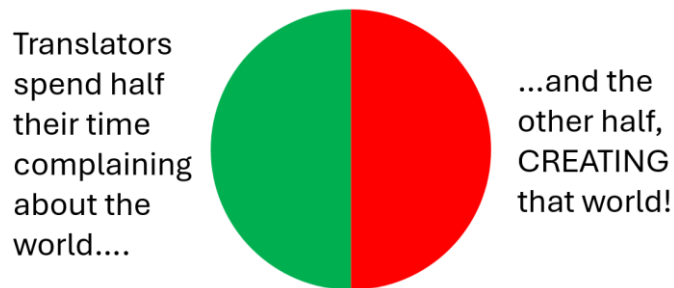


242 “The word for...”

This Chapter is based on an article I published on LinkedIn, which itself was inspired by an exchange with several people on LinkedIn, several of whom identify as “translators” but all of whom were defending the idea that there are some words in some languages which can be meaningfully described as “the word for...” some word in another language. There is no such thing, and translators of all people ought to know this. Those who tacitly promote this idea are unwittingly reinforcing the idea that translation is a rules-based, mechanistic, swapping of one code for another. These are the very expectations which ENABLE the replacement of translators by “bilingual” people and come to that, by AI. This surely comes under the heading of



I spent years on LinkedIn carefully avoiding other translators, but some unwise clicks and connections has led the algorithm to think I now need a cavalcade of bubble-dwelling blowhards lecturing the universe about what “interpreting is REALLY like” all complete with misspelled AI graphics and breathless reports that “Translation is not just replacing word-for-word you know!” like an eight-year-old who has just discovered that man is mortal.

After 40 years in the translation and interpreting industry, treating every market interaction as a precious opportunity to elevate the general understanding of how language and translation work, it causes me dismay to see people on social media sharing information that reinforces historical prejudices or over-simplifications (even by ostensibly denying them), rather than dismantling them and building something useful in their place.

Not everyone is like that. Occasionally I read something that is spot on, and which does not cravenly shy away from the hardened core of linguistics and translation theory in order to sound agreeably shallow to the distracted public.

But others are quite counterproductive.

Recently a person in NZ posted a thank you on LinkedIn to their two translators. The main point of their post however was to express astonishment that a particular word in English had no “word for it” in Māori.

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te reo Māori — a telling
sign?

I commented:

No language has "words for" the words of another language. Not a single language, and not a single word in any language has a counterpart waiting in another language ready to stand in for it. That's because they are different languages.

Languages evolve without the consciousness of other languages, or by making allowances for them, or by preparing the way for them.

Languages are statements about who a group of people are and they have zero interest in who others are.

So whatever you think you have "discovered" here, please multiply that by every word, in every language.

What followed was a rather pointless exchange of comments but then one person piped up and asked what I meant.



Cogitator | Because progress needs friction

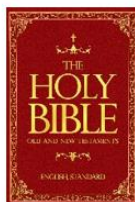
Chris Poole . yes, I am interested... because your statement was so emphatic "not a single word". But as Holly pointed out there are words with clear synonyms (kai/food etc) and even though a language evolves for a people in their place and time, the experiences of those people (including the basics like eat, discover, share) are not unique to them. I feel like you see this

I am honoured. But my response was too long for a comment, so I have turned it into this article.

Yes, there is no "word" in any language, that is the "word for" any word in any other language on every occasion and in every context. The only word of a translation that can be plausibly claimed to be "the" word is the word for which someone paid a translator.

That is my claim. There are a number of ways for me to back this up.

The first piece of evidence is the easiest to understand and available to anyone: Leaving aside mere revisions, there are several hundred different translations into English of the Bible (and countless other historical texts).



Why is that? If each word of the original had had "the word for it" waiting to be used in English, there would only be one translation, and indeed no "translator" would have been required. It would have been sufficient for a bilingual person (which is a very different thing from a translator) to simply identify the corresponding word in the target language and swap them over.

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But perhaps this is a straw man argument. There are *some* words in the Bible that are generally translated the same way, but others are different in every version.

Just as there is more than one way to say something in one language, there are almost always more options when you come to translate them. Perhaps I am exaggerating when I imply that that applies to all words.

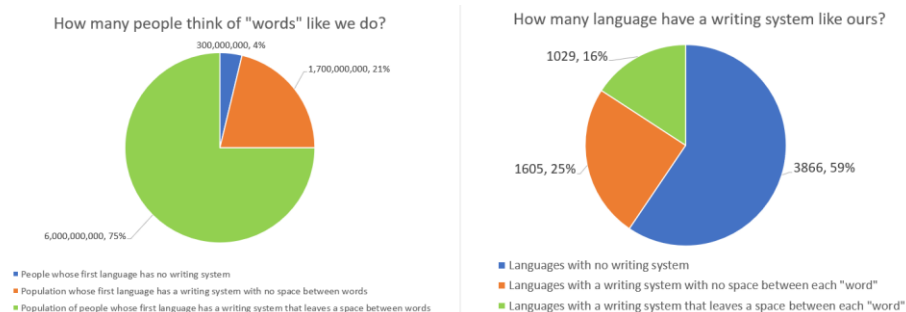
Are there two types of words? Some universal words that are only ever translated the same way, and others unique to a particular language community? As a translator I have never seen it proposed that some words are flexible and others fixed or indeed that they are easily identified as one or the other.

