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TRANSLATABILITY AND NON-TRANSLATABILITY BETWEEN LANGUAGES
AND CULTURES --- A CASE FOR SEMANTIC MAPPING

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A CASE FOR SEMANTIC MAPPING

by

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1. INTRODUCING A COMMON PROBLEM

"Translations are like women -- homely when they are faithful and unfaithful when they are lovely." (Cited in Nida 1964:2)

Students of the School of Australian Linguistics are drawn from Australian Aboriginal and Island groups that differ culturally and linguistically from mainstream white or "European" societies. Many of their communities have bilingual education programs, while several others are seeking authorisation as well as financial and moral support to begin bilingual/bicultural education. Such students seek training in book production for vernacular (less commonly English) reading materials, and in translation and interpreting skills.

Experiences at SAL (as well as in the Philippines and Indonesia) have demonstrated the linguistic and semantic chasms that exist between one's native language and English. I will discuss some of the classic problems and demonstrate how semantic maps help both the teacher and the learner solve them.

Scholars generally agree that language and culture are intertwined and connected -- although they would not agree on the extent of the relationship (hence, the disputes over the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that problems across cultures beset language teachers and their students, interpreters, and translators in parallel ways. Translation from one language to another depends on getting people to comprehend the full impact of a message on their own terms (of time, place in the world, social experience, educational background, etc.) and to react to it in their own way. Any translation that succeeds in these two important goals (understanding and reaction) is "faithful" -- and here we can be reminded of Nida's humorous quote from pessimistic early Renaissance Italian writers (above). It is therefore imperative for a translator to make his work impossible to misunderstand and as natural in expression as possible in order to elicit the desired reaction. Contrary to the analogy, a translation should not be homely, even if it is a bit culturally strained (insofar as people might not talk about its subject matter within their own culture: building a bomb shelter, boiling water before drinking it, or applying for unemployment benefits, etc.).

But the problems that confront a translator or interpreter are closely related to those faced by a language teacher or his/her students and also a linguist analysing a language. Hence, what I have to say will properly have a large audience and a wide range of applications. My strategy will be unorthodox, and perhaps I should warn you about it. My first intention is to confuse you, not with the technical jargon of a linguist (which is a hurdle I hope to avoid), but with not so simple data from English and Austronesian or

Australian languages. These problems illustrate the gaps that exist between the languages and the cultures they represent. My second intention is to illustrate how a simple device, called semantic mapping, can be of use to sort out the differences and help the educator, linguist, and translator/interpreter get on with his job.

2. "BASIC" VOCABULARY

Linguists have been interested in basic vocabulary for a number of reasons over the last few decades. One was to compare languages and see how close they were (this science has been called "lexicostatistics" and is based on the premise that languages "decay" or lose vocabulary, becoming different from one another at a roughly equivalent rate, so that the amount of difference, when measured, would give an index of the separation of the languages being compared - if an index of time separation was computed, then this became the science of "glottochronology"). Another reason for looking at basic vocabulary had to do with applied linguistics or language teaching: just how many words (and explicitly which ones) did one have to know in order to communicate at different levels of effectiveness in a given language? This had further applications for language testing and course programming.

But, as scholars throughout the world began reacting to lists of basic vocabulary (regardless of its purpose), we became increasingly aware of how little there was that was not controversial. Consider some examples: "EYE" - while this generally refers to the visual organ in most languages it has extended meanings, idioms, or grammatical uses which cause problems. ENGLISH (eye of needle, eye of cyclone, private eye; noun as opposed to the verb, "to eye someone"). MALAY mata (eye; focus, centre, orifice, eye-like attribute; mata-hari "eye of day" = wart, corn, pockmark; mata-kayu "eye of wood" = knot; mata-panah "eye of arrow" = arrowpoint; etc.) YOLNGU-MATHA mangutji (eye; seed; bullet; boyfriend/girlfriend; pool; waterhole, well; mangutjimiriw "no-eyes" = has no sweetheart (or) clumsy, careless; many idioms also occur) TAGALOG mata (eye; core; source, center, matang- looks like, a kind or type of, e.g., matang-bayani "eyes of a hero" = having the false courage of a drunk, matang-manok "eyes like a chicken" = cannot see in the dark; mata ng pigsá "eye of a boil" = pus-core; matang tubig "eye of water" = spring that is source of a stream; etc.).

