The Problem of Expanding Semantic Fields and Untranslatability at Word-Level

Alongside the rapid scientific development numerous terms come into existence at the behest of new concepts that immediately demand the most adequate name possible. This demand is best satisfied within the language where the concept is born; but issues pile up during endeavours to transfer them to other languages that are characterized by a "non-hospitable" linguistic environment towards foreign word-envelopes. Here we deal either with borrowings or with what might be called "a second-hand" wording of concepts, i.e. the process that occurs when a word representing a new-born concept is transposed to another language.

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The acceptability of loan-words can be taken as a specific characteristic feature by which all the languages in use can be measured and defined as to their level of flexibility on account of the ability to "outsource" the work of wording "newly minted" concepts. The noted ability is crucial and it is possessed by all languages and especially by those that are "culturally secluded" due to some specific geographic position of the territory where the language is developed. The explanation for that is simple: the bigger the distance between the borrowing language and the "lending" one, the higher the indicator of uncertainty avoidance from the part of the receptor language, which avoids making the effort of wording foreign concepts out of the preoccupation that if a slightest shade of meaning is lost as a result of translation, then in certain contexts the word might not be able to represent the entire concept. Hence such languages that stand away with their culture from the source culture that lends the concept prefer adopting the concept together with its "ready-made" word-envelope, rather than devising new envelopes for the adopted concepts through translation.

In other cases, when new concepts are chosen to be worded with the help of own linguistic tools (morphemes), certain problems may arise. The most common problem for such cases is that those concepts which are brought into existence along with the scientific development and are worded with the help of roots already existing in languages are usually translated correspondingly through what might be called a "morpheme-for-morpheme translation" but is generally known as calque (e.g. *accountability* translated into Armenian as *հաշվետվականություն*) or by the method of characterization or description of the object's function (e.g. *computer* → *համակարգիչ*). In such cases shades of meaning are liable to be lost during the

translation from the source language into another one, due to the fact that even two roots of two different languages that seem to be in semantic correspondence with each other (*system* – *համակարգ*) may be perceived and used differently in their languages retaining their implications even after the root has been used for coining a new word for a newcomer concept. The latter circumstance may have an unfavourable impact on the comprehensive representation of the entire meaning of the concept. However, if the TL community accepts the neologism, the redundant meanings of the morphemes used for its formation are likely to be dismissed through continuous usage of the newly formed word.

The main advantage of such borrowings is that identical word-forms actually (as will be seen from the examples discussed below) appear as bridges necessary for foreign language cognition.

As opposed to this, the main disadvantage is that for some languages the word-envelope may be borrowed in spite of the existence of an original word which actually suggests the same meaning, and in such cases the word (originally existing in a concept-borrowing language) may be ousted by the newcomer form.

To think of a simple example, let us try to imagine what might have happened if the State Language Inspectorate of the former Soviet Armenian Republic had decided to generally use the Russian word *система* instead of the original Armenian word *համակարգ*, starting, for example to use this word-form at first in all texts concerning the sphere of education (*կրթական սիստեմ, կրթաթոշակների և աշխատավարձերի վճարման սիստեմ, դասավանդվող առարկաների մշակման սիստեմ*, etc.). We may guess that this Armenianised *սիստեմ* might have all the chances of rapidly penetrating into other spheres or, linguistically speaking, into other semantic fields as well, eventually ousting the original Armenian form of *համակարգ*.

The safest situation for borrowing a foreign word-form to designate a concept is when there appears to be no original counterpart in the receptor language (like in the case of *robot, chip, monitoring*) i.e. when the concept itself is a novelty. In this case there appears to be no danger of dismissing mother tongue lexical items. The possibility of dismissing TL lexical items in the process of borrowing also depends on the functional sphere the item belongs to. For example, those lexical items that are used in factive language are more likely to be replaced especially if the borrowing appears to be more concise, practical and expressive. In fictive styles, however, both loanwords and their counterparts in the TL may well coexist. The same distinction may be drawn between items belonging to the fundamental word-stock of a language and those of the extended word-stock where fundamental word-stocks are undoubtedly less "tolerant" of the coexistence of various forms for one and the same concept than the extended word-stock which allows as much space for variety as possible.

What we intend to discuss in this article is the avoidance of the concept-borrowing culture to create its own word to denominate the foreign-based concept, i.e. when the same word is taken and used after certain spelling and phonetic adjustments required by the borrowing language systems. This strategy of language evolution suggests a

mechanism of language enrichment and cross-cultural development firmly based on borrowings.

