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B. Hunter Smeaton

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TRANSLATION, STRUCTURE AND LEXICOGRAPHY

B. Hunter SMEATON, New York

¶ The function of bilingual dictionaries in translation :

In this article, the second of a series on the nature and limitations of translation[1], we shall consider the function of bilingual dictionaries in translating, and this we shall do from two points of view : first, *as they are used by the translator,* and secondly, *from the point of view of structure.*

1. It should be noted at the outset that there is no particular correlation between knowledge of linguistic theory and the ability to translate. The translators who have such knowledge are few and far between, and it is doubtful if possessing it would improve their product.

The basic qualifications for a translator, besides general erudition, are :

(1) That he know his own language well and be able to express himself in clear and effective prose;

(2) That he have a reasonably extensive knowledge of the language he is translating from, or of a language closely related to it;

(3) That he know something of the subject matter of the translation; and

(4) That he have had some previous experience in translating as such.

2. As will be noted, it is assumed that the translator is working from another language into his mother tongue. This might, to cover exceptional cases, be modified to include individuals who have, through long residence in the country concerned and continuous practice in all general forms of its language, acquired what is tantamount to a subjective knowledge of that language. As a general rule, however, to translate into a language not one's own does not produce an idiomatic and reliable translation, and where this has to be done, it should be carefully checked by a qualified native speaker. Needless to say, in language learning, it is excellent practice to translate into the foreign language; but this benefits only the person who does it.

3. How can one tell if a translator is experienced and fit for his task ? The commonest way, of course, is to give him a test piece of which one already has a good translation and compare his result with the latter. An unqualified person may betray himself without this, however, and one fairly good sign of unfitness is the boast : ''Oh, I never use a dictionary — I don't need it !'' It is of course possible that, in cases where the translator's work is confined to a single, limited subject which, through repeated work in that sphere, he has come to know very well in the two languages, his need for a dictionary may be rather rare, and that he, and the person the translation is for, will be satisfied if, when he encounters a term or phrase not clear to him, he simply glosses over it in some way. But this is the

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exceptional situation. The translator is normally called upon to delve into all spheres of a language; and people who are completely bilingual with respect to so many diverse phenomena simply do not exist.

4. Every experienced translator, driven by necessity, will have come by a number of tricks in the use of a bilingual dictionary — though he has probably never thought of them as such, let alone codified them. Some of these are :

4.1 *Double-checking the other way.* Often, when a translator finds, opposite the entry, two or several inadequately qualified, or unqualified definitions, he cannot be certain which one to choose, even with the aid of ccntext. Assuming he has no other bilingual dictionary to check, he may then take the definition that seems the best bet and see how it is defined in the foreign language, and that failing, the next best, and so on.

The need for this arises particularly when the translator finds himself working with unfamiliar subject matter. Let us say a specialist in German literature has had a technical translation foisted upon him, and to save face he goes through with it. At one point he finds the word *Lager,* which he knows only as "couch, bed, sick-bed, lair, camp, warehouse" — none of which fits in this case. He then takes a dictionary of technical German and finds, after *Lager* : bearing, camp, bed, stock, store, warehouse. "Bearing" seems a possibility — it is part of his passive English vocabulary in some reference to machinery, though he never knew quite what it was. So he checks *bearing* in the English-German section, and sure enough, he finds, among the compounds of *bearing,* a number of terms defined by German compounds which (a) begin with "Lager-" and (b) tend to confirm that "bearing" is the word he wants (e. g., bearing alloy : *Lagerlegierung;* bearing friction : *Lagerreibung;* bearing pressure : *Lagerdruck;* etc.). In short, there has been an intersection of two probabilities — his best guess, and the supporting evidence — from which a practical certainty results.

4.2 *Looking up parts of compounds.* The translator from languages in which compounds appear typographically as single words, such as German, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages, soon learns to distinguish well established compounds from the more or less fortuitous ones, and to look up the components separately. Thus, a translator who, let us say, did not understand the German term *Untersuchungsausschuss* ("investigating committee") might look forever under 'U' without finding it. The translator who, though experienced with German, nevertheless did not recognize more than the part "Untersuchung(s)-", would go straight to *Ausschuss.*

4.3 *Conversion of words into cognate forms, or reduction of loan translations, when they cannot be defined in the form encountered.* The process of converting words into their cognates in a related language — often done subjectively between speakers of, say, Czech and Polish, or of Swedish and Norwegian, or when a Spanish speaker reads Portuguese, etc. — amounts, essentially, to the substitution of corresponding phonemes. Linguists, borrowing a term from communications engineers, have sometimes called it "code-switching" (cf. R. Jakobson, "Comparative Slavic Studies", in *Review of Politics* for January 1954, p. 68 f.). To the translator, of course, the operation is an orthographic one and presupposes a fair reading knowledge of the language he converts into. As a technique it is best applied to technical terms, since with these one can be fairly sure that the synthetic cognate, if found to be a real one, will have the same meaning and applications.