"GOOD" - languages split up the world of "goodness" into many factors, with senses such as 'fine, healthy, delicious, beautiful, accurate, true, kind' and attributes such as 'human' versus 'inanimate' / 'animate'. ENGLISH (good morning, good chap, good teacher, good food, good health, a good 20 miles). MALAY bagus (good of things), baik (good of persons), selamat (good of events: good morning, have a good trip, eat well, etc.). TAGALOG mabuti (good at, well = healthy, improve(d)), mabait (good = kindness of persons), magaling (good, skillful at doing, of use or benefit), maganda (good - as used in greetings, beautiful, lovely). YOLNGU-MATHA manymak (good in a very general sense, referring to such diverse connotations as healthy, delicious, lovely, kind, often without synonyms disambiguating the sense meant, e.g., manymak ngatha = delicious food/healthy food).

"TREE" - often is extended to refer to WOOD or FIRE. ENGLISH (tree as distinct from bush; family tree; transformational trees). MALAY kayu (timber, but used in compounds with names or parts of trees); pokok - pohon (stem or trunk of tree, but used to identify tree or plant species, pokok-kelapa = coconut-tree, pokok-pisang = banana-plant. YOLNGU-MATHA dharpa (tree, wood, stick), gurtha (deadwood, firewood, fire). Note that in Malay and in Yolngu-Matha one might draw a distinction between "living" (pokok and dharpa respectively) and "non-living" or "useful" (kayu and gurtha), with the use (as fire) becoming equally identified with the object (firewood) in Yolngu-Matha.

Reflect for a moment on the extent of meaning of other simple English words and their multiple translations in your language:

"FACE" (a pretty face, lost face, face the music)

"FAT" (noun versus adjective; is it a compliment or an insult to apply this word to a person?)

"MOUNTAIN" (does it differ from "hill"?; make a mountain out of a molehill)

"GRASS" (is there a specific word in your language? Slang: Marijuana)

"STONE" (is there a complementary range of forms such as PEBBLE and ROCK? Is there a verb usage? Slang: stoned = "high on drugs or alcohol")

If one runs through a full list of basic vocabulary (such as in Appendix 1), it suddenly becomes a very worrisome adventure. Some of the most common words of a language have such a wide range of meanings (denotations or what they can refer to, and connotations or what they have also come to mean with all the overtones possible) that they defy comparability and translation on a one to one basis with another language! However, this is because we are looking at the words in isolation. When they are used in context, we more often know exactly what they mean and what they should be in the other language.

3. LOANWORDS OR BORROWINGS

Sometimes the words that present the least difficulty for translation are loanwords which carry one, and only one, meaning in the borrowing language. For example, many Australian Aboriginal languages have borrowed English EYEGASSES, AIRPLANE, CHOCOLATE, COFFEE, WINDOW, SPOON, FORK, SCHOOL, etc. which do not present any particular problems. Sometimes, however, a word has undergone a change in meaning, so that one must be careful, e.g., English CREAM OF TARTAR has become Gupapuyngu GIMATATA, but now means "baking-powder". There are hundreds of loanwords in Malay from Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian that exhibit both of these phenomena: Persian BAZU 'shoulder' = Malay BAJU 'shoulder-garment' = jacket, shirt (shift of meaning), Sanskrit UPAVASA 'fast' = Malay PUASA 'fast (from food)' (same meaning), Arabic SHARBAT 'cooling drink' = Indonesian SERBAT 'ginger tea' (specialised meaning - compare English SHERBERT, also from the Arabic).

In language engineering words are sometimes borrowed wholesale from another language in the hopes that their vernacular equivalents (after adjustments to the sound system and spelling are made) will carry the meaning to fill a semantic vacuum. However, even here problems do arise. Firstly, the introduced word may sound like a native word which has a totally unrelated (or even rude) meaning - in which case even more adjustments are necessary.

