

Meaning-Text Theory in the translator's classroom

PRIMOŽ JURKO

Univerza v Ljubljani

ABSTRACT

The paper brings a brief presentation of key concepts of the Meaning-Text Theory and focuses on the practical value of its lexicographical tool for the description of syntagmatic meaning relations, i.e. the lexical functions (LFs). Although originally developed to facilitate the description of lexical relationships within the monolingual explanatory-combinatory dictionary, the system of lexical functions proves highly valuable in the bilingual setting as well, particularly in the L1-L2 translation, i.e. in encoding tasks. While translation into the translator's mother tongue is commonly regarded as less likely to suffer from poor knowledge of collocations, it is the L1-L2 translation that is typically affected by the translators' erring on the collocational side. On the basis of selected lexical items the paper will bring a brief comparison of lexicographical presentations used in encoding (Slovene-English dictionaries) with the results of the LF-based approach. Applied systematically and consistently within a given lexical field, the encoding-adapted system of LFs will help translation students get a better grasp of the elusive collocability of lexemes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Section 2 brings a brief presentation of the *Meaning-Text Theory* (henceforth MTT), and more specifically, where and how it can be relevant to translators' education. After introducing *lexical functions* (henceforth LFs) as an integral part

of MTT (§ 3), the paper concentrates on the notion of collocation and the problems of its successful translation (§ 4). Next, a key assumption of the universal nature of LFs and their value in translating collocations is tested on several lexical items in Slovene and English and the resulting collocations are compared to those included in relevant contemporary bilingual dictionaries, focusing on shortcomings as well as strengths of various approaches (§ 5). The paper closes by providing some general advice as to how to tackle the problem of both teaching and mastering L₁-L₂ translation of collocations (§ 6), which remains one of the fields where the bilingual dictionaries continue to fall short of translators' expectations.

2. MEANING-TEXT THEORY: SOME BASIC TENETS

The *Meaning-Text Theory* is best seen as a complex theoretical framework aimed at an exhaustive description of natural languages. Essentially the brainchild of Aleksander Žolkovskij and Igor Mel'čuk, it was launched in the 1960s and 1970s in Russia (Žolkovskij & Mel'čuk 1967, Mel'čuk 1974). Since then MTT has been developed in Russia, Canada and Europe, and has met with increasing popularity in the last decade, mostly owing to its formal nature, which makes it well suited for computer applications. MTT is based on three *postulates*, which are briefly described below.

Postulate I: MTT sees any natural language as a many-to-many correspondence between an infinite set of meanings and an infinite set of texts. This means that any given meaning can be expressed by different texts (synonymy) and a given text can correspond to different meanings (ambiguity through homonymy or polysemy).

Postulate II: The MTT correspondence is described by a formal device which simulates the linguistic activity of a native speaker – a *Meaning-Text Model*. The *Meaning-Text Model* is thus able to produce meaning-text correspondences that are seen as natural utterances by native speakers of a given language.

Postulate III: Given the complexity of the Meaning-Text correspondence, intermediate levels of (utterance) representations have to be distinguished: more specifically, a Syntactic and a Morphological level.

What is important in our case is the chosen fundamental directionality embedded in the methodology of MTT: it is *encoding* (or active-use) oriented, so its primary concern is how a given meaning is expressed in the language, rather than what a given expression means (also dubbed *decoding*). The notion of encoding is what underlies our chief concern and will be addressed later, although the encoding that will be in the focus of our argument is of a different kind: in MTT terms encoding is a monolingual activity and refers to expressing a meaning in a coherent text (i.e. text formation), while encoding in a bilingual (i.e. translation) setting refers to translation from the mother tongue into a foreign language (L₁-L₂ translation).

