



TRANSLATOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AT WORD LEVEL

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Abstract. This article touches upon the issue of non – equivalence at word level in literary works, where seven types of non – equivalence are discussed with examples and a number of strategies are given to deal with these problems.

Key words: source language, target language, culture – specific, superordinate, hyponym, substitution, loan, paraphrase, omission.

Non – equivalence at word level means that the target language has no direct equivalent for a word which occurs in the source text. The type and level of difficulty posed can vary tremendously depending on the nature of non – equivalence. Different kinds of non – equivalence require different strategies, some very straightforward, others more involved and difficult to handle. Since, in addition to the nature of non – equivalence, the context and the purpose of translation will often rule out some strategies and favor others.

The following are some common types of non – equivalence at word level, with examples from various languages:

a) Culture – specific concepts

The source – language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to a “culture – specific”. An example of an abstract English concept which is notoriously difficult to translate into other languages is that expressed by the word privacy. This is a very English concept which is rarely understood by people from other cultures. An example of a concrete concept is airing cupboard in English which, again, is unknown to speakers of most languages.

b) The source – language concept is not lexicalized in the target language

The source – language word may express a concept which is known in the target culture but simply not lexicalized, that is not ‘allocated’ a target – language word to express it. The word savoury has no equivalent in many languages, although it expresses a concept which is easy to understand. Landslide has no ready equivalent in many languages, although it simply means ‘overwhelming majority’ [Mona Baker, 2002; 21].





c) The target language lacks a superordinate

The target language may have specific words (hyponyms) but no general word (superordinate) to head the semantic field. Russian has no ready equivalent for facilities, meaning 'any equipment, building, services, etc. that are provided for a particular activity or purpose.' It does, however, have several specific words and expressions which can be thought of as types of facilities, for example sredstva peredvizheniya ('means of transport'), name ('loan'), neobkhodimye pomeschcheniya ('essential accommodation'), and neobkhodimoe oborudovanie ('essential equipment').

d) The target language lacks a specific term (hyponym)

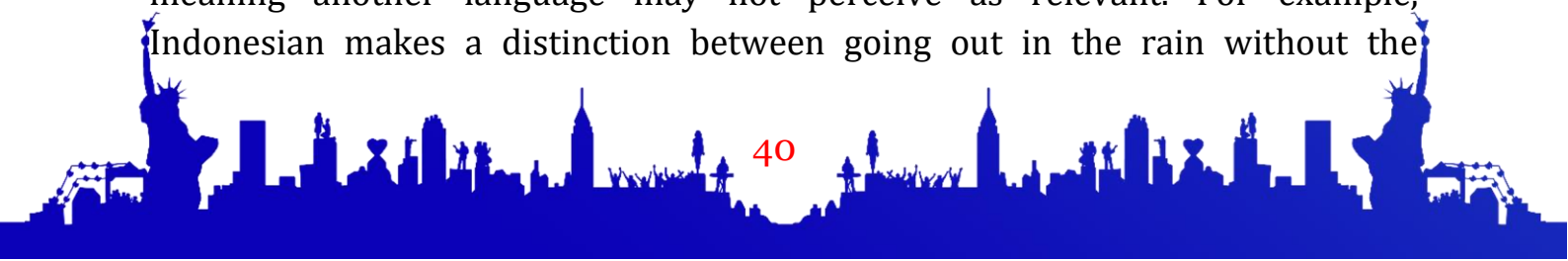
More commonly, languages tend to have general words (superordinates) but lack specific ones (hyponyms), since each language makes only those distinctions in meaning which seem relevant to its particular environment. There are endless examples of this type of non – equivalence. English has many hyponyms under article for which it is difficult to find precise equivalents in other languages, for example feature, survey, report, critique, commentary, review, and many more. Under house, English again has a variety of hyponyms which have no equivalents in many languages, for example bungalow, cottage, croft, chalet, lodge, hut, mansion, manor, villa and hall. Under jump we find more specific verbs such as leap, vault, spring, bounce, dive, clear, plunge and plummet.

e) The source – language word is semantically complex

The source – language word may be semantically complex. This is a fairly common problem in translation. Words do not have to be morphologically complex to be semantically complex [Bolinger and Sears, 2000; 168]. In other words, a single word which consists of a single morpheme can sometimes express a more complex set of meanings than a whole sentence. Languages automatically develop very concise forms for referring to complex concepts if the concepts become important enough to be talked about often. We do not usually realize how semantically complex a word is until we have to translate it into a language which does not have an equivalent for it.

f) The source and target languages make different distinctions in meaning

The target language may make more or fewer distinctions in meaning than the source language. What one language regards as an important distinction in meaning another language may not perceive as relevant. For example, Indonesian makes a distinction between going out in the rain without the





knowledge that it is raining and going out in the rain with the knowledge that it is raining. English does not make this distinction, with the result that if an English text referred to going out in the rain, the Indonesian translator may find it difficult to choose the right equivalent, unless the context makes it clear whether or not the person in question knew that it was raining.

g) Differences in physical or interpersonal perspective

Physical perspective may be of more importance in one language than it is in another. Physical perspective has to do with where things or people are in relation to one another or to a place, as expressed in pairs of words such as come/go, take/bring, arrive/depart and so on. Perspective may also include the relationship between participants in the discourse. For example, Japanese has six equivalents for give, depending on who gives to whom [McCreary, 1999;104].

