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TRANSLATION AND THE BILINGUAL DICTIONARY

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INTRODUCTION

Bilingual lexicography is obviously directly concerned with interlingual translation. As Ali Al-Kasimi (1977: 59) has pointed out, whatever one's specific definition of translation may be, some aspect of it is covered in a bilingual dictionary. Thus, Dostert's (1955: 124) definition of translation as "the transference of meaning from one set of patterned symbols (...) into another set of patterned symbols" is illustrated by the translated examples in the general bilingual dictionary (GBD). Oettinger's (1960: 104) definition of translation as "the process of transforming signs or representation into other signs or representation" is exemplified in GBDs by the transliteration of proper nouns of the source language (SL) for which there is no possible translation in the target language (TL), especially when the two languages use different writing systems. And finally, Oettinger's (1960: 110) definition of interlingual translation as "the replacement of elements of one language (...) by equivalent elements of another language" constitutes the basis of the GBD, whose *raison d'être* is to provide equivalent TL lexical items which can replace given SL elements. In other words, the general bilingual dictionary is, in principle at least, the translator's best friend and primary working tool since it provides him with translation equivalents.

In reality, however, GBDs have long been a source of frustration for translators. Although most have not been as condemning of them as Valery Larbaud (1946: 86-87) — who, comparing them to unilingual dictionaries, states categorically: *"Près d'eux les dictionnaires bilingues ne sont que des esclaves, ou mieux des affranchis faisant fonction d'huissiers et d'interprètes"* — almost all have some reservations about them. Peter Newmark (1988: 174-175), for instance, reproaches them for containing too many "dictionary words", i.e., words that are rarely used outside dictionaries, and advises using them "with caution" (1981: 163). And many practicing translators claim to avoid the use of GBDs as much as possible.

The general weaknesses of the GBD from the point of view of a translator working into his second language have been clearly outlined by Ingrid Meyer (1987: 27ff): they include weaknesses affecting the user's selection of a TL equivalent and weaknesses affecting the user's combination of the selected TL item with other elements of the TL context. Weaknesses affecting selection are of several different types. First, there is the problem of absence of the SL item: this is frequently the case for fixed expressions such as *cold war*, and for free combinations such as *manque de gentillesse* in the SL which can be translated by a single lexical item in the TL (*unkindness*). Second, there is the problem of absence of the TL equivalent: the GBD may fail to provide an equivalent for each of the senses of the SL item (for example, the sense of *bargain* for *aubaine*) or to furnish a stylistically appropriate equivalent (*unfortunately*, rather than *alas* for *hélas*). Finally, there is the problem of inadequate semantic and stylistic discrimination between the various TL equivalents proposed: how can the translator choose the appropriate TL equivalent if he does not know what differences exist, both meaning; and stylewise, between

the suggested TL equivalents? Weaknesses affecting the combination of the selected TL item with other elements of TL context include inadequate morphological specification (the indication, for example, that *planification* in French is countable, whereas its English equivalent *planning* is not), inadequate syntactic specification (the indication, for instance, that the French *remède* and English *remedy* are followed by very different prepositions), and inadequate collocational specification (the indication, for example, that in French one *pose du papier peint* while in English one *hangs* or *puts up wallpaper*).

While Meyer's study of the bilingual dictionary has been conducted from the point of view of translator trainees learning to translate into their second language, the present study will examine the GBD from the point of view of a professional translator working into his dominant language, which is the usual direction in which a professional translator works. In this paper, I will analyze the translation process and the intervention of the GBD in this process. In order to make the analysis real, I will use a genuine French text (an extract from an article by Jean-Claude Lasserre, entitled "Montréal, plaque tournante des transports en Amérique du Nord" — 1976) and its translation by the Translation Service, Quebec Department of Communications (1976) to reconstruct the process. The purpose of this analysis is to reveal the shortcomings of GBDs from the translator's viewpoint — in particular those of the French-English GBDs most used by Canadian translators (the *Harrap's New Standard* and the *Robert & Collins*) — and to suggest ways in which they can be improved to better meet the needs of Canadian translators.

