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Lexical Gaps of Kinship in the Yakut Heroic Epic Olonkho: Problems of Translation

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The problem of translating culturally related phenomena necessitates the description of their origins and development. To this end one should refer to such notions as linguistic worldview and linguistic universals because they play a vital role in the development of culture-specific vocabulary, including lexical gaps in a given language.

Keywords: lexical gaps, Yakut heroic epic Olonkho, linguistic worldview, linguistic universals, culture-specific vocabulary, kinship.

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1. Introduction

The problem of translating culturally related phenomena necessitates the description of their origins and development. To this end one should refer to such notions as *linguistic worldview* and *linguistic universals* because they play a vital role in the development of culture-specific vocabulary, including lexical gaps in a given language.

In recent decades, national and specific (i.e. distinct) elements in the lexical systems of languages and cultures have been described by foreign and domestic researchers from different points of view with the help of various terms: gap (J.P. Vinay, J. Darbelnet, K. Hale), lacuna (V.L. Muraviev), anti-words, gaps, lacunas

or blind-spots on the semantic map of the language (Yu.S. Stepanov), the examples of nontransferable character (G.V. Chernov), words with no equivalents, lexical zero, zero lexeme (I.A. Sternin), culture-specific or background vocabulary (L.S. Barkhudarov, E.M. Vereshchagin, V.G. Kostomarov), the unclarity in the texts of one language, realized by the speakers of this language at a farther stage of its development [Budagov], random holes in patterns [Scherba], random lacunas (L.S. Barkhudarov), burrs that “ride up” during intercultural communication [G. Gachev]. Canadian linguists J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet introduced the scientific term of *lacuna* and explained it as follows: “it is a gap

where there is no direct equivalent in the target language” [cited by Bykova].

Regardless of types, lexical gaps can be characterized by the obscurity, exoticism and foreignism of lexical items and their associated concepts found in the source language (L1) that do not have immediate equivalents for the recipient of a target language (L2).

A native system of concepts – a basis for a linguistic worldview – involves either concepts having nominative forms of expression (i.e. linguistically [lexically] expressible) or the ones not expressed by a native language (i.e. linguistically inexpressible) (Popova, 1998, 21). That being said, concepts unexpressed lexically actively participate quite as much as lexicalized concepts in the collective cognition of an ethnic group. Moreover, words without analogues in comparable languages – i.e. lexical gaps – are cognitively inaccessible phenomena to an L1 speaker. In other words they are not consciously noticeable and therefore unrecognizable in the case of monolingual communication. Therefore, to uncover lexical gaps in L1, a “mirror language”, L2, is needed and vice versa. This relationship can be symbolically represented as:

GAP {L1 ⇌ L2} → Lexical unit L1 / L2*

Furthermore, the description of a lexical gap in L1 is L-2 dependent – i.e. its properties are directly dependent on the properties of the mirror language. Also, as the double arrows in the above formula indicate, the relation between L1 and L2 is bidirectional, and the question of which language is L1 or L2 depends on the language under investigation. For example, the Yakut → English relationship uncovers lexical gaps in Yakut language on the basis of English, and the Yakut ← English relationship uncovers lexical gaps in the English language on the basis of the Yakut language. In this paper several lexical gaps

of the Yakut → English relationship type are presented and analyzed.

2. Analysis

Songs 5 and 6 of the Yakut heroic epic Olonkho “Nurgun Botur the Swift” by the prominent Yakut writer Platon Oyunskiy (Oyunskiy et al., 1960) were used as experimental material. For English data the translated, but as yet unpublished versions of the texts were used. The English translation (Oyunskiy et al., 2011) was made at the Department of Translation of the M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University.

Many Yakut turcologists feel suspicious of the quality of the English translation of Yakut because they believe that it is impossible to convey all the richness and depth of the Yakut language into another language, especially an unrelated one. In response to this view, it is appropriate to cite the words of the great Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson: “All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan words and loan translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions” [R. Jakobson, 140].

The main reason for the choice of the experimental material was the fact that the Yakut language as used in Olonkho is artistically rich and colourful. As such, it was assumed that it would contain a large number of lexical gaps, as it would be highly unlikely that it would easily be transformed into an equivalent form in the English language.

The comparison of semantically similar lexical units from two different language systems helps to reveal if they are directly mutually translatable. If not, then it is reasonable to hypothesize a lexical gap as the source of the difference. In comparison with the Yakut

language the following lexical gaps in English were identified.

