

## **Lexicography and Translation: The Case of Bilingual Arabic-English Dictionaries**

Mohamed H. Heliel  
*Kuwait University*

The paper aims at pinpointing the defects in three unabridged Arabic-English dictionaries: *Modern Written Arabic (MWA)* (1961), *al-Mawrid* (1988) and the latest one *al-Mughni* (1999). My hope is to remedy certain defects and help produce a dictionary that may assist the Arabic-English translator. It is true that the three dictionaries do not specifically set out the targeted readers or the functions they serve. *MWA* states that the targeted readers are not only 'English and American users but also orientalist throughout the world who are more at home with English than with German'. *Al-Mawrid* is totally silent about the targeted reader and the purpose it serves. *Al-Mughni* "aims to help in teaching Arabic through English, to help the reader through equivalents understand the Arabic language" (the preface). Though none of the compilers thinks of "translator" as a category of users, the three dictionaries, in the absence of an Arabic-English dictionary specially tailored for translators, are the only tools available for Arabic-English translators, whether native or non-native speakers. To improve the quality of these dictionaries and to benefit from the long and rich experience of their compilers, we shall illustrate different types of translation problems encountered by Arab university students as well as by translators and how these dictionaries could be used to solve them. We shall also provide suggestions for the improvement of certain lexicographic features directly related to translation.

### **1. Data Collection**

Ideally speaking, entries in an Arabic-English translation dictionary should be carefully chosen so as to provide an accurate and idiomatic picture of English and Arabic as they are used today. Roberts' survey (1994:52) showed that "translators need a bilingual dictionary that covers

a large number of words.” This proved to be one of the features they most liked about dictionaries they frequently used and one of the features which they think is in dire need of revision. Indeed, this is one of the essential criteria that make up for quality in dictionaries, i.e. comprehensiveness and up-to-date coverage.

In our translation courses and despite consultation of the three dictionaries cited, learners failed to find a high percentage of the words which they had tried to consult. The following is a sampling of such words:

عقد عمل جماعي - غناء جماع - سحب الثقة - مقابر جماعية -  
اعتقالات جماعية - الطبقات المطحونة - ترسيم الحدود - تهميش القضية  
- تلاوين الفكر - نهائيات الكأس - توصيف المادة الدراسية - تجذير الاتجاه  
العربي - تبلور التفكير الديني - التمزق النفسي - تفرغ علمي - فعاليات  
المؤتمر - كتابات أدبية - أهل اللغة - ابن اللغة - مدخل ( قرآن وحاسب  
آلي ) - إصدارت - منفذ للبيع - وقائع المؤتمر - نقلة نوعية - حيازة  
(العربية) - مسيرة راجلة - العيادة التخصصية - زمرة (عرفات) - الطغمة  
العسكرية - التراب (اللبناني) - رفاق السلاح .

It has to be noted in this context that the above list includes five types of words:

1. familiar words which have gained new meaning, e.g. تجذير
2. words which are morphologically and semantically new, e.g.  
فعاليات المؤتمر - نهائيات الكأس - تلاوين الفكر
3. words which have gained a figurative sense, e.g.  
تمزق نفسي - تهميش القضية - نقلة نوعية - منفذ للبيع - الطبقات المطحونة
4. words which constitute part of new combinations, e.g.  
رفيق السلاح - ابن اللغة - تفرغ علمي - مقابر جماعية - إجازة علمية
5. words which have gained a new connotative sense, e.g.  
الطغمة العسكرية - زمرة (عرفات) - التراب اللبناني

Sweeping modifications in Arabic vocabulary are ignored, even in the Arabic-Arabic dictionary. Two of the three bilingual dictionaries: *al-Mawrid* and *MWA*, have tried hard to improve on the monolingual Arabic dictionary with their collection of material and in their lexicographical treatment of entries but they have not succeeded in taking due cognizance of, were that possible, the basic changes in the growth of both languages, i.e. the source language ( SL) and the target language ( TL). It is much worse when a dictionary (see *al-Mughni*) gives linguistic museum pieces,

rather than furnishing the contemporary Arabic entries and English equivalents with their dynamic associations: e.g.