In Yolngu-Matha English COLLEGE comes out as GULITJ, which itself is a word meaning 'true'; nevertheless speakers accept the homonym and freely use GULITJ in its new meaning, tending to substitute RUMBAL or YUWALK (previously existing synonyms) in the meaning 'true'. Secondly, the introduced word may be unknown to the majority of the community, and an education program is needed to implement it successfully.

4. EXPLAINING THE UNTRANSLATABLES

Areas of vocabulary that touch at the core of a given culture (such as kinship terms, ceremonies, religious beliefs, personal-, subsectional-, or moiety-names, specific artefacts, etc.) are often literally untranslatable. This does not mean that it is impossible to render them into another language; it means that the other language does not have an equivalent, such that an explanation (rather than a translation) is the only means of getting the meaning or concept across. For example, in languages that distinguish UNCLES on the father's side from those on the mother's side, it is necessary to render the English word by a long circumlocution, as in Yolngu-Matha: NGAPIPIMIRRINGU NGUNHI NHOKAL NGANDI MIRRINGUWAL GALI'NGUR GA BAPA MIRRINGUWAL GALI'NGUR WAWAMIRRINGU = mother's-brothers that are on your mother's side and father's brothers that are on your father's side. This is a rather strained concept for Yolngu-Matha speakers, but the only way to state exactly what English UNCLE means. (One obviously does not want a Yolngu-Matha speaker to "cry uncle"! (an American idiom expressing surrender)).

When I speak to northeast Arnhemland Aboriginals about my parents-in-law in the Philippines, I find it difficult, if not culturally grating, to refer to my father-in-law as my NGAPIPI (mother's brother), and my brothers-in-law as my WAWA (elder brothers), because my in-laws are in no way genetically related to me, and my real relations of this sort reside in America. Yet, for them this is the proper way to speak of in-laws. To add to this complexity, the term most often translated as BROTHER-IN-LAW is DHUWAY, which really refers to the children of your father's sisters (the male off-spring may marry your own sisters and, hence, are your potential brothers-in-law). I certainly cannot refer to my Philippine brothers-in-law by such a word within my culture nor within Aboriginal culture. The Yolngu-Matha word WAKU means variously: CHILD (of a mother; fathers call their children GATHU), UNCLE (husband of father's sister), NIECE/NEPHEW (sister's children), GRANDCHILD (father's sisters' children), and GREAT-GRANDPARENT (on mother's side); The cultural and semantic link in all these relations is well beyond the European mind, but deeply rooted in Yolngu culture as a unity.

Many Aboriginal languages lack a word for HUMAN-BEING because they refer to the specific race or origin of people they deal with: YOLNGU (black person), BALANDA (European), MARIKAPUY (American), DJANIMAN (Chinese), etc. An over-insistent translator might choose a twenty word paraphrase to express the idea of all humans, by specifying all known groups, but a more creative approach would be the use of a simple pronoun: ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS = NGILIMURRU BUKMAK WAWA MANDYDI (we are all related as brothers and sisters).

We need not cite an extensive list of such culturally complex phenomena to make this point. It is well known that colour-terminology differs from language to language, and some of the basic colours are often difficult to translate: GREEN, BLUE, BROWN, GREY, etc. Explanations and comparisons are possibly the only productive way out of the dilemma.

5. SEMANTIC MAPPING

"Linguistics seems very like a squid -- an organism propelling itself rapidly backward, leaving behind a trail of ink" (Cited in Peacock 1978:535)

Semantic mapping is not a new idea, and I lay no claim to having invented or applied these devices to education or translation. Some of the very first semantic maps I can remember seeing are found in Nida (1974:19f, 72f and 1975:16ff). Hjelmslev (1963:53f) also used similar devices to describe differences in semantic coverage between languages, as did Wallace and Atkins (1960) in sorting out the meaning of kinship terms, or Fraake (1961) in describing the Subanon diagnosis of diseases. Semantic maps or diagrams are direct applications of componential analysis (Goodenough 1956, Lounsbury 1956, Nida 1975), which itself has roots in considerably earlier works (Conklin 1955; Bloomfield 1933, Chapter 9; Sapir 1944; Boas 1911; Saussure circa 1906-11; and on into a lot of the semantic reconstruction done on Indo-European languages during the last century). What is surprising is the sparse use made of them in applied linguistics and language teaching (see, for example, Pit Corder 1973:100; elsewhere the book makes rather turgid reading for lack of them).