ANALYSIS OF THE SL TEXT

The first stage of the translation process is that of analysis. The goal of this stage is total comprehension of the SL text. This can involve a variety of steps: reading of the text, contextual analysis, documentation and lexical research are the principal ones. Let us read through the following text for the purpose of total comprehension:

> **Montréal, plaque tournante**
> **des transports en Amérique du Nord**
> **Une position unique, malgré des handicaps**
>
> Le développement de Montréal n'est pas le fruit du hasard, car depuis les origines, ses habitants ont tiré parti d'un certain nombre d'atouts géographiques de première importance. La pièce maîtresse en est le Saint-Laurent, un fleuve magnifique et surtout une voie d'eau exceptionnelle donnant accès, après 1 000 km d'un tracé quasi rectiligne, à la véritable mer intérieure que constituent les Grands Lacs. À partir de l'Atlantique, il s'agit de la seule route de pénétration naturelle vers le centre du continent, tandis que ses débouchés sur l'océan, de part et d'autre de Terre-Neuve, sont nettement plus proches des côtes européennes que New York.
>
> Pour assurer sa suprématie sur cette grande porte continentale — ***a priori*** possible en n'importe quel point le long de l'axe fluvial — Montréal détient un autre avantage : son site se localise au pied des premiers rapides que l'on rencontre à partir de la mer, les rapides de Lachine. Après avoir contraint Jacques Cartier à mettre un terme à son voyage de reconnaissance de 1535, cet accident naturel a fait de Montréal un lieu de portage et de transbordement obligatoire entre une navigation fluviale lourde à l'aval, et une navigation intérieure plus légère à l'amont : c'est là l'origine de la fortune de la ville.

A French-English translator with a couple of years' experience would have little trouble understanding this extract, for there are few specialized terms and the ideas follow logically. At the most, he might like to confirm the meaning of certain lexical items, whose sense he has probably guessed from the context or from his knowledge of the situation. Such items could well be *plaque tournante*, *rectiligne*, and *transbordement*.

While the obvious tool to find the meaning of SL words is a unilingual SL dictionary, a translator who is merely looking for quick confirmation of a meaning that he has already deduced may turn quickly to a bilingual dictionary to obtain that confirmation. What would he find for the three lexical items indicated above in *Harrap's New Standard* and in *Robert & Collins*? In each case, he would find only TL equivalents, which may or may not help him to confirm his guess. *Plaque tournante* and *transbordement* will be used to illustrate the dilemma.

plaque tournante
Harrap's: Under *plaque*. **1.** (f) **plaque tournante** pivot
R & C: Under *plaque* (in compounds and set phrases section).
2. ... **plaque tournante** *(Rail)* turntable; *(fig)* centre.

Apart from the fact that this lexical item is hard to find in *Harrap's* — which is very annoying to the user, the translation — equivalent provided for it therein (*pivot*) provides no confirmation of the figurative use that *plaque tournante* seems to have in the source text, for *pivot* has both a concrete, literal meaning and a figurative meaning. In other words, the polysemy of the TL equivalent is an obstacle to comprehension in this case as in many others. It is only by looking at the following examples (*c'est la plaque tournante du projet*, The plan hinges on it; *Bruxelles est la plaque tournante du Marché commun*, Brussels is the hub of the Common Market) that the user gets a clear indication that *plaque tournante* can be used figuratively.

R & C, on the other hand, provides not only two different equivalents, one literal, the other figurative, but also distinguishes between them by a field label and the label *fig*.

The user is thus assured that *plaque tournante* can have a figurative meaning, which can roughly be rendered by *centre*.

However, not even *Robert & Collins* provides any indication of the meaning of *transbordement*.

transbordement
Harrap's: **1.** (a) transhipment (of cargo, passengers) ... (b) *(Rail, etc.)* transfer (of goods, passengers) from one train, plane, etc. to another ... **2.** ferrying across. **3.** *(Rail)* traversing of trucks, etc.
R & C: tran(s)shipment; transfer
[with cross-reference to the entry for *transborder*, where *tran(s)ship* is linked to the nautical field and *transfer* to the semantic domain of railways].

