

ТЕОРИЯ И ПРАКТИКА ПЕРЕВОДА

R. Ilson

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TRANSLATION EQUIVALENT?

*University College London,
WC1E6BT, Gower Street, London, United Kingdom*

When we use bilingual dictionaries, what makes us believe that the translations they offer are valid? Comparing the English nouns *smile*, *grin*, *smirk*, *sneer* with their translations in bilingual English-Russian and English-French dictionaries, I consider as criteria of translational adequacy the following: ostensive (referential) equivalence, etymology, morphology, phonology, (monolingual) definitional equivalence, (bilingual) reversion (reversibility). The special characteristics of reversion suggest that it might be worth distinguishing *translation equivalents* (=reversible items typically heteroglossal synonyms) as a hyponymic subset of translations (=heteroglossal definitions). Not considered here (for lack of immediately accessible evidence) is contextual or cotextual equivalence, though it would be significant if items in different languages had similar collocations and colligations.

Key words: translation; English; French; Russian; equivalence.

I

Examining several English nouns and their Russian and French translations, I hope to discern some of the criteria for a good translation equivalent.

Katzner¹ offers:

smile = улыбка

улыбка = smile

grin = усмешка

smirk = усмешка

sneer = (презрительная) усмешка *усмешка* = 1 smile; grin 2 sneer; smirk
презрительный = scornful; contemptuous, disdainful

O'Brien² offers:

smile = улыбка

улыбка = smile

grin = усмешка

усмешка = smile, smirk

Robert Ilson – Honorary Researcher Fellow of University College London, UK, Honorary Member of the European Association for Lexicography (e-mail: robert.ilson@outlook.com).

¹ Katzner K. (ed.) English-Russian, Russian English Dictionary. NY: Wiley, 1994.

² O'Brien M.A. (ed.) New English-Russian, Russian-English Dictionary. NY: Dover, 1944.

[*smirk* = усмешка]

sneer = (язвительная) насмешка, насмешка = mockery, derision, scoffing, jeering

зубоскальство язвительный = caustic, biting; (*fig.*) spiteful, wicked

[зубоскальство = scoff, jeer]

The equivalence *smile* = улыбка seems generally accepted. But on what basis? Can their relation be shown ostensively, as by eliciting the English and Russian words appropriate to pictures of people smiling? That may work – provided you are lucky enough for none of your Anglophone subjects to say *grin* instead of *smile* and none of your Russophone subjects to say *усмешка* instead of *улыбка*!

Are the two words connected etymologically, as with English *milk* = Russian *молоко*? Alas, I do not know. True, I have a fine *Dictionary of Russian Roots*³. But though it offers “over 500 of the most productive roots with their derivatives and compounds”⁴, *улыбка* is not among them – nor is any of its parts. On the other hand, English-language monolingual dictionaries of desk size or above offer etymologies as a matter of course; thus at *smile* n, *Concise Oxford Dictionary*⁵ offers “ME: *perh. of Scand. origin; rel. to smirk.*” At least some French monolingual dictionaries⁶ do so, too – but corresponding monolingual dictionaries of Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and German typically do not; this difference merits further investigation. As for Russian, *Ожегов*⁷ does not offer etymologies routinely (all such dictionaries may, however, show the foreign-language origins of borrowings).

Related to what might be called vertical or diachronic etymologies are what might be called horizontal or synchronic etymologies; that is, the analysis of an item into its morphological parts. Thus Katzner offers *shipbuilding* = *кораблестроение*; *судостроение*, where *корабль* and *судно* = ship, and *строение* = building, constructing. But such information, useful though it be when coping with compounds, is not much use when relating monosyllables (or, more generally, short words) to one another.

Yet another source of evidence is monolingual dictionaries.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*⁸ offers at *smile*:

³ *Wolkonsky C., Poltoratzky S. (eds.) Dictionary of Russian Roots. NY: Columbia University Press, 1969 (далее – DRR).*

⁴ *Ibid.* P. vii.