- نسخة التكرمة - كلثم - استكلب - كنعن - كفهورة - أعنك - مكنفش -  
تكتب - مقنعب - فالية الأفاعي - قحّم.

The same applies to the English equivalents: e.g.

- "He vindicated our good opinion of him" - كان عند حسن ظننا به  
- "effete man" - رجل عقيم  
- "beguile myself with hopes" - أعلّل النفس بالآمال

The vocabulary of modern Arabic is far from standardized (see W. Kamel, 2000). Its vocabulary and phraseology are currently adapting themselves to new and ever-changing circumstances, but documentation of Arabic as a living language is lagging behind whether in monolingual or bilingual dictionaries. Thus special attention should be given to neologisms especially in specialized fields such as economics, politics and mass media. The following are examples of words that were to be found and the specialized fields to which they actually belong:

- Linguistics	- تقديم وتأخير /
- Sports	/ ضربات الترجيح -
- Psychology	/ التمزق النفس -
- Music, electricity	/ قفلة -
- Banks	/ ربحية -
- Police	/ صحيفة جنائية / حيازة مخدرات -

Thus, one of the major reasons for dissatisfaction with the three dictionaries is **their neglect of extensive and varied uses of modern Arabic vocabulary.**

## 2. Inadequate Semantic Information

For the purpose of L1-L2 translation dictionary extensive semantic information is needed in two areas:

1. **Polysemy**: where different senses of the headword should be given and discriminated between.

2. **Synonymy**: where translation synonymous equivalents should be distinguished.

In *MWA* it is quite difficult to find one's way through the entries, which are cluttered, and the senses which are decontextualized and not discriminated, except through the use of semicolons, and the inadequate use of **s.o.** (abbreviation of someone) or **s.th.** (abbreviation of something) for the subject and object of the verb, e.g. ضَرَبَ ( cf. pp. 538-540) .

In *al-Mawrid*, there is an attempt at distinguishing senses through glosses and use of phrases (e.g. p.710). Though it is more user-friendly than *MWA*, still there is no attempt at distinguishing senses through typographical or non-typographical markers and the translator will surely lose his way in the over-extended list of phrases provided. Semantic relatedness is missing. The glosses e.g.

ضرب : تنقل ، سافر ، phrases with collocates, verbs with or without prepositions, and idioms are all gathered in one basket without any noticeable order.

*Al-Mughni* is in not at all helpful. It gives a long list of phrases and idioms without any distinction or any attempt to show semantic relatedness between the different senses that revolve around the root (e.g. ضَرَبَ p. 346).

It would be revealing to compare the three Arabic-English dictionaries with *Larousse Chambers (LC)* e.g., **stream** (p.429) where a gloss is given in the SL between square brackets, with an example of fixed phrases and usages following. Collocates are given and numbers are used to indicate sense divisions. In our bilingual dictionaries better treatment of source language, i.e. Arabic polysemy is needed.

It is essential that bilingual lexicographers make a demarcation not only between source language polysemes but also between target language synonyms (see Roberts 1999). In *al-Mawrid*, near-absolute synonyms are listed together. There is no indication of meaning or contextual relationships e.g.,

- *pride, boast (ing), boastfulness, brag (ging), vainglory; ostentation,*

*show off, pomposity* تفاخر.