Given the context of *transbordement* in the source text, it is clear that the reference is to navigation. And the morpheme *ship* in *tran(s)shipment* makes it clear that that is the appropriate equivalent. But what does it really mean? The substitution of one technical word in French by another in English does not help the translator understand either better.

One may well claim that meaning indication for SL headwords is not necessary in the GBD since the translation equivalents replace the definitions found in unilingual dictionaries. However, the fallacy of this belief has slowly become evident. How, for instance, can a user be sure, on the basis of TL equivalents provided, that the equivalent he has chosen presents the right SL sense if he sees a list of numbers denoting senses of a polysemous SL item but without any sense indications? Take the following example, drawn from the *Shorter Harrap's*:

coiffure
1. headdress; headgear. **2.** hairstyle. **3.** hairdressing

The equivalents *headdress* and *headgear* are rare enough for even anglophones to hesitate as to meaning 1. And, although these two equivalents are grouped together under

this sense, the semi-colon between them makes the user wonder whether he is really dealing with two separate senses. In fact, unless these equivalents were followed by a number of clear examples illustrative of meaning — which is not so in this case — even anglophone users would probably have to turn to unilingual dictionaries to sort out the various meanings of *coiffure* and the differences between the equivalents provided.

It was with the idea of remedying such a confusing situation that James Ianucci (1957: 278) proposed linking a bilingual dictionary to definitions found in an existing unilingual dictionary. He suggested that the definitions of the numbered senses in a unilingual dictionary be used as meaning discriminations for the equivalents cited in a bilingual dictionary. This could be done either by running a bilingual dictionary at the bottom of each page of an SL unilingual dictionary or by having the sense division numbers correspond to and thus refer to identical numbers in an SL dictionary. While neither of these solutions is practical — for the first one is too space-consuming while the second obliges readers to buy two separate dictionaries to fully profit from one — and while Ianucci considers the problem of discrimination of the senses of the headword from the point of view of choice of TL equivalent rather than that of comprehension of the SL item, it is nevertheless interesting to note that some recent bilingual dictionaries have moved slowly, although sometimes unsystematically, towards incorporating some form of definition, traditionally restricted to unilingual dictionaries.

Among French-English dictionaries, the one that has moved in this direction to some extent is the *Robert & Collins*, which occasionally provides synonyms and partial definitions for the different senses of the SL headword in parentheses as follows:

décent ... *(bienséant)* decent, proper; *(discret, digne)* proper; *(acceptable)* reasonable, decent

However, this is not done consistently, nor is it easy to determine on what basis the decision to insert a partial definition or not is based. Why for instance was some semantic discrimination, however minimal, provided for *rectiligne* (*(gén)* straight; *mouvement* rectilinear; *(Géom)* rectilinear) and none for *transbordement*?

In actual fact only a very few bilingual dictionaries follow most consistently the idea of defining the SL senses that the TL equivalents render. One of that small number is the *Robert & Signorelli* French-Italian / Italian-French dictionary, an example from which is cited below:

> ***beurrier***
> **1.** ... *[personne qui vend du beurre]* burraio ...
> **2.** ... *[récipient dans lequel on conserve le beurre]* burriera ...

It is obvious that inclusion in the GBD of short semantic indications of the kind presented here would greatly facilitate textual analysis by a translator who has a general idea of the sense of a word in a given context but wants a means of quick verification of his interpretation. Obviously, for lexical items which he does not understand at all, the translator would still need to turn to an SL unilingual dictionary. But the presence of partial definitions of SL senses in bilingual dictionaries would certainly benefit the translator at the analysis stage of the translation process.

Of course, this presupposes that the dictionary contains the lexical item sought. *Voie d'eau*, for instance, is not found in either *Harrap's* or the *Robert & Collins*. This is no doubt due to several reasons. As Meyer has clearly indicated, bilingual dictionaries are notoriously inadequate in their coverage of multi-word items such as this. Moreover, *voie d'eau* is a calque of English, and most bilingual dictionaries seem to avoid loan words and calques. Finally, this calque, like many others, is particular to Canada and is therefore not found in European bilingual dictionaries such as *Harrap's* and *Robert & Collins*.