2.1 THE EXPLANATORY-COMBINATORIAL DICTIONARY

A key component and an integral part of an MTM is the *Explanatory-Combinatorial Dictionary* (ECD), which is its lexicographical resource. While we cannot go into any detail due to space constraints, suffice it here to say that an ECD is not a dictionary in its classical form, but rather a very complex work of reference aimed primarily at linguists (for a brief introduction to the field of ECD lexicology see Mel'čuk *et al.* 1995). The level of complexity is such that it does not lend itself to use without a considerable amount of previous study, which enables the user to come to grips with the rigorous and highly formal metalanguage of the dictionary. The main reason for the complexity is that the compilers of ECDs have set themselves a formidable task: an *exhaustive* treatment of the included (single and multi-word) lexical units in terms of their semantic contents, possible syntactic patterns as well as their collocations. While pursuing the elusive goal of exhaustiveness is of course well worth every effort, the downside of this approach is obvious: currently the largest ECD is that of French (Mel'čuk *et al.* 1984-1999), which in four volumes (on a total of roughly 1,200 pages) covers some 200 lexical units. Other MTT-based dictionaries and lexical projects include the on-line dictionary of Spanish collocations *DiCE* (<http://www.dicesp.com>), and the combinatorial dictionary of French *DICOUÈBE* (<http://olst.ling.umontreal.ca/dicouebe/>). For a full list see the MTT home page (<http://meaningtext.net>).

The time consuming ECD enterprise has been criticized by some lexicographers for its highly formalized approach (e.g. Siepmann 2006). However, its system of *lexical functions* (LFs) has proved to be a very flexible tool for the lexicographical description of collocations, and is discussed at length in Wanner (1996). The system of LFs has enjoyed wide acceptance and appreciation among lexicographers (e.g. Atkins & Rundell 2008) and will be at the core of this paper.

3. LFs: HOW DO THEY WORK?

One way to describe LFs is to say that they are labels for “institutionalized” lexical relations holding between lexical units. The connection between two (or more) lexical units is such that if a given meaning M is to be expressed by the lexical unit L_1 , the choice of the second lexical unit L_2 is automatic. In an ECD, LFs are used extensively to describe collocational restrictions between lexemes. The following example will illustrate the functioning of LFs. The LF with the meaning *to perform / carry out* is called **OPER** (printed in bold in accordance with the MTT notation conventions) and, with the nouns *walk*, *passeggiata*, *Spaziergang*, *sprehod* as its English, Italian, German and Slovene keywords respectively, the function has these values:

OPER(walk) = take

OPER(passeggiata) = fare

OPER(Spaziergang) = machen

OPER(sprehod) = iti na

One can immediately see the automatism mentioned earlier; from the example it is also clear that the automatism is *language specific*, so the automatic choice of the value of the LF OPER across various languages is not meaning related at all. If it were meaning related, you would be likely to hear Italian learners of English to say *Let's *make a walk*, or a Slovene translation into English might be *They went *on a walk*. To anyone however briefly involved in the education of translators this type of error is certain to ring a bell, and next we will look at how LFs can be the remedy for wrong collocations.

4. COLLOCATIONS AND LFs IN L₁-L₂ TRANSLATION TEACHING

The notion of collocation in the last two decades has become the focal point of contemporary lexicology in general and corpus linguistics in particular. From the seminal early ideas of Sinclair (1991) about the prevalence of the *idiom principle* in texts, to the growing acknowledgment of the importance of collocation in foreign language teaching (cf. Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992, Granger 1998, Handl 2008) and the resulting classroom-oriented works (Lewis 2000, McCarthy & O'Dell 2006), the study of lexicon in general and collocation in particular has proved to be of paramount importance for learners' L₂ linguistic performance. Mastering of collocations is in learners commonly seen as that highly regarded component that brings one's L₂ speech and writing closer to the native-speaker standard. This is particularly important in translators' training, since efficient and good translations should in principle be able to pass as native speakers' texts.

Despite the growing awareness of the ubiquity of collocation and its role in learners' L₂ output, the number of specialized dictionaries of collocations has remained low. If we consider English as one of the languages which currently enjoy the best lexicographical coverage, we will see a big time gap from the early treatment of collocations in the *BBJ Dictionary of English Word Combinations* (Benson *et al.* 1986) to the relatively limited *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* (Hill and Lewis 1997) and the more recent *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* (Lea 2002) and *Macmillan Collocations Dictionary* (Rundell 2010). While literally dozens of dictionaries have been published on other phraseological phenomena (e.g. phrasal verbs or idioms), the production of commercially viable collocational dictionaries has been limited to the four mentioned above (i.e. to the best of my knowledge). One of the reasons for this long gap may well be the growing inclusion of collocations into learners' EFL dictionaries such as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Summers 2009) or the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (Rundell 2007). However, the number of collocations covered in specialized dictionaries of collocations is much higher: an estimate based on random sampling shows that the number of collocations included in the new edition of the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* is about tenfold of those in the latest edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Turnbull 2010).

