# A Communicative Approach to Meaning Discrimination in Bilingual Passive Dictionaries

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Doi: 10.5901/mjss.2012.v3n3p505

**Abstract** *Advances made in the area of linguistics and lexicography have affected the way bilingual dictionaries are perceived. Bilingual dictionaries, as important devices in intercultural and interlingual communications, are not regarded as mere reference tools containing a list of items with their corresponding translation equivalents. Nowadays, the role of the user in lexicographic communication has been highlighted and every decision made in the process of dictionary making is based on the purpose the dictionary is going to serve and the intended users' needs and expectations. The present article aims at studying the issue of sense discrimination in bilingual passive dictionaries from a communicative perspective. In so doing, meaning discrimination and its importance is discussed. Then, the factors influencing the application of meaning discrimination strategies are introduced. In addition to equivalent relation which is a factor already discussed by the scholars of the field, part of speech is introduced by the researchers as the second factor contributing to meaning discrimination. It is concluded that the entries having more complicated equivalent relations need more meaning discriminatory strategies. Besides, verbs, due to the role they have in comprehension and due to their polysemous nature, call for more meaning discriminatory strategies.*

*Keywords: lexicography, communicative approach, meaning discrimination, equivalent relation, part of speech*

## 1. Introduction

Lexicography as a branch of applied linguistics has developed since last decades. If one is interested in following the trend of this development, three approaches to lexicography should be reviewed. The first approach is the traditional approach; the deep rooted tradition of listing a number of words and giving some information about orthography, pronunciation and meaning of words in language. As a matter of fact, that is what early dictionaries could offer. In this narrow sense, a dictionary is compiled mainly for reference. This is the most primitive function of the dictionary (Yong & Peng, 2007). However, there are far more functions for dictionaries to perform than just that. "The … dictionary is much more than an instrument providing answers to linguistic questions, however complex, even for a fairly well-educated public of users" (Bejoint, 1994:115). The reference function of the dictionary presents only part of the picture of dictionary uses, though it is the most fundamental and important one.

Adopting a different view toward language, linguists moved away from the traditional approach and the result was a textual approach to lexicography. The development of text linguistics has made it theoretically possible and necessary to review and assess the traditional ways of looking at dictionaries and view them from an entirely different perspective (Yong & Peng, 2007). Unlike the traditional approach in which the entries of the dictionary were studied separately and one by one, textual approach tries to consider the whole dictionary as one coherent text. Frawley (1989) believes that taking such an approach, one can look at dictionary from four viewpoints: content and form, producer or compiler of the text which includes intentionality of it, the receiver of the text, and finally the intertextuality and situationality of the text.

However, as Yong and Peng (2007) believe, although textual approach is a new approach which looks at lexicographic issues from a novel perspective, it suffers from some shortcomings. For one thing, they believe that, textual approach is mostly concerned with the principles governing systematizing the text of dictionaries and ignore the functionality and practicality of them. The most recent approach to lexicography which is a communicative one tries to eliminate the shortcomings of the previous approaches and pay more attention to those aspects overlooked by the two mentioned approaches. According to the communicative approach, in every communication the following aspects should be taken into consideration:

1. communication is a socio-cultural behavior;
2. communication involves sending and receiving messages;
3. messages are encoded by senders and intend to be decoded by receivers;
4. senders and receivers of messages are participants in the process;
5. participants are socio-cultural beings and share a common code; and
6. messages are sent and received to achieve certain purposes.

According to Yong and Peng (2007), this model generates the possibility of observing the dictionary as an entire entity "from three different but interdependent standpoints, i.e. from the position of *compilers*, from the position of *users*, and from the position of *contexts*." From the *compiler*'s point of view, such macro-level problems as perspective, policy, purpose, methodology, function, etc. can be handled. From the position of the *user*, factors such as age range, educational background, user expectation, user feedback etc. will be considered and explored. From the position of *context* in which the process of dictionary making is actualized, a number of problems will be raised and evaluated.