According to Gouws (1996:16), the main objective of the bilingual dictionary should not only be “the establishment of a relation of semantic equivalence between source and target language. Instead, a lexicographer has to endeavor to reach communicative equivalence”. The following are examples of unsatisfactory lexicographic treatment :

- *Al-Mawrid* : *audience, attendance, spectators, viewers, onlookers, watchers, observers* ، متفرجون : نظارة ،

- *MWA* : *fight, struggle, strife, contest, controversy; dispute; death struggle, agony of death.*

Compare (*LC*,1999) where a numerical order gives rapid access to the explanation (see also *Collins Robert (CR)*, 1995; *Collins Klett (CK)*, 1983) of each sense, which in turn gives access to the translation equivalent.

There is always partial overlapping of meaning between equivalents which should be made clear to the dictionary user. Meaning is not something ‘static’ and ‘the size of overlapping area has to be determined in each individual case’ (Kusssmaul 1995:93). In bilingual dictionaries, such as *LC*, *CK* and *CR* distinction is made through glosses, context word or illustrative uses, e.g. :

(*LC*) *chunk* {transcription} *n. [of meat, wood] gros moreceau m; [of budget, time] grande partie f.*

(*CK*) .....{transcription} *n grosses Stuck; (of meat) Batzen m; (of stone) Braoken m .*

Thus it is essential for the bilingual Arabic-English dictionary to give all possible contextual guidance in the TL synonym paradigm. Furthermore, labels should be used to indicate stylistic and register differences. *Al-Mawrid*, for example, does not distinguish between *formality* and *informality* in the host of equivalents provided for words, e.g. زهو

*pride, haughtiness, arrogance, vainglory, vanity, conceit, self-conceit, self-esteem, self-importance, show-off, flaunt (ing)*

Notice in this context that **vainglory** is of dated or formal derogatory usage and **show-off** is informal.

## 1. User-Friendliness

Finding information easily and speedily is one of the essential requirements especially in a translation dictionary involving a root-based language such as Arabic.

*MWA* adopts a root-oriented approach, but the way its entries are arranged makes it difficult to use, especially for native speakers of Arabic because of the following considerations : (1) The verb stem forms follow the tradition of Western Orientalists and are indicated by Roman numerals. Arab users are unaccustomed to this designation, which should be coupled with the corresponding form in Arabic. (cf. Madina 1973). (2) Nominal forms follow stem forms, and are arranged according to their length, verbal nouns of the stems and all active and passive participle follow at the end.

One has to work one's way through a whole list of derivatives to find what one is aiming at. Gathering all stem forms in one entry and the derivatives of the forms separately in independent sub-entries shatters the semantic relatedness of the stems and the derivatives, e.g. خفاق in the entry خفق . It would be easier for the translator if the derivative followed the stem form to which it is semantically related, an approach successfully adopted by *al-Sabil*, where derivatives are nested with their stem forms.

Also Madina (1973 : ix) follows the same arrangement. In the preface of his dictionary, which is hard to get by, he states. "Instead of the widespread practice of grouping all verbal forms first, followed by nominal forms and then the participles, the derivatives of each form (i-x) are here listed directly under the form," e.g. بَطُوْ

*Al-Mughni*, like the *MWA*, is root-oriented. No typographical methods are used to indicate the borders of an entry or the demarcation line between a stem and a derivative. However, derivatives follow stem forms, same as in *MWA* e.g., خفق

Al-Mawrid is alphabetically oriented. Though alphabetical arrangement is sometimes recommended in a root-based language like Arabic, it has its disadvantages on both the semantic level and the level of user-friendliness:

(1) In the entry **حكم** where the derivatives are :

- حكم / حكمي / حكم / حكمي / حكمة / حكيم / حكومه / حكومي  
 - محكمة / تحكيم / محاكمة / إحكام / تحكم / استحكام / حاكم /  
 - حاكمية / محكوم / محكم / مُحكم / مُحكم / مستحكم

one has to move from letter [ح] to letters [م ، ت ، أ] which are far apart, a job which is time-consuming. Besides, words such as:

- محكوم / محكم / محكم / مستحكم

are, in varying degrees, semantically related. The core meaning of the stem is : **منع** "preventing injustice", ( see Ibn Faris). All derivatives revolve around judging, ruling, making firm which should be gathered together in one block.

