

On Lexicographical Translation in Bilingual Dictionaries and its Multi-disciplinary Theoretical Basis

Wei Xiangqing*

Abstract: Traditionally, in the field of bilingual lexicography, the main task for lexicographers is to provide lexical equivalents in bilingual dictionaries by all possible means. And accordingly, how to provide appropriate or satisfying translation equivalents in bilingual dictionaries is always the centre of attention in bilingual metalexicography. However, the history of bilingual lexicography shows that it has never been an easy task, because of linguistic and cultural anisomorphism. The usual compromise made by most lexicographers is to introduce partial or explanatory equivalents. This recourse means that most bilingual lexicographers, unfortunately, more than often, fail to meet the needs of foreign language learners. Certain misconceptions about the translation equivalents emerge among the language learners, which explains the awkward situation that besets bilingual lexicographers. The present contribution aims at perceiving lexicographical translation as a dynamic process by which an adequate semantic system in the target language would be set up to serve as a functionally equivalent defining system. By doing this, bilingual lexicographers should establish a powerful target language semantic network, in which lexicographical sections like verbal illustrations, usage notes and etymologies, etc. would be considered together with the translation equivalents as an integrated whole. This is an attempt to describe the essential features of lexicographical translation and its multi-disciplinary theoretical basis, in the hope that future practice in bilingual lexicography might be improved.

Key words: bilingual dictionaries, lexicographical translation, multi-disciplinary theoretical basis

0. Introduction

It is well known that the lexicographical definition enjoys a considerably privileged status in monolingual lexicography. Lexicographers in their dictionary compilation process undoubtedly pay more attention to definition writing than other aspects. As for bilingual

* Wei Xiangqing: Bilingual Dictionary Research Centre of Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, Jiangsu, China. E-mail: njuwxq@yahoo.com.cn.

lexicography, there has been a long-standing mistaken idea, namely, to describe the source language lexical items is to provide only their semantic equivalents in the target language. There is a theoretical background to this deep-seated belief, originating in the bilingual lexicographical tradition of more than three millennia ago. That is, there is not much difference between monolingual lexicographical definition and lexicographical translation. The only disparity between them lies in the fact that they use different metalanguages to define or describe. Owing to this blind spot in bilingual lexicographical studies, there has been little improvement in terms of the study of lexicographical translation. And this misconception means that the needs of bilingual dictionary making are not met. In present-day China, a great variety of bilingual dictionaries are flooding the book market, among which satisfying ones are not often seen. This situation is directly caused by the backward study of lexicographical translation. We have to reflect on this problem in an entirely new, rational way and hopefully make some progress, in which case a better bilingual dictionary making on the whole will be guaranteed.

Monolingual lexicographical definition, as the core of monolingual dictionary making, is crucially important. And so is the lexicographical translation in bilingual lexicography. Nevertheless, in traditional bilingual lexicography, the above two issues are always conflated. People have a somewhat biased view that they can compile bilingual dictionaries successfully by following the principles of monolingual dictionary making, and lexicographical translation can be dealt with by drawing indiscriminately on the experience of monolingual lexicographical definition. Actually, as we know, lexicographical translation is very different from monolingual dictionary definition though lexicographers involved in different languages do share their thoughts or ideas in their respective careers, and the stereotype of “translation equivalents” shows limitations of unsystematic thoughts on lexicographical translation.

Lexicographical definition, as its name denotes, refers to the defining work in dictionaries, namely, defining lemmas and sub-lemmas. For a long time, people have tended to think about the issue of lexicographical definition in a rather static way. In other words, definitions that appear in dictionary texts are often mixed up with the dynamic process of defining in dictionary compilation. In fact, the defining process in a dictionary is complex, demanding a comprehensive perspective on the nature of defining work and systematic thought on the specifications of compilation. To define a single lemma in a dictionary in most cases requires a cross-entry description, in which case all the possible related information should be provided outside the specific article of the lemma. It is indeed to build a semantic network to define a single lexical unit, which meets the requirements of dictionary users for lexical knowledge to develop their lexical competence. The benefit of this is that a careful and skillful dictionary user may find what is expected or

even sometimes unexpected.

Lexicographical translation follows the same pattern. It has been widely acknowledged among linguists as well as language teachers that lexical competence is vital for language learning. Modern dictionaries as one of the major resources for autonomous vocabulary learning are meant not only for giving specific linguistic instructions but also, more importantly, for helping the dictionary user develop their lexical competence as a final objective. In order to achieve this goal, lexicographical translation must be a dynamic defining process of source language entries by way of establishing a functionally equivalent target language semantic network. And the traditional way of providing mere “translation equivalents” will certainly not at all help in many cases since “absolute equivalents” are virtually impossible to find: they simply do not exist.

