

Language transfer in translation: The case of lexicosemantic transfer and its impact on lexical correspondence/non-correspondence between languages

Abstract

Lexical relations, Collocations and false friends constitute the most significant areas of negative language transfer in translation. These aspects of interlingual lexical contrast illustrate the considerable difficulties that foreign language students face when they translate forms and expressions from a source language into a target language. Translation, in such cases, instead of being a learning and problem-solving strategy often results in lack of lexical correspondence between the source language and the target language, inappropriateness to the context and sometimes even to something not possible in the target language, i.e., semantically non-permissible.

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ملخص

إن العلاقات المفرداتية وتصنيفاتها وكذا الصيغ المشابهة شكلا والمختلفة معنى تشكل أهم مجالات التحويل السلبي في الترجمة. وتمثل مظاهر الفروقات المفرداتية بين اللغات هذه الصعوبات المعنوية التي يواجهها طلاب اللغات الأجنبية عندما يترجمون صيغا وعبارات من لغة - لأخرى. وفي مثل هذه الحالات، عوض أن تكون الترجمة تعلمًا وتخمينًا فهي غالبًا ما تؤدي إلى نقص في التوافق بين لغتي الترجمة أو عدم تجانس العبارة مع سياقها مما قد يؤدي إلى تعبير مستحيل في اللغة المترجم إليها أي أنه تعبير لا قيمة دلالية له.

The aim of this paper is to throw light on some aspects of the English language which belong to the most significant areas of difficulties met by Algerian university students who resort to translation as a learning and problem solving strategy. In particular, the inquiry in this paper is directed towards the rules not only of usage but also of use that the student must know in order to be able to translate linguistic forms appropriately from a source language into a target language.

Taking into account the complex linguistic background of Algerian students who have the Algerian dialect of Arabic as their mother tongue, Standard Arabic as their Language one (L.1) in education, French as their Foreign language one (F.L.1) and English as their Foreign language two (F.L.2), this paper attempts to illustrate the considerable difficulties which lie in the use of selection-restrictions and contextual rules of the language which the students face when they move from one language into the other. Consequently, they can speak or write grammatically, but not idiomatically, not native-like, which means that they

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do not always succeed in selecting what is appropriate to the context (linguistic and situational). The result is often a negative transfer which is reflected more commonly in the use of forms and expressions which are appropriate to the situations of L.1 (Arabic) or F.L.1 (French) in F.L.2 (English).

To illustrate this inappropriateness to the context of the target language or more precisely this lack of correspondence between the lexical forms and expressions of the target language and the previously known languages, the present account examines some cases with reference to three important areas : lexical relations, collocations and false friends. In the first two cases, difficulties particularly arise when the student is confronted with the choice of synonymous, hyponymous and even antonymous lexical items which vary in usage and use across languages. This means that the identification of such relations between lexemes which belong to different languages is not a straightforward matter since these lexemes vary first, with respect to their collocational environment which is determined by the selection-restrictions or co-occurrence restrictions which are specific to each language and second, with respect to their semantic range, i.e., the range of applicability or the various uses to which these lexemes are put in each language. Consequently, it is not easy for the learner to translate lexical forms with a sufficient degree of precision from one language into another on the basis of such relations. In other words, strongly reliable degrees of semantic similarity, inclusion or opposition are possible but only within a specific language. The following cases illustrate the point. For example, we may have a source language which draws a semantic distinction not present in a target language by having two or more lexemes which correspond to only one lexeme in the target language. This implies that the latter lexeme is supposed to have a semantic extension in the target language which covers the same range of applicability as the former lexemes in the source language. The following

sets of verbal lexemes in Arabic and French illustrate the former case :

Arabic: **dja:ʔa ʔata: ʔaqbala qadima**

French: **venir, accourir, affluer,**

and the following verbal lexeme in English illustrates the latter case which is that of come.

The specificity which exists in French and Arabic may be rendered in English either

by collocational devices as Lyons (1977, Vol. I, p.262) puts it :

In many cases, one language will use a syntagm where another language employs a single lexeme with roughly the same meaning.

and which the students should be aware of or simply rendered by the straightforward verb **come**. The latter solution implies that the same verb may have a general and a specific meaning and in such a case, the result will be a positive transfer in translation leading therefore to lexical correspondence rather than non-correspondence. In other words, translating into the target language in similar cases does not seem to be a complex task whereas the reverse, i.e., translating from the target language poses quite serious problems since the learner, in translating, has to be able to select the closer, if not the appropriate, lexical correspondent among a range of possible correspondents as is the case with Arabic.

Another example which shows the lexical non-parallelism between languages which leads to negative semantic transfer is found in the neutralization in Arabic of the deictic component which expresses the antonymy relationship contracted by the pair immigrate and emigrate in English and **immigrer** and émigrer in French. In other words, this time, it is the source language ,i.e., Arabic which uses a single lexeme ha:djara to account for both lexemes in the other two languages which represent F.L.1 and F.L.2 in the case of Algerian students. Consequently, the lack of this semantic specificity, i.e., directional orientation, within the verbal lexeme itself in Arabic quite often leads to error in translation since the students tend to confuse both lexemes in the target language or use one of them invariably. In such cases, the students extend the use of the two words of F.L.2 and even F.L.1 to the same contexts as their corresponding term in first language.

Hatch and Brown (1995, p. 127) refer to this process as ' loan translation' and say:

Loan translation is a common lexical process
in second or foreign language learning that
often leads to error.