Whatever the reasons for the exclusion of certain words from a bilingual dictionary, it is evident that, for the GBD to be useful at any stage of the translation process, it must include a large number of words, including multi-word items, loan words and calques, that are relatively frequently used in a given geographic area. This also means that the GBD will be truly helpful to Canadian translators at the analysis stage only when there is one that reflects Canadian linguistic usage.

TRANSFER OF THE TEXT INTO THE TL

The second stage of the translation process is that of transfer, whose goal is the production of a draft translation. At this stage, the use of the bilingual dictionary is most obvious, since this type of dictionary is specifically concerned with translation equivalents. The translator complements his own knowledge of the SL and TL with consultation of a GBD to produce a translation such as the following, which is a slightly modified version of the official translation of the SL text cited above. The modifications, which have been introduced to allow for the revision of the text at a later stage, are italicized.

> **Montreal, North America's** *transport centre*
>
> **A unique position but some handicaps**
>
> The development of Montreal is no accident. From the very beginning its inhabitants have taken a number of geographical assets of prime importance and turned them to their advantage. The king pin is the *Saint* Lawrence, a magnificent waterway that provides access, after 600 miles of a virtually straight course, to the inland sea formed by the Great Lakes. Starting at the Atlantic, it is the sole natural way of entry to the middle of the continent, while its outlets on the ocean, on either side of Newfoundland, are considerably nearer the coasts of Europe than is New York.
>
> Montreal has another advantage which assures its control of this great gateway to the continent, possible in principle at any point along the axis of the river: its position at the foot of the first rapids encountered on the journey from the ocean, those at Lachine. This natural accident, which forced Jacques Cartier to put an end to his 1535 voyage of exploration, made Montreal a mandatory portage and transshipment point for the heavy traffic downstream and the lighter inland traffic upstream: this is the source of the city's good fortune.

Let us suppose that the translator of this text needed help in finding suitable equivalents for the following SL items: *tirer parti de*, *atout*, *pièce maîtresse*, and *porte* (in the figurative sense found in the source text). Would he have been able to find in *Harrap's* and *Robert & Collins* the translation equivalents *turn to their advantage*, *assets*, *king pin*, and *gateway*, which he finally chose? Neither dictionary provides all these answers.

Gateway is listed as an equivalent of *porte* in *Harrap's*, along with *doorway* and *entrance*, but with no indication of the fact that it is normally used figuratively, while the other two are generally not. It is only through one example, among the many provided (*la géométrie est la porte des sciences mathématiques*, geometry is the gateway to mathematics) that the user is made aware of the figurative use of this word. However, *Harrap's* does provide the equivalent chosen by the translator, even if the latter has to work hard to find the answer, while *Robert & Collins*, which sticks to the literal meaning of *porte*, does not.

The same is true of the item *pièce maîtresse* found under the word *maître* in both dictionaries: *Harrap's* provides the translation equivalent *king pin*, whereas the *Robert & Collins*, which only presents this item in an example, does not.

When it comes to *atout* and its equivalent *asset*, on the other hand, the latter dictionary is superior. It not only provides the translation equivalent *asset*, but also indicates that this equivalent should be chosen when *atout* has the sense of *avantage*. *Harrap's*, on the other hand, does not give this equivalent in the list of equivalents, and while *asset* is

found in the translation of an example (*M. Dupont est un atout dans notre jeu*, Mr Dupont is an asset, a great asset, to our party), the example is placed in a sense division that is followed by the label *Cartes*!

Finally, neither of the two GBDs gives *to turn to one's advantage* as a possible equivalent of *tirer parti de*, although both provide several equivalents including the rarely used *to turn to account*.

It can legitimately be argued that all possible equivalents of an SL item cannot be noted by any GBD. However, none of the equivalents the translator chose for the SL items discussed above are particularly rare or abstruse. A translator should therefore have the right to expect to find them in a bilingual dictionary, especially those, like *Harrap's* and *Robert & Collins*, which do not limit the equivalents provided to the most frequent ones, as some other dictionaries do.

Moreover, it is bad lexicographic practice to present common equivalents not in the list of equivalents but only in the translation of examples, as was the case with *asset* in *Harrap's*. A translator looking for quick verification of an equivalent that comes to mind is very likely to miss them or will find them only after considerable waste of time.