They also believe that early dictionary compilers assumed themselves as users and considered lexicographic problems on behalf of users. These compilers used to make lexicographic choices on "an imaginary basis," and the users' role in dictionary making and their relation with the compiler were not recognized until the late 20th century when the users' role started to become one of the most essential aspects of dictionary research:

> The user perspective has always been there, at least implicitly, but in recent years it has slowly gained in status and is beginning to affect the whole field of lexicography.
>
> (Hartmann, 1987:121)

One of the striking features which makes this model different from the traditional model and the textual model is that it gives prominence to the user's role in the lexicographic communication and incorporates the dictionary user into its general configuration, thus treating the dictionary user as one of the participants in the process of dictionary making. This means that lexicographers will have to bear in mind dictionary users' needs and expectations and their inevitable influence on decisions concerning dictionary policies and their implementation in the course of dictionary making.

With regard to bilingual lexicography, it is widely believed that the most important task of dictionaries is providing the users with appropriate translation equivalents (Steiner, 1971; Bogusławski, 1976, in Piotrowski, 1994; Kromann & Riiber & Rosbach 1984; Manley & Jacobsen & Pedersen, 1988; Zgusta, 1988 in Piotrowski, 1994). Looking the matter from the communicative view described above, in so doing, the task of lexicographers is not merely listing a number of translation equivalents. In fact, the lexicographer should take the users into consideration and pay attention to their look up needs and their ease in choosing the appropriate translation equivalent from among all the equivalents listed for the lemma (Gouws & Prinsloo, 2005).

This study, adopting a communicative view, aims at discussing the issue of meaning discrimination in bilingual passive dictionaries. The researchers hope to shed light on:

1. the issue of meaning discrimination and its importance in bilingual dictionaries;
2. the factors influencing the amount of meaning discriminatory strategies that should be allocated to each entry.

## 2. Decision making in bilingual lexicography

Like any other types of dictionary, bilingual dictionaries have also some predetermined purposes and users. Every step taken in the process of dictionary making on the part of the lexicographer should be in line with the intended functions the dictionary is to serve. Besides, the dictionary should be a tool specifically satisfying the reference needs of its specific users (Yong & Peng, 2007). In short, it can be claimed that lexicographic purpose and perspective are two important factors in the process of decision making.

### *2.1 Lexicographic purpose: general-purpose vs. special-purpose*

According to Yong and Peng (2007) bilingual dictionaries may be differentiated according to the purpose they serve. A general-purpose bilingual dictionary is designed for the general public of the source and/or target language and meets the general purpose of consulting for information concerning the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of the vocabulary involved. It attempts to cover as wide a range as possible of the general vocabulary of the source language. The general vocabulary should not be interpreted as the whole lexicon of the source language, which is impossible for any bilingual

dictionary to cover and describe. It should be understood as that part of the vocabulary that proves to be of more practical utility to the bilingual dictionary user than the rest of the lexicon.

A special-purpose bilingual dictionary is compiled to meet the special needs of specific user groups. Such a dictionary can serve only one purpose or a limited set of specific purposes. It may provide the user with the signification and sometimes the use of only scientific and technical terms of the source language in a special field such as business or commerce (special-field bilingual dictionaries), or it may choose to focus on the description of only one aspect of the source language, such as grammar or collocation (special-aspect bilingual dictionaries).

According to Yong and Peng (2007), it does not seem to be very difficult for bilingual lexicographers to keep special-field bilingual dictionaries within the defined vocabulary boundary, but it would be totally impossible, if not a serious mistake, to make the same demand on general-purpose bilingual dictionaries. According to them, faced with the enormous increase of specialized vocabularies of science and technology, bilingual lexicographers tend to increase the proportion of the entries devoted to scientific and technical terms in their dictionaries to meet the needs of a wider range of users. However, this does not mean eliminating the distinction between general-purpose and special-purpose bilingual dictionaries, because they differ not only in scope of coverage and entry selection but more significantly, in purpose, in method of information presentation and description, and in their general nature.

