

LECTURE 15

LEXICAL PROBLEMS: Lexical Differences Between Languages

Plan:

- 1 Lexical differences from Phonological and grammatical systems
- 2 Three Types of Lexical Meaning
- 3 Divergences in the Semantic Structure of Words
- 4 Different Valency in meaning

Languages differ in their phonological and grammatical systems; their systems of meaning are also different. Any language is able to describe things, notions, phenomena and facts of life. This ability of language ensures cognition of the outside world. But the ways of expressing these things and notions usually vary in different languages. That means that different languages use different sets of semantic components, that is, elements of meaning to describe identical extra-linguistic situations.

She is not out of school yet. (G. Heyer).

Она еще не кончила школы (еще учится в школе).

The same fact is described in the English and the Russian languages by different semantic elements.

Benjamin paced his chamber, tension building in him. (E. Taylor).

Бенджамин шагал по комнате, его напряженное состояние все усиливалось.

The correlated verbs “to build” and *строить* (primary meanings) have different semantic structures, they are not co-extensive and do not cover each other. Consequently the verb *строить* is unacceptable in this context. Equivalence is achieved by the choice of another verb – *усиливаться*. The two verbs “to build” and *усиливаться* taken by themselves express different notions, but in this context they possess the **same semantic component** viz. the component of intensification (of tension). A non-correlated word is often selected in translation because it possesses some common semantic component with the word of the SL text, as in the present case (*to build* – *усиливаться*). The existence of a common seme in two non-correlated words is a factor of primary importance in the choice of equivalents which opens up great possibilities for translators. Another example may illustrate this point.

The cash needed to repair the canal is sitting in the bank.

Деньги, предназначенные для ремонта канала, все еще лежат в банке.

The verb “to sit” and *лежать* are by no means correlated words. But they possess one seme in common – to be at rest, to be unused.

Three Types of Lexical Meaning

As one of the main tasks of translation is to render the exact meaning of words, it is important to consider here the three types of lexical meaning which can be distinguished. They are: *referential*, *emotive* and *stylistic*.

Referential meaning (also called nominative, denotative or cognitive) has direct reference to things or phenomena of objective reality, naming abstract notions and processes as well. Referential meaning may be primary and secondary thus consisting of different lexical Semantic Variants (LSV).

Emotive meaning unlike referential meaning has no direct reference to things or phenomena of objective reality but to the feelings and emotions of the speaker. Therefore emotive meaning bears reference to things, phenomena or ideas through the speaker's evaluation of them. Emotive meaning is inherent in a definite group of words even when they are taken out of the context.

Stylistic meaning is based on the stylistic stratification of the English vocabulary and is formed by stylistic reference, e.g. *face* (neutral), *countenance* (literary), *mug* (colloquial).

Referential Meaning and its Rendering in Translation

Lexical transformation which are practically always required in the rendering of referential meaning in translation are caused by various factors. They may be classed as follows:

- a) *different vision* of objects and phenomena and *different approach* to them;
- b) *different semantic structure* of a word in the SL and in the TL;
- c) *different valency or collocability*;
- d) *different usage*. Different vision.

It is common knowledge that one and the same object of reality may be viewed by different languages from different aspects: *the eye* (of the needle – *ушко иглки*; *hooks and eyes* – *крючки и петельки*).

Hot milk with skin on it – *горячее молоко с пенкой*.

Desalination – *опреснение*; *visible to the naked eye* – *видимый невооруженным глазом*; *a fortnight (forteen nights)* – *две недели*.

He lives next door – *Он живет в соседнем доме*.

All these words (*naked eye* – *невооруженный глаз*; *fortnight* – *две недели*; *next door* – *соседний дом*) describe the same facts and although formally not correlated they are equivalents.

He was no armchair strategist – *Он отнюдь не был кабинетным стратегом*.

Not only words of full meaning but even prepositions may imply different vision.

He folded his arms across his chest, crossed his knees.

Он скрестил руки на груди, положил ногу на ногу.

This factor (different vision) usually presents little difficulty for the translator but it must never be overlooked, otherwise the translator may lapse into literal translation. The difficulty arises when such words are used figuratively as part of some lexical stylistic device, that is, when they fulfill a stylistic function, e.g.

