

Journal des traducteurs Translators' Journal

Translation, Structure and Lexicography

B. Hunter Smeaton

Volume 4, Number 1, 1er Trimestre 1959

La lexicographie au Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061515ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061515ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0316-3024 (print)

2562-2994 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Smeaton, B. (1959). Translation, Structure and Lexicography. *Journal des traducteurs / Translators' Journal*, 4(1), 9–14. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061515ar>

TRANSLATION, STRUCTURE AND LEXICOGRAPHY¹

B. Hunter SMEATON, New York

19. Having now considered some of the better known approaches to semantic reality, and their application to both description and comparison, let us now examine, in the terms common to these approaches, the process of looking up a word in a bilingual dictionary.

20. In a dictionary, of course, the point of departure is the *lexeme*, or "word" — this in contrast to the thesaurus, which, in effect, presents semantic fields, from which the user, on the basis of his subjective knowledge of the language, selects from the mosaic the piece most suited to his need.

20.1 There is no reason, now, why we cannot equally well speak of a *lexemic field* and likewise apply to it the mosaic analogy. Since its area, however, does not refer to semantic structure, but only to the given lexeme and its possible semantic realizations, we can more conveniently depict it as a circle divided into sectors, bound together by their homonymy and (in terms of the written language) their identical spelling, with orthographically dissimilar homonyms excluded. Lacking frequency counts, moreover, we must follow the ordinary dictionary in avoiding any commitments as to relative commonness of occurrence of the senses shown, and the sectors are therefore of equal size.

20.2 The lexemic field, to be sure, will tend to correspond to a semantic field in that some, perhaps all, of the homonyms may be in varying degrees synonymous; one or more of them, on the other hand, may be semantically unrelated to the rest. Thus, *wood* — "the material wood" and *wood* — "firewood" are semantically related; but *wood* — "an area of growing trees" is, synchronically speaking, not semantically adjacent to the other two but to be grouped, more logically, with a series "wood, forest, grove, etc." On the level of expression, however, this fact is not relevant. We have, then, for *wood*, the following figure — in which the definitions, in a bilingual dictionary, will of course be in another language :

"The material WOOD"	"Area of trees"
"FIREWOOD"	

w o o d

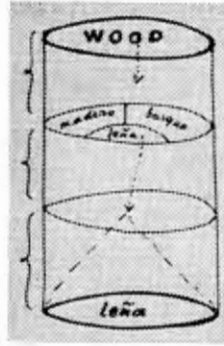
1. Cf. Journal des Traducteurs, III. 3 (1958) : 122-130.

21. To show the process of the use of a bilingual dictionary in translation, assuming the translation here to be from English into Spanish, we may in turn incorporate this figure into a three-dimensional diagram :

EXPRESSION
(English) :

CONTENT :

EXPRESSION
(Spanish) .



point of
selection

choice of
synonyms
(if any) here

We will suppose, regarding the example shown, that a Spanish-speaker is translating from English into his own language, and he comes to the sentence: "She sent the boys out to gather some wood." We will also suppose he is not a very bright fellow as far as English is concerned, who shouldn't have been assigned to the translating job in the first place, and he has to look up the word "wood" in a dictionary. He finds opposite the entry "wood" the definitions "madera, leña; bosque". And having at least understood the context, he automatically selects *leña*, the only definition that can be used in the sense at hand (though he may pause for a second to decide whether there is a more appropriate synonym for *leña* in Spanish — which there is not).

The whole process is normally instantaneous, to be sure. The translator does not weigh each of the definitions in the balance, since the accumulated evidence of the context, combined with his own intelligence, has already narrowed down the possible choices before he takes the dictionary in hand.

The above diagram also illustrates why it is so laborious a process to write in, or translate into a language not one's own, via a bilingual dictionary: every time one reaches the point of selection, he must take the definitions he finds and check back to find precisely what they mean in his own language, unless he proposes to guess . . .