I can illustrate the procedure very well by showing you some problems I once had with an Italian medical article. Bilingual dictionaries involving Italian as one language are almost without exception poor or inadequate (for that matter, the fine bilingual dictionaries for French-English/English-French by Harrap and Kettridge excepted, most good bilingual dictionaries seem to come from the countries bordering the Baltic). Edgren for Italian is excellent, but it is limited to the literary language. So with an Italian technical article, the translator is pretty much on his own.[2]

2 Since this talk was given, I found, in the New York Public Library, what may well be an important exception to this generalization, as far as general technical vocabulary is concerned : Dott. Ing. Giorgio Marolli (of the Fiat Company), **Dizionario Tecnico inglese-italiano italiano-inglese.**

My first problem was with the phrase *risentimenti ghiandolari al collo.* "Collo" I knew as "neck", and "ghiandolari", by code-switching, read immediately as "glandular". But how about "risentimenti" ? I would hardly be a translator worthy of the name if I embraced this "false friend" and wrote : "glandular resentments on the neck" ! Yet two Italian-English dictionaries gave me no more help than this : "*risentimento* : resentment, grudge". I thought of French *ressentir,* "to feel, et al.", and *ressentiment,* which can mean "an attack, touch, return (as of a disease)". But one could not have glandular attacks, touches or returns. I there-upon checked Spanish *resentimiento,* which gave : "resentment, grudge; impairment". "Impairment" was just what I wanted : it made very good sense in the context and was now hallowed by evidence, and it had the additional virtues of being both a good medical word and, because of its non-commital nature, a good translator's word.

The next problem was *caverne pregresse.* "Caverne" was obviously, in this context, "cavities" — but as for "pregresso", I could not even find it in any Italian dictionary at my disposal. Similarly, I tried Spanish **pregreso,* Portuguese **pregres(s)o* and French **prégresse* or **prégressif,* all without result. This left, among my dictionary resources, only Latin itself. And sure enough, I finally ran down *praegredior, praegressus sum* : to go before, precede. Hence, of course, "previous cavities". ... Naturally, had I been a better Latinist, such a circuitous process could have been avoided ...

Another type of conversion was exemplified by the word *ilo,* obviously, in the context, a part of the body somehow related to the lungs. Medical terms, of course, one can nearly always safely assume to be Greek or Latin; and for English one may assume minimum orthographic modification of the Greek or Latin original. For the reformed spelling of Italian, one reckons, in reconstructing, the possibility of a no longer written initial 'h'; that 'i' may represent either original 'i' or 'y'; while for final 'o' one would look for final '-us' or '-um' in the English spelling of the same medical word. I therefore tried **hylus* and **hylum* in Dorland's *American Illustrated Medical Dictionary,* without result. On my second try, however, I was successful : the word was *hilus* (with an alternate form *hilum*), which the definition further corroborated.

The same article also provided an instance of loan translation. The term to be translated was *gabbia toracica.* The latter word was clearly "thoracic", but all I could find for *gabbia* was "cage" — and I could picture the doctor reader raising his eyebrows over "thoracic cage" and wondering about the merits of the translator ! In a second Italian-English dictionary, under the seventh definition of the word *gabbia,* I found also a meaning "basket". This rang a bell : the German *Brustkorb !* This, in turn, led me at once to the proper English term, "thoracic cavity". (The Italian term was doubtless transmitted and rendered literally into Italian by Italian medical students who had studied in Vienna). (I later found there is an English term "rib cage" — but this smacks suspiciously of layman's usage and is in any case not quite the same concept.)[3]

Technical German, of course, abounds with loan translations : given a basically sound knowledge of the formative elements of German and technical English, one really needs no dictionary to reconstruct "hypersensitivity" out of *Ueberempfindlichkeit* and "protozoön" out of *Urtier.*

Needless to say, the translator will also, at one time or another, have need for monolingual dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesauruses and personal informants. ... In this talk, however, we are concerned only with the problems involved in the use of bilingual dictionaries.