⁵ *Concise Oxford Dictionary. Oxford, 2011 (далее – COD).*

⁶ *Eg Le Petit Robert. Paris, 1989.*

⁷ *Ожегов С.И. (сост.) Толковый словарь русского языка / Под общ. ред. Л.И. Скворцова. М., 2015 (далее – О).*

⁸ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, Mass., USA, 2003 (далее – MWCD).*

a facial expression in which the eyes brighten and the corners of the mouth curve slightly upward and which expresses esp. amusement, pleasure, approval, or sometimes scorn

O offers at *улыбка*:

Мимика лица, губ, глаз, показывающая расположение к смеху, выражающая привет, удовольствие, насмешку и т.п. (O)

Both dictionaries mention the face and the eyes. MWCD, mentioning “the corners of the mouth”, alludes to the lips. What is expressed by *smile/улыбка* includes “amusement/расположение к смеху”. Where MWCD offers “pleasure, approval”, O has “привет, удовольствие”. All these are positively valued – if not identical. Tellingly, both MWCD and O remind us that *smile/улыбка* can also express negative feelings: “scorn” for MWCD; “насмешка” for O (itself translated in Katzner as “ridicule; derision”). The correspondence is not exact. But it seems to provide better evidence than our other criteria that *smile/улыбка* are indeed Good Translation Equivalents.

As for *усмешка* (and indeed *насмешка*), we have some evidence of the etymological kind. DRR tells us that CMEX- ... СМЕШ- is a productive Russian root meaning ‘LAUGH’⁹. That suggests what might be called a lexicological “deep structure” relating these two Russian words to the semantic field that also includes English *grin, smirk, sneer* – and of course *smile/улыбка*.

In the absence of horizontal or synchronic etymological/morphological information, we must turn to the evidence of monolingual dictionaries.

O offers at *усмешка*:

улыбка, выражающая насмешку или недоверие, насмешливое движение рта.

O’s definition presents *усмешка* as a kind of *улыбка*; ie as a hyponym of *улыбка* – making therefore *улыбка* a hyperonym (superordinate) of *усмешка* (O). But how do the two differ? In that *усмешка* typically expresses something negative (eg, *насмешку*) whereas *улыбка*, though capable of expressing negativity (eg, *насмешку*), is typically positive (eg, *привет*).

Katzner’s *усмешка* makes clear that it encompasses what for Anglophones seems a large semantic space: *smile, grin, smirk, sneer*. That is not unknown in lexicography: French *aimer* corresponds to both *love* and *like* in English. How large that space is may best be shown by examining the treatment in a reputable monolingual English dictionary of *grin, smirk, sneer* (for *smile*, see above)¹⁰:

⁹ Wolkonsky C., Poltoratzky S. (eds.) Op. cit. P. 331.

¹⁰ Katzner K. (ed.) Ibid.

COD offers:

grin = a broad smile;

smirk = a smug or silly smile;

sneer = a contemptuous or mocking smile, remark, or tone (COD).

To capture these English-language nuances in a dictionary of Russian and English we probably need to expand their Russian translations. My Russophone colleagues can do that better than I. But to start the ball rolling, may I suggest:

grin = широкая улыбка;

smirk = самодовольная или глупая улыбка;

sneer = презрительная или насмешливая улыбка.

But this treatment strikes me as slightly defective, in that it uses only heteroglossal definitions; ie, definitions in a language other than that of the definiendum. Users of a bilingual dictionary (like me) want/expect (if possible) proper translation equivalents – word-for-word ones. For the English words under discussion here, such a one-word translation equivalent exists: it is *усмешка*. Should *усмешка* not be included in the entries above? The remaining question is where; in other words, as what Merriam-Webster lexicographers call the First Substitute or the Second Substitute? I'd say as the Second Substitute:

grin = широкая улыбка: *усмешка*;

smirk = самодовольная или глупая улыбка: *усмешка*;

sneer = презрительная или насмешливая улыбка: *усмешка*.

So those who wish to use *усмешка* in Russian will do so informed by its preceding heteroglossal definition, which can act as what many bilingual lexicographers call a Sense Discriminator – even though they might prefer homoglossal sense discriminators; eg:

grin = (a broad smile) *усмешка*.

