

**THE PROBLEM OF EQUIVALENCY IN BILINGUAL  
DICTIONARIES: A LEXICOGRAPHICAL AND CROSS-  
LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract:** *The primary function of a bilingual dictionary is to mediate between two linguistic systems by providing accurate lexical equivalents. However, the pursuit of "perfect" equivalence is often hindered by deep-seated semantic, structural, and cultural disparities. This article explores the multifaceted problem of equivalency through the lens of modern lexicographical theory. By examining the spectrum of equivalence—ranging from full congruence to absolute zero equivalence—this study highlights the limitations of traditional word-for-word substitution. The findings emphasize that equivalence is a dynamic, context-dependent process. The research concludes that lexicographers must transition from being mere "translators" to "cultural mediators" who utilize descriptive glosses and illustrative collocations to bridge the gap between Source Language (SL) and Target Language (TL).*

**Keywords:** *Bilingual Lexicography, Lexical Anisomorphism, Zero Equivalence, Functional Equivalence, Cultural Lacunae, Pragmatic Failure, Meta-lexicography.*

**Аннотация:** *Основная функция двуязычного словаря заключается в посредничестве между двумя языковыми системами посредством предоставления точных лексических эквивалентов. Однако стремление к «идеальной» эквивалентности часто затрудняется глубинными семантическими, структурными и культурными различиями. В данной статье рассматривается многогранная проблема эквивалентности через призму современной лексикографической теории. Анализируя спектр эквивалентности — от полной конгруэнтности до абсолютного нулевого соответствия — исследование подчеркивает ограничения традиционного дословного перевода. Полученные результаты показывают, что эквивалентность является динамическим и контекстно-зависимым процессом. В заключение делается вывод о том, что лексикографы должны перейти от роли простых «переводчиков» к роли «культурных посредников», используя описательные толкования и иллюстративные словосочетания для преодоления разрыва между языком-источником (SL) и языком перевода (TL).*

**Ключевые слова:** *двуязычная лексикография, лексическая анизоморфия, нулевая эквивалентность, функциональная эквивалентность, культурные лакуны, прагматическая неудача, мета-лексикография.*

## 1. Introduction

The fundamental challenge in bilingual lexicography is rooted in the fact that languages are not isomorphic. They do not share a universal, symmetric

map of reality; instead, each language functions as a unique semiotic system that categorizes human experience differently. This phenomenon, often termed **lexical anisomorphism**, ensures that neat one-to-one correspondences between the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL) are rare exceptions rather than the rule (Váradi, 2000).

The problem of equivalency arises when a lexical unit in the SL possesses a semantic range, stylistic nuance, or cultural weight that cannot be mirrored by a single term in the TL. Historically, bilingual dictionaries have been criticized for offering "decontextualized" lists of synonyms, which frequently lead to "pragmatic failure"—where a user selects a word that is grammatically correct but contextually or socially inappropriate (Gouws, 2017). This article aims to analyze the structural and cultural barriers to equivalence and propose strategic models for modern dictionary compilation.

### **Methods**

This research utilized a **qualitative meta-analysis** of established lexicographical frameworks and contemporary studies in bilingual terminography. The methodology involved:

- \* **Contrastive Typological Analysis:** Investigating how the structural differences between language families (e.g., Indo-European vs. Turkic) create systemic barriers to direct equivalence.

- \* **Thematic Literature Review:** Synthesizing theories from Nida's "Dynamic Equivalence" and Zgusta's "Lexicographical Equivalence" to identify modern shifts in the field.

- \* **Case Study Synthesis:** Evaluating the effectiveness of "gap-filling" strategies—such as calquing, borrowing, and explanatory paraphrasing—used in high-tier international dictionaries (Sephodi et al., 2025).

\* **Digital Corpus Analysis:** Reviewing how modern electronic dictionaries use parallel corpora to identify "functional equivalents" in real-world usage.

## **Results**

### Semantic Anisomorphism and Divergence

The analysis identifies "Semantic Divergence" as the most frequent obstacle. This occurs when an SL term has multiple TL equivalents, each applicable only in specific contexts. Dictionaries often suffer from "under-addressing," providing a list of synonyms without discriminatory markers (e.g., register, technicality, or tone). Consequently, the user is left to guess which equivalent fits the specific syntactic environment (Gouws, 2017).

### . Zero Equivalence and Cultural Lacunae

"Zero Equivalence" (or "lexical gaps") occurs when a concept is unique to the SL culture (e.g., specific legal terms, culinary items, or social customs) and lacks a conceptual counterpart in the TL. Research shows that even when a "functional" match is found, the **connotative value** (emotional or historical weight) often remains absent. These cultural lacunae require the dictionary to provide a **cultural gloss** or an encyclopedic note rather than a simple translation.

### . Collocational and Syntactic Barriers

Equivalence is not confined to the word level; it extends to how words behave in a sentence. A major finding is that "translation equivalents" often fail because they do not share the same **collocational range** as the source word. For example, a verb in the SL may take a specific preposition that its "equivalent" in the TL does not. Without providing these "collocational environments," dictionaries lead users to produce contextually nonsensical translations (CyberLeninka, 2026).

## Discussion

### . Strategic Models for Lexical Gap-Filling

To address the issues of zero and partial equivalence, lexicographers must adopt a hierarchical intervention model:

**\*\*Functional Equivalence:\*\*** Prioritizing the "intended effect" on the reader over literal accuracy (Nida, 1964).

**\*\*Descriptive Paraphrasing:\*\*** When no single word exists, a concise definition must be used as the equivalent.

**\*\*Illustrative Examples:\*\*** The study argues that "meaning resides in use." Including authentic sentences from corpora allows the user to see the "equivalence in action," which is more effective than a static definition (Zgusta, 2010).

### 4.2. The Evolution of the Lexicographer's Role

Modern lexicography must move toward a **\*\*user-oriented approach\*\***. The dictionary should not be a passive list but an active tool that anticipates the user's difficulties. As digital platforms allow for more space, the inclusion of audio-visual aids and hyperlinked cultural notes can resolve many of the "untranslatability" issues that plagued traditional print dictionaries.

## Conclusion

The problem of equivalency in bilingual dictionaries is a complex intersection of linguistics, culture, and cognition. As globalization increases the interaction between diverse languages, the demand for "context-aware" lexicography becomes more urgent. While "perfect" equivalence remains an elusive ideal due to the inherent differences in how humans conceptualize the world, **\*\*functional clarity\*\*** is achievable. By integrating corpus data and cultural markers, lexicographers can provide tools that move beyond simple word-matching toward true cross-cultural communication.

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