### *2.2 Lexicographic perspective: active vs. passive*

Previous typological studies did not seem to take much notice of the distinction between active and passive dictionary types, but they are important dimensions, especially when considered from the position of the dictionary user and in bilingual circumstances (Yong & Peng, 2007).

Most traditional bilingual dictionaries were intended for decoding purposes, that is, to help the user find a correct and precise understanding of “hard words” in her/his reading of the foreign language texts. The need for an active bilingual dictionary intended to aid encoding and the distinction between active and passive bilingual types grew out of the fact that no bilingual dictionary can serve all purposes equally well.

Generally speaking, active bilingual dictionaries are designed for encoding. They intend to help such linguistic activities as writing, speaking and translating into a foreign language. In active dictionaries, efforts are often made towards helping the user achieve an active use of the source language, especially in producing new texts. Great importance is given to the description of how words behave grammatically, pragmatically and culturally.

Passive bilingual dictionaries, on the other hand, are intended for decoding. They are of more effective assistance in linguistic activities such as listening, reading, and translating into a native language, as they focus more on the semantic aspect of the source language lexicon, i.e. lexical equivalents between the language pair. This is why active bilingual dictionaries are regarded as dictionaries for production and passive ones as dictionaries for comprehension.

## 3. Meaning Discrimination

According to Piotrowski (1994), any method of distinguishing the senses and strings of equivalents in meaning is known as meaning discrimination. The semantic comment on a bilingual dictionary should not be limited to the mere listing of translation equivalents. If a dictionary is only a list of equivalents, it will be very demanding on the part of the user to make good choices of equivalents for a specific context. Al-Kasimi (1983) stressing the fact that a bilingual dictionary describes a language and culture that are different from the language and culture of the dictionary users, believes that bilingual dictionaries should provide meaning discriminations so as to enable a user to select the appropriate equivalent. According to him (1983:68) “unless the meaning discrimination is solved systematically, a bilingual dictionary cannot be a dependable guide to the proper equivalents.” He adds that meaning discrimination depends on whether the dictionary is meant for comprehension or production, and whether it is intended for speakers of a source or target language. Al-kasimi is of the opinion that proper meaning discrimination can be achieved by using one of the following devices: punctuation, illustrative examples, indicating parts of speech, usage labels and context word or phrase.

Gouws and Prinsloo (2005) believe that the comment on semantics in translation dictionaries should make provision for a treatment procedure that has all the polysemous senses of a lexical item in its scope. Gouws and Prinsloo (2005:151) further believe that “polysemy is a word specific feature which implies that for a polysemous word in the source language one will not necessarily find a target translation equivalent with exactly the same polysemous senses.” In such cases, according to them, lexicographers not only have to provide a translation equivalent for each one of the polysemous senses of the lemma, but also have to make sure that a target user of a given dictionary can achieve a successful retrieval of information from the translation equivalent paradigm. This means that for all translation equivalents

that are polysemous, each word should be accompanied by extra-linguistic information. This will enable users discriminate the senses. Gouws and Prinsloo (2005:153) say that "it is of extreme importance that the lexicographic treatment presented in a bilingual dictionary may not leave the translation equivalents isolated from their typical contexts."

## 4. Factors influencing meaning discrimination in bilingual dictionaries

In the light of the fact that in modern lexicography allocating equal or random amounts of meaning discriminatory strategies to different words is rejected, it is important to know which words should take precedence with this regard. In this study, two factors of equivalent relations and parts of speech are believed to be the factors that should play a role in sense discrimination.

### *4.1 Equivalent relations*

It is believed that the translation equivalents of a bilingual dictionary are "the most salient data category" in such a dictionary (Gouws, 2002). A translation equivalent is a target language item, which can be used to replace the source language item in a specific occurrence. The relation between source language items and target language items is known as an equivalent relation, which can be of three different types, namely congruence, divergence and surrogate equivalence.