Instant history, like instant coffee, can be remarkably palatable, at least it is in this memoir by a former Whitehouse side who sees L.B.J. as “an extraordinary gifted President who was the wrong man, from the wrong place, at the wrong time, under the wrong circumstances.

Современная история, так же как и такой современный продукт как растворимый кофе, иногда бывает удивительно приятна, по крайней мере это так в рецензируемых мемуарах бывшего помощника президента Джонсона, который характеризует его как «исключительно способного президента, который был неподходящим человеком, родом из неподходящего места, в неподходящее время, при неподходящих обстоятельствах».

One and the same product is named in the S and T languages according to its different properties: the English language stresses the speed with such coffee can be prepared whereas the Russian language lays special accent on the fact that it is soluble.

A word in one Language may denote, due to different vision, a wider non-differentiated notion, while the same notion is, as it were dismembered in the other language, and, consequently, there are two or more words denoting it. For example, the Russian word *часы* corresponds to two English words; “*watch*” and “*clock*”. The Russian word *город* has two counterparts; “*town*” and “*city*”. And vice versa, one English word may correspond to two or more Russian words, e.g. “*moon*” – *луна, месяц*, “*bell*” – *колокол, колокольчик, бубенчик, звонок, склянка, рында*. The Russian language uses one word *палец* which is indiscriminately applies “to terminal members” of the hand and foot, while the English language discriminates between these members and has accordingly three different words: *thumb, finger, toe*.

3 Divergences in the Semantic Structure of Words

The semantic structure of words presents a complicated problem as the so-called correlated words of the T languages are far from being identical in this respect. The only exception are some groups of monosemantic words which will be dealt with later.

Divergences in the semantic structure of words of the S and T languages are one of the primary cases of lexical transformations. These divergences or dissimilarities are connected with certain peculiar features of a word or a group of words. Even words which seem to have the same meaning in the two languages are not semantically identical. The primary meanings of correlated words often coincide while their derivative meanings do not. Thus there is only partial correspondence in the structures of polysemantic words as their lexical semantic variants do not cover one another. Semantic correlation is not to be interpreted as semantic identity and one-to-one

correspondence between the semantic structures of correlated polysemantic words in the two languages is hardly ever possible.

Such partial correspondence may be illustrated by the following analysis of the correlated words *стол* and *table*. Their primary meanings denoting the same article of furniture are identical. But their secondary meanings diverge. Other lexical semantic variants of the word *table* are: part of the machine-tool; slab of wood (stone); matter written on this; level area, plateau; palm of hand, indicating character of fortune, etc. Lexical semantic variants of the word *стол* are: еда, пища, (стол и квартира, диетический стол); учреждение, отдел в канцелярии (паспортный стол, стол находок) etc.

Not infrequently the primary meaning (and sometimes the derivative meanings as well) of an English word consist of more than one semantic component or some, forming the so-called “bundles” of semantic elements. This is usually reflected in dictionaries which give more than one Russian equivalent of each LS of the English word.

The analysis of the polysemantic word “*mellow*” shows that it can modify a wide variety of objects and notions: fruit, wine, soil, voice, man, etc. Each sphere of its application corresponds to a different derivative meaning and each meaning (consisting of several semes) accordingly has two or more Russian equivalents.

1. спелый, мягкий, сочный (о фруктах); 2. выдержанный, старый (о вине); 3. приятный на вкус; 4. подобревший, смягчившийся с возрастом (о человеке); 5. мягкий, сочный, густой (о голосе и красках); 6. рыхлый, плодородный (о почве); 7. разг. веселый, подвыпивший. (БАРС)

It also follows from the above example that there is no single Russian word with a similar semantic structure corresponding to the word “*mellow*” and comprising all its meanings.

4 Different Valency in meaning

The aptness of a word to appear in various combinations is described as its lexical valency or collocability which amounts to semantic agreement. Collocability implies the ability of a lexical unit to combine with other lexical units, with other words or lexical groups. A word as a lexical unit has both paradigmatic and syntagmatic collocability. The lexical meaning of a word is revealed in either case. The contexts in which a word is used bring out its distribution and potential collocability, thus the range of lexical valency of words is linguistically determined by the lexical meaning of words, by the compatibility of notions expressed by them and by the inner structure of the language word-stock.