What is proposed here as a regular classroom practice with students at the intermediate level and above, is that all L₂ lexicon-building activity be organized in a manner which is centered around collocations. A very efficient and reliable

way of achieving this is by means of LFs. In our experience even advanced students too often rely on oversimplified views of equivalence between L₁ and L₂ lexical items, which is in their opinion basically a one-to-one relationship. When confronted with translation of collocations, they often rely on the hypothesis of translatability, and because they are unaware of collocational restrictions, they commit errors by translating collocations *per partes* and not as wholes. Our attempt at improving the translation students' handling of L₂ collocations is based on extensive use of LFs in the vocabulary-related parts of their training. At the core of our approach is the raised students' awareness of the complex and web-like relations between lexical units. Students are typically quick to respond to the new model of lexicon and appreciate the more intricate links between the respective vocabularies of the source and target language.

No further explanation of the LFs will be given here, as this is not the goal of the present paper. Moreover, their names are all derived from Latin and are more often than not self-explanatory, especially in the context of the examples provided below. The LF-approach to collocations will be illustrated taking the nouns *life* and *money* as keywords, and we will be interested in what verbs can precede these two nouns, i.e. what are the typical actions or states associated with *life* and *money*. The methodology is based on previous empirical work (Jurko 2000), which yielded a selection of the most productive LFs, i.e. those LFs which were found to have the highest collocational potential. In the present analysis the application of these LFs was combined with and compared against the data derived from corpora of contemporary Slovene and British English (*FidaPlus* and *UKWaC*, respectively, both available at <http://the.sketchengine.co.uk>). Both the LFs and their values are listed in the tables below. Note that the examples included in the tables do not present an exhaustive list, they should rather be considered cases of high illustrative value.

4.1 KEYWORD 1: ENG *life* /SI *življenje*

The concepts or meanings (and the corresponding LFs) most often associated with the keyword *life* include:

- to make longer – expressed by CAUSPREDPLUS, CAUSCONT
- to make shorter – expressed by CAUSPREDMINUS
- to make better – expressed by ANTIDegrad
- to make worse – expressed by Degrad
- to begin – expressed by CAUSFUNC₁
- to end – expressed by STOP

Note: in the tables below the two slashes sign (//) precedes a synonymous expression of a given value in order to comply with the notational convention of MTT.

LF	življenje	life
CAUSFUNC ₁	vdahniti [N _{dat}] - dati [N _{dat}] -	give [N] the breath of - give [N] -
STOP	izgubiti - //umreti	lose [N's] - //die
PERMCONT	rešiti -	save [ART] -
INCEPREAL	zaživeti -	start living [det] -
CAUSCONT	podaljševati -	make - longer
DEGRAD	greniti -	make - bitter
ANTIDEGRAD ANTIDEGRAD+BON	polepšati - olajšati -	make - nicer make - easier
FUNC ₀	teče	runs
OPER ₁	živeti - imeti -	live [ART] - have [ART] -

Table 1. LFs of *life* / *življenje*

4.2 KEYWORD 2: ENG MONEY / SI DENAR

The concepts or meanings (and the corresponding LFs) most often associated with the keyword *money* include:

- to accumulate - expressed by the LF CAUSPREDPLUS
- to spend - expressed by the LF CAUSPREDMINUS
- having a lot - expressed by the LF A₁MAGN
- having a little - expressed by the LF A₁ANTIMAGN

LF	denar	money
A ₁ A ₁ of a whole country	denaren monetaren	- related monetary
Magn	//bogastvo	//wealth
A ₁ Magn	bogat premožen	rich/wealthy affluent
A ₁ AntiMagn	reven	poor
CausFunc ₁ Ver	zaslužiti -	earn -/make-
CausFunc ₁ AntiVer	ukrasti	steal -
IncepOper ₂ Plus	obogateti	become rich/get rich
CausPredPlus ^{gradually} CausPredPlus	varčevati - zbirati -	save - raise -
CausPredMinus	Trošiti/porabljati	spend
CausPredMinus ^{temporary}	posoditi	lend
CausPredMinus ^{unthriftily}	zapravljati zafrčkati	waste squander

Table 2. LFs of *money* / *denar*

5. COMPARISON WITH CURRENT DICTIONARIES

From the vantage point of an encoding translator, the first source to check for collocations is obviously the ubiquitous bilingual dictionary. Due to space constraints our analysis will be limited to the entry *življenje* (English *life*) as it is presented in the currently largest *Slovene-English Dictionary* (Grad and Leeming 1996) and the most recent *Concise English-Slovene and Slovene-English Dictionary* (Zaranšek 2006).