With the acceleration of globalization, the teaching of second languages (e.g. English or Chinese) has become much more popular. As a result, the compilation and publication of bilingual dictionaries are seen as a must and have become a highly competitive area. While language learners find a large number of bilingual dictionaries available in bookstores, they complain about their low quality. Among the shortcomings they identify, translation equivalents rank high. To escape this, both lexicographers and metalexicographers have to think about lexicographical translation from an entirely new perspective: they have to take a comprehensive or systematic approach. A theoretical exploration of this issue will certainly benefit the bilingual compilation practice as well as the teaching of second languages.

In studies of bilingual lexicography, the essential features of lexicographical translation have unfortunately long been neglected. In fact, a profound understanding of the true nature of lexicographical translation has indeed serious impact upon the overall theoretical framework of bilingual lexicography. Theoretically speaking, the process of lexicographical translation involves the studies of many interrelated research fields, such as lexicography, linguistics, translation studies, psychology and the interdisciplinary field of comparative cultural studies. The author of the present paper here proposes that the improvement of lexicographical translation can not be really made without the true understanding of its essential features and its multi-disciplinary theoretical basis. The following are the brief ideas concerning this topic.

1. The essential features of lexicographical translation

Ever since their first emergence in the history of lexicography, dictionaries as the final arbiter of “correct” or “standard” use of languages, have long been playing a significant role in helping language learning. It is quite natural that foreign language learners put much trust in the usefulness and authority of kinds of information conveyed in bilingual

dictionaries while they are trying to get to grips with the phonological, grammatical, semantic or pragmatic aspect of certain lexical items. However, sadly, most bilingual dictionaries puzzle or confuse their users by offering only misleading target language “equivalents”. Bilingual lexicographers may seem to be to blame, yet it is not fair to rebuke them for all faults. The cultural and linguistic diversity between the source and target languages places major barriers in their routine task of lexicographical translation. Nevertheless, a deep-rooted misconception about lexicographical translation may further explain.

Influenced heavily by the traditional paradigm of bilingual lexicographical practice, bilingual lexicographers habitually base their work on the achievements made by their monolingual counterparts. To be more specific, bilingual lexicographers normally make a comparative study first of the linguistic vs. cultural information conveyed in various monolingual dictionaries with recourse to other reference works. Then they try to work out a possible partial or sometimes pseudo target language equivalent according to their own understanding of the meaning of each lexical item. This process reflects the universal belief held by most bilingual lexicographers of the prime aim of bilingual lexicography, namely, providing the source language lexical units their target language equivalents. And this deep-seated belief was once clearly expressed by American lexicographer and theoretician Zgusta in his book *Manual of Lexicography*.

Compared to the traditional understanding of lexicographical translation, modern bilingual lexicography requires more, since the needs of dictionary users have changed greatly. Most foreign language learners nowadays are seen actively involving themselves in various interlingual communications, which require their better lexical competence instead of limited lexical knowledge in the past. Therefore, they become less satisfied with those partial equivalents in bilingual dictionaries only. The fact is , they need more useful instructions for productive language activities, such as speaking, writing and translating. So, bilingual lexicographers presently have to meet this new challenge from dictionary users. And the essential features of lexicographical translation should be seriously reconsidered.

Lexicographical translation as a newly employed terminology in lexicography does differ from its monolingual counterpart—monolingual lexicographical definition. Its unique features have much to do with the nature of bilingual lexicography. A recent consensus achieved among most bilingual lexicographers is that bilingual dictionaries should to the greatest extent help foreign language learners to develop their lexical competence. Since the expectations of modern foreign language learners for dictionaries are really more diverse than those of their previous generations, it is not feasible to fulfill their potential requirements by merely partial equivalents. Apart from those partial equivalents, dictionary users will need more instructions from the information conveyed by

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verbal illustrations, usage notes, cross-references, etc. What's more, the process of lexicographical translation is in fact a continuous one in the way that each revision of the dictionary would bring improvements to the previous work. In a word, lexicographical translation features as a dynamic process and comprehensive system rather than static equivalents presented as a result.

According to Dr. Hartmann, there are four major formal structures in modern dictionary texts. They are megastructure, macrostructure, microstructure and mediostructure.^① Since lexicographical translation is considered as a dynamic and systematic work, it will obviously make good use of those means concerning different structures. It is reasonable to say that lexicographical translation also enjoys the above four structures. The only difference lies in that the latter focuses exclusively on the semantic content, and ignores the dictionary format.