#### 4.1.1 Congruence

An ER of congruence is characterized by a one-to-one relation at lexical, pragmatic and semantic level. As a result, both source and target language forms have exactly the same meaning and implications. In such cases, the translation equivalent can substitute the source word in all its uses. This type of ER holds few problems for a lexicographer. However, the existence of congruence is limited to very rare cases. The entry for the source word *ambulance* chosen from *Hezaareh English-Persian Dictionary* can be regarded as an example of congruence:

ambulance … آمبولانس

#### 4.1.2 Divergence

The commonest equivalent relation in bilingual dictionaries is divergence. It is characterized by a one to more that one relation between source language and target language forms. In other words, in cases where a given source word has more than one translation equivalents, the equivalent relation is that of divergence. Divergence might happen on lexical grounds, semantic grounds or both.

*Lexical divergence*

When a monosemous lemma has more than one translation equivalents and the translation equivalents are partial synonyms in the target language lexical divergence happens. Most of the dictionaries use a comma to separate these equivalents:

patient … بیمار، مریض

At semantic level there is a one to one relation between the source language and the target language, but at lexical level there is a one to more than one relation, i.e. a relation of divergence at lexical level.

According to Gouws (2002), where lexical divergence prevails the lexicographer has to make sure whether the translation equivalents are full or partial synonyms. If they are full synonyms, which is very seldom the case, the lexicographic treatment can be similar to the case of congruence. But, more often than not the equivalents are synonymous only partially. In such cases, the user should not only be informed about the fact that these partial synonyms can substitute the source word, but should also be cautioned that the target language equivalents can not substitute one another in all contexts (Gouws, 2002). Here meaning discrimination comes to the play. As a result, the lexicographer should make use of some sort of contextual clues to indicate the typical environment of the translation equivalents.

*Semantic divergence*

The second type of lexicographic divergence is *semantic divergence*. It happens where the source language lemma is a polysemous lexical item. Since cases of polysemy are language specific, and since the chances are minimal that a single

target language item will have the same semantic load as the source language item, a translation equivalent needs to be introduced for each sense of the source language lemma. Dictionaries use different devices to mark the occurrence of semantic divergence. Some use a numbering system to differentiate between different sets of translation equivalents each representing a sense of the source language lemma, some others use semicolons as markers to separate translation equivalents representing different polysemous senses of the lemma.

Gouws (2002) believes that no lexicographer may assume that the users of the dictionary will intuitively know which translation equivalent to choose for a given source language situation. Consequently, lexicographers are compelled to utilize additional strategies to give rise to an optimal retrieval of information on the part of the user. Like the case of lexical divergence, these strategies include contextualization related strategies.

*Poly divergence*

It happens very often that both lexical and semantic divergence prevail in the translation equivalents offered for a source language item:

**recognize** ... 1. شناختن، بجا آوردن، باز شناختن، تشخیص دادن 2. تایید کردن، مورد تایید قرار دادن، تصدیق کردن، اذعان کردن، قبول داشتن 3. (رسمی) [دولت، رژیم] به رسمیت شناختن 4. تشخیص دادن، درک کردن، وقوف یافتن بر، متوجه ... بودن، دریافتن 5. قدردانی کردن از، ارج نهادن بر، گرامی داشتن

*I recognize him as a good teacher.* او را معلم خوبی می دانم. قبول دارم او معلم خوبی است.

As evident, having five sets of translation equivalents in Persian, *recognize* is regarded as a polysemous lemma. On the one hand, it has the requirements of being a case of semantic divergence and, on the other hand, each set of equivalents contains more than one translation equivalents. Such co-occurrence of lexical and semantic divergence gives rise to an ER of *poly divergence* which calls for a well-developed and consistently used system of contextual and contextual guidance.

4.1.3 Surrogate equivalence

The existence of lexical gaps is very common in all languages. Where lexicographers are confronted with the lack of a target language lexical item which can be coordinated with a given source language item, a *surrogate equivalent* is created.

