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PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETING PROVERBS AND SAYINGS IN BILINGUAL LEARNER'S DICTIONARIES

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Abstract. Proverbs and sayings constitute a culturally marked layer of phraseology that poses serious challenges for bilingual lexicography. Due to their figurative meaning, pragmatic function, and national specificity, proverbs are often inadequately represented in bilingual learner's dictionaries. This article analyzes the key problems of interpreting proverbs and sayings in bilingual educational lexicography, focusing on semantic non-equivalence, cultural untranslatability, pragmatic loss, and pedagogical constraints. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of phraseology, pragmatics, and translation studies, the paper argues that traditional lexicographic practices fail to ensure communicative and cultural equivalence. The study also refers to existing empirical research on dictionary use and proposes lexicographic strategies aimed at improving the interpretation of proverbs for foreign language learners.

Key words: proverbs, sayings, bilingual learner's dictionaries, lexicography, pragmatics, cultural meaning, equivalence.

In modern linguistics, proverbs and sayings are regarded as stable phraseological units that encode collective experience, social norms, and culturally embedded knowledge (Mieder, 2004). Unlike free lexical items, proverbs function as complete communicative acts and carry implicit pragmatic meanings that depend heavily on context.

Bilingual learner's dictionaries are designed to support foreign language acquisition by providing equivalents and explanations between two linguistic systems. However, research shows that figurative language, particularly proverbs, remains one of the least successfully treated areas in bilingual lexicography (Moon, 1998; Atkins & Rundell, 2008). According to empirical studies, over 60% of language learners report difficulties in understanding proverbs even when dictionary explanations are provided (Boers, 2000).

This article aims to examine the core problems related to the interpretation of proverbs and sayings in bilingual learner's dictionaries and to identify linguistically grounded solutions.

One of the most widely discussed problems in proverb interpretation is **semantic non-equivalence**. Nida (1964) distinguishes between *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*, noting that figurative units rarely allow for direct correspondence.

Studies of English–Uzbek and English–Russian bilingual dictionaries reveal that approximately 45–50% of proverbs lack direct equivalents and are often translated literally, leading to semantic distortion (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005).

For example, literal translation may preserve lexical components but fail to convey metaphorical meaning, while functional substitution may erase the source culture's

imagery. Learner's dictionaries frequently prioritize brevity over accuracy, which results in oversimplified interpretations.

One of the most persistent challenges in the lexicographic interpretation of proverbs and sayings is their strong cultural embeddedness. Proverbs are not merely linguistic units but carriers of culturally constructed knowledge, values, and social norms accumulated over generations. As culturally marked expressions, they frequently encode culture-specific imagery, historical references, and shared assumptions that are not transparent to speakers of another language.

In bilingual learner's dictionaries, this cultural specificity often results in interpretative inadequacy. While lexical meaning may be rendered through translation or paraphrase, the underlying cultural motivation of a proverb is frequently omitted. This omission significantly reduces learners' ability to comprehend the intended meaning beyond its surface interpretation. Research in cultural semantics suggests that without access to culturally grounded explanations, learners tend to interpret proverbs literally or apply them in inappropriate communicative contexts (Wierzbicka, 1997).

Lexicographic studies demonstrate that educational dictionaries systematically underrepresent cultural information due to space constraints and pedagogical simplification. Atkins and Rundell (2008) note that culturally bound expressions are frequently treated as ordinary phraseological units, with minimal or no reference to their cultural background. As a result, learners may acquire an incomplete or distorted understanding of proverb semantics.

Moreover, cultural asymmetry between languages intensifies the problem. When the source and target cultures conceptualize similar experiences through different metaphors, functional equivalents may obscure national imagery, whereas literal translations may become semantically opaque. This creates a fundamental lexicographic dilemma: whether to preserve cultural authenticity or to prioritize learner comprehension. Failure to resolve this dilemma systematically leads to inconsistent and methodologically weak dictionary entries.

From an educational perspective, insufficient cultural interpretation limits the development of intercultural communicative competence. Since proverbs often serve evaluative and normative functions in discourse, misunderstanding their cultural implications may lead not only to semantic errors but also to pragmatic failure in real communication.

Pragmatic Meaning Loss and Contextual Deficiency. In addition to cultural specificity, the pragmatic dimension of proverbs constitutes a major source of interpretative difficulty in bilingual learner's dictionaries. Proverbs function as complete utterances that perform specific speech acts, such as advising, warning, evaluating behavior, or expressing criticism. Their meaning is therefore inseparable from communicative intent and discourse context.

However, lexicographic practice tends to prioritize semantic explanation while marginalizing pragmatic information. As a consequence, learners are often provided with abstract definitions that fail to indicate how, when, and for what communicative purpose a

proverb should be used. Pragmatic theories emphasize that meaning emerges not only from linguistic form but also from speaker intention and situational context (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996).

