Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 231 (2016) 19 – 24

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference; Meaning in Translation: Illusion of Precision, MTIP2016, 11-13 May 2016, Riga, Latvia

Converses and antonyms in translation

Nijolė Maskaliūnienė*

University of Vilnius, Universiteto g. 3, Vilnius 01513, Lithuania

Abstract

Semanticists have already proven that antonyms and converses are two distinct types of sense relations. However, even recent studies make little distinction between the two, with the term *antonym* being used for both (e.g. Jones 2002). The goal of the article is to show that the two categories are different in several aspects and that their differences are reflected in translation. Analysis of the corpus of about 1,000 English sentences and their translations into Lithuanian has revealed that antonymic translation is much more frequent compared to converse translation because of the pragmatic role of the units comprising a converse pair.

Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of MTIP2016

Keywords: Antonyms; converses; antonymic translation; converse translation; pragmatic role of lexical converses.

1. Introduction

In books on semantics, antonyms and converses are often discussed together as both categories are characterized by the same paradigmatic relation of oppositeness (Murphy 2003). Traditionally, the concepts of 'antonymy' and 'oppositeness' are treated as synonymous with antonymy encompassing converseness (see Jones, 2002, p. 2). Therefore, one might expect antonymic translation and converse translation, i.e. a translation of an antonym or a converse in the Source Text (ST) by its counterpart in the Target Text (TT), to be similar in nature. However, analysis of the corpus of about 1,000 English sentences with antonyms and converses and their translations into Lithuanian has revealed that although the meanings of words of these two semantic groups are related in certain aspects, antonyms and converses behave differently in translation, which, among other things, supports the understanding of antonymy

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +37052687245.
E-mail address: nijole.maskaliuniene@flf.vu.lt

Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of MTIP2016
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.09.066

and converseness as two distinct types of sense relations. The goal of this paper is to show how the differences between the two categories of oppositeness are reflected in translation.

2. Antonyms and converses compared

It seems that antonymy does not cause problems when people are asked to define it or give examples of antonyms. The term 'converseness', on the contrary, is mostly known to a limited circle of specialists, but not to the public at large. For instance, in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002) antonyms are defined as words which are opposite in meaning to other words, e.g. *dead* and *alive* or *big* and *small*. The dictionary also states that some linguists use the term antonym to mean only gradable pairs, i.e. pairs like *big* and *small,* while *dead* and *alive* are treated as complementaries (or ungradable antonyms). Converses are not mentioned in the dictionary at all, although in linguistics the concept was introduced by Lyons as early as 1963 and further developed in his works of 1968 and 1977. His ideas were adopted by Apresjan (1974/1995), Kastovsky (1981), Cruse (1986), Murphy (2003) and many other linguists who single out the latter category in its own right, making a distinction between antonyms and converses on the basis of their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features.

The reason for antonyms and converses to be treated as categories of the same order lie in their semantics, as both make binary oppositions, the members whereof contain a distinctive feature of oppositeness (Palmer 1982; Cruse 1986). It seems that here their similarity ends, as on the level of syntax and pragmatics antonyms and converses differ more than, say, antonyms and synonyms.

First of all, it must be stressed that the converse properties of a pair of words, contrary to those of antonymy, become evident only on the syntactic level. For instance, Haspelmath (2002, p. 210) observes that the verbs *like* and *please,* and *rob* and *steal,* are roughly synonymous, and their different syntactic behaviour cannot be predicted from their meaning, i.e. being synonymous paradigmatically, they produce conversely related sentences, cf.:

1a. *I* ***like*** *this song* ↔ b. *This song* ***pleases*** *me*;

2a. *Baba* ***stole*** *my bike from me* ↔ b. *Baba* ***robbed*** *me of my bike.* (Haspelmath 2002, 210).

What this means is that, although the categories of converseness and oppositeness overlap, they do not coincide. The criteria used to define purely semantic categories are therefore inadequate in dealing with converses.

Even greater differences between antonyms and converses are observed at the pragmatic level. Converses describe one and the same situation, but from the perspective of its different participants, e.g.:

3a. *John* ***precedes*** *Bill* ↔ b. *Bill* ***follows*** *John;*

4a. *My brother* ***owns*** *the largest betting shop in London* ↔ b. *The largest betting shop in London* ***belongs to*** *my brother*.