Japanese may be brought as a descriptive example for the mentioned case since that language has long been developing "on its own" due to the isolated location of Japan where sufficient contact with other cultures has started relatively recently. Over the last few decades a lot of words were borrowed by the Japanese from the English language. Japanese is remarkable in the sense of having a flexible linguistic mechanism based on the ability to adopt loanwords after a certain phonetic change which helps fit foreign words to the Japanese phonetic system.

As it has been partially mentioned above, borrowings may best be characterized as "bridges" between different linguo-cultural sign-systems linking back to loanword cognates, i.e. their basewords (in Daulton's terms (Daulton 1998: 1)) in the SL and providing common "opportunities" for easier language acquisition for both source culture and target culture representatives.

Besides, borrowing is a tool for dealing with untranslatability. At the structural level, the issue of untranslatability boils down to that of the interrelation between word-form and word meaning, while from a more practical point of view the phenomenon occurs as a result of hostile TL environments conditioned by mentality-related peculiarities. Due to the mechanisms of borrowing existing in a language, the problem of untranslatability may be positively downplayed at least at the structural level.

The best way to adopt an "alien" word is to develop linguistic mechanisms that help the newcomer assimilate with the vocabulary of the language where changes of the word's meaning, its form and function in speech can play a great role. It is due to such mechanisms that Japanese today has the so-called built-in lexicon. The many transformations that English words undergo when adapted into Japanese include: rephonalisation, shortening, speech part modification, and semantic modification. Simon-Maeda and Sheperd (1995) have provided a detailed explanation of these changes. In such works as "Loanwords – Pitfall for All Students", they also underscore the downsides of English loanwords in Japanese, particularly the danger that English loanwords pose for Japanese learners of English. According to these linguists, because of the transformations that basewords undergo, the level of resemblance of those high-frequency basewords to their loanword counterparts is questioned.

Since the above-mentioned issues are best exemplified on the material of Japanese, let us follow through and try to identify the effect that English loanword acquisition has on Japanese people and on their language.

As opposed to Simon-Maeda and Sheperd's views, Frank E. Daulton (Women's College, Niigata, Japan) asserts that there are definitely advantages to be drawn from the existence of loanwords in a language – referring again to the example of Japanese which, as stated already, has an extensive stock of English words that enjoy the same status as originally Japanese words (Daulton 1998: 1-2).

The existence of loanwords in a language can be analysed from different aspects – probably the most important of which being their impact on the adopter-language system as well as their influence on the specific group of language-users who "recruit" the

loanword into their actual lexicon.

While analysing the effects of the influx of foreign word-forms into a language it should first of all be mentioned that those forms become common links, i.e. they are understandable both for the source culture representative and the representative of the borrowing culture. Such linguists as Brown and Williams (1985), Kimura (1989), and Daulton (1998) studied the impacts of English word-stock in Japanese on Japanese students learning English. Thus, Brown and Williams found that students studying English as a foreign language understand the word better if it is a loanword cognate (e.g. Japanese *pen* borrowed from English and mainly used without any change in meaning may help Japanese students of English identify the meaning of the English word 'pen' better, since it is definitely the baseword for *pen* which is commonly used in Japanese; other examples of loanword cognates are 'teeburu' – table, 'orenji' – orange, etc).

Thus, in Japanese, as Daulton states, 734 high-frequency headword groups correlate to English loanword cognates, so that the loanword lexicon can allow Japanese learners of English to gain a large number of highly useful lexical items, particularly nouns, in a short period of time, saving harder ones for later (Daulton 1990: 40).

The above-mentioned examples show how a language may manipulate foreign word-envelopes for its own convenience and according to its borrowing strategies. However, there is a certain problem caused by the strategy of borrowing: ideally, borrowings help create a certain stylistic effect in speech and in fiction. When we assimilate foreign word-forms with our language material and the community starts perceiving them as common words, they actually become void of the potential to produce a stylistic effect of foreignness where necessary. So, from an aesthetic point of view, it might be better for the word սխստեմ to appear within the boundaries of fictional contexts and preserve its original spice, rather than become a dictionary entry and lose it.