Empirical research confirms that lack of pragmatic guidance leads to frequent misuse of proverbs by language learners. Boers (2000) reports that learners who rely exclusively on dictionary definitions demonstrate a significantly higher rate of pragmatic errors, particularly in formal or intercultural communication. This suggests that semantic comprehension alone does not guarantee communicative appropriateness.

Another critical issue is the absence of contextualized examples. Proverbs are highly sensitive to discourse environment, and their pragmatic force often depends on intonation, register, and social relations between interlocutors. When dictionaries present proverbs in isolation, learners are deprived of essential cues required for correct interpretation and usage.

Furthermore, pragmatic labeling—such as indicators of irony, evaluative stance, or register—is rarely applied consistently in learner's dictionaries. This omission weakens the instructional value of dictionary entries and contradicts the communicative goals of modern language teaching, which emphasize pragmatic competence alongside grammatical accuracy.

Therefore, the pragmatic underrepresentation of proverbs in bilingual learner's dictionaries constitutes a systemic lexicographic shortcoming that directly affects learners' communicative performance.

Bilingual learner's dictionaries operate within strict pedagogical and methodological constraints that significantly affect the treatment of proverbs and sayings. Unlike general or scholarly dictionaries, learner-oriented lexicographic resources are designed for users with limited linguistic competence and cognitive processing capacity. This educational orientation necessitates simplification; however, in the case of proverbs, simplification often results in semantic and pragmatic reduction.

One of the central pedagogical challenges lies in balancing accessibility and descriptive adequacy. Proverbs are semantically dense units whose meaning emerges from metaphorical mapping, cultural knowledge, and discourse conventions. When dictionary explanations are excessively simplified, learners may acquire only a generalized or incomplete interpretation, which fails to reflect the communicative value of the expression. Nation (2013) emphasizes that oversimplified definitions hinder deep lexical acquisition and impede the development of productive competence.

Another significant constraint concerns learner proficiency levels. Bilingual dictionaries rarely differentiate proverb explanations according to users' linguistic competence. As a result, the same entry is expected to serve both lower- and higher-level learners, despite their divergent interpretative needs. Empirical studies in applied linguistics demonstrate that advanced learners benefit more from elaborated explanations and contextual examples, whereas beginners require guided interpretation supported by usage notes and functional paraphrases (Laufer & Hadar, 1997). The absence of level-sensitive treatment limits the pedagogical effectiveness of proverb entries.

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Furthermore, space limitations inherent in printed and digital dictionaries encourage lexicographers to minimize commentary. This practice often leads to the exclusion of pragmatic labels, stylistic markers, and cultural annotations. Consequently, proverbs are presented as isolated semantic units rather than as discourse-sensitive communicative tools. Such representation contradicts contemporary pedagogical principles that emphasize contextualized and usage-based learning.

Methodologically Grounded Lexicographic Strategies for Improvement. Addressing the identified challenges requires a shift from purely translational lexicography toward an integrative, learner-centered approach. Modern lexicographic theory advocates for methodological frameworks that combine semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions of meaning in a structured and pedagogically informed manner (Atkins & Rundell, 2008).

One effective strategy involves the use of multi-layered interpretation, where a proverb entry includes a functional equivalent in the target language, followed by a concise explanatory paraphrase. This structure allows learners to access meaning at different levels of depth while preserving communicative relevance. Research indicates that such hybrid explanations significantly enhance comprehension and retention compared to single-method definitions.

The inclusion of contextualized examples represents another crucial improvement. Corpus-based examples reflecting authentic usage enable learners to observe pragmatic functions, register constraints, and discourse positioning of proverbs. Empirical evidence suggests that contextual illustration increases correct proverb usage by up to one third in learner production tasks (Boers, 2000).

Additionally, the systematic application of pragmatic and stylistic labels—such as evaluative function, degree of formality, and speaker attitude—provides essential guidance for appropriate use. These markers contribute to the development of pragmatic competence and reduce the risk of communicative failure.

Finally, frequency-based selection criteria should guide the inclusion of proverbs in learner's dictionaries. Only proverbs with high communicative relevance and attested contemporary usage should be prioritized. Corpus-driven frequency analysis ensures that lexicographic resources align with actual language use rather than prescriptive tradition.

The interpretation of proverbs and sayings in bilingual learner's dictionaries remains a complex lexicographic problem due to semantic non-equivalence, cultural specificity, pragmatic loss, and pedagogical limitations. Existing dictionaries often fail to provide sufficient information for accurate comprehension and appropriate usage.

This study confirms that an interdisciplinary approach combining phraseology, pragmatics, and translation theory is essential for improving the lexicographic treatment of proverbs. Enhanced interpretation strategies will contribute not only to lexical competence but also to learners' cultural and communicative proficiency.

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