5a. *John* ***bought*** *the car from Peter* ↔b. *Peter* ***sold*** *the car to John.* (Kastovsky, 1981, p. 125)

The thematic roles of the participants of this situation (arguments) and the syntactic functions of these arguments in conversely related sentences differ even though the situation itself does not change, while antonyms describe two different situations, not one, and the same participants in antonymic sentences perform the same thematic roles, e.g.:

6. *Workers* ***are building*** *the bridge;*

7. *Workers* ***are demolishing*** *the bridge.*

The fact that converses define one and the same situation allows us to treat them as contextual variants, or, to use Apresjan's terminology, as a means of synonymy in language (Apresjan, 1974/1995, p. 258). Antonyms are also a means of synonymy when synonymy is understood in a broad sense as an ability of a word to substitute another word in the same context without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

This paradox of antonyms building synonymous sentences is neutralized in those contexts where an antonymous pair consists of a positive and negative form. As such, they are interrelated as notions of oppositeness, but they are related as synonyms as well. For instance, some of the negated (non-gradable/bounded) adjectives are interpreted as synonyms of their antonyms (*not alive* equals *dead* or *hostile* equals *not friendly*) (cf. Murphy 2003, p. 202). Both antonymic translation and converse translation are based on this synonymy.

3. Antonymic translation

Antonymic translation is defined as a translation mode whereby an affirmative (positive) element in the ST is translated by a negative element in the TT and, vice versa, a negative element in the ST is translated using an affirmative element in the TT, without changing the meaning of the original sentence. It is not a word-for-word translation, but a transformation when the translator selects an antonym and combines it with a negation element (e.g. *good > not bad*) (cf. Chesterman, 1997, p. 102; Louw, 2006, p. 65).

In literature one can find other terms referring to the same type of transformations, e.g. *antonymic substitution*, *positive / negative recasting* or simply a *transformation with negation*. Newmark chose the term a *negated contrary* and explained it as the use of an affirmative element instead of a double negation, and vice versa. It is a very concrete transformation that in principle may be applied to any action (a verb) and quality (an adjective) (Newmark, 1988, p. 88). Along with this modulation one often has to make additional grammatical or lexical changes in the sentence in the target language (Leppihalme, 1996, p. 201). Thus antonymic translation is a complex transformation, the essence of which lies in the synonymy of the sentences / constructions with a negative element and its affirmative counterpart, or vice versa.

Antonymic translation as such can be understood in broader and narrower terms, i.e. it may cover instances of (1) a simple substitution of an element in the ST by its antonymic counterpart (negative or positive) in translation; (2) positive / negative recasting, a translation procedure where the translator modifies the order of the units in the ST in order to conform to the syntactic or idiomatic constraints of the TT; and (3) narrowing of the scope of negation whereby the original negative sentence is turned into an affirmative one in translation by moving the negation element to a word phrase or an elliptical sentence (cf. Proshina 2008). The term antonymic translation covers all these three types.

From what has been said it follows that antonymic translation is closely related to negation. There are three major types of negation: syntactic (*I think she is **not** happy*; *I **don't** like her story*), morphological (*I think she is **un**happy*; *I **dis**like her story*) and inherent ('lexical') (*I think she is **sad**; I **hate** her story*) negation. The syntactic pattern is the most productive, typical of all adjectives and verbs. The morphological and inherent patterns are more idiosyncratic, applying to some verbs and adjectives, but not others (Givon, 2001, p. 395–396).

In many instances there is a direct interdependence between the type of negation and the type of antonymic translation. For example, in the event of morphological negation, which is marked by the presence of a negative affix in the ST (in English), antonymic translation takes the form of a positive substitution in the TT (in Lithuanian), and vice versa, e.g.:

8a. *Marija Silva was **poor*** (Jack London) – b. *Marija Silva buvo **ne-turtinga** 'Marija Silva was **not+rich**';*

9a. *They were **un-successful** farmers* – b. *Jie buvo **prasti** fermeriai 'They were **bad** farmers'.*

Researchers have also noticed that in the case of morphological negation a certain loss in the equivalence of the original and translation may occur because usually antonyms with a negative element retain a smaller part of the intensity of the other element in antonymic opposition (e.g. *neturtinga 'not rich'* does not necessarily mean *poor* or *unsuccessful* is not necessarily *bad*). Irrespective of this loss, which in certain contexts is accepted as insignificant, this type of antonymic translation is quite productive.