It should be noted that valency comprises all levels of language – its phonological, syntactical and lexical levels. Only lexical valency will be considered here.

A detailed analysis of factual material shows that valency in the English language is broader and more flexible than that in the Russian language. This fact confronts the translator with additional difficulties, as it enables a writer to use unexpected individual combinations. It follows that valency may be obligatory non-obligatory and words accordingly fall into two categories: “open” or discrete words and “closed” or non-discrete ones. The adjective “aquiline” is a classical example of a word with a closed valency (cp. the Russian adjective *кромешный*).

Every language has its established valency norms, its types of word combinations, groups of words able to form such combinations. This especially concerns traditional, obligatory combinations while individual combinations give greater scope to translators. Individual collocability is by no means arbitrary and must not violate the existing models of valency. As a writer may bring out a potential meaning of some word he is also able to produce unexpected combinations. Such individual but linguistically justifiable collocations belong to the writer’s individual style in the way as his epithets or metaphors and may be regarded as an effective stylistic device, e.g.

She had seen many people die, but until now, she had never known a young foreign death.
(R.Godden).

У нее на глазах умирало много людей, но до сих пор ей не приходилось видеть как умирал чужеземец, да еще такой юный.

Words traditionally collocated tend to constitute clichés, e.g. *a bad mistake, high hopes, heavy sea (rain, snow)*, etc. the translator is to find similar TL clichés, traditional collocations: *грубая ошибка, большие надежды, бурное море, сильный дождь (снег)*. The key word in such collocations is a noun, both semantically and structurally, while the modifying adjective plays a subordinate role. The key word is always preserved in translation but the collocated adjective is rendered by a word possessing a different referential meaning which expresses the same category (in this case – intensity) and corresponds to the TL valency norms. For example:

a bad mistake – грубая ошибка
a bad headache – сильная головная боль
a bed debt – невозвращенный долг
a bad accident – тяжелый несчастный случай
a bad wound – тяжелая рана
a bad egg – тухлое яйцо
a bad apple – гнилое яблоко.

It should be noted that words playing a qualifying role may be not only adjectives but also verbs and adverbs, e.g. *trains run – поезда ходят; to sit in dry dock – стоять в сухом доке.*

The problem of semantic agreement inevitably arises in the translation of phraseological units consisting of a verb of wide meaning and a noun (collocations or

set expressions). The verb is practically desemantised and the noun is the semantic centre of the collocation.

The translation of the verb is determined by the law of semantic agreement, e.g. *to make tea (coffee) – заваривать чай (кофе)*

To make beds – стелить постели

To make faces – строить рожи

To make apologies – приносить извинения.

Every language possesses regular and compatible collocations.

After a day of heavy selling and in spite of persistent Bank of England support, the pound closed on Monday at a new record low against the United States dollar.

После того как в течение всего дня усиленно сбывались фунты стерлингов и несмотря на упорную поддержку Английского банка, к закрытию биржи в понедельник курс фунта достиг рекордно-низкого уровня по отношению к доллару.

The richer the semantic volume of a word is, the richer is its collocability which opens up wide translation possibilities.

A detailed analysis of various collocations shows that individual and unexpected collocations in different functional styles are much more frequent in English than in Russian.

Different collocability often calls for lexical and grammatical transformation, though of the collocation may have its equivalent in Russian, e.g. a “*controversial question*” – спорный вопрос but the collocation “*the most controversial Prime Minister*” cannot be translated as самый спорный премьер-министр.

Britain will tomorrow be welcoming on an official visit one of the most controversial and youngest Prime Minister in Europe.

Завтра в Англию прибывает с официальным визитом один из самых молодых премьер-министров Европы, который вызывает самые противоречивые мнения.

Sweden's neutral faith ought not to be in doubt.

Верность Швеции нейтралитету не подлежит сомнению.

A relatively free valency in the English language accounts for the free use of the so-called transferred epithet in which logical and syntactical modifications do not coincide.

I sat down to a very meditative breakfast.

В раздумье я принялся завтракать.

Logically the adjective “meditative” refers to the subject of the sentence whereas syntactically it is attached to the prepositional object. This unusual attachment converts

it into a transferred epithet. The collocation *задумчивый завтрак* is hardly possible in Russian.

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