Such efforts at sense discrimination via the insertion of extra information are not unknown in bilingual dictionaries:

Collins Robert French-English English-French Dictionary¹¹ offers: like... = *person aimer* (bien).

II

By way of comparison, here is how CRFEEF deals with the analogous problem:

smile = sourire [NB. sous + rire = lesser + laugh.];

grin = (*smile*) (large) sourire;

smirk = (*self-satisfied smile*) petit sourire satisfait or suffisant; (*knowing*) petit sourire narquois; (*affected*) petit sourire affecté;

¹¹ *Atkins B.T.* (ed.) Collins Robert French-English, English-French Dictionary. Collins, 1981. (CRFEEF)

sneer = [in CRFEEF *sneer* n is entered as an *act* or a *remark* but not as a facial expression. However, it offers, as one translation of **he said with a sneer**, dit-il...avec un sourire de mépris, which suggests *sourire de mépris* as the missing facial expression.

Thus we have in French:

sourire = smile;

large *sourire* = grin;

petit *sourire* = smirk:

sourire de mépris = sneer

self-satisfied = satisfait/suffisant

knowing = narquois

affected = affecté

...and in Russian (shortened to save space):

улыбка = smile:

широкая улыбка = grin;

самодовольная улыбка = smirk;

презрительная улыбка = sneer;

усмешка = grin; smirk; sneer.

French presents a classic semantic hierarchy, with *sourire* as its hyperonym, *large sourire*, *petit sourire*, and *sourire de mépris* as its immediate hyponyms, and *petit sourire satisfait/suffisant*, *petit sourire narquois*, and *petit sourire affecté* as hyponyms of *petit sourire*; ie, as co-hyponyms of a hyponym. Russian can be described thus too, with *улыбка* as hyperonym and *широкая улыбка*, *самодовольная улыбка*, and *презрительная улыбка* as its hyponyms. But in Russian there is the additional complication that *усмешка* can replace *улыбка* as an alternative hyperonym for all the multi-word translations above; that is, for all save the translation of *smile* itself. Which leaves the question: What is the relation of *улыбка* and *усмешка*? Here one might say that *улыбка* and its hyponym *усмешка* can serve as co-hyperonyms, with *улыбка* the unmarked (or neutral) member of the pair and *усмешка* the marked member. As for English, its *smile*, *grin*, *smirk*, and *sneer* seem independent words without an obvious hyperonym. Nor are they related etymologically or morphologically (though *smile* and *smirk* may be related etymologically and *sm-/sn-* may be some sort of phonaestheme).

So to cover this semantic area English has four independent words (*smile*, *grin*, *smirk*, *sneer*); at the other extreme French has one word (*sourire*) nuanced by modifiers (eg *large*); Russian has two words: neutral unmarked *улыбка* like *sourire* and also able to be nuanced by modifiers; marked *усмешка*, meaning something like *улыбка* +, where + indicates some nuance of expression that may not be actually expressed verbally. (I note in passing that neither French nor Russian seems to have a one-word translation equivalent of the English noun *frown*.)

This investigation can readily and usefully be performed not only by adding other languages but also by adding other bilingual dictionaries. What might we not discover by looking at the relevant items in a dictionary of French and Russian?

III

The Ultimate Test – Or Is It?

So far we have identified several criteria for assessing translation equivalents: ostensive equivalence, etymology, morphology, phonology, and definitional equivalence. As for *улыбка* = *smile*, the pair exhibited ostensive and definitional equivalence only. But there is another test which if passed will constitute conclusive evidence of translational equivalence: reversion. By that is meant for example that if the English-Russian part of a bilingual dictionary offers *smile* = *улыбка* and its Russian-English part offers *улыбка* = *smile*, we can assert with confidence that the two are indeed translation equivalents. Likewise for *smile* = *sourire* and *sourire*=*smile*.