5.1 THE ENTRY ŽIVLJENJE IN THE SLOVENE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

As the complete entry is rather long, here we will only list the verbs that can precede *življenje* and are included among examples of use:

dati (svoje) -e za domovino - to lay down one's life for one's country;
izgubiti -e - to lose one's life;
rešiti si -e - to save one's life;
podariti sovražniku -e - to spare an enemy, to spare an enemy's life;
prositi za (svoje) -e - to beg for one's life;
obuditi koga k -u - to revive someone;
spremeniti svoje -e - to change one's way of living;
stopiti v -e - to come into being, to enter the world;
tvegati svoje -e - to risk one's life, to dice with death;
vzeti si -e (*napraviti samomor*) - to take one's own life;
zagreniti komu -e - to embitter someone's life;
žrtvovati svoje -e - to sacrifice one's life

The verb equivalents in the above examples can be divided into three groups:

- a. contrastively relevant examples, dati – lay down, izgubiti – lose, rešiti – save, podariti – spare, prositi za – beg for, tvegati – risk, vzeti si – take one's own, žrtvovati – sacrifice;
- b. free combinations or contrastively irrelevant examples: obuditi – revive, spremeniti – change;
- c. obsolete or wrong examples: stopiti – come into being / enter the world, tvegati – dice with death, zagreniti – embitter.

Compared to the LF generated list these verbs are not included in the dictionary:

- dati nekemu/nečemu življenje – give sb/sth life
- greniti – make bitter
- vdahniti življenje nekemu/ne emu – give sb/sth the breath of life
- zaživeti – start living

Note that the dictionary provides partially or completely wrong equivalents in at least two instances: in the case of *dolgo življenje* the included equivalent is *longevity*, which may mislead the unsuspecting translator to produce a text like **He had a happy longevity*. The second error is the equivalent for *zagreniti*, which is *embitter*: this particular verb does not collocate with *life*, but rather with

persons or actions, so if somebody is making your life bitter, you are likely to be embittered, but not your life. But since the aim of this paper is not criticism of the *Slovene-English Dictionary*, let us turn to the most recent one.

5.2 THE ENTRY ŽIVLJENJE IN THE CONCISE ENGLISH-SLOVENE AND SLOVENE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Since the entry is relatively short, it is presented here in its entirety:

vsakdanje življenje: everyday/day-to-day life;
način življenja: way of life;
[družinsko, spolno, družabno] življenje: [family, sex, social] life;
človeško življenje: human life;
posmrtno življenje: life after death;
nočno življenje: nightlife;
(način življenje) [zdravo]: life, lifestyle

What is evidently missing from the entry are verbal examples of use, so the Slovene user is left clueless as to what one can *do* with *life* in English. Apparently, the entries in both dictionaries could be greatly improved by including the LF-generated collocations. However, as noted above, these shortcomings of the Slovene general purpose dictionaries were somewhat expected. Next, some practical guidelines will be offered as to how to introduce LFs in translators' training.

6. HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF LFs IN THE CLASSROOM

The MTT is a self-contained linguistic theory and the system of LFs alone is a highly complex organism. Therefore, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to attempt anything more than merely hint at the highly formalized and rigorously organized layers underlying the MTT structure. However, although the system of LFs was developed as a strictly lexicographical instrument, its impact and depth of insight into syntagmatic meaning relations stretches far beyond MTT lexicography and natural language processing. In our case, its role has easily been adapted to fit the requirements of translators' training. The universal validity of LFs is perhaps their greatest strength: in our case this means we could simply take the Italian noun *vita* (life) as the keyword and the system would come up with a list of verbs as *dare*, *perdere*, *salvare*, *vivere*, *allungare*, *rovinare*, *complicare* and a host of others.

If the Latin-sounding names of LFs should prove to be too much to swallow for some students, the teacher can always replace them with commoner concepts or paraphrases (e.g. *to a great/small extent*, *begin/end*, *big/small*), as long as the student's output is a collocation and not an isolated word. A seemingly meaningless detail is also hidden in the way students react upon hearing a collocation for the first time. In my experience many of them seem to rely completely on their aural memory and do not write the collocation down,

especially in a fast-paced training session. Although it may seem too obvious and even patronizing to some, it is advisable to make students aware of the importance of activating their visual memory as well. Naturally, these decisions will always depend on the specific learning situation, students' age, proficiency level, motivation and several other factors.

