Lexical Items and Situational Context

In chapter 4, three kinds of meaning were discussed—REFERENTIAL MEANING, ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING, and SITUATIONAL MEANING. We have now discussed referential meaning in some detail. The **situation** in which words are used is also crucial to the full meaning of words. The particular word that is chosen will depend on various factors of the **situation** in which the communication is made. The translator must be aware of the meanings of words which are conditioned by the **situation.**

Connotation of lexical items

In addition to conveying factual information by reference to THINGS, EVENTS, ATTRIBUTES, and RELATIONS, words also reflect attitudes and emotions. For example, the word *mother* has a positive and emotional response for most people. The word *woman,* on the other hand, is more neutral. But the word *witch* would be negative for the majority of English speakers. Words bring forth an emotional response in people and this response has sometimes been referred to as *emotive meaning.* In the example above, the words *mother, woman,* and *witch* might or might not be referring to the same person. However, even when a word does refer to the same referent, there may be various lexical choices based on connotative or emotive meaning. For example, the words *father, daddy, dad, pop,* and *the old man* are all lexical items which refer to "the kin who is of the previous generation, male and lineal." The word *father* has a **connotation** of respect; whereas, *daddy* **has** a **connotation** of intimacy. *The old man* shows some lack of respect for most speakers of English or might be used in jesting. People do not think of words according to their REFERENTIAL MEANING only but also react to them emotionally.

Connotative meanings are often culturally conditioned. A word which has a **positive connotation in** one culture may actually have a **negative connotation** in another, as for example, the English word *tribe.* In some parts of the world, ethnic groups react very **positively** to being called a *tribe.* In other parts of the world, this same word has **negative connotations** and people do not want to be called members of a *tribe.*

Referentially, the word *tribe* would be referring to an ethnic group, but the positive and negative overtones must also be taken into consideration if the word is chosen to be used in translation, or a wrong meaning may be conveyed.

The word *fox* has **negative connotations** in English when it is associated with the qualities *of cunning* and *deceitfulness.* In some other languages, the equivalent word which refers to the animal *fox* may have no **emotive meanings** at all or may have a **positive connotation.** Words which may be completely neutral in the source language, if translated literally, may have strong emotional overtones in the receptor language. Words also change in their **connotative meaning.** For example, the word *tribe,* mentioned above, may be quite neutral in a given country and later develop a **negative connotation** or a more **positive connotation.** The word *boj* in Pidgin (Papua New Guinea) has **negative connotations.**

Words often occur in sets which range from negative to positive. For example, the English words *skinny, thin,* and *slender* probably have the following **connotation** for most people: negative for *skinny,* neutral for *thin,* and positive for *slender.* As far as the referential meaning, they are synonyms, but they are used very differently because of **connotation.** In the same way, *fat* is probably negative; whereas, *overweight* is more neutral and *plump* more positive in connotation. A translator must be aware of the positive and negative **connotation** of words in the source language so as to translate with an appropriate **connotation** in the receptor language.

Attributes which are near synonyms may not appropriately be interchangeable. For example, the English set *beautiful, handsome, pretty,* and *lovely* are all referring to more or less the same quality. However, *handsome* has additional **connotation** of usually referring to a male person and certain other things such as a horse or a piece of furniture. *Pretty,* on the other hand, would not be used in the same contexts, but rather to refer to a female person, to flowers, etc. *Beautiful* is probably the most neutral and can be used in more contexts than the other words of the set.

Words may also vary in connotation depending on whether they are old or new. Generally speaking, there are words that are *archaic, old-fashioned, neutral,* or *modern.* Each language will have words which would not be appropriate because they are considered *archaic* or *old-fashioned.* In some situations, a translation using words which are *modern* might be inappropriate because, to some speakers of the language, they would not be accepted vocabulary. On the other hand, *archaic* words may be rejected by other members of the society. For example, in English the use of *thee* and *thou* shows that the people who are using the old language are religious and belong to a certain group that still uses that language. Because of this **connotation,** it would be inappropriate to use these words in most translations into English today.

In studying the lexicon of a language, it is important not only to know the referential meaning of the word, but to know which words are considered old or new and, therefore, in a certain sense, are not a part of the neutral present day vocabulary. There may be places in the translation where an old or a new word would be appropriate, but the important thing is to be aware of this possible difference. If archaic words are used, the translation will probably not be used after the older people are gone. Words understood by all speakers of the language are the ones which will be the best choice in the translation.

Words have different connotative meanings in one language than in another because of the negative or positive taboos which have developed in the cultures. We have mentioned that words with heavy negative taboos often result in euphemisms. The presence of euphemistic expressions for certain words would be an indication that the word probably has a strong negative connotation. In some cultures, there is a negative taboo about saying the name of a person who is dead. In other cultures, there may be a very positive attitude and children will be named after their recently departed ancestors.