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We have now discussed their use from the average translator's point of view. Let us now consider, from the linguist's standpoint, what happens when two languages are juxtaposed in dictionary form.

Florence, Le Monnier, 1954, 1076 pp. with suppl. tables and diagrams. ... I should also mention the existence of a very good dictionary of commercial Italian by Spinelli : (It.-Engl., Engl.-It.). Turin, Lattes, 1927.

3 A further addition is the French "cage thoracique".

5. As a linguist — in the narrower, scientific sense of the term — one starts from certain basic assumptions, which we will take the liberty of stating here as axioms, without pausing to justify them :

5.1 Following the distinction first effectively drawn by De Saussure, and underlying most of modern linguistics : Any message, spoken or written, has a dual aspect : its *content* (signifié) and its *expression* (signifiant).

5.2 Every language, or dialect of a language, has a structure peculiarly its own.

5.3 (In part a corollary to **5.2**) : No unit of expression in a language can have an existence independent of all its other, similar expressive units. The parts of a language are all interrelated. Illustrating this in lexical terms :

The English verb *to catch* can have meaning only by virtue of its distinctness in meaning from all other verbs in the language. Its meaning is further defined, and to some extent subdivided, by the words it can be associated with. Thus : to catch a ball, to catch one's coat on a nail, to catch a cold. Its action may be further specified by its role in an entire sentence : "He tried in vain to catch the ball." The image here evoked is also a specific, positive one, and not merely the negation of "catch (the ball)."

Very often, in fact, as every experienced translator knows, one must take the entire passage or utterance into account to arrive at the proper meaning of a single word.

Syntactic factors may also enter into play. Thus, the German word *da* at the beginning of a clause means *since, inasmuch as*, if the verb appears at the end of the clause; but (variously) *there* or *thereupon, at this* if the verb immediately follows it.

The Arabic word *fa'r* means mouse or rat : only the context can clarify which is meant, and it may very well not do so. And the fact that the difference may not be relevant to the Arab writer is little help to the translator whose language forces him to make a choice.

6. These axioms — the content-vs.-expression duality of language, the unique structure of every language, and the interdependence of its parts — underlie, then, the linguist's judgment of any language. Most of the special disciplines grouped under linguistics deal with the *expressive* or *formal* aspect of language. The science which is concerned with the structure of meaning, or *content,* is *semantics;* and it is with semantics that the translator is involved at every stage of his task.

7. Semantics emerged as an independent field in the early 19th century and was first known as semasiology (Reisig, 1830). Its application, like that of the other branches of philology, along with the natural sciences, followed the dominant trend of Darwinian theory. Words were traced through history, the philologist proper being concerned with the evolution of their forms, while the semasiologist added to this an interest in the evolution of meaning which accompanied a given form. Attempts were made to find laws which would make this evolution of meaning codifiable and predictable. It was noted that the meanings of given words underwent certain metamorphoses which were labelled "broadening", "narrowing", "transfer", etc. :

7.1 *Broadening* : *dog,* originally designating only one breed of dog, later came to designate this animal generically.

7.2 *Narrowing* : *deer,* which originally meant "animal" in general, later came to refer only to one species of animal. Similarly, *hound,* once the general word for "dog", is now restricted principally to the meaning "hunting dog".

7.3 *Transfer* : The word for *rudder* in one dialect of colloquial *Arabic,* and in some forms of Spanish, has in modern times also been applied to "steering-wheel". Like-

wise, the word for "brakes" in most Romance languages is simply the word for "reins" transferred.

8. Such analysis is historically interesting and to some extent useful, but its application is rather limited. The voices of a few who, in the latter 19th century, saw broader implications in semantics (Humboldt, Hermann Paul) went unheard, and decades were to pass before their ideas were recalled. Hermann Paul was probably the first to point out that the most significant thing about, say, the "narrowing" of *hound* and the "broadening" of *dog* was precisely the fact that the one accompanied the other. Thus, *the total domain of meaning was more or less constant throughout,* and what appeared to be two independent developments was only two aspects of a single one.

Paul also realized that semantics need not restrict itself to concern with changes in meaning (diachronic semantics) but could also be profitably applied to the study of the distribution of meaning within a given language at a given moment in history, such as the present (synchronic semantics).