(2) The relatedness of the figurative sense to the literal sense is lost; e.g. **الطبقات المطحونة** , for instance, will be **مطحون** . In such a dictionary ] *to grind, mill, pulverize, crush*, given at a distance from the root [ sense in :

- طبقة مطحونة "downtrodden class"

is different from :

- بن مطحون "ground coffee-beans".

Because of the existence of two or more morphological forms having the same meaning, co-reference prevails, e.g.

- مشاهمة ( p.1044 ) : راجع تشابه ( p . 319 )
- مشاقمة ( P.1044 ) : راجع شتم ( p. 662 )
- مشاجرة ( p. 1044 ) : راجع شجار ( p. 662 )

#### 4. Word Combinations

The core of the process of translation is understanding the meaning potential of a given word or phrase and seeing how it is 'activated' by the context in which the word is used. The shortest context into which a word is activated and in which individual word senses can be decoded is what comes before or after it, i.e. a collocation. Transferring collocations from one language to another is transferring from one culture to another and from one linguistic semantic system to another. The "problems arise" as Neubert & Shreve 1992) state, " when a translator has to deal with the language-specific ways these combinatory potentials emerge in the text." Meyer (1987) has demonstrated that one of the weaknesses of the general bilingual dictionary is manifested in the user's combination of the selected (TL) item with other elements of the (TL) context. Usually, he comes up with 'pseudo-collocations' i.e., combinations of L2 lexical items that are a translation of the (SL) collocations but do not occur in the (TL) or combinations which belong to neither the (SL) nor the (TL).

Though some attention has been attached by the dictionaries discussed to word combinations, collocations are still insufficiently studied in Arabic. An account of Arabic phraseology which is characterized by depth of analysis and breadth of coverage is yet to come. The *MWA*'s reference to the collocates of the verb as s.o. (هـ) or s.th. (هـ) is not sufficient. The translation of , بخس for example, will vary according to the nature of the object : cf.

1. بخس ( قدره )
2. بخس ( الميزان / الكيل )
3. بخس ( الثمن )
4. بخس ( شخصاً حقه )
5. بخس ( شخصاً )

It is also coloured by vagueness, e.g.

**bakhasa** (*bakhs*): to decrease, to diminish reduce (sth), to lessen (e.g .



قيمة , *qimatuhu*, the value of sth), to disregard, neglect, fail to.

The notation **sth** does not specify the object and is of no use to the translator. Arabic monolingual dictionaries are no better. They use *الشيء* (*thing*), which does not help the translator either.

The word *طاحن* , for example, with its English equivalents is given in the three dictionaries as follows:

- *al-Mughni*: grinder, crusher, pulveriser, animal which tramples down a grain harvest , to extract grain.

- *MWA* : molar tooth, grinder.

Both dictionaries present one grammatical category, namely اسم الفاعل (present participle) used nominally. *al-Mawrid* , on the other hand, presents the word as اسم الفاعل used adjectivally.

*al-Mawrid* : fierce, violent, hot, destructive, ruinous, deadly, internecine. However which of these equivalents would the translator choose for :

حرب طاحنة (present participle used adjectivally)?

The same thing applies to *مطحون* , which is a derivative absent of *al-Mughni* and *MWA*. In *al-Mawrid* some equivalents are given: *ground, milled, pulverized, crushed*. However, None of these synonyms could be used for the Arabic collocation *الطبقات المطحونة* where the second element *مطحون* is used figuratively .

Bilingual dictionaries such as *CR*, *CK* and *LC* are remarkably rich sources of this type of lexical information. They have their particular devices to denote collocations lexicographically. The *CK* is a good example :cf.