An LF-based collocation-hunt in a new lexical field can be very efficient as a brainstorming activity. A good starting point is to begin with *typical* actions, actors, circumstances, shapes etc. that provide the keywords of the field. The next step is to challenge the students to think of as many as possible complements of a lexical word: what can be done to or with a given noun? What adjectives will it allow as premodifiers? If the noun is an animate/active entity, what will it typically do? With a verb, students should be alerted to the most frequent adverbs, prepositions, etc. that keep it company. The result of such intensive problem-solving activity (that can be either organized as an independent task or placed in the middle of a translation class) is a closely knit network of several tens of collocations, which are learned in the proper context.

Raising the level of translation into L₂ in upper intermediate and advanced students in most cases equals raising the level of idiomaticity, which in turn means as few as possible or no wrong collocations. Therefore, putting appropriate stress on the elusive goal of mastering L₂ collocations is apparently of great importance and the system of LFs is only one of many possible ways of achieving it. However, it is one of the most elegant, flexible and efficient ones and for that reason alone worth investigating.

REFERENCES

- Atkins B.T.S. & Rundell M. (2008) *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Benson M., Benson E. & Ilson R. (1986) *The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Grad A. & Leeming H. (1996) *Slovensko angleški slovar*, Ljubljana, DZS.
- Granger S. (1998) "Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL writing: collocations and formulae", in *Phraseology*. Ed. by A.P. Cowie, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 145-160.
- Handl S. (2008) "Essential collocations for learners of English: the role of collocational directions and weight" in *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Ed. by F. Meunier & S. Granger, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp. 43-66.
- Hill J. & Lewis M. (1997) *The LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations*, Hove, Language Teaching Publishing.
- Jurko P. (2000) *Leksikalne funkcije: uporaba v eno- in dvojezičnem slovaropisju*, doktorska disertacija, Ljubljana, Filozofska fakulteta.
- Lea D. (2002) (ed.) *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lewis M. (2000) (ed.) *Teaching Collocation. Further Developments in the Lexical Approach*, Hove, Language Teaching Publications.

- McCarthy M. & O'Dell F. (2006) *English Collocations in Use*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Mel'čuk I. (1974) *Opyt teorii lingvističeskix modelej Smysl- Tekst. [Towards a Theory of Meaning-Text Linguistic Models]*, reprinted in 1999, Moskva, Jazyki russoj kul'tury.
- Mel'čuk I. Arbatchewsky-Jumaire N., Elnitsky L., Iordanskaja L. & Lessard A. (1984, 1988, 1992, 1999) *Dictionnaire explicatif et combinatoire du français contemporain. Recherches lexicosémantiques I-IV*, Montreal, PUM.
- Nattinger J.R. & DeCarrico J. (1992) *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Rundell M. (2007) (ed.) *The Macmillan English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, Oxford, Macmillan Education.
- Rundell M. (2010) (ed.) *The Macmillan Collocations Dictionary*, Oxford, Macmillan Education.
- Siepmann D. (2006) "Collocation, colligation and encoding dictionaries. Part II: lexicographical aspects", *International Journal of Lexicography* 19:1, pp. 1-39.
- Sinclair J. (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Summers D. (2009) (ed.) *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 5th edition, Harlow, Pearson Longman.
- Turnbull J. (2010) (ed.) *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 8th edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Zaranšek P. (2006) (ur.) *Mali angleško slovenski in slovensko angleški slovar*, Ljubljana, DZS.
- Žolkovskij A. & Mel'čuk I. (1967) "O sisteme semantičeskogo sinteza. II: Pravila preobrazovanja" [On a System of Semantic Synthesis (of texts). II: Paraphrasing Rules]. *Naučno-tekničkaja informacija, Vol. 2, Informacionnye processy i sistemy*, pp. 17-27.
- Wanner L. (1996) (ed.) *Lexical Functions in Lexicography and Natural Language Processing*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.

INTERNET SOURCES

- DiCE: Diccionario de colocaciones del Español, <http://www.dicesp.com> (last accessed 12.1.2011)
- DiCouèbe Dictionnaire en ligne de combinatoire du Français, <http://olst.ling.umontreal.ca/dicouebe/> (last accessed 15.1.2011)
- MTT: Meaning-Text Theory, <http://meaningtext.net> (last accessed 3.12.2010)
- SketchEngine, <http://the.sketchengine.co.uk> (last accessed 13.12.2010)