22. The example given assumes the information provided by the dictionary is complete. Most bilingual dictionaries, however, abrogate what might be considered their responsibility at a point far short of what might be hoped for. The lexicographer says to you, arm in arm with the publisher, "Here — you take it from there !" In the better (and costlier) dictionaries, one must grant, the uses of the entry word are parenthetically qualified, and sometimes illustrated in sentences. Even the best of them, however, do not take into account more than a small part of the structural ramifications of a language — that part which lexicographical tradition recognizes. One never completely escapes the notion that a word in language A equals a word in language B.

23. What *could*, then, be useful to know about the word "wood" in the meaning of "firewood"? Well, the fact, for example, that it has a special association with certain verbs, such as "gather", "cut" and "chop". It is also of importance to know that it can be used partitively (thus, with "some", as in the sentence given), which "wood" in the other two meanings cannot.

"Wood" in the meaning *bosque*, moreover, is characteristically used with an article "a" or "the". "Wood" in the meaning *leña* may sometimes be used with "the", but because of its collective sense, never with "a".

24. As regards the matter of *gathering* wood, it should be noted, there is no way the foreigner can be sure, without being told, that this verb, and not another (unless "collect"), is the one used in this connection. The Spanish verb *coger* used with *leña* also means "to catch" or "to seize" — so why not go out and *catch* wood?! (The bilingual person, of course, often does things like this — as so effectively analysed by Professor Uriel Weinreich in his *Languages in Contact*).

Where the lexicographer draws the line in regard to affinities of this sort — such as that between the verb and its complement and qualifiers — has always been rather arbitrary, and probably conditioned by the axe of economy more than by any clearcut criterion. The *degree* of attraction of a word or locution to the verbal or nominal nucleus (i.e., its boundness) would seem to provide the yardstick. More often, however, the lexicographer fears to venture far beyond the tangible boundary provided by the orthographic unit — the word, in the layman's sense.

25. Precisely because of the historical accident that, in German, compound nouns and, in their infinitive form, compound verbs, are written as an orthographic unit, German always comes out the better in bilingual dictionaries involving German.² A single orthographic unit is *ipso facto* accepted as a unit, whereas in a language in which corresponding components are written as orthographically separate units, these are somehow felt to be more or less autonomous just because they are separately written, even though their mutual bond is just as strong as it is in German.

25.1 English, in comparison, suffers greatly. One need only think of the variety of current meanings that attach to the verb "hold up" (to hold up something that might fall, to hold up traffic, to hold up an order, to hold up a bank, etc.) And yet, in the English-German section of the Langenscheidt *Taschenwörterbuch* — which has quite a good name for general utility — one finds for "hold up" only *sich (aufrecht)erhalten* (lit., "to hold oneself up", i.e., "to sit up straight", or figuratively, "to keep up one's courage"). Not only are most of the common meanings ignored, but even the one given can correspond to "hold up" only in its figurative sense — a fact which is not stated.

25.2 Even the compiler of German words, however, is ultimately the victim of orthography. As long as the adverbial qualifiers of a verb behave themselves and stay within the bounds of compactness, while avoiding any semblance of independent character, the German lexicographer will pat them on the head, prefix them to the verb and admit the resultant units to the society of compound verbs. Thus, *verstehen* (understand); *anfangen* (begin); *wiederherstellen* (repair); etc. A few ex-nouns and adjectives are also allowed in, such as *teilnehmen* (participate), *heimkehren* (return home) and *freilassen* (release, set free).

² The same applies to Dutch, Yiddish, and, to a large degree, the Scandinavian languages.

25.3 Prepositional phrases functioning as adverbial modifiers of a verb, on the other hand, are regarded askance. Even some of these, however, have qualified for a sort of second-class membership; they are not allowed, normally, to touch the verb, but their nominal part may doff its capital in favor of a small letter to show that it is part of an adverbial unit directly associated with the verb, and sometimes the noun and preposition are written together as a unit. Such are *in acht nehmen* (now more common than *in Acht nehmen*) (to take care, look out — lit., “to take into heed”) and *zugrunde liegen* (to underlie — lit., “to lie at [the] base”).