Furthermore, in overusing the target language lexeme, i .e., extending its use to all the situations which are similar to those of the source language, the learner is identifying similar semantic features between the lexemes of the target language and those of the background languages and this would inevitably also lead him to identify similar collocational features. Consequently, certain intransitive verbs in English may be used transitively, i.e., taking an object complement collocate rather than a modality complement collocate or vice versa depending upon the syntactic environment of the corresponding verbs in either language one or language two. For example, the verbs in the following pairs of sentences which are related at all linguistic levels in L.2 and L.3:

le bateau a coulé the ship sank

ils ont coulé le bateau they sank the ship

are rendered differently in Arabic, namely, by the switch of the verb from an intransitive agentive form to a transitive causative one,

ghariqat assafi:natu (the ship sank)

?aghraqu: assafi:nata (they sank the ship)

Experience has shown that the students fail to capture this relationship and use the verb **sink** in the causative sense. This can be explained by the fact that only the primitive or core components of the verb, i.e., downward motion + liquid , which are common to the three languages are retained. The other use which modifies the morphological pattern of the basic verb in Arabic and which entails volition on the part of the initiator subject pushes the learner to look for another verbal form in English to express such a meaning. The learner here behaves just as he would do for other verbs which enter into similar constructions. In other words, the learner generalizes such cases as **drop** and **fall** which represent two allolexemes of the same lexeme **fall** and which in fact correspond to the two allolexemes in Arabic ?**asqaTa** (drop, fell) and **saqaTa** (fall) of the same lexeme saqaTa . In these cases, the agentive and the causative forms in Arabic correspond in fact to two different forms in English whereas in the other cases, e.g., sink, the two different forms in Arabic correspond to only one form in English. However, such overgeneralizations on the part of the learner do not apply in the case of all English verbs with a double constuction. Consequently, transfer of L.1 syntactic and

semantic information is not the only cause. Lack of exposure to L.3 and even to L.2 and limited knowledge of certain properties of these two languages are also responsible factors. What can be inferred from this is that the learner is not aware of the possibility of **they sank the ship** just as he is not aware of **ils ont coulé le bateau**.

This lack of a straightforward correspondence or parallelism between the lexical relations of the three languages show that such relations are rather idiosyncratic and intralingual in character and trying to translate them may often lead, as Durrell (1988, p.237) puts it, to «overlap, asymmetry and a marked degree of interlingual incongruence.» Another interesting case of semantic transfer in translation which is found even among high standard university students of English is reflected in the use of the verb **climb**. Learners' performance has proved that only the core or primitive meaning of **climb**, i.e., upward motion, is mastered and the extended meaning which is far from the core or basic meaning of the verb is ignored such as **climb down**. The reason is that the idiomatic use of **climb** does not correspond to the use of **tasallaqa** (climb) in Arabic or **grimper** in French in which the feature of upward motion represents the core component and is never neutralized. This semantic restriction is therefore transferred to the English verb **climb** which shares the same distinctive feature of upward movement and on this basis, the combination of **climb + down** is regarded as an opposition rather than a possible collocation.

Along the same lines, some written and oral data in English from advanced students has revealed that some reflexive verbs in French influence the learner produced English verbal forms as in **she withdrew / retired herself into her room** for **elle se retira dans sa chambre**; **she approached herself near the window** for **elle s'approcha de la fenetre**; **she advanced herself** for **elle s'avança**; **he exiled himself for political reasons** for **il s'exila pour des raisons politiques** etc. These produced English strings prove transferability of pronominal agentive verbal forms from L.2 into L.3 in which the same verbal form conveys both pronominal agentivity and non-pronominal causativity.

Arabic would use different morphological patterns to express such notions. Another significant area of semantic interference which leads to lack of lexical correspondence across languages is that of what is generally referred to as 'false cognates' or false friends (les faux amis), i.e., words which have the same or very similar forms in two languages as in French and English, respectively F.L.1 and F.L.2 for Algerian students, e.g., **actuellement** and **actually**; **journal** and **journal**; **lecture** and **lecture**; **superviseur** and **supervisor** etc, to name but just a few. The semantic difference between the cognates of any two or more languages may vary from partial to complete depending on the words considered and the degree of relationship between the languages under question.

Suffice it to say that these false cognates may, at first sight, look helpful to the students who would use them as a translation problem solving strategy since these cognates make the vocabulary of the target language look familiar to them and therefore give them a psychological feeling of confidence. However, using them can lead not only to lack of lexical correspondence but even to something not possible in the target language, i.e., semantically non-permissible.

The cases mentioned so far are, by no means, the only ones. Many other aspects of interlingual lexical contrast have been left unmentioned in this short account such as

the polysemic nature of certain words, their connotative range as is shown in the distinction between what C. James (1980, p, 96) labels as 'cognitive' and 'connotative' synonymy and which he illustrates with the following pairs of lexemes « freedom / liberty » and « hide / conceal ». The words in each pair are not interpreted in the same way by native speakers of the language because of the differences in their connotative range, i.e., all the cultural associations that surround them. So, how can we talk about

100 per cent, i. e. , one-to-one correspondences across languages ?

All the aspects discussed here are significant contributing factors to language transfer in translation resulting therefore in inappropriateness, 'unenglishness' and unidiomatic English, i. e. , non-native like . No wonder that , as Marton (1977, p.. 37)

reports :

A frequent comment of a native speaker of English on a text, either written or oral, produced by an advanced learner is to the effect that it is all grammatical and there seems to be nothing wrong about it but altogether it does not quite sound like what any native speaker would say or write under the circumstances.

In conclusion, we hope that this paper has, at least, shed light on some of the underlying linguistic complexities of learning and translating skills which would, certainly, benefit from contrastive studies of lexical systems which are of extreme importance for teachers and learners, for bilingual and multilingual lexicographers and especially for those who work in the field of translation.

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