A semantic map is any graphic device that illustrates the range of meaning of a word or words either within one language or between two (or more) languages. Illustration 1 compares English COLLIE, DOG, and ANIMAL, and shows how one is included within the other. Illustration 2 compares Yolngu-Matha MANYMAK 'good' with English GOOD, HEALTHY, DELICIOUS and illustrates semantic overlapping. A pedagogical application is shown here by way of a problem for Yolngu-Matha speakers: they must isolate the area of overlap in English, where there would not be one in their own language.

Circles need not be the only device. Illustration 3 demonstrates a chart comparing some chain relationships between English and Spanish. (See Hjelmslev (1961:53-54) for two similar approaches.) When a language possesses many synonyms that differ in connotation (e.g., English NAUGHTY, BAD, WICKED, EVIL) this can be illustrated more clearly by such a method. Illustration 4 shows this for some items of Australian English on a scale from polite to rude. Such kind of mapping can also be extended to a two-dimensional scale, and makes an excellent testing device for one's "feel" of the language, as in Illustration 5.

Contrastive tables can also be made to highlight the differences between two languages being studied. Illustration 6 shows this for the pronouns of English and Yolngu-Matha. Again, this can be used as a means for teaching and testing.

Similarly, contrastive tables should be used to emphasize the difference between two cultures being studied. Illustration 7 shows the progression of a full day within Malay culture (wherein day begins at nightfall--hence the first word is that for 'night') and within English/European culture (wherein day begins at 'dawn').

It is not my intention here to offer a mini-course in semantics, for that would be far afield of both my aims and the time allotted for this presentation. I merely wish to emphasize to what extent semantic maps of one kind or another can assist the language teacher/learner, the translator/interpreter, and the linguist.

In a recent public lecture organized by the Planning Authority for the proposed University of the Northern Territory, M. A. K. Halliday stressed the point that there was an analogy between language teaching/learning and the structure of meaning. Words are not related to objects directly (in a "diadic" way), but rather through the intervention of meaning, which depends to a large degree on the cultural context of a given language (such a relationship is "triadic"). Similarly, the relationship of theory and practice is not a diadic one, but rather triadic, with the intervention of language teaching/learning. (See Illustration 8.) It is the language teacher who applies theoretical discoveries (be they grammatical trees or semantic maps) while going about the practice of getting pupils conversant with a foreign language.

Some of the problems that I have been discussing here can be illustrated (and, hence, taught) with semantic maps. The diversity between words of any two languages, particularly in the area of "basic vocabulary" can be exemplified by semantic maps that expose the differences, and do not sweep them under the rug for pupils to sort out as they become more fluent in the language. The similarities can equally be highlighted with maps that show the semantic domains overlapping, insofar as they can and do overlap. When words are not translatable because of huge gaps between the two cultures, semantic maps cease to have any function; recourse to the role of explanations, paraphrases, and interpretations becomes necessary.

However, because languages differ in every possible way (see Illustration 9) is no reason for despair. Since each language is used as a tool for communication within its own culture, one must keep one's sights on the overall meaning of and reaction to a particular piece of literature. Whereas some of the most striking differences between languages are at the two extremes (phonological output and basic vocabulary as embedded in culture), the most important similarity is the need to communicate. Solutions to problems encountered must be sought in the higher levels of linguistic analysis, such as discourse analysis, or in communicative competence theory. Overall tactics to achieve such goals must be considered carefully in order to realise a genuine transfer of communication. Semantic mapping is one such tactic at the level of words in isolation. Pupils must learn these as part of the whole process of gaining competence in the language. However, I should not emphasize these tactics out of their immediate context — they are simply a handy tool for coming to grips with the complexities of vocabulary. Problems at the level of the phrase, the sentence, and the entire discourse require different solutions, and I trust that this conference will address them too.