There may also be positive taboos which result in certain connotations of meaning. For example, among the Hebrew people, the high respect or positive connotation for the word *God* has resulted in euphemistic ways of referring to *God*. Because of great respect, the name is not used in normal conversation, but words like *heaven* or *the most high* are used as substitutes. The substitute words should not be translated literally into a language that does not normally make this kind of substitution. The meaning *God* should be translated overtly.

Speaker-addressee relationship

The choice of lexical items may also depend upon who is talking to whom. The speaker-addressee relationship will often determine choices of vocabulary that result in sub-dialects of the language. A person does not talk the same way to a small child as he does to an educated audience at a university. Factors such as age, social class, educational level, and technical expertise of the audience will affect the choice of vocabulary used.

Most languages have some speech variation which is considered "baby talk." In English, if we hear someone say sentences like *Baby want milk* or *Daddy loves you,* we immediately know that the speaker is addressing a very small child. Oral communication with young children may involve special grammatical constructions such as the examples cited above, or it may involve the use of sound changes or the choice of special words. Among the Aguaruna, it is common to hear a woman who is talking to a baby change all of the voiceless sounds to voiced. For example, *tsamau,* which means "banana drink," would be pronounced *chamau* when talking to a small child. When one hears an adult making this sound

change, one knows immediately that a small child is being talked to. In talking to a small child, the word *daddy* would probably be chosen rather than the other lexical choices mentioned above *(father, dad, the old man)*. *Mommy* would be used in English rather than *mother*. In addition, vocabulary would be rather limited to suit the understanding of the child.

In many societies, teenagers develop a special vocabulary which they use when talking to one another. Although understood by the adults around them, this special vocabulary would not be used by the adults. Also, in any group, there will be vocabulary which is still understood by most of the population but only used by older people, since the words are no longer part of the vocabulary used by the majority. It is, of course, obvious that the translator will want to avoid vocabulary which is age-specific and use the vocabulary which is understood by the majority of the people without any **age connotation,** unless the source text author intends to show age by the choices in the original.

In some languages, there will be differences between **men's speech** and **women's speech.** There will be a difference simply because men talk about different things than women do. Men will have specialized vocabulary to talk about the work that they are involved in, such as house construction, business, shamanism, religious rites, and so forth. The women will have specialized vocabulary for talking about the work that they do in the garden, sewing, cooking, and so forth. There are certain words which have the connotation of being associated with women and others which will have the connotation of being associated with men. Cocama (Peru) has different pronominal sets depending on whether a man or a woman is speaking. Dixon (1971:436-37) reports a difference between everyday speech and **mother-in-law language** in north Queensland, Australia. Every speaker of Dyirbal knows both languages, the regular language and the special language used in the presence of relatives who are considered taboo. (The term "mother-in-law" is used to refer to all taboo relatives.) Completely different vocabulary is used. For example, in display 13.1, there are three words which express ways *to cut* (Dixon 1971:437).

EVERYDAY LANGUAGE	"MOTHER-IN-LAW" LANGUAGE
nudin (sever)	*dyalngan*
gunban (cut a piece out)	*dyalngan*
hanyin (split a log)	*bubaman*

Display 1

This language presents an extreme example, but it is not uncommon to have vocabulary which is used in special situations or when talking to certain people. The translator must be aware of these restrictions in choosing lexical equivalents to avoid wrong connotations or Misunderstanding.

Levels of politeness are very important in the Japanese culture. "Japanese has a complex inter-connected system of lexical selection and verbal constructions which vary depending on who is speaking, to whom one is speaking, and about whom one is speaking" (Hinds 1973:155).

In his article Hinds gives lexical items which have the same referential meaning but differ by the added meaning components of *humble, honorific,* and *neutral* (see display 13.2).

ENGLISH	HUMBLE	HONORIFIC	NEUTRAL
wife	*kanai*	*okitsan*	*tuma*
house	*uti*	*otaku*	*ie*
aunt	*obci*	*ohcisan*	

Display 2

The *humble* word is used to refer to oneself and to someone or something immediately connected with oneself. The *honorific* form refers to another person whose status is meant to be elevated.

Levels of politeness are also used in selecting verbs. Note the following examples (Hinds 1973:156):

sasiageru	to give to an equal of high status or to a superior of high status to give to an
ageru	equal or superior to give to an intimate
yarn	or an inferior to give to the speaker
kudasaru	(deferential) to give to the speaker
knrern	(nondeferential)

When translating into Japanese, levels of politeness become very important in choosing the correct word. When translating from Japanese, it will probably not be possible in most languages to keep these distinctions, but the translator should be aware of this loss of meaning.