Dagut (1981: 64) believes that lexical gaps might be motivated either on linguistic grounds or on extra-linguistic grounds. A linguistic gap occurs when a given referent is known to the speakers of both languages but lexicalized in only one of the languages. To put it in other words, the meaning of the item exists in both languages but only one of the languages lexicalizes it. Such a lexical gap which has some linguistic reasons is called *linguistic gap*.

There are also some cases where the speakers of one of the languages of the bilingual dictionary are familiar with a given referent and their language has a word to refer to it, but the speakers of the other language are not familiar with the referent and consequently their language has no word to refer to it. Such a lexical gap which has some extra-linguistic motivations is called *referential gap*.

According to Gouws (2002), lexical gaps in the target language of a bilingual dictionary may never result in the lexicographer refraining from an attempt to provide the lemma with a translation equivalent that conveys the meaning of the source language item to the dictionary users. One way to fill in the possible blanks is employing loan words. It is of utmost importance to pay attention to the point that lexicographers are not the "initiators of the loan words," but where the loan words do exist in a language as a part of the lexicon of that language the lexicographer can make use of it. However, where a loan word is not recognized in the target language of a bilingual dictionary the lexicographer often compliments the translation equivalent with a brief paraphrase of meaning i.e. explanatory (descriptive) equivalent.

*4.2 Part of speech*

Reviewing the existing literature on sense discrimination reveals that scholars of the field have only paid attention to equivalents relations. But, the researchers of the present study believe that parts of speech can also play a role.

It is believed that as the kernel of a sentence, a verb has an important role in comprehension (Xu, 2008). According to Béjoint the first choice of users for retrieval of information in dictionaries is always the verb (Béjoint, 1981). Although

many users might not have a good command of function words, adverbs and adjectives, when it comes to decoding a statement in a foreign language they rarely look them up in a dictionary. Instead, looking the verb up, they try to grasp the meaning of the whole statement (Xu, 2008). Their search for the meaning of adverbs and adjectives is limited to the cases where such items have a pivotal role in understanding the whole utterance, or where the purpose of looking up is finding the meaning of a specific adverb or adjective. However, if a dictionary is particularly geared to satisfying the encoding needs of the users, the requirements would differ, since there the user is obliged to know about the meaning of the item, as well as its syntactic, morphological and collocational behavior. There, function words also play a role.

In addition, verbs are believed to have more senses than other categories of part of speech (Miller and Fellbaum, 1992; Brown, 1994; Källkvist, 1997; Xu, 2008; Elston-Güttler and Williams, 2008). According to Miller and Fellbaum in *Collins English Dictionary* verbs on the whole have an average of 2.11 senses while nouns have 1.74 senses (Miller and Fellbaum, 1992). Along these lines, Brown (1994) also confirmed the general tendency of verbs to be polysemous and their senses to be context dependent. Xu's study also confirmed the same claim in the Big Five (Xu, 2008).

Bearing the two above mentioned facts about verbs in mind, one can conclude that verbs are the category deserving more attention as far as addressing is concerned (Xu, 2008), since in a bilingual passive dictionary verbs are consulted by the users more than other parts of speech. Besides, the inherent polysemous nature of the verbs might be challenging to many users. As a result, it is imperative for lexicographers to pay attention to this fact while assigning meaning discriminatory strategies to different words.

## 5. Conclusion

This article examined systematic application of meaning discriminatory strategies in bilingual passive dictionaries. The two factors of equivalent relations and parts of speech were introduced as the ones playing a role in assigning different amounts of sense discriminatory strategies to words. As for the first factor, it should be mentioned that the more complicated the equivalent relations, the more need for meaning discriminatory strategies. Thus, equivalent relations of semantic divergence and poly divergence call for more sense discriminatory strategies in comparison with those of congruence and lexical divergence. With regard to the part of speech, the researchers believe that verbs need more amounts of meaning discrimination due to their role in comprehension related activities and their polysemous nature. Lexicographers are advised to take these factors into consideration while allocating meaning discriminatory strategies to words. That way, they can take one forward step towards compiling a dictionary which is communicatively successful.

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