In the case of lexical (inherent) negation, a positive or (in most cases) negative recasting takes place in translating English words which are positive in form, but negative in meaning, i.e. in translating words, the meaning of which contains a negation seme, e.g.:

10a. *The wolf **ignored** them* – b. *Vilkas jų **ne-paisė*** 'The wolf **paid no attention** to them';

11b. *He **is off duty** now – b. Šiuo metu jis **ne-dirba*** 'Currently he **does not work**'.

Antonymic translation involving syntactical negation appears mostly in such syntactical patterns as comparative sentences, time clauses, exclamatory sentences, indirect questions and a few others. In this type of antonymic translation, syntactic negation is often combined with both a substitution of lexical elements and a negative or positive recasting, e.g.:

12a. …*that **was** the coldest night in his memory* (Joan Rowling) – b. …*tokios šaltos nakties jis **ne-prisiminė*** '…such a cold night he **did not remember**';

13a. *He **has been accused** of many faults at different times...* (Joan Rowling) – b. *Kokiomis ydomis jis tik **nėra kaltinamas**...* 'What sort of vices **has he not been accused** of...'

The analysis has revealed that antonymic translation may be mandatory where the target language has no lexical or syntactic equivalent of a particular element in the ST, and the translator has to conform to the syntactic or idiomatic constraints of the TT. But more often than not the antonymic translation is an optional choice by the translator. Usually, a word-for-word translation is possible, but it is evident that the translation benefits from this more demanding and more original approach to the text in general. It shows the translator's ability to employ different means of his or her native language in order to retain the style and mood of the original.

4. Converse translation

Converse translation is defined in a similar way to antonymic translation. It is a translation mode whereby one member of a converse pair used in the ST is replaced by the other member of the pair in the TT (Louw, 2006, p. 56, cf. Klein 1976, Chesterman, 1997, p. 103) as in the following sentences:

14a. *I **received** a letter and a snapshot from him* (Harper Lee) – b. *Jis **atsiuntė** man laišką ir nuotrauką. 'He **sent** me a letter and a snapshot'*

15a. *My dear boy, they **won't give** you a sovereign.* (Evelyn Waugh) – b. *Mielas berniuk, tu iš jų **negausi** nė sovereno. 'My dear boy, you **won't get** a sovereign from them.'*

16a. *"But what good are these bigger-things, these masterpieces?" Ruth demanded. "You **can't sell** them."* (Jack London) – b. *Bet kas iš tų rimtų kūrinių, tų šedevrų? – pasiteiravo Ruta. – Jų niekas **neperka**." '**Nobody buys** them.'*

It seems logical that, being denotative synonyms, such units would allow building contextually synonymous sentences. The analysis of all those instances has confirmed that the choice of converses in the same context, be it within the ST or between the ST and the TT, is determined by the communicative goal of the speaker, or their focus, in presenting the situation from the perspective of one or the other participant of the situation. The speaker's choice, on the other hand, is also determined by the preceding context and the direction of its development, i.e. the theme–rheme structure (old vs. new information) (Apresjan, 1974/1995, p. 258). In certain instances the context rigidly restricts the interchangeability of converses because it would mean an interruption of cohesion or an abrupt change in the focus, e.g.:

17a. *The school team became champion of the game; the finals **were won** by three to one. 'Mokyklos komanda tapo turnyro nugalėtoja; finalinės rungtynės **laimėtos** trys – vienas.'* – b. *The school team became champion of the game; *the finals **were lost** by three to one. 'Mokyklos komanda tapo turnyro nugalėtoja; *finalinės rungtynės **pralaimėtos** trys – vienas.'*

In this example the focus of the sentence is the school team and the fact that it *has won* (*laimėjo*) the game. The replacement of the verb *win* by its converse counterpart *lose* (*pralaimėjo*) is impossible either in the original or in

translation as it would completely change the focus (and the meaning) of the cohesive text. Compare:

In other instances the information structure is retained, and replacement of one converse by its counterpart seems possible if the main meaning of the sentence is not affected, e.g.:

18a. *It cost about ninety bucks, and all he* ***bought*** *it for was twenty.* (J. D. Salinger) – b. *Mašinėlė kainavo arti devyniasdešimties dolerių, o aš jam* ***pardaviau*** *už dvidešimtį.* 'The typewriter *cost about ninety bucks, and I* ***sold*** *it to him for twenty.'*

19a. *You need to* ***hear*** *it*. (Sandra Brown) – b. *Kas nors turi tau* ***pasakyti*** *teisybę.* 'Somebody has to ***tell*** *you the truth.'*

20a. *…he was the* ***son*** *of an editor in the East*. (Jack Kerouac) – b. ... *jo* ***tėvas*** *buvo redaktorius Rytuose*. '...his **father** was an editor in the East.'

