DICTIONARIES FOR TRANSLATOR AND LANGUAGE LEARNER
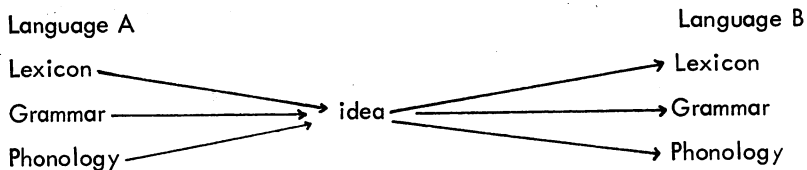
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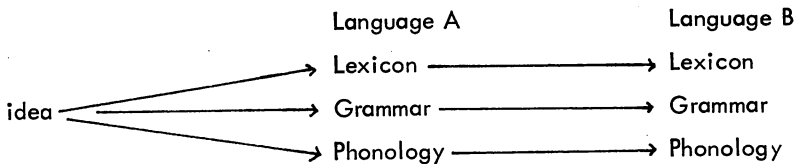Revised Version of paper read at the Third Annual Congress of the Linguistic Society of Papua and New Guinea.

A translator and a language learner[1] have a lot in common. The translator wishes to take an idea that exists in one language and present it with all its emotive, referential and linguistic meanings[2] in the equivalent idiom of another language. The language learner wishes to know another language so that he can understand it and/or express himself in it not only without "accent" but also in the "natural" manner of the native speaker. They both wish to be able to communicate in a manner that is not recognised as "foreign". To do this effectively they need to know the grammar and the lexicon of the language (with perhaps a knowledge of the phonology).

Some Translation Theory

The process of verbal communication may be charted as follows:[3]


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Language A                              Language B
Lexicon                                 Lexicon
Grammar        →  idea  ←               Grammar
Phonology                               Phonology
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It is a simple but disastrous mistake to imagine the process to be:


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              Language A          Language B
              Lexicon ————————→ Lexicon
idea ←        Grammar ————————→ Grammar
              Phonology ——————→ Phonology
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I wish to give some examples to show the error of considering that there is a one-to-one correspondence in any two languages between phonology, grammar and lexicon.

Example A

A Russian friend of mine upon arrival at Sydney was shocked to hear these words shouted at her across the pavement: "Buy your piper here to die."

Example B

Extract from an advertisement attached to a pair of Shorts of a popular brand sold in Papua and New Guinea:

"Fit comfortably, longer life. R.I.P. resistant. Washable won't shrunk with more. No fade or stain. Size for every build. Pants full cut across seat things and legs for greater comfort and less strain on active jobs."

Example C

Cited by C. Kilham, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Darwin, Australia.

An aboriginal boy was being tested on his comprehension of English. He had to write "true" or "false" against the following statement:

"A canoe walks on the water." The boy wrote "true" and could not understand why he was marked down.

I think it is obvious that the problems encountered by the Russian lady, the foreign business firm, and the Australian aboriginal boy were to a greater or lesser degree problems of phonological, grammatical and lexical equating of their own native tongue to that of English. The Russian lady did not realise that the vowel system of the paper-boy was not equivalent to her own and that what he actually said was: "Buy your paper here today." The foreign advertising man had problems of grammar "washable won't shrunk with more" and of lexicon "full cut across seat things." The Aborigine thought that the word "walk" in English covered the same area of meaning that "walk" did in his own language and so it was correct to say that a canoe "walked" on the water.

At some point in the description of a language these difficulties have to be dealt with. We need a statement of phonology and not just a "key to pronunciation", a complete grammar statement and a dictionary. Just where these three areas of description begin and end and what overlap and interdependence there will be will depend very much on the language(s) involved and the individual compiler (his "theory

of meaning" and his own preference as to the best method of analysing and describing grammar and phonology).

It is outside the scope of this paper to attempt to deal with "theories of meaning" or approaches to language analysis.

The translator and language learner needs above all else to know how to use a language "naturally". He may be phonologically right in that he pronounces everything correctly using the sound system, sentence stress and intonation as it should be used. He may know the grammar completely so that he uses the correct word order in the various clauses, phrases, etc. of the language. Yet he may still be unable to express himself properly if he has not at his disposal a satisfactory dictionary.

Problems of Synonyms

Suppose the dictionary supplied a list of synonyms as its definition of a word, would this be enough? With this list of synonyms he may make a similar mistake to the new Australian who was told that SAY, TELL, SPEAK are synonyms in English and so he proceeded to write:

I say a story to my children each night.

I tell German as my own language.

I speak I am a German.

A dictionary needs to go further than simply listing synonyms and antonyms. True synonyms are a rarity in any language. The dictionary needs to show the areas of overlap and the areas of difference in so-called synonyms. Another suggestion is that phrases or sentences be supplied showing what lexemes[4] they can occur with.

Problems of Idioms

As a student, I had to translate into German the following sentence:

"We needn't have taken so much trouble". Before translating, I had to remember that this is an English idiom.[5] A dictionary that would tell me what the equivalent expression in German is would be very helpful. Basically the sentence is: "We would not have needed to take so much trouble (if we had known what would happen)". It is important, according to my teacher (and not the grammar book or dictionary), to realise I must not translate "take" with the obvious verb "nehmen" but use the German equivalent in such an expression "machen".