One of the main concerns of the translator who is translating for indigenous minority cultures is the educational level of the audience for whom he is translating. If the translation is to be read by people with the level of primary education, the vocabulary chosen must be vocabulary

which would be understood by those people. If, however, the translation will be used primarily by people who have a secondary education there will be a great deal of additional vocabulary which might be used. For example, more educated persons tend to have borrowed more words from other languages and use these as part of their own language. Persons with less education would probably not understand many of these borrowed words. A more educated person will have an extensive vocabulary in the areas in which he has studied; whereas, he may lack some in the vocabulary of other people in his culture because he will not have been involved in many of their experiences, due to the fact that he was in school.

Communication situation

In addition to the age, sex, and educational level of the speaker (writer) and the audience, there are also many factors in the **communication situation** which will affect the particular choice of vocabulary. Different vocabulary will be used in giving a **formal** speech than that which would be used in **casual** conversation in one's home or with friends. There will be special pronunciation, words, and grammar for formal speech, informal speech, and casual speech. For example, the word *inebriated* would be used in formal speech, *drunk* in informal speech, and *stoned* in casual speech. A person might be addressed as Dr. *Jones* in a formal speech, *John* in informal speech, and *Buddy* in casual speech. In English, *younger generation* is more formal than *children,* and *kids* is less formal. One would expect to find formal speech used in the classroom, in parliament, when the elders of the village speak to the people, and in radio broadcasts. Informal speaking would be used outside the classroom, around the fires in the village, when eating together, and in most conversations. Casual speaking would occur in the home and with close friends.

The matter of **formal** versus **informal** is often closely related to the location where the speech is made. In writing, there will also be degrees of formality, and one would not write using the same kind of vocabulary when writing a letter to some government official as one would when writing to one's friend. Part of this, of course, would be the difference in subject matter, but even the way of greeting and the way of expressing the content will be different. In writing an official letter, words *residence* or *incision* might be used; whereas, in writing about the same subject to a friend, one would use *house* and *cut.*

Technical terminology may also have special connotative value for those who use them. Sometimes people will use more technical or more formal vocabulary, in order to impress the audience with their own level of education or status in the community. The use of technical terms can be a way of speaking which will eliminate some people from

understanding because they are not acquainted with the technical terminology. The translator must carefully keep in mind who the audience is for whom he is translating and not use vocabulary which is so technical that it will not be understood. A medical bulletin translated for doctors might use words like *incision, lesion, tonsillectomy,* and *optometrist.* The same information translated for rural people with less education might use *cut, wound, have tonsils out,* and *eye doctor,* respectively.

Within the same language, certain vocabulary items may be used in one **region** or country, and a different vocabulary in another **region** or country, to mean the same thing. For example, the word *cookie* is used in the United States to refer to the same thing which is called *biscuit* in Australia. The American word *trunk* (of a car) is equivalent to the word *boot* in Australia and the word *gas* is equivalent to *petrol.* In New Guinea, the Pidgin speakers in one area use the word *buscat* and those of another area use the word *puse* meaning *cat.* In West African English, the word *dash* is used for *tip* (money left for a waiter) and *bush* means an *uncultivated* (or *nontown) area.*

It is important that the translator be aware of *the* **regional differences** and make every attempt to use words which will be understood as widely as possible. If one is translating for the speakers of a local area, then, of course, the particular form used in that area will be chosen.

Cultural meaning of words

One of the most difficult problems in translating is found in the differences between **cultures.** The people of a given **culture** look at things from their own perspective. Many words which look like they are equivalent are not. They have special connotations. For example, the word *pig* has a very negative connotation in the Jewish culture, but in the cultures of Papua New Guinea *pig* has very positive connotations because *pigs* are a very important part of the culture. In the American culture, this word is neutral in most of its uses. This difference is based upon **cultural** variations and the part that *pigs* play in the society.

Different **cultures**...have different focuses. For example, the cultures of New Guinea focus on gardening, fishing, foods, trees, plants, and ceremonies; whereas, the culture of America focuses on working, earning money, sports, schooling, and marriage. Some societies are more technical and others less technical. This difference is reflected in the amount of vocabulary which is available to talk about a particular topic. There may, however, also be both technical and nontechnical vocabulary to talk about the same thing within a given society. If the source language text originates from a highly technical society, it may be much more difficult to translate it into the language of a nontechnical society. For example, to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into the languages of

Papua New Guinea or the languages of the Amazon of South America, there will be many problems in vocabulary having to do with such things as *priest, temple, sacrifice,* and *synagogue.* If one were translating a book on social science, dealing with African cultures, it might be very difficult to find equivalent words for items of these cattle cultures when translating for Papua New Guinea languages or for Amazon jungle groups. The same would be true in translating documents about the Eskimos and about *snow* for the Arabs who live in the desert. When the cultures are similar, there is less difficulty in translating. This is because both languages will probably have terms that are more or less equivalent for the various aspects of the culture. When the cultures are very different, it is often very difficult to find equivalent lexical items.