While trying to build a semantic network for describing each source language entry, bilingual lexicographers have to understand and remember that they should pay special attention to the prototypicalness or representativeness of the language information they provide in the dictionary. By prototypicalness or representativeness, the author here stresses the necessity and significance of the generativeness or productivity of the dictionary information. To clarify, what lexicographers present in bilingual dictionary texts should be instructive enough for foreign language learners' successful encoding activities in the real language situation. In this case, bilingual lexicographers do play a vital role in deciding which type of language information should be included in the dictionary. Since English is currently a global language, varieties of English present a colourful picture of world Englishes. It is advisable for bilingual lexicographers to bring the dictionary user, the English learner for example, the most standard or well-received language information, namely, the spelling, pronunciation, grammar, meaning and usage. And this could be a solid foundation for the language learner to understand further other language varieties. In this respect, the proper use of corpus data would be of great help for bilingual lexicographers in their usual practice of lexicographical translation.

2. Its related multi-disciplinary theoretical basis

Lexicography as an interdisciplinary research field has now increasingly shown its evident academic dependence to other related or neighboring subjects like Semantics, Psychology, and Information science and so on. When it comes to bilingual lexicography, the research scenario would be even more complicated because of the wide divergence between different languages involved both linguistically and culturally. The study of

^① Please refer to Hartmann, R.R.K. & G. James (1998).

lexicographical translation may draw inspiration from many interrelated research fields, the study of semantics, applied linguistics, translation studies and metalexical studies, to name just a few.

2.1. The study of lexicographical semantics

As Zgusta claims in his *Manual of Lexicography*, lexical meaning stands in the center of the lexicographer's attention...because practically all decisions of the lexicographer are in a direct or indirect relation to the way in which he deals with lexical meaning in his dictionary. (Zugsta 1971:21) The study of semantic theories would undoubtedly prepare lexicographers for their dictionary-making practice, no matter what kind of dictionaries they are going to compile. For monolingual dictionaries, the main focus will be on the defining job. Everything the lexicographer does is for the ultimate purpose of defining clearly the meaning of each lexical unit. As for lexicographical translation, not only the understanding of the source language definition but also the appropriate description of each lexical unit in target language equivalents should be achieved. Compared to the compilation of most monolingual dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries are more troublesome or difficult to deal with. A comparative study of lexical semantics is certainly in foremost need.

To study the meaning of each lexical unit, lexicographers do have a good reason to go to the research field of semantics and pragmatics for a comprehensive understanding. They will surely meet with different schools of semantic study and various semantic theories. Then what to choose and how to decide is unavoidable and most probably confusing for most lexicographers. Referring to this issue, Zgusta put forward his own constructive ideas; the lexicographer will do well to give great attention to all researches in the field of semantics: the more he knows about the semantic properties of the words, the better he will do his job. (Ibid:24) But, he further pointed out that the meaning issues in dictionary research are different from what we normally think about semantics in general. The former situation is more pragmatic or practical in the sense that it deals with specific problems in dictionary compilation. In this case, what interests lexicographers most should be the semantic studies concerning the real lexicographical situation. It is highly desirable for bilingual lexicographers to work out solutions to individual semantic problems in their dictionary texts. Thus, there is an urgent need to introduce a new branch of semantic studies—the study of lexicographical semantics. When this new research field is examined closely, its ultimate goal should be further defined. The research here in this new subject area centers upon the unique feature of the study of meaning as the interface among all other aspects of language study, such as the study of pronunciation, grammar and usage. And what can finally be explored and interpreted in this field are the characteristics of semantic situation in dictionary texts and the whole lexicographical process.

Lexicographical translation should also benefit a lot from the exploration in general.

2.2. The study of foreign language vocabulary learning

It has been commonly understood that foreign language learners learn vocabulary autonomously from various dictionaries, especially bilingual ones. Different from early or traditional bilingual dictionaries, modern bilingual lexicography is expected more by language learners. Ideal bilingual dictionaries will be adequate for dictionary users in the process of their gaining lexical competence.

To have a thorough understanding of the needs of foreign language learners, bilingual lexicographers have to follow with interest what has been achieved in the field of applied linguistics, especially learning and teaching of foreign lexicon. In what way can a foreign language learner be considered a successful learner of words? It's a question that always concerns language teachers or researchers in the area of vocabulary learning. Many scholars have devoted their time to the study of lexicon acquisition and many contributions have been made internationally. There are also many foreign language teachers who in their teaching syllabus offer good coverage of vocabulary teaching and some effective techniques have been invented. All these successful practices in the field of applied linguistics will surely be very inspiring for bilingual lexicographers.