1. within the transitive verb entries typical objects of the headword are given: *dilute* [dailu:t] I vt *orange juice, milk* etc, verdunen; *colour* abshwächer; (fig)

2. within adjective entries, typical nouns modified by the headword are given: *aggressive* 1. aggressive, *lover* ungestüm 2. *salesman, businessman* etc dynamisch, aufdringlich (pej).
3. within adverb entries, typical verbs or adjectives modified by the headword: cf. *animatedly* adv. rege; *talk also* angeregt.

The same approach could be adopted with certain modifications in Arabic-English dictionaries (see Heliel 1997).

## 5. Idiomatic & Metaphorical Information

What is transparent to a native speaker of one language linguistically and socio-culturally might be altogether difficult to translate to another language. This applies to idiomatic and figurative usage. Due to lack of good documentation the idiomatic and metaphorical information provided in the Arabic-English dictionaries cited, is inadequate, e.g.

- بنت الحلال (الزوجة) / حية رقطاع / شيخ المترجمين /
- عنان السماء / بيت الله / رأس الحكمة / قصير اليد

None of these structures is covered by Arabic-Arabic dictionaries (for *حياة رقطاع*, for example, *al-Mu'jam al-'Arabi al'Asasi* (1989) or *al-Mu'tamad* (2000) . *Al-Mughni* for the same phrase gives the literal meaning: *snake with elongated spots (like tiger)*. The *MWA* gives: *speckled, spotted* as equivalents to. . . . *مرقط*. *al-Mawrid* gives the verb *رقط* with the equivalents: *to speckle, fleck, spot, dapple*, which can never be of use in the translation of the combination *حياة رقطاع* in the description of an evil woman. Only the literal meaning is given.

Thus the translation dictionary should help the translator develop a high degree of proficiency in lexical usage, collocational control and idiomatic command.

## 6. Structural Markers

A translation-oriented dictionary is expected to help its user by designing the articles in such a way that information is easily and speedily accessed. Structural markers are part of the access structure and they serve as a guide to the user to reach information items (see Gouws 1998:23).

The three dictionaries are deficient in their structural markers, whether typographical or non-typographical: cf.

- **Typographical markers.** According to Gouws (1998) they include: font types and sizes, bold print, capital letters and italics. All except capital letters may be utilized in Arabic-English dictionaries.

- **Non-typographical devices** include frames, coloured blocks, diamonds, etc.

With the exception of *al-Mawrid*, the two other dictionaries lack typographical devices. It is suggested that:

1. bold type and big font should be used for the headword.
2. *idafa* constructs such as ابن اللغة should be discriminated from other kinds of word combinations like idiomatic expressions.
3. certain symbols should be used to indicate: e.g. collocations (cf. *CR, LC*) ; idioms (see *Qamus 'Arabi-Rusi Madrasi*) ; verbs followed by prepositions ; figurative usage ; grammatical categories such as present participle, اسم الفاعل  
past participle اسم المفعول , etc.
4. the confusing system of colons and semicolons should be replaced by numerical or letter systems.
5. stem forms could be indicated by coloured blocks or shady squares.

## Conclusions

Through the analysis of these unabridged Arabic/English dictionaries we may conclude:

1. Though in two of these dictionaries attempt has been made to include neologisms and the new senses of words which have not been recognized in the Arabic/Arabic dictionary, there is still a lot to be done towards good documentation that would embrace the extensive and varied uses of modern Arabic vocabulary.
2. Extensive semantic information is needed as far as Arabic polysemy and synonymy are concerned. Distinction between senses and synonyms should be made through glosses and collocates. As a matter of fact, all sorts of contextual guidance should be provided.
3. In a root-based language like Arabic, care should be taken to choose an entry arrangement that would help the user find information easily and speedily. Semantic relatedness between the root and the derivatives should, at all costs, be preserved.
4. Arabic phraseology needs to be sufficiently studied and decisions taken of how it could be lexicographically treated.
5. To help the translator find information easily in our bilingual dictionaries good use should be made of structural markers.

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