A translator must have a completely free hand to work out the best solution for their client without being bound by the insistence by someone external to that transaction that “ $x = y$ ”. If translators had to follow rules like that, they would be no more than taxi drivers or button-pushing machine operators, rather than the professionals they like to claim they are.

The practical approach is to assume that every single word must be treated on its merits, or, more technically, on the role it plays in the sentence, on the functional contribution it makes to the overall meaning and pragmatic effect of the text or speech.

The next reason is that the concept of a “word” is by no means universal. English speakers assume that any text is unambiguously made up of units of meaning called “words”, and that everyone agrees on the number and arrangement of them, because of a space left either side of each one. (The non-translator then goes on to assume that the “word” is also the unit of translation).

This is not the case. 85% of the world’s languages are not divided into “words”, and 25% of the world’s population write languages with no “words” as defined above (mostly Japanese, Chinese and Arabic).



Even in German (and other languages with spaces) individual words are built up with prefixes and suffixes that modify their meaning so that they end up doing the work of half a dozen words in English. The idea of a one-to-one equivalence in any translation task is known by the experienced translator (in any language pair) to be absurd.

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So, the assumption that all languages are divided up in the same way as your own, into “words” with a corresponding “word for it” in other languages, displays a deep ignorance of how languages are constructed. To be honest it is also rather Imperialist. Other languages and cultures don’t exist “for” mine. They exist for themselves.

The last reason is that translators don’t translate “words”.

A bilingual dictionary is not providing you with translations of anything. It is simply a record of words and the possible ways they have been interpreted by the speakers of other languages in the past. The total number of words and associated interpretations that are included in a dictionary - in other words the length of this list - is governed by the economics of publishing and not by the number of expressions available to the educated or inventive speakers of any language, let alone that “God of languages”: the translator.

They are not books of rules or prescriptions. They are some of the raw and reference material from which translators construct sellable judgement and decisions.

The proper unit of translation is “purpose” (“Skopos”). If a translator has the interests of another person in their hands, their primary duty is to ask themselves “What is this person trying to achieve, and how is that being frustrated by the language barrier?” and, to the extent that it requires text, speech or sign in a source language being reproduced in a target language, then they must do whatever is necessary, and the best they can, to restore to that person the experience of sharing a language. They literally have no business doing anything else.

As they do this, they will find that the individual words of the source language (such as they can be identified as such – see above) will be shuffled around, they will divide and merge, blend and dissolve, turn into five words or disappear altogether, with new ones sprouting where none were expected.



The expertise professed by the professional translator is the person able to make those decisions (quickly enough and often enough to make a living). Translation isn’t about the words; it’s about the interests of the parties. (If it was just about words, that would be a branch of linguistics, or perhaps a matter for the publishers of dictionaries, and anyone calling themselves a translator who confuses these things will likely be replaced by AI).

Anyone tacitly imposing the condition on a translator that the translation be morphologically identical to the source (i.e. one word = one word) is forcing the translator to jump through a

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medieval hoop, based on a primitive grasp of language, completely uniformed by over a thousand years of academic insights.

Finally, the context of a word determines what happens to it in translation, not a glossary of corresponding terms.

One commenter on the thread insisted that I was wrong because “ ‘kai’ is the Māori word for ‘food’ ” (and was supported by the commenter to whom I am responding here who called them “synonymous”, but that’s not what “synonymous” means).

When we start out as translators that is certainly how we tend to structure our understanding, because we have none. But we soon discover that it is “*a* word for” not “the word for” food, and there are many others. And the only person in the room being paid to choose “the” word on that occasion is the translator.

Choosing the best one in a given context is the skill of translation. (For example, the Māori word “kai” appears in translations of plenty of English sentences in which neither the noun “food” nor the verb “eat” appears but which speak of “edible things”, “snacks”, “supper” and “meal”. So clearly the word “kai” is “the word for” a number of words, not just “food”.)

Other major elements of context are register and rhetorical effect. Even if we don’t call it “literature” every type of text ever has a literary dimension: prosody, figurative speech, cultural references, and many other mechanisms designed to engage the reader at a psychological or emotional level, and a professional translator has no grounds to exclude those considerations from their responsibilities. That sometimes means that even proper nouns like “Karen” become derisive metonyms or “Wellington” might be a metaphor requiring a completely different treatment in the target language.

Any objections along the lines of “Oh but that’s literature” or “Oh but our language is different” are called “special pleading” or “exceptionalism” and typify a person at the early stages of learning.

Context includes a number of considerations far too high to list here, but the primary one is the question “what does the client need?”

This whole thread started with a client thanking two translators who apparently met the client’s needs. No one else outside that transaction can possibly gainsay what they delivered and were paid for. Especially if they’ve spent the money.

No one knows where or how the work of a particular source word will ultimately be done in translation until someone is prepared to pay a translator to create that truth. And if your expectation is that everything you call a “word” in the source language is bound to appear in the target language as what you consider to be a single word, let alone a specific one whose functional equivalence you thought was preordained - you will suffer a form of disappointment that your translator ought to be able to mitigate with some client education.

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