

TRANSLATION BETWEEN
TYPOLOGICALLY DIFFERENT
LANGUAGES OR THE UTOPIA OF
EQUIVALENCE

*1 vs 1.round, 1.long or 1.nasty
being*

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Starting point

Language = translation of culture into words.

If perfect equivalence (lexical, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, discursive and cultural) is hard to obtain even for languages that are typologically and culturally close it becomes an almost impossible goal between languages that are very different typologically and culturally.

Objective

Show what kind of translation difficulties arise when translating between Palikur and French/English

Explore translation possibilities/impossibilities on three levels:

- grammar
- lexicon
- discourse.

Main topics

- 1) Palikur language and people
- 2) Grammatical differences and equivalence : translating Palikur numerals
- 3) Lexical issues: polysemy and specialized words
- 4) Equivalence in discourse

1) Palikur language and people

Palikur language and people



Palikur language and people

- A population living in French Guyana and Brazil
- Between 850 and 1000 speakers in Guyana
- Total population : about 2000

Palikur language and people

Traditional Activities

- Agriculture
- Hunting
- Fishing
- Handicrafts



Palikur language and people

The language

- Linguistic family: Arawakan
- Complex grammar (classifiers)
- Multilingual environment

2) Grammatical differences and equivalence

Translating numeral classifiers

Definition

- *“Classification of nouns means the division of the nouns of a language into a limited number of classes with class membership formally taking effect on the noun itself and/or beyond the nouns in at least certain contexts.”(Wurzel 1986:77)*
- *“Classifiers are generally defined as morphemes that classify and quantify nouns according to semantic criteria.”(Senft 2000 : 21)*

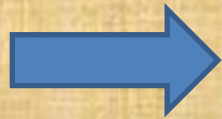
Translating numeral classifiers

Definition

“The classifier that refers to a nominal referent may individuate the noun and then highlight a special (shade of) meaning which then extracts one special referent out of the sum of possible extralinguistic referents the noun can refer to if it is not specified by this classifier.” (Senft 2000 : 36)

Translating numeral classifiers

- Between 12 and 20 words for *one*.
- Word classes according to semantic criteria:



different world vision

culture strongly present in
language

Translating numeral classifiers

one

paha – house, egg, nest, grave, mosquito net, hammock, basket

pahak – flat objects (paper, leaf, table, mushrooms, plate, linen, spoon)

pahakti – tree, plant, thorn

pahamku – knife, axe, needle, nail, boat, car

Translating numeral classifiers

one

pahat – long objects (bottle, bow, fishing rod, rifle, banana, wave)

pahavu – woman, baby, bird, butterfly, crab, fish, turtle, some insects, shrimp

pahavwi – man, mammals, evil spirits, flies, scorpion, moon, snake

Translating numeral classifiers

one

Potential effects on translation



Palikur – French/English

semantic/cultural loss (impossible to deal with unless one writes a translator's note)

French/English – Palikur

world/situation knowledge required in order to choose the right classifier

Translating numeral classifiers

one

Particular case : classifier change

Ex. *pahakti ã* - *one (plant) tree*

= *a tree in the forest, alive, in normal conditions*

pahat ã - *one (long object) tree*

= *a tree which has been cut, in a horizontal position = a piece of wood*

Need for lexical indications in the TL.

3) Lexical issues:
polysemy and
specialized wor(1)ds

Polysemy as a reflection of culture and world perception

was

1) piece of land in the forest where
the

Palikur grow crops (especially
cassava)

2) palm tree

3) açai palm tree *Euterpe oleracea*
(*very important part of their diet*)

Polysemy as a reflection of
culture and world perception
Solving the ambiguity is rather easy:

context

morphology (possessives)

Ex. *nuwasra* – *my land* (where I grow
crops)

nuwasiy – *my açai palm tree*

But we lose all the cultural implications
of this kind of polysemy (the vital role
that both concepts play in Palikur

Specialized words and world

perception

“Geometric” vision of the world

illustrated by:

classifiers

various word series (*to wash, clean/empty, whole/entire, cut*)

prepositions (*on, in, etc.*).

Specialized words and world perception *to wash*

sukūhavene – wash the dishes, flat
and round objects, boat

sukumbetene – wash tissue objects,
fruit in clusters, pieces of meat
(grouped objects)

sukumtene – wash the outside of
round, square/cubic objects

Specialized words and world perception

sukumbohene – wash flat objects
(table, knife)

sukuminene – wash the outside part
of cylindric objects (bottle, bananas)

sukũhekune – wash the inside of
hollow objects (bottle, box, fridge,
house etc.)

Specialized words and world perception

Prepositions : *on/in*

avew ã – *on vertical tree* – *in a tree*

amin ã – *on horizontal (long) tree* – *on a tree*

Specialized words and world perception

Semantic equivalence can be acquired either through lexical addition or through specific words having the same meaning but not the same cultural baggage.

However, the world vision encoded in the words will be lost.

4) Equivalence in discourse

Oral vs written discourse

- repetitions
- hesitation
- different use of pronouns
- ceremonial formulae

Oral vs written discourse

Equivalence is impossible as it (also) depends on:

- discourse target
- discourse purpose
- discourse codes

Conclusion

The meaning of equivalence itself (regardless of grammar or lexical considerations) depends on the answer to the following question:

Is translation the mirror of a world or the mirror of a text?

(Or the mirror of so many other different things...)

KIBEYNE

A photograph of a paved road in Kibeyne. The road is wide and paved, stretching into the distance. On the left side, there is a building with a brown corrugated metal roof and a brick wall. A green mailbox is visible on the grass. On the right side, there are utility poles with power lines, a green fence, and a red structure. In the distance, a person is riding a bicycle on the road. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.