But bilingual dictionaries tend to limit such reversion to single-word equivalents (such as *smile*, *grin*, *smirk*, *sneer*). While *улыбка* and *усмешка* are both entered in dictionaries of Russian and English, *широкая улыбка*, *самодовольная улыбка*, *презрительная улыбка* are not main entries or sub-entries (though they may appear in examples). As for dictionaries of French and English, CRFEEF besides its main entry *sourire* makes at *sourire* a sub-entry of **un large [sourire]**, which it glosses as: ‘(*chaleureux*) a broad smile; (*amusé*) a (broad) grin, a broad smile’. **Sourire/regard de [mépris]** appears as a sub-entry under **mépris** and is glossed as ‘scornful *ou* contemptuous smile/look’; interestingly, *sneer* is not included in the gloss. Main entries or sub-entries for *petit sourire* etc. are, however, nowhere to be found in the French-English part of CRFEEF.

What all the above suggests to me is that:

1) It might be worth distinguishing *translation equivalents* (=reversible items typically heteroglossal synonyms) as a hyponymic subset of *translations* (=heteroglossal definitions);

2) Makers of bilingual dictionaries might do well to enter more multi-word items as main entries or sub-entries; and/or to include them in examples at main entries or sub-entries.

REFERENCES

1. Ozhegov S.I. (ed.) 2015. *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo yazyka* [Explanatory dictionary of the Russian language]. Pod obshch. red. L.I. Skvortsova. Moscow, Mir i Obrazovanie. (In Russ.)
2. Atkins B.T. (ed.) 1981. *Collins Robert French-English, English-French Dictionary*. Collins.
3. *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 2011. Oxford.

4. Katzner K. (ed.) 1994. *English-Russian, Russian English Dictionary*. NY, Wiley.
5. Le Petit Robert. 1989. Paris.
6. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 2003. Springfield, Mass., USA.
7. O'Brien M.A. (ed.) 1944. *New English-Russian, Russian-English Dictionary*. NY, Dover.
8. Wolkonsky C., Poltoratzky S. (eds.) 1969. *Dictionary of Russian Roots*. NY, Columbia University Press.

Р. Илсон

К ВОПРОСУ ОБ ЭКВИВАЛЕНТНОСТИ ПЕРЕВОДА

*Университетский Колледж Лондона,
WC1E6BT, Великобритания, Лондон, Gower Street*

Когда мы используем двуязычные словари, что заставляет нас верить в то, что переводы, которые они предлагают, адекватны? Сравнивая английские существительные *smile, grin, smirk, sneer* с их соответствиями в двуязычных англо-русских и англо-французских словарях, в качестве критериев адекватности перевода я рассматриваю следующие: очевидную (референциальную) эквивалентность, этимологию, морфологию, фонологию, (одноязычную) эквивалентность словарных статей, (двуязычную) реверсию (обратимость). Особые характеристики реверсии позволяют предположить, что стоило бы выделить *разнородные эквиваленты* (= обратимые элементы, прототипические гетероглоссальные синонимы) как гипонимическое подмножество переводов (= гетероглоссальные определения). В статье не рассматриваются (в связи с отсутствием на сегодняшний день явных доказательств) контекстуальная и котекстуальная эквивалентность, хотя нельзя отрицать роль наличия сходных свободных и идиоматически связанных словосочетаний у тождественных элементов в разных языках.

Ключевые слова: перевод; английский язык; французский язык; русский язык; эквивалентность перевода.

Сведения об авторе: *Роберт Илсон* – профессор, почетный научный сотрудник Университетского колледжа Лондона, Лондон, Великобритания, почетный член Европейской ассоциации лексикографии (e-mail: robert.ilson@outlook.com).

СПИСОК ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

1. *Ожегов С.И.* (сост.) Толковый словарь русского языка / Под общ. ред. Л.И. Скворцова. М., 2015.
2. *Atkins B.T.* (ed.) Collins Robert French-English, English-French Dictionary. Collins, 1981.
3. Concise Oxford Dictionary. Oxford, 2011.
4. *Katzner K.* (ed.) English-Russian, Russian English Dictionary. N.Y., 1994.
5. Le Petit Robert. Paris, 1989.
6. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, Mass., USA, 2003.
7. *O'Brien M.A.* (ed.) New English-Russian, Russian-English Dictionary. N.Y., 1944.
8. *Wolkonsky C., Poltoratzky S.* (eds.) Dictionary of Russian Roots. N.Y., 1969.