While studying the Yui language of the Chimbu district in New Guinea, I came across the expression - "heba nenana" which literally means "you shall eat sweet potato". However it is an idiom meaning "If you do not refrain from doing that, I will do something drastic to you." These idioms are as much part of the lexicon and therefore rightly belong in the dictionary as words which may be listed separately and defined in terms of objects and processes. It would seem advisable to include all such "idioms" and "cliches" in the dictionary. Any language learner or translator would need to know these if he intends to communicate as "naturally" as possible.

The Problem of Semantic Range[6]

In my study of German I was reading C.F. Meyer's book "Der Schuss von der Kanzel" and I came across the following sentence:

"Der General, dessen Eintritt ein wohlgefälliges Germurmel erregt hatte, wendete sein gesammeltes Antlitz der Gemeinde zu, konnte aber mit einer ungezwungen Wendung des Kopfes leicht den hohen Sitz beobachten, wo sein Vetter horstete"

Vocabulary was my weak point, therefore I began furiously to consult the dictionary as I started translating:

1. The General's Eintritt had caused a disturbance.

    Eintritt: entering on (an office, etc.), beginning, accession, commencement, settling in (of winter, etc.), appearance, incidence, entry, entrance, admission, ingress.

    Now, the General's what had caused the disturbance. Probably "entrance" is correct.

2. He turned his "gesammeltes " face to the congregation.

    Gesammeltes: was not listed. However the ge- prefix is used on past participles and there is a verb sammeln.

    Sammeln: (a) gather, collect, pick, amass, accumulate, salvage, assemble, rally, concentrate (troops etc.)

    (b) collect, assemble, rally, flock together, concentrate, collect one's thoughts, regain one's self possession or composure, composed oneself.

    What sort of a face did the General have?

3. where his cousin horstete

    Horsten: build an eyrie, nest.

Did the cousin actually build a nest?   The dictionary does not help very much but imagination can run riot!   The cousin of the General was in a place that he regarded as his "nest" and so he was "nesting" there.   I hope my teacher agrees with me!   A dictionary that gave this figurative use in its definition would be helpful.

If we switch the problem around and look at it from the point of view of a student of English whose native tongue is not a European one, how is he to translate the English word CHAIR.

Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of the English Language entry under word CHAIR.
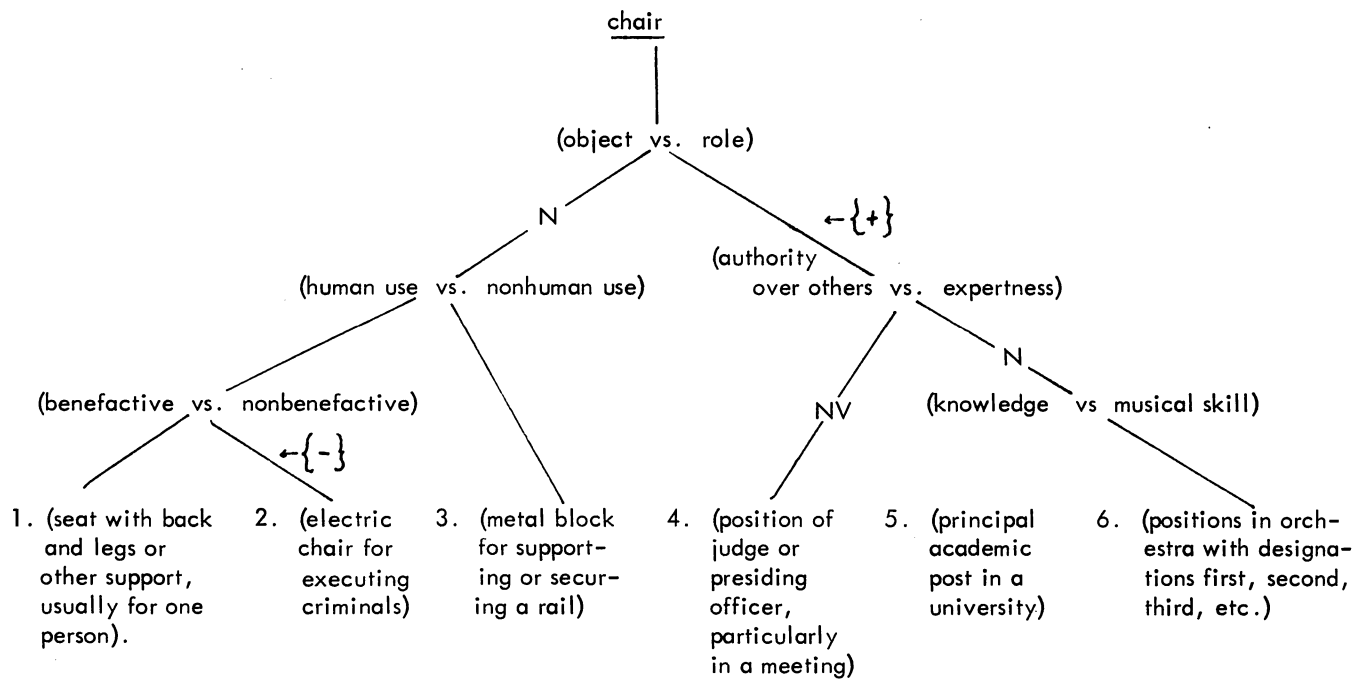
Noun.   1.   a moveable or stationary seat, usually with four legs and a back and for one person.