9. In 1924, when Ipsen coined the term *Bedeutungsfeld,* or semantic field[4], the trend was already away from the evolutionary outlook and toward the structural analysis of phenomena (cf. *Gestalt* psychology, and in its train, such now familiar approaches and emphases as functionalism in anthropology, psychomatic medicine, et al.) Ipsen's term was therefore eagerly seized upon and expanded in a number of directions and applications.

The basic figure used by Ipsen, and more broadly, by Jost Trier and others, was that of a mosaic of meanings, as reflected in the words (or more properly, morphemes) of a language, which segmented the otherwise undifferentiated, underlying field of meaning. In other words, expression, called here the *Wortdecke* ("word cover"), was superimposed upon content.

This, of course, could not be wholly adequate, since meanings of given words (viz., the pieces of the mosaic) commonly overlap. In his effort to cope with this problem, Weisgerber went even further and developed elaborate three-dimensional schemes.

10. Porzig went further yet, and, while accepting the principle of the semantic field, which had mainly been applied to the differentiation of nouns, be found that the structure of meaning was better expressed by using as a point of departure the basic relations which exist between given nouns and given verbs, or between nouns and adjectives. As a working convention, Porzig saw verbal and adjectival nuclei from which nouns radiated.

11. Thus, *bark* and *dog* stand in an inherent relationship to another as do *grasp* and *hand.* Earlier, we noted, in describing the delimitation of meaning of the verb "catch", that it stands in special affinity with certain nouns. Quite noteworthy in this regard is a recent reference work published by the Rodale Press called *The Word Finder*[5], designed to be of help to the writer by supplying him with adjectives to go with nouns, nouns to go with verbs, et al. Thus, under "flame" one finds, amongst scores of other adjectives : vivid, dancing, pure, sacred, ardent, hungry, lurid, springing,

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4 See Suzanne Ohman's excellent summary entitled "Theories of the 'Linguistic Field' ", WORD IX, 2 (Aug. 1953), to which I am indebted for some of the data employed here.
5 Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pa. (1947); xxxii + 1317 pp.

etc. Verbs associated with "flame" include : burst into, kindle, feed, leaps, flickers, devours, rages, etc. The verb "dislike" has : strongly, inherently, heartily, deeply, intensely, mutually, etc. There is no evidence that the publishers of this volume were operating along the lines of Porzig's theory, or indeed that they ever heard of him. Relationships of this type between the parts of an utterance are an obvious (though hitherto little considered) fact in the structure of any language.

12. The application of structural linguistics — with its insistence on the interrelatedness of the parts of a language — to the solution of the semantic problems of language development (i e., historical or diachronic semantics) has also borne fruit. Instead of the traditional tracing of the etymologies of single words, for example, Trier and other German scholars (sometimes called "the Neo-Humboldtian school"), and American scholars such as Professor Yakov Malkiel of the University of California, have found that the words of a language can be grouped into families according to their form, and that meaning tends to be attached to these "family forms", rather than to the individual words. Like the individual in society, therefore, the individuality of a word, and therewith its form and meaning, is continually threatened with submersion by the group, and only the fact that the needs of communication require it to have differentiative value save it from a sort of totalitarian levelling. There is an eternal dichotomy between drift towards a norm and the need for expressive contrast — that is to say, between death and life. It follows, of course, that words live and evolve in groups, rather than as detached particles.

13. Minority systems within a language are always under attack. Every new generation of English-speaking children tries to establish "taked", "goed" and "falled", and every new generation of French children wants to say "plus bon" instead of "meilleur". Often enough, they succeed : "swoll" for "swelled" now evokes laughter; "whom", a vestige of case distinction which English as a whole has discarded in favor of syntactic devices, survives only in formal usage; and if "if" plus a past tense form equals hypothetical present (if we had, if I knew), then "if I was" must relegate "if I were" to the museum.

Catty, says Bolinger, of the University of Southern California, won out over such rivals as *waspish, vixenish* and *shrewish* because of its formal affinities to *cutting, curt* and *sarcastic* — and meaning tagged along. The word *pacific* had to go, in favor of *peaceful*, because *-ific* suggests "drive and power" (terrific, horrific, prolific). The initial cluster 'gl-' is generally associated in English with something visual (glimpse, glance, glow, glare, glitter, gleam). And new words in the language, if they are to survive, must fall in line with formal groupings appropriate to their meaning[6].
14. To depict these relationships, Bolinger adds still another picture to our geometrical armory : that of a stellar universe, with suns and satellites and an eternal interplay of attractions and repulsions.

