Shortcomings and the potential of specialised contrastive bilingual lexicography

Any bilingual dictionary is contrastive by nature, as it documents linguistic information between language pairs. However, the design and compilation of most bilingual dictionaries is often no more than mere lists of lexical or semantic equivalents. In internet forums, one can observe a huge interest in acquiring relevant knowledge about specific lexical pairs that are prone to comparison in a more comprehensive manner as they may pose lexical challenges. In particular, these are often easily confused pairs (e.g. false friends or paronyms) and new terms increasingly travelling between languages in news and social media.

With regard to English and German, the fundamental comparative principles upon which contrastive guides should be build are either absent, or specialised contrastive dictionaries simply do not exist, e.g. comprehensive descriptive resources for false friends, paronyms, protologisms or neologisms (see Gouws/Prinsloo/de Schryver 2004). As a result, users turn to electronic resources such as Google translate, blogs and language forums for help. For example, it is English words such as *muscular* which have two German translations options. These are two confusables *muskulär* and *muskulös* both of which exhibit a different semantic profile. German *sensitiv/sensibel* and their English formal counterparts *sensitive/sensible* are false friends. However, these terms are highly polysemous in both languages and have semantic features in common. Their full meaning spectrum is hardly captured in bilingual dictionaries to allow for a full comparison. Translating protologisms such as German *Doppelwumms* as well as more established new words is one of the most challenging problems. Currently, German neologisms such as *Klimakleber* are translated as *climate glue* (instead of *climate activist glueing him-/herself onto objects*) by online tools, simply causing mistakes and contextual distortion. Most challenges users face today are well-known (e.g. Rets 2016). New terms are often unregistered in dictionaries and it is often impossible to make appropriate choices between two or more (commonly misused) words between two languages (e.g. Benzehra 2007). These are all relevant problems to translators and language learners alike.

This paper calls for the implication of insights from contrastive lexicology into modern bilingual lexicography. To turn dictionaries into valuable resources and in order to create productive strategies in a learning environment, the practice of writing dictionaries requires a critical re-assessment. Furthermore, the full potential of electronic contrastive resources needs to be recognised and put into practice. After all, monolingual German lexicography has started to reflect on how users' needs can be accounted for in specific comparative linguistic situations. Some of these ideas can be comfortably extended to bilingual reference guides. On the one hand, this paper will deliver a critical account of some English-German/German-English dictionaries and touch on the shortcomings of contemporary bilingual lexicography. On the other hand, with the help of fictitious resources I will demonstrate contrastive structures as focal points of consultations which answer some of the more frequent language questions more reliably. Among others, I will explain how we need to build user-friendly dictionaries to allow for translating false friends or easily confusable words from the source language into its target language efficiently. With regard to neologisms, I will show how discursive descriptions and definitions that are more elaborate can support language learners to learn about necessary extra-linguistic knowledge. Overall, this could improve the role of specialised dictionaries in the teaching or translating process (cf. Miliç et al 2019).

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