2.   a seat of office, as of a professor or moderator.

3.   an office, or officer; a chairman.

4.   an iron block for holding railroad tracks in place.

5.   the seat with long projecting arms on which the glass blower rolls his blowpipe;   also the set of men working with him.

6. a sedan (obs)

Verb.   7. to install in office.

8. to preside over a meeting.

9. in England, to carry a chair in public, bear in triumph in a chair.

Even when the student has this list in front of him he may still not know the "meaning" of "CHAIR".

There are still contexts in which ambiguity exists.

e.g.   1. "He sat in the chair." - meanings 1, 2, 3, and 8.

2. "He accepted the chair." - meanings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9.

3. "He got the chair." - meanings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, and also "electric chair".

Nida discusses this problem in his reference to semantic range (Nida 1964 p. 104) and sets up in chart form the following re-definition of CHAIR which would be of infinitely more help to the translator or language learner.

chair

(object vs. role)

N   ←{+}

(human use vs. nonhuman use)   (authority over others vs. expertness)

(benefactive vs. nonbenefactive)   ←{−}   NV   N   (knowledge vs musical skill)

1. (seat with back and legs or other support, usually for one person).

2. (electric chair for executing criminals)

3. (metal block for supporting or securing a rail)

4. (position of judge or presiding officer, particularly in a meeting)

5. (principal academic post in a university)

6. (positions in orchestra with designations first, second, third, etc.)

Nida comments: "The dictionary which would serve for an adequate semantic theory is not, however, merely some typical exhaustive dictionary, such as is commonly published today. For one thing, a semantic theory about the synchronic functioning of a language does not require information on pronunciation, etymology, and cognate relationships to words in other languages. What is required is a listing of all the meanings (linguistic, referential and emotive) structured in such a way as to reveal the patterns of structural contrasts which form the framework of meaning. Unfortunately, in most dictionaries, descriptions of meaning consist merely of lists of diverse usages". (p. 102).

Problems of Usage

In New Guinea languages the problems of dictionary making are increased because of the need to explain to the European reader the cultural significance of words and expressions. Words are basically verbal expressions for features of the culture. Europeans too often have the habit of discussing words in terms of psychological entities rather than social ones[6]. I have had problems assigning English meanings to the Yui words. A list of words in Yui with the nearest English equivalent is not only a very poor substitute for a dictionary but is almost an impossibility. There are some words in Yui which do not have a single basic meaning. Yet when these words occur as part of a larger group, this group as a whole has a meaning readily translated into English. For such words it is only possible to define the meaning in context.

e.g. the verb NONGWO

a. nongwo.

1.	a nongwo	"he believes"
2.	e nongwo	"he has a friend"
3.	ya nongwo	"he has a garden"
4.	kul nongwo	"he begets"
5.	si nongwo	"he bites"
6.	a nongwo	"he owns"
7.	kuni nongwo	"he steals"
8.	nongwo	"he eats"
9.	bna nongwo	"he has a headache"

It will be noted that except for 1 and 6 there are changes in context which help provide the change in meaning. Looking at 8, we may be tempted to assign the meaning "to eat" to the verb "nongwo" but then how would we deal with the meanings of the other examples. Another point to note is that the words supplying the change in

context with the exception of 7, are themselves verb stems to which a single definite meaning cannot be assigned. This really adds to the problem rather than assisting in its solution.

I see no alternative but to note each "usage" of the word in the dictionary giving examples of the context.

As I am both a translator and a language learner and therefore know the frustrations of not finding the answer in a dictionary, I thought it appropriate to air my grievances here. The answer may not be a simple one. Perhaps bigger and better bilingual dictionaries would be helpful but then what of the cost and bulk? Perhaps the answer is to have more "technical dictionaries" to cover such things as synonyms, idioms, usage, and as Nida suggests, semantic range.

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Notes.

1.   "Language Learner" is used here to refer to a serious student of a "living" language.
      It does not refer to a person who learns part of a language for the purposes of
      gaining technical knowledge.

2.   See Nida (1964) chapters 4 and 5 for a full discussion of these distinctions.

3.   See Deibler, E. W. Jr. "Sememics and Translation" Kivung Vol 2 No. 1, April,
      1969.

4.   "Lexeme" is used here following Longacre 1964.

5.   See Healey, A.   "English Idioms"   Kivung Vol 1 No. 2 August 1968 and Balint,
      A. "Sector Analysis and Idioms" Kivung Vol 2 No. 1, April 1969.

6.   Nida, E. A. "Linguistics and Ethnology in Translation problems" in Hymes ed.
      1964 page 90.