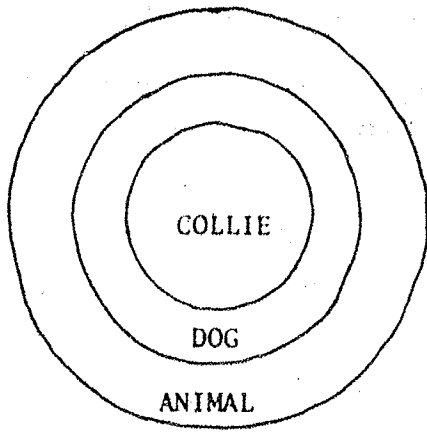


ILLUSTRATION 1. INCLUSION.

English: COLLIE - DOG - ANIMAL

[See Nida (1975:15f).]

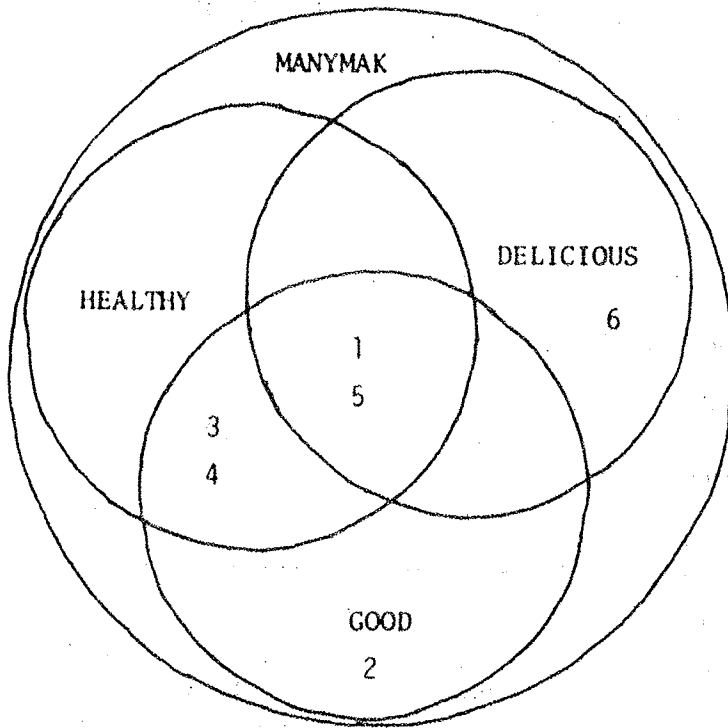


ILLUSTRATION 2. OVERLAPPING.

[See Nida (1975:16f).]

Yo!ngu-Matha: MANYMAK =

English: GOOD, HEALTHY, DELICIOUS

PROBLEM EXAMPLE:

1. HONEY
2. MONEY
3. IRON TABLETS
4. SUNSHINE
5. CLAMS
6. BOTTLE OF SHERRY

ILLUSTRATION 3. CHAIN RELATIONSHIPS. [See Nida (1974:21).]

English:	FAUCET/TAP	KEY - - KEY (solution)	CODE (Morse)--CODE (legal)
Spanish:	LLAVE - - - - -	CLAVE - - - - -	CÓDIGO

ILLUSTRATION 4. SCALE OF MEANING (POLITE TO RUDE). ["I FEEL (x)"]

Australian English:	ILL	HORRIBLE	BAD	LOUSY	CROOK	RATSHIT
	(polite)	-----				(rude)

ILLUSTRATION 5. SCALE OF MEANING (TWO-DIMENSIONAL).

["THE PERFORMANCE WAS (x)"]