2.3. The study of translation variation

Bilingual dictionary translation basically belongs to the genre of translation practice. It shares the common features of all kinds of translation activities. Nevertheless, it has its own characteristics. Therefore, the study of bilingual dictionary translation is a necessity indeed. Otherwise, the quality of bilingual translation will not be improved easily. In bilingual dictionary translation, an appropriate idea of "translation equivalence" should be set up. "to be equivalent" does not refer to the equivalents provided by the translator but the constructive process the dictionary user has to go through gradually. And in this long process, bilingual dictionaries have a significant part as enlightening resource materials.

During the process of lexicographical translation, the interlingual transformation from source language to target language always exists. Dictionary translation in nature is part of translation activity though it certainly differs much from the practice of literary or any other full text translation. According to the theory of translation variation put forward by Chinese scholar Zhonglian Huang, it can be categorized as a kind of specialized translation, namely translation variation. In contrast to literary translation as well as other kinds of full-text translation, dictionary translation is uniquely done with no reference to any broader contexts other than those limited sentential contexts. Dictionary texts are specially designed and different from those in novels or other books. Nevertheless, dictionary translation after all is a kind of translation and bilingual lexicographers should pay enough attention to the theory of translation.

To cope with dictionary translation difficulties, lexicographers should be wise enough to understand the basic criteria for successful interlingual rendition first. And later the authority of dictionary texts and their characteristics have also to be reasonably stressed. The ultimate purpose of compiling a dictionary is never too clear to introduce the user to the possible meaning of each lexical unit. The bilingual dictionary writer enjoys the role of a semantic interpreter in the sense of bridging the gap of two remote languages and respective cultures. Thus, it is quite necessary for bilingual lexicographers to study the theory of translation variation and try to find the unique law governing the translation activities in compiling bilingual dictionaries. As a positive result, both bilingual lexicography and translation studies will be greatly enriched or enlarged. And the research field of bilingual lexicography in China has already witnessed the recent heated discussions of bilingual dictionary translation, which will guarantee the further improvement of the quality of bilingual translation as a whole.

2.4. The metalexical studies

The study of lexicographical translation after all is part of metalexical studies. Or what matters most for lexicographical translation is the general considerations of metalexical studies as well the dictionary practice. Without basic considerations of dictionary research, any theoretical exploration would not be fruitful in the end. The modern lexicographical research paradigm—user-orientation or user-friendliness—is a case in point here. It is a fundamental principle for contemporary world lexicography, which explains the positive borrowing from other related research fields and successful application to metalexical studies. As we know, the target user of bilingual dictionaries is the second language learner. They in many cases go to bilingual dictionaries only as a last resort, and they put their trust on the information provided by those dictionaries. They can either be faced with specific language problems or be interested in learning new vocabulary. How to meet their different needs of language learning is the major and permanent concern of metalexical studies. This is also true for bilingual lexicographers while compiling bilingual dictionaries. How to compile a bilingual dictionary successfully is really a matter of understanding dictionaries both theoretically and practically. What we mentioned in the previous paragraphs as the multi-disciplinary theoretical basis would be empty without this foundation or premise.

Last but not the least, it is important to note that lexicographical translation and monolingual lexicographical definition are by nature disparate things, though many people, even some metalexical studies, do not believe this way. The study of lexicographical translation will be considered as a great contribution to lexicography on the whole and it will set the possible guidelines for the practice of bilingual dictionary writing. In achieving this goal, we have to rely on the above-mentioned multi-disciplinary theoretical basis.

3. Conclusion

In the present paper, the author probes into the nature of bilingual lexicography, namely, lexicographical translation in bilingual dictionaries. As a special variety of translation different from literary translation and other full-text translation, it demands that bilingual lexicographers should pay enough attention to not only the issue of linguistic transformation but also more importantly the difficulties caused by the disparity in understanding different cultures. In other words, providing partial equivalents of the source language entry words in bilingual dictionaries is not the only or absolute concern as before. Instead, to construct a semantic network in target language context for the dictionary user is most necessary and welcome. And this tough job can only be done with a multi-disciplinary theoretical basis. In doing this, whether the semantic description is typical or representative is the final arbiter of the quality of the lexicographical translation. Only with a comprehensive and deep understanding of the source lexical unit can the second language learner benefit from bilingual dictionaries in the sense of gaining second language competence, especially lexical competence.

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