And, I should add, there is no reason why, in the quest for an expressive image, one cannot go on into the ultradimensional — say, the statement of semantic and/or formal relationships in terms of brain cells con-

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6 See article by Dwight L. Bolinger, "The Life and Death of Words"; **The American Scholar** Summer 1952. Regarding the "root-forming morphemes" of the type of English 'gl-', 'sn-', '-ump', etc., see L. Bloomfield, **Language** (1933) 14.9 (p. 244f.).

nected in infinite degrees of directness and indirectness by nerve paths, the more travelled routes corresponding to those of maximum response, etc.

15. As long as we realize that these figures are arbitrary working devices, and not segments of the Absolute, any of them may have a degree of validity, in an appropriate application, as an approach to reality. We must content ourselves with being finite and human. With this in mind, we may feel free to borrow whatever figures may be useful for our purposes.

15.1 The mosaic has the advantage of being in a single plane, but it is certainly disadvantageous from a printing point of view — apart from the fact that the division into segments is inescapably arbitrary and becomes almost impossibly complex as soon as one goes beyond the contrast of more than two meanings. Consequently, a box arrangement has often been used to show, for example, the relative distribution of word forms covering the same semantic area in two or more languages. Here are some examples :[7]

Fig. 1

15.2 Given such a diagram, the contrasts are simply stated by enumerating the meanings represented in the language which has the maximum number of subdivisions. Thus, Spanish distinguishes between *leña* (firewood), *madera* (the material wood), *bosque* (a wood such as one could go walking in) and *selva* (forest) — distinctions of which the other languages are capable but do not require beyond the subdivisions indicated. Spanish also distinguishes between "to be" (existence) and "to be" (location or transient status). In English, on the other hand, we make a distinction not known to Spanish between "mineral" and "ore", and, according to locale factors, between "forest", "jungle" and "bush". Swedish and the other Scandinavian languages make a distinction not known to English, French or German between "to play (a musical instrument, etc.)" and "to play (games)".

7 After Llorach, **Gramatica Estructural**, p. 20. This is not a true semantic field, however : the concept of "the material wood", synchronically considered, juxtaposes that of "stands of trees" mainly by virtue of the homonymic factors in French, English and German.

16. Perhaps the most useful application that could be made of the mosaic figure in actual representation would be in the superimposition of a schematic, un-filled-in mosaic representing the subdivision of an arbitrary area of meaning in one language upon another mosaic for the corresponding area of meaning in another language, thus graphically illustrating, in general, the characteristic non-coincidence of semantic fields in any two given languages : The same figure, of course, can equally well serve to
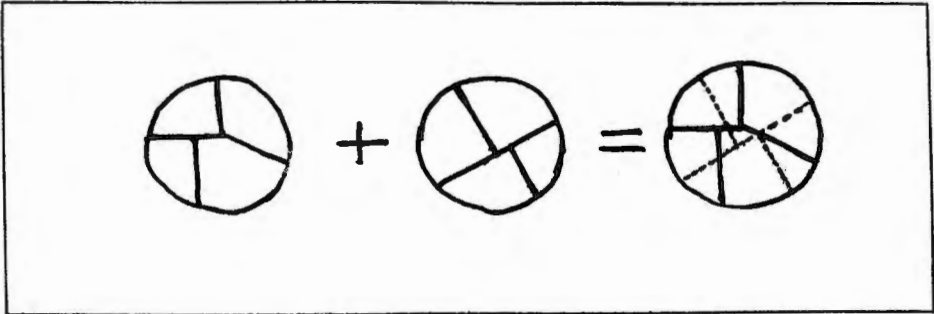

Fig. 2

illustrate the contrast between two different periods of the same language, or two stages in the language development of a single individual[8]. It also provides tangible terms for the more lucid presentation of a number of useful generalizations. One may say, for example, that, if we let these two patterns represent two entire languages, and we were to find, when one was superimposed on the other, that the patterns coincided perfectly, then there would be word-for-word correspondence between the two languages (to the linguist, of course, a known impossibility, even between the respective forms of two languages representing a limited semantic area ; but this is just what the layman — or 98 per cent of humanity — has always imagined to be the case, as any language instructor can only too well confirm). Furthermore, in a bilingual dictionary, given such a situation, there would never be more than one definition opposite the entry (or perhaps two or more purely synonymous definitions — also not strictly possible).