25.4 But what of *gesund werden* (to get well, recuperate), and *Ruhe finden* (a euphemism for “to diet”, lit., “to find rest”)? And then there is the verb *mit Mann und Maus untergehen* (to go down with all hands, as in the sentence, “Das Schiff ging mit Mann und Maus unter” — a fixed metaphor, no longer necessarily with humorous intent). ...For evident reasons, one can hardly expect these to be included under the *anfangen* and *teilnehmen* scheme, and list, under ‘M’, a verb “mitmannundmaus untergehen” — even though, structurally, such qualifying phrases, because of their regular association with certain verbs, not only combine with these verbs to form unitary concepts no more complex on the content level than *anfangen*, but also exhibit precisely the same syntactic behavior as the expressively simpler compounds.³ The trouble is that, since these verbally more elaborate compounds cannot qualify, for one reason or another, as orthographic units, they often get lost in the shuffle and are not listed anywhere.

26. If lexicographers, in compiling vocabulary, worked from a structural point of view, and tried to record not mere examples of words (that is, orthographic units), but also sought to find for every verb, noun and adjective an exhaustive list of the qualifiers and complements regularly associated with it, they could then proceed to the compilation of a scientifically sound dictionary that would be far more useful than the best we have today.

27. Another vital item commonly either omitted or inadequately included in dictionaries is the connective particle, by which I have in mind particularly the preposition or prepositions which follow a given verb, adjective, etc. Thus if I wish to express in Spanish “to seize by the hand”, or “drunk on brandy”, neither Cuyas nor the new dictionary by Williams will help me. I must look in the *Gramatica de la Lengua Castellana por la Real Academia Española*, which contains a special list of “words constructed with a preposition”, to find that these phrases would be “*coger a mano*” and “*borracho de aguardiente*”.⁴

28. Returning, finally, to what I should like to know about the various definitions of English “wood”; I would also like to have a semantic picture of the boundaries between, *wood, forest, jungle, copse, thicket, bush, grove*, etc. As a dictionary user I would be grateful to be cross-referenced to a key-word in a supplement to the dictionary in which groups of the more important partial synonyms were briefly distinguished from one another. Without this, the information the dictionary purports to give is inadequate in a very vital respect, and sometimes very difficult to obtain, so that it might almost be simpler for me to make a trip to the country where the language is spoken and reside there a few years to learn these things —

³ Thus, if one puts the verb (*etwas*) *mit Mühe und Not schaffen*, as in “Er schaffte es mit Mühe und Not” (“He did it with great difficulty”), through various tenses, and in both dependent and independent word order, it will behave syntactically just like *anfangen*, *mit Mühe und Not* corresponding to *an-* and *schaffen* to *-fangen*. The same is true, for that matter, in the case of wholly fortuitous qualifiers, as in the series “Er steht morgen um sechs Uhr auf” (He is getting up at six o'clock tomorrow)

⁴ See 9th ed. (1917), pp. 217-46, or later ed.

which is just about what the lexicographer-publisher team has told me to do, in effect.⁵

* * *

29. Summary and conclusions.

In the foregoing we have examined the subject of translation as a whole, and then brought our interest to bear upon one incidental but vital aspect of translation, the use of bilingual dictionaries, and their usability. Analysing them in terms of structural linguistics, we were able, from this fresh approach, to diagnose certain of their major shortcomings which normally escape attention. We end with the following suggestions for the improvement of bilingual dictionaries, some of major and others of minor importance:

29.1 Definitions, if they are to be honest and real definitions, should, through the use of illustrative sentences and locutions, show the major affinities of words to other words in the language, to the extent it is practical to do so.

29.2 The bilingual dictionary should be provided with a supplement for each language in which useful, arbitrarily selected groups of semantically related words are defined contrastively with one another, and to which the words concerned would, in the dictionary proper, be cross-referenced. This would also save some space in the definition of entries. These supplements, depending on their size, could be either bound into the same volume or made the object of a separate volume, without which no bilingual dictionary would be complete.

29.3 In the case of bilingual dictionaries involving English, the fullest possible treatment should be accorded the English verb/adverb compounds (hold up, get along, pass up, put up with, etc.).

