Bridging Cultures with a Bilingual Dictionary

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A carefully compiled bilingual dictionary is a linguistic and cultural bridge between two languages. It opens an avenue for the comprehension of concepts expressed in a target language by people of a source language or for people of the source language to compose concepts in the target language.\(^1\)

The potential use and usefulness of a bilingual dictionary varies greatly depending in part on the nature of the two languages involved. An English-German or German-English dictionary, for example, would probably be of primary use to students of either English or German or researchers working in one of these languages with which they are only partially familiar.

A bilingual dictionary such as an Ifugao-English dictionary on the other hand would have a different potential for use and,\(^2\) in fact, would have significant restrictions on its use and usefulness. It might, of course, be used by students of the Ifugao language and culture, though this would be a limited use since those investigating Ifugao are few in number. It could be used by an Ifugao learning English though, for this purpose, it would have limited usefulness. Better would be an English-Ifugao dictionary that would describe the lexicon of English in a language most familiar to the Ifugao student. This is precisely what an Ifugao needs for both comprehension of English and composition of oral and/or written material in English. Lexicographers have said repeatedly that it is impractical, and I would say probably impossible, to describe both languages simultaneously in a bilingual dictionary. An Ifugao-English dictionary would undoubtedly be of value as a repository for at least some of the Ifugao language and culture. And certainly such a purpose is important for posterity, to preserve valuable and, eventually in some cases, irretrievable information.

But can a volume such as an Ifugao-English dictionary have practical value in the everyday lives of an average native speaker? To answer this question we need to know precisely what kind of languages and cultures are involved and what happens when they come together in a way in which one influences the other or they influence each other. English is what we might term a cosmopolitan language. By that is meant that in its developmental history, through extensive contact with many other languages and cultures, it has developed into a composite language reflecting a conglomerate culture. And not only has it borrowed from other languages and cultures but it has participated in multicultural development in which it, simultaneous with many other cultures in

\(^1\) The target language is the language being described in the dictionary. Lexical items of that language in an alphabetically-arranged standard dictionary appear nearest the lefthand margin of the page. The language used to describe the lexical items is the source language.

\(^2\) Ifugao is a language in north-central Luzon, Philippines with about 10,000 speakers. It is just emerging from a pre-literate stage. The New Testament scriptures \textit{Nan Map hod an Ulgud Jesu Kristu} was published in 1977 and a bilingual dictionary, \textit{The Batad Ifugao Dictionary with Ethnographic Notes}, was published in 1993. Other publications are forthcoming.
Europe, America and elsewhere, has developed what might be called a super culture. The term “super” is not intended to imply “superior” but simply “composite” in that it includes cultural features of many societies. For convenience of reference we refer to the language and culture of such a group as cosmopolitan. In marked contrast are groups such as Ifugao which we designate as having folk languages and cultures. These are languages with a history of relative geographic and/or cultural isolation. Many, but by no means all, have taken on some of the superficial trappings of super cultures, some aspects of outside material culture such as clothing or electronic gadgetry, but are distinguished by the fact that basically they adhere to cultural values and mores of their ancestral heritage.

So when two such languages become juxtaposed, especially through mass media, the folk society will inevitably begin taking on features of the cosmopolitan culture despite any possible attempts of purists within the folk culture or crusaders from the outside to prevent or minimize it. Usually such acquisitions are taken on willy-nilly. They are unplanned and uncontrolled with a tendency to primarily adopt features of the super culture that have a negative impact on the folk culture. The result is all too often cultural stagnation with people living a dead-end existence within a cultural “living death” milieu. In some cases it results in cultural disintegration and death.

It is here that a bilingual dictionary can assist in developing some order to an otherwise chaotic situation. A folk language-cosmopolitan language dictionary carefully compiled with both linguistic and ethnographic information can provide a major tool for allowing carefully selected and wholesome aspects of the cosmopolitan language and culture to be shared in a way that fits the cultural context of the folk language and culture. This would result in the controlled cosmopolitan development of the folk culture. It would have the aim of enriching, rather than supplanting, the culture with, hopefully, minimal negative impact.

A folk language-cosmopolitan language dictionary could be designed basically as a translator’s dictionary. It would contain a carefully selected vocabulary designed to cover the translation of written materials in the cosmopolitan language. This would be restricted to material of “high moral and patriotic value.” It would also contain ethnographic information especially relevant to the anticipated areas that might be translated and this would aid in vocabulary selection. It could also be designed to include the preparation of materials using other media as well as, for example, a video media. Selection of multi-media materials would be by responsible nationals who are sensitive to needs of a folk culture, probably with the help of outsiders who know best what appropriate materials are available.

In compiling a folk language-cosmopolitan language dictionary, the compiler should have a detailed list of possible materials for translation. Though much vocabulary would be compiled into the dictionary during the course of translation projects, the compiler should be well aware of the material to be translated and include as much relevant vocabulary as possible into the dictionary before translation is begun. It would be more difficult to anticipate the need for the dictionary’s use in preparing for projects using other media. Lacking vocabulary would need to be added immediately preceding and during the development of such projects.

The final question is, who would be the principal user of a folk language-cosmopolitan language dictionary? The answer to some extent involves the extent to which native speakers are able to take concepts in the cosmopolitan language and

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3 This term is commonly used in statements of intent in the translation of materials by the Summer Institute of Linguistics for various cultural communities worldwide.
adequately translate them into the folk language. For some languages, major input is necessary by someone from outside the language, commonly a linguist. This might be someone with the same national background as people of the folk culture, or it might be someone from another country. There are some folk languages, however, for which native speakers are or can be adequately trained to be the primary users of the dictionary to translate materials into their own languages, usually with some help from outsiders. In this case, the dictionary would be used primarily to understand and translate concepts originating in the cosmopolitan language. Access to such concepts would be through an extensive cosmopolitan language index which would key cosmopolitan language concepts into the folk language.

For many folk-language projects a cosmopolitan language-folk language dictionary would be most ideal. It would provide a tool to aid members of the folk culture in comprehending and selecting concepts in the cosmopolitan culture and preparing them for use in the folk society. It has, however, one major drawback: it would be largely a single-purpose dictionary. A folk language-cosmopolitan language dictionary on the other hand could serve several purposes. It would provide a major tool for non-native speakers to help in the process of transferring concepts into the folk language. It could be used by students and researchers with an interest in the folk culture. It would help establish the folk language, struggling for a place in a multi-cultural context, to be established as a bona fide language. And it would be a major linguistic and cultural treasury for the folk language.

Bilingual dictionaries, carefully prepared with extensive cultural notes can and should aid folk cultures to selectively adopt wholesome features of contiguous cosmopolitan cultures.