- мэний – быстро бежать, мчаться, нестись – to run quickly;
- сэгэт – приоткрывать – to open slightly;
- бэрдимсий – кичиться, бахвалиться, зазнаваться, задаваться – to pretend to be better than you actually are;
- харалдык – проталина – thawed patch;
- эдьий – старшая сестра – elder sister.

Russian scholars provide many detailed classifications of linguistic gaps (I.Yu. Markovina, Yu.A. Sorokin, et al.). Lexical gaps discovered in Olonkho were classified using the part-of-speech principle – classifying individual instances of lexical gaps on the basis of their membership to a particular part-of-speech. Here, the focus was on noun-gaps and verb-gaps.

Like any natural language, both the Yakut and English language exhibit both universal and specific ways of organizing and labeling the world. Language-specific meanings represent a system of concepts reflective of a cultural group's collective cognition that obligatorily "imposes" itself on its speakers. Perception and interpretation of reality, peculiar to some language, is partly universal and partly nationally specific. Therefore, at the cognitive level there is a close link between a language and its speakers' thinking, such that the structure of a language and its semantic system correspondingly interact with the structure of thinking and the mind's perceptual system.

Noun-gaps found in Olonkho can be divided into five subgroups: 1) nouns connected with the main practice of the Sakha people – i.e. cattle-breeding; 2) nouns describing social and kin relations; 3) nouns describing nature, environment and life; 4) nouns describing parts of the body; and 5) nouns describing time and space.

In this paper the second subgroup of noun-gaps was analyzed. This subgroup, kinship noun-gaps, has both culture-free (i.e. universal) and culture-specific elements. Therefore, there should be both overlaps and divergences in lexical units from the Yakut and English languages that belong to this subcategory of lexical gaps. That is, certain kinds of hierarchy of social and kin relations should be the same, and others, for various reasons – different. In the latter case certain lexical items of one language would be impossible to directly translate into another. Figure 1 presents 10 lexical units compared across three languages – Yakut, Russian and English. Note there are no words "mother" and "father" because they were not found in the experimental material. These words, however, are not lexical gaps as there are direct equivalents between the two languages under the study.

Figure 1 shows that the comparison of the Yakut and English lexical units denoting kinship uncovers lexical gaps in describing elder and younger relatives, father's and mother's relatives in the English language. According to the Dictionary of the Yakut language by Edward K. Pekarskyi, the word "аҕас" means "1) elder sister; аҕаһым – my elder sister; 2) father's elder female relative; таай аҕас – mother's elder female relative".

Clearly "аҕас" does not have a direct English equivalent. Therefore, it must be translated in English either as a set phrase "elder sister" or as an analogue "aunt", which means "the sister of your mother or father, or the wife of your uncle", depending on a situation and context. The word in Yakut and its near equivalent expression in English have a common semantic component "a relative of one of the parents", and on the surface, at least, it makes them look very similar. But *аҕас* has an additional semantic component – a seme denoting "generation (e.g. elder)" which implies

| | Yakut | Russian | English |
|----|----------|---|--|
| 1 | аҕас | 1) старшая сестра; аҕаһым (=моя старшая сестра); 2) старшая родственница со стороны отца; таай аҕас (=старшая родственница со стороны матери). | 1) elder sister, my elder sister; 2) aunt – elder female relative (father’s line); aunt – elder female relative (mother’s line); |
| 2 | балыс | 1. младший (по возрасту); меньший; 2. младшая сестра. | 1) a younger relative; 2) a younger sister |
| 3 | оҕонньор | 1) старик, старец; 2) в притяж. ф. муж; оҕонньорум (=мой муж); 3) ирон. разг. старик (об основательном, спокойном, а также зрелом не по годам человеке); 4) почтенный (почтительное обращение к старшему по возрасту); убайым оҕонньор, хаһан кэлэбин? (=наш почтенный старший брат, когда ещё приедешь?) | 1) old man; 2) in the possessive form – husband: my husband; 3) ironically, familiar – serious, old person beyond years; 4) distinguished, respectable man (form of address): “our respectable brother, when are you going to come?” |
| 4 | эдьий | 1) старшая сестра (родная); 2) старшая родственница (по линии отца или матери); тётка; 3) тётя, тётенька (обращение к женщине средних лет); | 1) elder sister (one’s own); 2) aunt-elder female relative (both father’s and mother’s lines); 3) form of address to the middle-aged woman |
| 5 | эмээхин | 1) старуха, старая женщина; 2) разг. жена, супруга. | 1) old woman; 2) informal. – wife, spouse |
| 6 | сангас | жена старшего родственника (по отношению к лицам обоего пола). | sister-in-law – wife of an elder relative (this term is used by both females and males) |
| 7 | абаҕа | дядя (старший брат отца) | uncle – elder brother of father |
| 8 | таай | дядя (по материнской линии безотносительно к полу говорящего) | uncle – brother of mother (this term is used by both females and males) |
| 9 | убай | 1) старший родной брат; 2) старший родственник по линии отца (моложе отца); 3) дядя, дядюшка (обращение к старшему). | 1) elder brother (one’s own); 2) uncle – elder relative (father’s line); 3) uncle (form of address) |
| 10 | ини | 1) младший родной брат; 2) младший родственник по линии отца (по отношению к сыновьям последнего). | younger brother (one’s own); 2) uncle – younger relative (father’s line) towards father’s sons |