Finally, what seems to be lacking in many cases — this was clearly indicated by the *porte / doorway* example — is adequate semantic information on the equivalents provided and adequate semantic and stylistic discrimination among them. This can be provided by different means: (1) the clear separation of the different senses of the SL headword, along with a partial definition of the sense, followed by TL equivalents; (2) systematic use of field labels; (3) the inclusion of actants or arguments to differentiate between equivalents that render the same overall sense but in different contexts; (4) usage notes, etc. Until these means are used regularly and consistently, the usefulness of the GBD even at the transfer stage of the translation process will be limited.

REVISION OF TRANSLATION

Every professional translator reviews his translation, however rapidly, once it is completed, and tries to improve it. During the revision stage, the translator ensures that all the meaningful elements of the SL text are found in the translation, attempts to find a better way of expressing himself in the TL, and checks for details like spelling. Below I will revise the elements underlined in the translation presented above, and, in the process, I will discuss the usefulness of the GBD at this stage of translation.

The first underlined item is *transport* as the equivalent of the French *transports* in the title of the source text. While, under the influence of the French text, the translator could easily use the English cognate *transport* in his draft translation, he would probably question his judgment at the revision stage and wonder if he should have used *transportation* instead. A quick check in both *Harrap's* and the *Robert & Collins* would be of absolutely no help, since the former does not even list *transportation*, while the latter merely presents the two in merged form as *transport(ation)*, making no distinction between the two. The official translator of our source text has finally opted for *transportation*, no doubt on the basis of a good English dictionary or his personal instinct for the English language.

The next element to require revision is *centre*, which has been used tentatively to render *plaque tournante*. While this equivalent renders the figurative sense of the SL item, it is by no means as *descriptive* as the French word. So the translator may well try to find something better. The equivalent found in the official translation, *hub*, is not even mentioned in *Robert & Collins*, and it is only in the translation of one of the two examples of *plaque tournante* (*Bruxelles est la plaque tournante du Marché commun*, Brussels is the hub of the Common Market) that it is presented in *Harrap's*.

The third element requiring attention is the form of *saint* in the proper noun noted as *Saint Lawrence* in the draft version. While this item is found in *Harrap's*, the equivalent presented is wrong! The river in Canada is the *St. Lawrence*, and not the *Saint Lawrence* as *Harrap's* indicates. Again the fact that the GBDs consulted are European creates a problem for Canadian translators, although *Robert & Collins* does provide the right solution if only in its second edition.

These three examples show clearly that current GBDs are not very helpful to the translator at the revision stage for much the same reasons as they are inadequate at the transfer stage. Apart from the SL items which they do not cover, they do not provide enough equivalents, they do not list the equivalents they provide together, and they do not differentiate between the equivalents they do provide.

CONCLUSION

Given the overall shortcomings of GBDs, translators, the obvious users of such dictionaries, are obliged to turn to several of them to find the answers they seek and, even then, to use unilingual SL and TL dictionaries to complete or verify the answers provided by the former. While translators always will and always should use various types of dictionaries, it would nevertheless save them much precious time and energy if a better GBD were produced. Such a dictionary would attempt to respond to the specific needs of translators by providing equivalents for every major sense or nuance of source language terms; by increasing the number of multi-item words and collocations; by systematically adding field, register, geographical, currency and commentary markers to both the headwords and the proposed equivalents; by including contemporary and principally non-literary examples of usage; and by organizing the material included in an easily consultable manner.

These are the goals of the Bilingual Canadian Dictionary Project, an interuniversity project launched in 1988 by the University of Ottawa and the University of Montreal. The Bilingual Canadian Dictionary will be oriented not only towards the needs of Canadians in general but also and particularly towards those of Canadian translators. This dictionary, which should be published before the turn of the century, will be one of the few, if not the only one, in the preparation of which translators will play a leading role: this means that it will be better adapted than most existing GBDs to the translator's tasks. It is hoped that the publication of this dictionary will end the love-hate relationship that traditionally exists between the translator and his bilingual dictionary.

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Une position unique, malgré des handicaps

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