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ENGLISH-UKRAINIAN TRANSLATOR’S FALSE FRIENDS

It is commonly renowned that “translator’s false friends” have always been of particular interest to scholars and language students alike; ironically, professionals and people with a good command of a foreign language are more likely to be deceived by them than those who have just started learning the language. The term “translator’s false friends” denotes words in the source and target languages which are more or less similar in form. From the historical point of view “false friends” are a result of interactions between languages. Nevertheless, they occasionally may result from accidental coincidences, and while speaking of cognate languages, they are based on words with common prototypes in their parent language. Thus, it is not surprising that the number of “false friends” varies greatly for different language pairs; it is estimated, for instance, that there are several thousand English-Ukrainian false friends. The vast majority of them are loans from some common source, genuine or pseudointernationalisms and derivatives of such loan words. Results of direct English-Ukrainian language contacts form a significantly smaller group. “False friends” always belong to related semantic fields or at least can occur in similar contexts; words whose similarity is obviously accidental usually cause no false associations. V. Komissarov (1990) divided “translator’s false friends” into two groups: words with utterly different lexical meanings and words with some common elements in their semantics. The latter may be divided into several subgroups: words with a different set of notional meanings; words with different emotive or stylistic connotations; words with different usage, or combinability; realia. The first subgroup is closely related to the last one, as differences in the notional meaning of words are sometimes caused by differences in the lives of nations; some traditions of word usage may also be connected with differences in realia. Stylistic divergences may also be accompanied by slight semantic differences. A peculiar group of English-Ukrainian translator’s false friends is formed by words with different meanings in different varieties of English (usually British and American English). “False friends” have always been a source of numerous translation errors, some of which may become widespread in translation practice. Moreover, a number of Russian and Ukrainian words have acquired new meanings through language interference caused by frequent cases of unnecessary loan translations. Finally, such errors in translations of belles-lettres, scientific and business texts may lead to serious misunderstandings.

How can one handle translator’s false friends? There is still no definite answer to the question despite the amount of research done on it. In fact, the most suitable solution to the problem seems to be in the translator’s own hands. On seeing an unknown or ambiguous word in the text, one should consult a dictionary as long as it is possible; however, it is even more advisable to constantly improve one’s vocabulary and extralinguistic competence. Paying special attention to the context also proves to be helpful in most cases. Moreover, although the coverage of lexical combinability is insufficient in most bilingual dictionaries, the translation problems caused by it are easily surmounted by a translator’s linguistic feeling that may be either “inborn” or developed through continual practice and learning.

References