Figure 1

a lineal form of kinship, while the English word *aunt* does not have it.

The same occurs with the translation of other nouns. For example: “эдьий” – 1) elder sister (one’s own); 2) elder female relative (among mother’s or father’s relatives); 3) aunt (address to a middle-aged woman); “убай” – 1) one’s elder brother; 2) father’s elder male relative (younger than father); 3) uncle (address to an elder person); “таай” – uncle (mother’s relative without reference to the speaker’s sex);

“абаҕа” – uncle (father’s elder brother); “ини” – 1) one’s younger brother; 2) father’s younger male relative (in relation to the sons of the last-mentioned), etc.

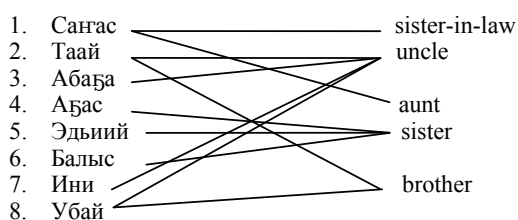
The above comparison of the Yakut and English terms referring to “kinship” shows that the two languages are rather different. In the Yakut language there are different words to describe father’s relatives, mother’s relatives, elder relatives and younger ones, but not in English.

(1)

| | |
|---|---|
| Көхсүттэн тэһииннээх Күн-айыы оҕолоро, Арҕаһыттан тэһииннээх Ахтар айыы кыргытара, Аҕастарым- эдьийдэрим! (Oyunskeyi, 1960, p. 125) | The children of Kun- Aiyy With the reins on your backs, The daughters of Akhtar- Aiyy With the reins on your napes, My aunts and sisters! |
|---|---|

Comparing the meanings of the Yakut kinship words with the English kinship noun-gaps (i.e. translations) – e.g. аҕас (elder sister, elder father’s female relative) vs. aunt (the sister of your mother or father, or the wife of your uncle); эдьий (one’s own elder sister, elder female relative, aunt, mistress) vs. sister (a daughter of your parents; a female nurse in charge of a hospital; a nun; an affiliate organization; woman friend; woman loyalty is felt to) – prompts one to conclude that the Yakut and the English semantic components differ in terms of their differential semes. For example, the English term *sister* does not have the seme denoting “elder” and moreover this word has a number of other meanings not found in the Yakut language (e.g. nurse, nun...).

Much the same can be said of the other kinship noun-gaps. The scheme below shows the semantic relations of the kinship terms from both languages. Each term in the Yakut language has more than one corresponding terms in the English language. However, some terms overlap more frequently, e.g. таай, абаҕа, убай=uncle and аҕас, эдьий, балыс=sister:



Another important aspect to be considered when comparing L1 and L2 words is the

relative degree of deviation of their semantic field components. For example, the Yakut term *санҕас* can be translated into English as *sister-in-law* because the general components of these terms are similar. However, their specific semantic components are different. The Yakut term *санҕас* means *wife of an elder relative* and its specific semantic component denotes the idea of “generation” or “age” and depending on a context it may be translated as *aunt*, if refers to a wife of any elder relative. In comparison, while the English term *sister-in-law* has a broader meaning, “sister of your husband / wife” or “the wife of your brother”, its differential semantic component is “sister”. While it is true that the translation of *санҕас* with *sister-in-law* roughly conveys the proper meaning of the Yakut term (i.e. wife of an elder relative towards both male and female relatives), it also seems to be the case that some differential semantic components of the Yakut words may be lost in translation.

