three different areas of meaning, and as such, is related to three different sets of
An example of the definitional analysis of *berrear* (the Spanish equivalent of *bawl*) can be seen in Figure 5. Figure 6 is an example of the comparison of the definitional components of *bawl3/berrear3*.

**Figure 5 Activity Sheet 3 (completed)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>berrear3</th>
<th>bawl3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grito</td>
<td>canto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ruido</td>
<td>ruido</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desafinadamente</td>
<td>desafinadamente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infantil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sonido fuerte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6 Activity Sheet 4 (completed)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>berrear3</th>
<th>bawl3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grito</td>
<td>canto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ruido</td>
<td>ruido</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desafinadamente</td>
<td>desafinadamente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infantil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sonido fuerte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parallel representation in English and Spanish of the subdimension of to make a musical sound, with approximate correspondences within the two sets of verbs, would be similar to those in Figure 7.
When students compare the subdimension in Figure 7 (to make a musical sound) with that of Figure 8 (to make a loud sound by speaking), they find that although lexemes such as bawl belong to more than one meaning area, these meanings are interconnected and must necessarily be taken into account in the search for correspondence. In this case, all the meanings of bawl coincide in the component of loudness. Nevertheless, it is evident that the lexicographer who elaborated the initial bilingual dictionary entry only chose to define bawl as a kind of shouting.

Students thus acquire a graphic representation of how different languages divide up the same semantic space, and see distinctions made in one language that are not made in another. This coincides with the following list of insights which can usefully be gained through Language Awareness activities:

- There is no word-for-word equivalence.
- Like-sounding words may not mean the same.
- Some languages have several words for only one word in another.
- Some languages do not have a word that others have (Donmall, 1991: 120).

**Conclusions**

Even students with a good command of two languages often begin translation studies with an erroneous concept of the translation process and what it involves. This is partly due to naïve ideas about meaning and language. One of the most important tasks for the teacher is to foster awareness in students of how language
Language Awareness works through a wide variety of activities which ultimately lead them to understand translation better.

The exercise in lexical analysis described here builds on knowledge the students already have (the use of dictionaries, knowledge of the L1 and L2) and helps them see how basic correspondences at the level of word can be derived. It also encourages students to place words in terms of their paradigmatic relations with other words in the same meaning area. This is valuable because even students with a high level of proficiency in the FL often do not have an overview of the semantic distinctions made in comparable lexical domains.

The effectiveness of these activities can be judged from the reports of the students themselves: that they later found insights from the activities to be beneficial for pre-translation text analysis, as well as for the subject of Terminology where they also had to derive conceptual relationships between terms in so-called translation correspondences in bilingual dictionaries, but even more so in specialised domains.

Notes
1. This research was carried out within the framework of the project Desarrollo de una lógica léxica para la traducción asistida por ordenador a partir de una base de datos léxica ingles-espaiiol-francés-aleman multifuncional y reutilizable funded by the DOICYT (PB 94-037). The author wishes to thank Peter Garrett as well as the two anonymous referees for their suggestions and helpful comments regarding this article.
2. Entry taken from Amador English-Spanish Dictionary.
4. The English dictionaries used were Collins Cobuild, Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary, Cambridge International Dictionary, American Heritage Dictionary of English Language and Culture, Spanish dictionaries were María Moliner: diccionario del uso del español, Diccionario ideológico de la Lengua Española and Diccionario de la Real Academia Española.

References