The culture is often reflected in the figurative usages of words. For example, in America we use *sheep* in a figurative sense as "one who follows without thinking." In Papua New Guinea, people use *cassowary* in figurative speech, but this would never be used figuratively in America because there are no cassowaries. The matter of the figurative uses of objects of the culture will be discussed more in the chapter on metaphors. The important thing to note here is that the object is the same; that is, if we are talking about a *pig* in Papua New Guinea or a *pig* in the Jewish culture, the object is the same. However, the meaning is quite different since in Papua New Guinea *pig* signifies *food* and *wealth,* but among Jewish people, it has a connotation of *unclean* and is a *nonfood* item.

Symbolic actions

In every culture, there will be certain actions which will be **symbolic.** These will occur in the source language text, usually without any indication of what the significance of the action is. If the action is simply translated literally, it may result in zero or wrong meaning. For example, various movements of the head are **symbolic** in most languages. If the text simply says *he nodded his head,* without any indication of why, this might be misunderstood; if in the source language culture, nodding the head meant *yes* and in the receptor language culture, nodding of the head had no particular **symbolic meaning.** It might also be that in some other culture, nodding of the head would indicate negative rather than positive response. For example, among the Choi of Mexico, wagging one's head from side to side indicates an emphatic *no* and wagging it up and down signifies *joy.* In the Greek New Testament, wagging the head is used as a symbol of *derision,* but to show this same kind of *derision* among the Witoto of Peru, a person would stick out his chin. In most English speaking countries, a person points to himself with his finger towards his chest when saying *I,* first person, but this is not true for the Chinese. The word for *I* or *me* in old Chinese was *tseu* which means *nose.* In China, one still puts his finger on the side of his nose when saying *I (Encyclopedia Americana,* Vol. 12).

If the form of an action is already associated with a different function in the receptor language, it is difficult sometimes to know how to translate **symbolic actions.** If the intended meaning is simply made explicit and the word expressing the action is kept in the translation, it still may not make a lot of sense although in some situations this would help. For example, if the source language text says *shake one's fist,* the translator could add in *anger* in order to clarify the meaning of the gesture. However, *if shake one's fist* is used in the receptor language for some other **symbolic meaning** this could be very confusing to the readers of the translation. In such cases, it might be better to drop the specific reference to the **symbolic action** completely and simply make explicit the meaning of the action. It might be possible in some instances to use something more **generic.** For example, instead of saying *he shook his fist at him* one could say *he showed that he was very angry.* The important thing is that the translator be aware of the fact that **symbolic actions** often have different meaning in the receptor language and in the source language. An adjustment may need to be made in order to "avoid a wrong meaning or no meaning at all.

EXERCISES -Lexical Items and Situational Context

A. State the **emotive contrast** between the following lists of lexical items which have the same underlying meaning. In what **social context** might each be used?

 1. father, daddy, dad, pop, the old man
 2. die, kick-the-bucket, pass away, leave us, expire
 3. speak, preach, lecture, share, talk

B. List all of the words which are used *for father, die,* and *speak* in a language other than English which you speak. What are the differences in **connotation** between members within each set which you have listed?

C. How would you react to the following words?   Rate them 1-5 on a scale with 1 being good and 5 being very bad.

child	death	father	Blood
God	school	prostitute	Potatoes
bread	colonialism	tribe	Vomit
mother	murder	car	Traitor

D. Find five different sets of words in a language other than English in which the members of the sets have essentially the same referential meaning but one has a **good connotation,** one a **bad connotation,** and one has a **neutral connotation.**

E. Write a sentence you might say in English with each of these **symbolic actions.** You may change the tense of the verbs. Use natural English:

1. wrinkling up nose
2. raised eyebrow
3. shrug of shoulders
4. nod of head
5. clenched teeth
6. hands on hips, feet apart
7. chest out, shoulder back
8. wave of hand towards oneself
9. wave of hand, no direction
10. man tipping his hat
11. chin protruding
12. smiling
13. talking out of the side of the mouth
14. stomp of the foot

F. Which of the above symbolic actions are used in your culture? For each of these, write a sentence you might say with each of these **symbolic actions.**

G. Explain why there are three different ways in which John Smith is addressed in the following:

1. His neighbor passed him with a quick, "Good morning, John."
2. The chairman said, "If Mr. Smith will please come forward we will proceed."
3. The president of the college added, "Professor Smith will be presenting the lecture."

H. In what **communication situation** might "Good morning" in English be accompanied by each of the following:

1. a salute
2. a hand shake
3. a smile
4. a scowl
5. a bow
6. a wink
7. a wave of the hand

I. Would these same actions (H above) accompany the greeting in the other language which you speak? In what situation?