The above are some of the more common examples of non – equivalence among languages and the problems they pose for translators. We can now look at examples of strategies used by professional translators for dealing with various types of non – equivalence [Catford J. C., 1995; 103].

a) Translation by a more general word (superordinate)

This is one of the commonest strategies for dealing with many types of non – equivalence, particularly in the area of propositional meaning. It works equally well in most, if not all languages, since the hierarchical structure of semantic fields is not language – specific.

b) Translation by cultural substitution

This strategy involves replacing a culture – specific item or expression with the target language item which does not have the same propositional meaning but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader. The main advantage of using this strategy is that it gives the reader a concept with which s/he can identify something familiar and appealing.

c) Translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation

This strategy is particularly common in dealing with culture – specific items, modern concepts, and buzz words. Following the loan word with an explanation is very useful when the word in question is repeated several times in the text. Once explained, the loan word can then be used on its own; the reader can understand it and is not distracted by further lengthy explanations.

d) Translation by paraphrase using a related word

This strategy tends to be used when the concept expressed by the source item is lexicalized in the target language but in a different form, and when the





frequency with which a certain form is used in the source text is significantly higher than would be natural in the target language.

e) Translation by paraphrase using unrelated words

If the concept expressed by the source item is not lexicalized at all in the target language, the paraphrase strategy can still be used in some contexts. Instead of related word, the paraphrase may be based on modifying a superordinate or simply on unpacking the meaning of the source item, particularly if the item in question is semantically complex.

f) Translation by omission

This strategy may sound rather drastic, but in fact it does no harm to omit translating a word or expression in some contexts. If the meaning conveyed by a particular item or expression is not vital enough to the development of the text to justify distracting the reader with lengthy explanations, translators can and often do simply omit translating the word or expression in question.

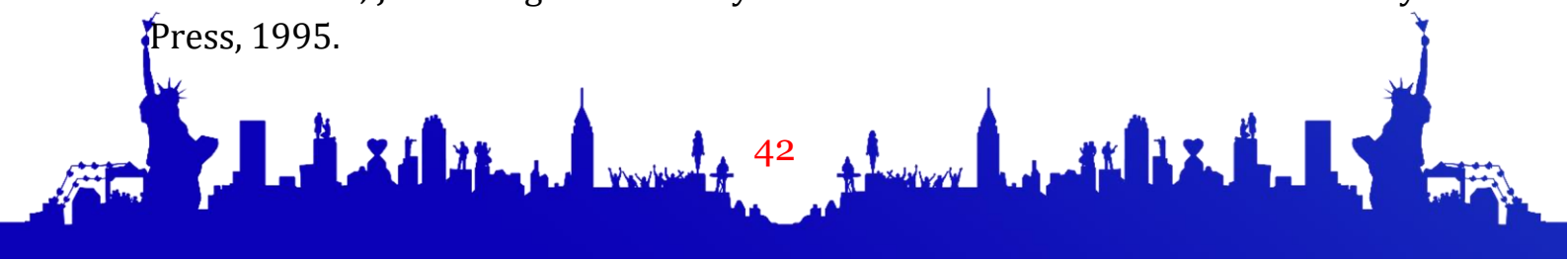
g) Translation by illustration

This is a useful option if the word which lacks an equivalent in the target language refers to a physical entity which can be illustrated, particularly if there are restrictions on space and if the text has to remain short, concise, and to the point.

As a conclusion, it can be said that in dealing with any kind of non – equivalence, it is important first of all to assess its importance and implications in a given context. Not every instance of non – equivalence you encounter is going to be significant. It is neither possible nor desirable to reproduce every aspect of meaning for every word in a source text. We have to try, as much as possible, to convey the meaning of key words which are focal to the understanding and development of a text, but we cannot and should not distract the reader by looking at every word in isolation and attempting to present him/her with a full linguistic account of its meaning. Besides, it is impossible and unhelpful to attempt to relate specific types of non – equivalence to specific strategies, as other features of the text should be taken into account during the process of translation.

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