17. On certain levels, to be sure, word-for-word correspondence at least tends to be the case. It will be noted that in bilingual *technical* dictionaries, including the best ones, single definitions per entry predominate; and where, occasionally, there is more than one definition, different applications of the word in different trades or milieus are reflected — rather than differences of meaning determined by the word's relation to its neighbors in the sentence, as is more likely to be the case in a general bilingual dictionary.

A *socket wrench*, after all (G. Aufsteckschlüssel), has a sharply defined function, and all socket wrenches are constructed on the same general principle, so that there are not too likely to be whole or partial synonyms for it within any given language. So also supersonic speed (G. Ueberschallgeschwindigkeit), which is both unique and absolute in its meaning.

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8 My 3-year-old son, for example, does not distinguish between "find" and "look for" : "What are you finding ?" he says.

18. Other conclusions we may draw from the fact of this more or less one-to-one correspondence of entry to definition in the bilingual technical dictionary, in contrast to the normal one-to-many relationship one must find in a good general bilingual dictionary — conclusions which experience will corroborate — are :

18.1 The only polyglot dictionaries that are not somewhat of a fraud are polyglot technical dictionaries.[9] For general polyglot dictionaries, one need only consider that, whereas in a bilingual dictionary only two oppositions are involved (A to B, and B to A), a dictionary dealing with five languages, to accomplish the same results, treating each language separately in terms of the other four, must present twenty such relationships. One can therefore arrive at some estimate of its thoroughness and consequent worth simply by dividing its total thickness by ten and comparing the result with an average bilingual dictionary printed on the same quality paper. ... In practice, such thoroughness is not attempted. One need only consider the ramifications of an exhaustive treatment of French "rendre" in several other languages to realize why. What usually happens is that the general polyglot dictionary is built around the language of the editor/compiler, and one outstanding meaning of the entry in *his* language must suffice with heavy preference accorded to cognates. Thus : attention — attention — atención — atenção — Aufmerksamkeit. (What, then, of Fr. attention = look out ! = Achtung ! ?)

18.2 A general bilingual dictionary that has an average of only one or two definitions per entry is certain to be wholly inadequate for even elementary needs — often, alas, *particularly* for elementary needs, since such dictionaries are likely to be watered down versions of orthodox larger dictionaries unrevised since 1890 and deal only with the parlor language of the ladies and gentlemen of that era.

In fact, it may be stated categorically that nearly all pocket dictionaries are junk, whose main virtue lies in their portability, and the sense of confidence they may give their owners, rather like a sort of St. Christopher medal...

Good dictionaries are almost invariably expensive — that there is such a thing as a bargain bilingual dictionary is a myth cultivated by publishers with old plates to exploit.

It does not follow, of course, that *because* a dictionary is bulky and expensive, it is also a good dictionary. At the present time, for example, no dictionary of Portuguese-English/English-Portuguese adequate for 20th century use exists, to my knowledge. If you try to buy one, you will be sold the 2-volume Michaelis — a subjectively compiled affair deceptively well-supplied with examples (nearly always the wrong ones, you find). ... The only scientifically compiled general bilingual dictionary of modern Arabic is the Arabic-German one by Wehr — and a corresponding German-Arabic volume has yet to appear.[10]

Considering the pivotal role that bilingual dictionaries play in communication between cultures, we must regard this as a shocking state of affairs — one need only think of this factor (amongst many others, of course) in connection with the general lack of mutual understanding between the Arab world and the West.

18.3 Finally : the clearcut interlingual correspondence of technical terms is the reason for the selection of the technical sphere for experiments with *translating machines* : the machine requires less instructions. It would be much harder to transmit nursery talk (assuming one wanted to). ... The same is true of *Interlingua*, which recently had its major debut in connection with a medical conference : medical language tends to be a single, world-wide code. ... This is the reason for the emphasis on the technical which seems to go with these language-barrier eliminating projects, and the desirability of international brotherhood among scientists, while worth the rhetoric devoted to it, is wholly incidental to the choice.

(To be continued in our next issue)

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9 Two fine examples of this genus are : **Tekniikan Sanasto, saksa-englanti-suomi-ruotsi-venaja** (Technical Vocabulary, German-English-Finnish-Swedish-Russian), Helsinki (1950) Otava; and for a special technical field, Clairville, **Polyglot Medical Dictionary, French-English-German-Latin.**
10 This state of affairs, I am glad to report, has been substantially corrected for Portuguese-English by the appearance in September 1958 of James L. Taylors' **A Portuguese-English Dictionary,** Stanford University Press. See my review in the current issue of **Library Journal.**