It is important to note that this is not a question of polysemy. The aforementioned examples overlap in their general components of meaning, but the spectrum of their differential semantic components is wider for the Yakut terms than for their English counterparts. The meaning of a word is not its most elementary semantic unit; there are other smaller meanings, semes that produce meanings not by an elementary mechanic addition, but by certain hierarchies. A speech-act presupposes the actualization of the relevant meanings of lexical units; however, it is also the case that while certain semes or components are expressed, others not relevant to the communicative situation may be neutralized (i.e. lose their meaningfulness).

The next fragment contains the example of a lexical gap “sibling” meaning “brother” or “sister”.

(2)

| | |
|---|---|
| Убайдаах балыстыы Куйахалара күүрэн Кутана быһытыһан Олоруохтара баара дуо... Oyunskiy, 1960, p. 170) | How could two siblings Sit horror-struck With their hair stood on end... |
|---|---|

This example illustrates the regularity inherent in the use of semantic specification and generalization. Here, in contrast to the hierarchical semantic structure of *убай* (=1: elder brother (one's own); 2: uncle – elder relative (father's line); 3: uncle (form of address), *балыс* (=sibling – brother / sister) does not have a distinct seme denoting “gender” and therefore has a more generalized, gender-neutral meaning. From a communicative perspective, its semantic function is to express a global, inclusive notion of kinship; in this example a more gender-specific meaning of “sibling” is not required by the communicative context.

3. Discussion

Many factors come into play when translating lexical gaps: linguistic, cultural, psychological, contextual, stylistic as well as the need to translate not only the objective meaning(s) of a lexical unit, but also its connotative signification that reflects its use within a particular socio-cultural environment.

The comparative analysis between the Yakut kinship terms drawn from songs 5 and 6 of the Yakut epic Olonkho with their lexical near-equivalents from the English language showed that these terms differ with respect to the semantic structure of their constituting semantic element (i.e. semes). Based on the results of the analysis, it is safe to say that the Yakut kinship terms have a broader range of differential semes and by extension a more hierarchically organized semantic structure than the terms of kinship in the English language. This implies that in order

to convey the same notion expressed in the Yakut language by a single term, a speaker of English must resort to employing different lexical strategies, such as circumlocution, neologisms and/or adoption of loanwords. Thus, we identified ten lexical gaps in the English language corresponding to ten Yakut kinship terms based on Olonkho.

English lexical gaps have a direct impact on attempts to translate Olonkho into the English language. Like the English speaker, the translator must also put to use various techniques in order to ensure an accurate transmission of information without considerable loss of meaning, especially deep, connotative meaning, from the original text. There are several strategies that a translator can employ, such as hyperonymic transformation (generalization), hyponymic transformation (specification), explanation, analogue, transliteration, transcription and loan translation. The choice of the strategy depends on the purpose and the conditions of a translation task. For example, if one of the requirements is economy and efficiency of translation, then transliteration (e.g. writing *эдьий* as *edjei*) may be a better choice to explanation which is usually more sizable in terms of content and labour.

4. Conclusion

Lexical gaps is the notion for which there is a word in L1, but not in L2 – poses an important and challenging problem for the translator, especially one concerned with the translation of classical or folklore texts such the Yakut epic Olonkho. It is imperative that translators are aware and are able to competently use some or all of the techniques devised for dealing with lexical gaps. Such techniques can help preserve the full spectrum of meaning of the original text and ensure the more genuine transmission of culturally vital information from one culture to another.

- * The formula can be read in the following way: given two languages L1 and L2, a lexical gap (GAP) of L1 can be obtained as a lexical unit L1, if L2 is used as a comparison language; conversely, a lexical gap (GAP) of L2 can be obtained as a lexical unit L2, if L1 is used a comparison language.

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Лексические лакуны родства в якутском героическом эпосе Олонхо: проблемы перевода

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Проблема перевода культурно связанных явлений требует описания их происхождения и развития. Для этого следует обратиться к таким понятиям, как языковые мировоззрения и языковые универсалии, потому что они играют жизненно важную роль в развитии культурно-специфической лексики, в том числе лексических лакун в данном языке.

Ключевые слова: лексические лакуны, якутский героический эпос Олонхо, языковое мировоззрение, языковые универсалии, культурно-специфическая лексика, родство.

Работа выполнена в рамках исследований, финансируемых Красноярским краевым фондом поддержки научной и научно-технической деятельности, а также в рамках тематического плана СФУ по заданию Министерства образования и науки Российской Федерации.