29.4 Definitions should be illustrated not only by all possible locutions, as noted, but the principal proverbs and sayings of a language should be taken over from proverb collections, etc., and systematically included, rather than just occasionally.

29.5 Geographical names should not be separated from their corresponding adjectives and put in a special section, but incorporated in the main alphabetization. This, happily, is done in the new Williams dictionary of Spanish-English/English-Spanish. Similarly, there is no object in separating abbreviations in a special list — unless to shorten the life of the dictionary user. These, too, are incorporated in at least one dictionary I know (Dorland, *The American Illustrated Medical Dictionary*).

29.6 Inclusion of essential information with regard to irregular verbs; unpredictable plurals; the prepositions that follow verbs, adjectives, etc.; accentuation schemes (in a language such as Russian) (done, at least, in O'Brien's *Russian-English Dictionary*); and, in short, any inflectional or other vital information the foreign user needs and cannot otherwise get, unless with a speaker of the language as informant, should be *mandatory*. If practical, information on verb paradigms should be included in smaller type with the entry (Edgren's *Italian-English dictionary*), though supplementary tables illustrating model inflections can also be effective (William's dictionary of Spanish-English).

29.7 A useful supplement to the bilingual dictionary, which need not take up too much space, would be specimen, parallel-column translations of selected

⁵ "Synonym dictionaries", of which the thesaurus is one type, do, of course, exist, but, as previously noted, there are normally no definitions included, and it is up to the user to select the appropriate word. One that can be mentioned that does have definitions is Roque Barcia, *Sinonimos Castellanos*, Madrid (1910). In it, pairs or groups of words are contrasted, e. g., liberal/generoso, echar/arrojar/lanzar, precaucion/cautela, etc. I know of no such dictionary, however, that is integrated with a bilingual dictionary.

texts, some *from* one language and some *from* the other, with marginal commentary in the appropriate language.

29.8 Full-length grammars, printed in a separate volume, should be integrated with given bilingual dictionaries with cross-references from the dictionary to the grammar — thus putting an end to the lack of coordination between the grammar and the dictionary which form the nucleus of one's references on a foreign language. ...Many bilingual dictionaries, to be sure, do have grammatical summaries, but these are usually too condensed to be of much use.

30. Perhaps I should add the general suggestion that it should be a criminal offense to sell as adequate for current, general use, or display for sale, a dictionary which has gone unrevised since the days of gaslight and high-button shoes. Such legislation, in the United States, would fall under the administration of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, along with the laws designed to protect the public against the adulteration of foods and the like.

Certainly, with the aid of even a fraction of the funds that are now going into other branches of science, many of the advances I suggest could, with due compromise, be carried out.

Le coin des rieurs :



- Relevé dans un récent catalogue de grand magasin : *Cage à serins à pied* (je serais curieux de voir des cages pour serins en voiture) ; *pèse-personnes recommandables* (pas pour les voleurs) ; *service de table en quarante morceaux* (pour scènes de ménage ?). Dans la presse, on demande des *ajusteurs* d'assurance bilingues (munis de clefs anglaises, je suppose ?) ; quant à la situation des *ingénieurs stationnaires*, elle n'a pas avancé d'un pouce.
- En corrigeant les épreuves de ce numéro, je relève une coquille : *lexicogaphers*. Encore heureux que l'imprimeur n'ait pas mis "lexicogaffers". Cet hybride désobligeant désignerait, je suppose, un lexicographe rustaud et particulièrement gaffeur. Et de cette espèce, il n'en "faux pas"...
- Quelle est la devise des herboristes anglais ? (Thyme is money) ♦ Dans quel quartier de Paris habitent les coureurs cyclistes ? (Porte Maillot) ♦ Où habitent les Canadiens ayant bonne vue ? (A Longueuil) ♦ Un habitant de Val d'Or tombe d'un avion la tête en bas ; où tombe-t-il ? (A Dorval) ♦ Quels arbres plante-t-on auprès de la morgue ? (Des noyers) ♦ Quoi de commun entre un Québécois et un éléphant ? (Leur devise : "Je me souviens") ♦ Quelle est la devise des lexicologues ? (De deux mots, il faut choisir le moindre).