Thus, generally we have second-hand wording of concepts through:
1. Borrowing foreign word-forms together with the concepts if the latter do not exist in the receptor language (e.g. *robot, smartphone* which have many different functions and an attempt to translate them descriptively into Armenian could result in confusion and misunderstanding). Here a slight phonetic shift is possible and acceptable.
2. Borrowing foreign word-forms because of practical reasons or a slight shift in meaning that it represents against an original counterpart in the receptor language which may eventually come out of usage (*pen* in Japanese; տերմին in Armenian, etc.).
3. Translating the word by means of own linguistic word-building mechanisms, i.e. morpheme-to-morpheme translation, which is the implementation of roots and suffixes corresponding to those used in the source culture for wording the new concept[1]
   (e.g. паровоз – շոգեքարշ; чертово колесо – սատանի անիվ; *term – եզր*).

However, none of the above-mentioned ways of taking new concepts from one

culture to another can be viewed as a high-quality translation, taken into account the fact that a high-quality translation, both practical and in line with the target language mentality, should at best represent a product of creative transposition.[2]

Before proceeding to the definition of untranslatability related to the above-mentioned hurdles of transferring concepts from one culture to another, let us refer to traditional definitions of untranslatability. Thus, untranslatability is a property of a text, or any utterance, in one language, for which no equivalent text or utterance can be found in another language.[3]

However, since the "human factor" is very critical in translation and consequently untranslatability as well, the special approach towards (seemingly) untranslatable concepts is formed by people in general and the TL community in particular.

Thus, hereby it is proposed that the concept of untranslatability should be imparted another meaning which is more at the emotional level, having the implication of an encouraged duty of being careful during translating concepts in either way. In other words, untranslatability is a linguistic situation 1) "where a linguistic unit can not be put into another form or style or language"[4] and 2) where it is preferable not to translate a linguistic unit into another/other language(s) but borrow the source culture linguistic unit, given certain objective reasons for which any "product" of such translation is liable to cause confusion or loss of meaning.

Of course, we might go deeper into the detail of delineating linguistic and cultural types of untranslatability. However, the mentioned issues were covered many times in various critical essays arguing theoretical and practical aspects of the phenomenon of untranslatability at the level of morphology (Walters 2002: 1).

Unlike the difficulties arising at the morphological level, untranslatability is not discussed at the level of concepts. Concepts, ideas and phenomena embedded in one culture can somehow be made understandable in another culture and in this way they are transferable, be it with or without morphological changes. In either case one of the translation procedures is implemented and if there is no change of form/envelope, we deal with a borrowing. Thus, the availability of flexible word-building mechanisms in a language facilitates the solution of untranslatability issues if those mechanisms operate in a "tolerant" TL environment.

Notes:

1. Note that the descriptive method of wording concepts may be considered as translation, since its results show the lowest level of creative transposition; examples of the application of the mentioned method are *telephone* – հեռախոս, *term* – զիտարան, *computer* – համակարգիչ.

2. Though borrowing is considered to be a procedure/method of translation (see, for example, Vinay, J. P. and Darbelnet, J. *Translation Procedures //* Translation Studies Reader / Ed. by S. Gabrielyan, Yerevan, 2002: 129) by certain linguists, an exacting approach would concentrate on a full shift of both word envelope and its pronunciation through the application of a morphemically and phonetically

different sign-system than that with which the concept is expressed in the ST in order to avoid the possibility of facing problems related to the TL mentality.
3.   The definition was found at http://en.wikipedia.org.
4.   The definition was found at http://www.thefreedictionary.com.

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Ընդլայնվող իմաստային դաշտերի և բառակազմական մակարդակում անթարգմանելիության խնդրի շուրջ

Հոդվածում արծարծվում է անթարգմանելիության խնդիրը բառա-կազմության մակարդակում՝ հաշվի առնելով բառարմատների և բառակազմական այլ տարրերի իմաստների ընդլայնումը լեզվի զարգացման

հետևանքով: Ճապոներենում անգլերենից փոխառված բառաշերտի, ինչպես նաև հայերենի և ռուսերենի համեմատական օրինակների միջոցով ցույց է տրվում, որ անթարգմանելիության խնդրի լուծումը սերտորեն առնչվում է այն լեզվական մեխանիզմների առկայությանը, որոնք թույլ են տալիս յուրացնել օտարամուտ բառերը՝ ապավինելով այն սկզբնական կաղապարին, որը հասկացության ստեղծման պահին ընտրվել է վերջինիս լիարժեք և անթերի արտահայտման համար: Քննարկվում են նաև հասկացության բառայնացման ձևերը երկրորդ՝ ոչ սկզբնաղբյուր լեզվում: