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The Conceptual Structure of Terms as the Tertium Comparationis in Contrastive Terminology

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The paper discusses the issue of determining the proper tertium comparationis (TC) for contrastive equivalent terminological units from two languages. Taking into account the monosemic and mononymic character of the "ideal" term, for TC we assume the common conceptual structure of the two contrasted terms, expressed linguistically by a common definition. Hence the aim of contrastive analysis is reduced to assessing quantitatively and qualitatively the various linguistic means used in the two languages for reflecting the characteristics (genus and differentia) of the same concept.

(Author)

In contrastive linguistics the term "tertium comparationis" (TC for short) denotes the background of likeness against which differences between two (or more) languages are explored. When contrasting lexical units a (presumably) universal set of semantic components is assumed to be a convenient TC (3). These components are identified by applying the procedure of componential analysis (4). The subsequent steps in the analysis involve the identification of the so-called semantic feature complexes (3), each complex specifying one of the senses of each lexical item. Then follows a matching procedure: those L1 and L2 lexemes or meanings receiving the same components are by definition translation equivalents.

When contrasting two terminological units of terms belonging to two languages (L1 and L2) we suggest that a rather different procedure, as compared to the one described above, should be used. The reasons for putting forward this different approach lie mainly in the idiosyncratic nature of the term as a linguistic sign in comparison with the common word. For instance, the word is dependent on context, i.e. word form and word content form an inseparable unit, whereas the term is a linguistic symbol assigned to one or more concepts which are defined from neighbouring concepts. In addition, it should be noted that between concept and term a lasting connection is made in a very deliberate way in contrast to the word which is formed mostly unconsciously (for further details on the idiosyncratic nature of the term as a linguistic symbol (1), (7), (2)). These idiosyncracies necessitate a basically different approach to the procedure of contrasting two (or more) terms of L1 and L2. The difference, in our opinion, should consist in pursuing aims which are very different from the ones pursued when contrasting two (or more) common lexical items. Taking into account the general belief of terminologists that the main problem of terminology is the relationship between definition and term (5), (6), the former being the linguistic expression of the conceptual structure of the term, i.e. its meaning, we suggest that the final aim of the contrastive analysis of two terminological units should be a quantitative and

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qualitative assessment of the degree of reflection of the conceptual structure in each term, in other words, an assessment of the nominative value of the two contrasted terms. Such an approach requires a certain extent of idealization or formalization, which is typical of any linguistic enterprise.

Firstly, we assume a priori that the two terms being contrasted are absolute translation equivalents. Thus they are supposed to have the same conceptual structure, which is expressed linguistically in a common definition no matter what language that definition is worded in.

Secondly, we assume that the two equated terms are both monosemic and mononymic (on monosemy and mononymy in terminology see (2)), i.e. one concept only is assigned to one term and one term only to one concept. Given that condition, then the conceptual structure being common for the two terms, can be taken as convenient criteria for comparison of the tertium comparationis. Thereby the latter will be represented by the genus-species relationship in the concept, the organization of the conceptual structure playing the role of a universal set of semantic components. The semantic feature complex in this case will be only one resulting from the monosemic and mononymic character of the term.

Bearing in mind the theoretical considerations set out in the previous paragraphs, we suggest the following procedural steps in contrasting two (or more) terminological units in L1 and L2:

- Step 1 - extracting the genus and differentia "operands", i.e. providing the set of universal semantic com-

ponents as the tertium comparationis (how this could be done practically will be the subject of another paper);

- Step 2 - Mapping these components onto the semantic components contained in the meaningful units (morphemes for one-word terms and lexemes for multiword terms) on the surface structure of the two contrasted terms;

- Step 3 - Assessing the degree of reflection on the conceptual structure on the surface structure of each term, or in other words, assessing their nominative values. The latter procedure involves a quantitative assessment as expressed in the number of concept characteristics reflected in the term form and a qualitative assessment consisting in the determination of the various linguistic means used for reflecting these characteristics, such as existing resources in the language (by transfer of meaning), direct borrowings, calques or loan translation, classical term elements, etc.

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