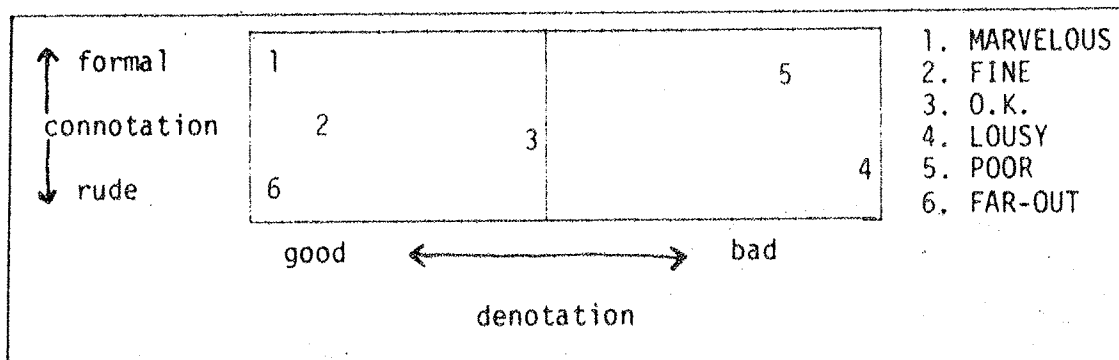


ILLUSTRATION 6. CONTRASTIVE TABLES.

[THE PRONOUNS OF YOLNGU-MATHA AND ENGLISH.]

	1	2	3+		1	2	3+
1	ngarra	linyu	napurru		I		
1+2	x	ngali	limurru		x	WE	
2	nhe	nhuma- manda	nhuma		YOU		
3	ngayi	manda	walala		HE/SHE	THEY	

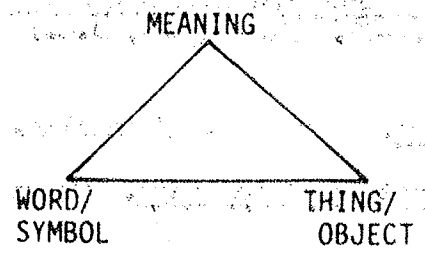
ILLUSTRATION 7. CONTRASTIVE TABLES.

[CULTURAL PROGRESSION OF A FULL DAY: MALAY AND ENGLISH.]

Malay:	MALAM		SUBOH	PAGI		PĒTANG
		TĒNGAH-MALAM			TĒNGAH-HARI	
English:	DAWN	MORNING	NOON		EVENING	NIGHT
			AFTERNOON			

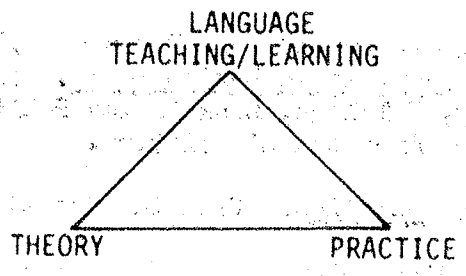
ILLUSTRATION 8. TRIADIC RELATIONSHIPS OF MEANING AS COMPARED TO THEORY

AND PRACTICE: [M. A. K. Halliday, 18 February 1982]



[NB: not OBJECT + + + WORD]

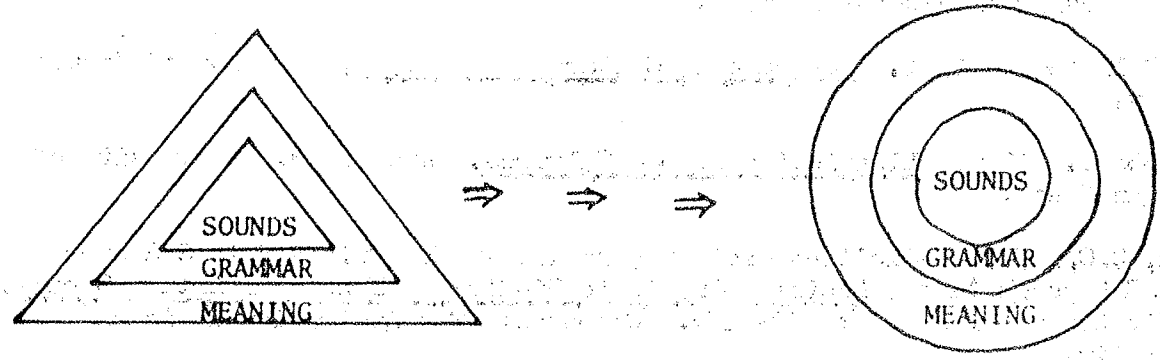
[This illustration originally from Ogden and Richards (1923).]



[NB: not THEORY + + + PRACTICE]

ILLUSTRATION 9. EXAMPLE OF MAPPING ONE LANGUAGE ONTO ANOTHER.

[Noreen Pym, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Darwin, 13 March 1981]



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