

Chapter 3

Equivalence at Word Level

3.1 The Word in Different Languages

Words serve as fundamental units of meaning in any language, yet their structure, function, and semantic scope vary significantly across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This variation arises due to linguistic structures, historical development, societal needs, and cultural influences. Understanding how words function in different languages is essential for achieving accurate and meaningful translation.

Nature of Words Across Languages

Different languages structure words uniquely, affecting their meaning and usage. These differences are often classified into three broad linguistic typologies:

1. **Isolating Languages:** Languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese rely on individual morphemes that stand alone as words. For instance, Mandarin Chinese has little inflection, meaning that word relationships are determined by word order rather than affixation.
2. **Agglutinative Languages:** Languages such as Turkish, Finnish, and Swahili construct complex words by stringing together multiple morphemes, each with a specific grammatical function. For example, in Turkish, the word **evlerinizden** (from your houses) consists of the root **ev** (house), plural suffix **-ler**, possessive suffix **-iniz** (your), and the ablative suffix **-den** (from).
3. **Inflectional Languages:** Languages like Latin, Russian, and Greek modify words by changing their endings to indicate grammatical relationships such as tense, case, gender, or number. For instance, in Latin, **amare** (to love) changes to **amavi** (I loved) and **amatus** (loved, past participle), altering its form but retaining the same root.

These structural variations create challenges in translation, requiring translators to make adjustments to preserve meaning without distorting the original message.

Cultural Influence on Words

Language is deeply rooted in culture, and words often reflect cultural realities that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. Some notable examples include:

- **Environmental Influence:** Eskimo-Aleut languages, such as Inuktitut, have multiple words for snow due to its cultural and environmental significance, whereas English relies on adjectives (e.g., wet snow, powdery snow) to describe variations.
- **Social Hierarchies:** Japanese incorporates multiple levels of politeness within its lexicon, such as **kenjougo** (humble language) and **sonkeigo** (respectful language), which have no direct equivalents in English.
- **Emotionally Charged Words:** Some languages possess words that encapsulate complex emotional states that other languages lack. For instance, the Portuguese word **saudade** expresses deep nostalgic longing, while English requires an entire phrase to convey the same sentiment.
- **Cultural Practices:** The Indonesian term **gotong royong** (mutual cooperation within a community) reflects a communal value that lacks a direct equivalent in English.

Borrowing and Word Adaptation

Language contact and globalization lead to borrowing and adaptation of words. English, for example, has borrowed extensively from Latin (**via**), French (**rendezvous**), and Japanese (**tsunami**). However, borrowed words may undergo semantic shifts. For instance, the English word **panini** (originally an Italian plural form) is often used as a singular noun in English.

3.2 Lexical Meaning

Lexical meaning refers to the meaning of individual words or phrases in a language. It can be categorized into various types, each of which plays a significant role in translation.

Types of Lexical Meaning

1. Denotative Meaning:

- Denotation refers to the literal or dictionary meaning of a word. For example, the word **dog** refers to a domesticated canine.

- In translation, denotative meaning is typically prioritized to ensure clarity, but variations exist. For instance, the English **blue** and the Russian **голубой (goluboy)** do not fully align, as **голубой** specifically denotes a lighter shade of blue.
2. **Connotative Meaning:**
- Connotation involves additional, often culturally or emotionally charged meanings associated with a word. For example, **home** in English conveys warmth and family beyond its denotative meaning of a place of residence.
 - Translators must consider the cultural and emotional weight of words. For instance, the English word **cheap** can carry negative connotations (low quality), whereas its equivalent in other languages may simply mean inexpensive without negative undertones.
3. **Collocational Meaning:**
- Collocation refers to words that naturally co-occur. For instance, in English, **heavy rain** is correct, while **strong rain** sounds unnatural.
 - Direct translation of collocations often leads to awkward phrasing. For example, the English **make a decision** translates into Spanish as **tomar una decisión** (literally: take a decision), highlighting differences in collocational norms.
4. **Thematic Meaning:**
- Thematic meaning depends on word order and emphasis. For example, **He alone survived** versus **Only he survived** conveys subtle differences in emphasis.
 - Translators must decide how to preserve emphasis while maintaining grammatical correctness in the target language.

Polysemy and Homonymy

- **Polysemy** occurs when a word has multiple related meanings. The English word **bank** can mean both a financial institution and the side of a river.
- **Homonymy** refers to words that have the same spelling or pronunciation but unrelated meanings, such as **bat** (flying mammal) and **bat** (sports equipment).

In translation, context is critical to avoiding ambiguity and selecting the correct meaning.

Synonymy and Antonymy

- **Synonyms** (words with similar meanings) vary in shades of meaning. For example, **big** and **large** are synonyms, but their usage differs (e.g., **big mistake** vs. **large amount**).
- **Antonyms** (opposites) provide contrast, such as **hot** and **cold**. However, not all languages categorize opposites in the same way. For example, some languages differentiate between **light blue** and **dark blue** as entirely separate colors, whereas English treats them as variations of one color.

3.3 The Problem of Non-Equivalence

Non-equivalence arises when a word in the source language has no direct counterpart in the target language. Several types of non-equivalence pose challenges for translators.

Types of Non-Equivalence

1. **Conceptual Gaps (Lexical Gaps):**
 - Words that exist in one language but not another, such as **saudade** (Portuguese) or **hygge** (Danish).
 - Solutions: Descriptive phrases, borrowing, or adaptation.
2. **Semantic Fields and Lexical Sets:**
 - Languages categorize words differently. For example, Arabic distinguishes between **baarid** (cold/cool), **haar** (hot, weather), **saakhin** (hot, objects), and **daafi'** (warm).
 - Translators must navigate these distinctions carefully.
3. **Cultural-Specific Items:**
 - Concepts like **hanami** (Japanese flower viewing) require explanation or adaptation.
4. **Grammatical Differences:**
 - English distinguishes singular/plural (dog/dogs), while Japanese does not.
 - Some languages assign gender to nouns (e.g., French **le soleil** (the sun, masculine) vs. **la lune** (the moon, feminine)).

Strategies to Overcome Non-Equivalence

1. **Using a More General Word:**
 - **Sushi** → **Japanese food** (when exact meaning is unknown).
2. **Borrowing:**
 - English borrows **karma** (Sanskrit), **fiesta** (Spanish), etc.
3. **Paraphrasing:**
 - **Hygge** → **A cozy, pleasant atmosphere of togetherness.**

4. **Cultural Substitution:**

- **Thanksgiving** → A local harvest festival equivalent.

5. **Omission:**

- Removing untranslatable words while maintaining meaning.

6. **Addition of an Explanation:**

- Footnotes or explanatory phrases.

Conclusion

Equivalence at the word level remains one of the most challenging aspects of translation due to linguistic, cultural, and conceptual differences. By employing various strategies, translators can effectively bridge linguistic gaps and preserve the integrity of the original text.