It is evident that the contexts of 18–20 above allow for a converse counterpart to be used in translation even though the focus of the situation expressed by the subject of the sentence changes. The division of a sentence into theme and rheme is closely related to and dependent on the regularities of a cohesive text. In the case of the neutral unmarked word order as in the above sentences, the syntactic structure and the theme–rheme structure usually coincide: the subject (or subject group) corresponds to the theme and the predicate (or predicate group) corresponds to the rheme. Thus, converses are more often used to change the focus and not the theme–rheme structure, but the change in the focus (emphasis) always implies a change of the thematic content.[1]

5. Conclusions

The article aims to draw attention to the differences between two semantic categories described in terms of oppositeness, antonyms and converses, which are particularly evident in translation. It has been shown that although antonymic and converse modes of translation are based on the ability of antonyms and converses to build contextually synonymous sentences there are great differences in their application which are predetermined by the differences in the syntactic and pragmatic features of the two groups of words.

First of all, on the level of syntax, the syntactic functions and semantic roles of the arguments in antonymic oppositions do not change. There are no changes in their pragmatic functions either, therefore in translation it is possible to replace an antonym in the ST by its counterpart in the TT, even though a certain degree of equivalence may be lost.

Sentences in converse oppositions, on the contrary, are characterized by a change in the syntactic functions (subjects turning into objects, and vice versa) and, in many cases, the changed semantic roles of the arguments marking the same participants (referents) of the situation. The most important difference, however, lies in the pragmatic role of converses which is to serve as a means of focusing the situation from the perspective of its main participant (performing the syntactic function of the subject of the sentence). If the converse is replaced by its counterpart, the focus of the situation also changes and triggers a change in the functional sentence perspective, or the theme–rheme structure of the sentence.

This change has implications in translation as well, because by choosing the converse mode of translation, the translator risks disrupting the whole pragmatic pattern of the TT, the logical sequence of the thematically connected sentences. Therefore, instances of converse translation are far less numerous in the corpus than those of antonymic translation. They are mainly to be found in dialogue for the reason that in dialogues textual cohesion is less rigidly observed.

An overarching conclusion of the article is that translation can be instrumental in proving that antonyms and converses are completely different semantic categories even though they are characterized by the same sense relation of oppositeness.

---

[1] For more detail on interchangeability of converses in the text see Maskaliūnienė (2003, 2004).

References

Apresjan, J. D. (1974/1995). *Leksičeskaja semantika*. (*Lexical semantics*). Moskva: Nauka.

Chesterman, A. (1997). *Memes of translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Cruse, A. (1986). *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Givon, T. (2001). *Syntax: An introduction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Haspelmath, M. (2002). *Understanding morphology*. London: Arnold.

Jones, S. (2002). *Antonymy. A corpus-based perspective.* London / New York: Routledge.

Kastovsky, D. (1981). Interaction of lexicon and syntax: Lexical converses. In J. Esser & A. Hübler (Eds.), *Forms and functions. Papers in general, English and applied linguistics presented to Vilém Fried on the occasion of his 65th birthday* (pp. 123–136). Tübingen: Narr.

Leppihalme, R. (1996). Caught in the frame – A target culture viewpoint of allusive wordplay. *The Translator, 2(2),* 189–218.

Louw, T. A. W. (2006). *Transformations in the Septuagint. Towards an interaction of Septuagint studies and translation studies.* PhD Thesis. Leiden.

Lyons, J. (1963). *Structural semantics: An analysis of part of the vocabulary of Plato*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics* (vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maskaliūnienė, N. (2003). Focus and perspective in the selection of lexical converses. *Kalbotyra, 53,* 371–78. Vilnius.

Maskaliūnienė, N. (2004). Factors restricting the interchangeability of lexical converses in the sentence. *Kalbotyra, 54(3),* 54–60.

Murphy, M. L. (2003). *Semantic relations and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Newmark, P. (1988). *Textbook of translation*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.

Palmer, F. R. (1982). *Semantics: A new outline*. Moscow: Vysšaja škola.

Proshina, Z. (2008). *Theory of translation* (English and Russian) (3rd ed.). Vladivostok: Far Eastern University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2000). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). London: Pearson Education.