Lexical Anisomorphism: A Matter of Culture or Structure?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss lexical anisomorphism from the perspective offered by the Finnish-Swedish General Dictionary, co-edited in part by the present writer. Finnish and Swedish stand out among most languages pairs involved in bilingual dictionaries, insofar as they have a very different language structure (Finnish belonging to the Finno-Ugrian, Swedish to the Germanic group of the Indo-European family of languages). Yet, for mainly historical reasons the speakers of Finnish and Swedish to a remarkable degree share the same culture, world view and way of life. Against this background, the author proceeds to discuss whether the lexical gaps in the above dictionary are of a structure-or a culture-related character. The expression "culture-related" should here be taken to understand also cases where universal designata have found lexical expression only in the source language.

1. A theoretical discussion of lexical anisomorphism

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about our dissecting nature along lines laid down by our mother tongue is one of the fundamental building blocks of

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contrastive linguistics. As a corollary to this hypothesis comes Zgusta's well-known concept of lexical anisomorphism, which forms a basic tenet of bilingual lexicology and evidently, by way of extension, of the concrete tasks of bilingual lexicography as well. For, as was pointed out by Leemets: "Bilingual lexicography must by all means be based on the result of a comparative study of languages, being in its turn the main basis for the comparison of languages on [the] lexical level" (Leemets 1992:471).

On closer inspection, lexical anisomorphism, i.e. the lack of equivalents in a given language A for lexical units present in another language B, turns out as a Janus-faced concept with regard to its underlying causes. As Steiner noted: "Sometimes the [target-language] word is lacking because the concept or thing [it designs] is not important in the culture […]. But sometimes the concept, practice, custom or object is present in both cultures [i.e. of the source and target language] and yet the word is lacking in one of the languages" [Steiner 1989:289]. In the words of Lim: "one language may lexicalize a meaning that is not lexicalized in the other" [Lim 1996:883]. What is more, the concept or practice may even be a universal feature relating to the human condition and yet have no lexical unit attaching to it. To illustrate, reference may be made to the Finnish verb vierastaa or the German verb fremdelen, whose denotative meaning is essentially the same. Both refer to a type of behaviour common to all babies during a certain stage of their development, namely their shying away from strangers and reacting with apprehension to them. As is well known, there is no corresponding word-for-word equivalent for this behaviour in English (nor for that matter in my native Swedish).

In considering this subject, Steiner goes on to observe that the lack of such a linguistic item does no harm to culture, civilization or the economy