

Dictionaries and their Discontents

Level: Any except absolute beginners.

Objective: To illustrate the problems associated with using Turkish-English dictionaries.
To get students to look at chunks of meaning rather than individual words.
To get students to recognize language gaps between Turkish and English.
To help students understand the importance of thinking in English.

Prep: If you don't know Turkish well, inform a fluent English & Turkish speaking member of the staff to come support you at the end of the activity.

Plan: This is a good lesson to do within the first day or two of starting a new class. It drives the point home quick and illustrates the reasons why you won't be allowing Turkish-English dictionaries in class (you won't be, right?) Before class, write these sentences up on the board:

	Turkish	English
"Yemek" means "to eat."	_____	_____
"Yer" means "place."	_____ yer _____	_____
"özlemek" means "to miss."	_____	_____ miss _____

1. *Yarın önemli ve zor sınavım var. Çok heyecanlıyım.*
2. *Çanakkale Savaşında çok şehit verdik.*
3. *Hastayım. Ateşim var.*
4. *Sigara içmek istiyorum. Ateşin var mı?*
5. *Bir kütük daha ateşe atabilir misin?*
6. *Gözlerimin önüne bir hayalet çıktı.*
7. *Yukarıya çıkalım.*
8. *Saat beşte evden çıkacağım.*
9. *Beş dakika sonra sınıfa gideceğim.*
10. Mike: *Nasılsın?*
Deniz: *Teşekkür ederim.*

They are all very simple sentences and after the first course, students should be able to handle the grammar in all of them. Even most first course students could probably do it. Before the exercise, ask the class what's more important, translating words or translating meaning. They will probably give you the correct answer. Then tell them that we will be doing some translation practice today. Make sure you have a pocket dictionary. Make a point of looking in your dictionary and underlining these translations. On the board write *yemek*=to eat, *yer*=place and to *özlemek*=to miss. Ask the students to double check and make sure they agree with you. The dictionaries will give more than one translation, but just go with the ones you already put on the board.

Now write the sentence “*yemek yer*” and translate it in front of the class as “To eat place.” A number of students should shout out that it should be “He/She/It eats food”, because “*yemek*” is a noun in that sentence and “*yer*” is actually the present simple form of “*yemek*” as a verb for he/she/it. Act stupid and incredulous like you don’t understand what’s wrong. Ask the students how you could translate it wrong since everyone agreed your dictionary translations were correct. After a bit, tell a student to come up and correct it. Now, ask the students what “miss” means and point at the board. Proceed to fill out the rest of the sentence as “I missed the bus.” Then translate it as “*Otobüsü özledim.*” “*Özlemek*” actually means “to miss” as in “I miss home” or “I miss my family”. The correct verb is “*kaçırmak*”, but we use “to miss” for both meanings while in Turkish they are separate verbs. The students will shout that it’s wrong and just keep asking them to explain why. You looked in your dictionary, it must be correct. Allow a student to come up and fix the sentence. Again, look at the dictionary and then at the board blankly. Seriously, belabor this point. After this, again ask the students if we need to translate words or translate meaning.

With this prep in mind, tell the students that you are going to give them 15 minutes to translate all the other sentences in groups. For this, you recommend that they use a Turkish-English dictionary. I guarantee they will all have one. I also guarantee that they will translate 90% of the sentences wrong. They might get numbers 7 or 8, but I’ve never even had an upper-intermediate class translate the rest correctly. Make sure they do this on a separate sheet of paper from the one with the Turkish sentences on it (if they wrote them down).

After the time is up, put the correct translations on the board. If your Turkish is not that good I highly recommend bringing in a Turkish member of the staff at this point for them to agree with you (arrange this beforehand and explain things, cause most likely they would also translate them wrong otherwise). If your Turkish isn’t good enough and you don’t bring a staff member in the students will really doubt your translations and the lesson will fail.

As you finish a sentence or group of sentences go over the reasons for the students’ failure to translate correctly (i.e. English has different grammar rules, vocabulary is different, the culture is different, Turkish-English dictionaries are often wrong). You may want to point out the fact that Turkish only has around 160,000 words compared to English’s over 600,000. In any case, get them to give you the reasons.

Now, make sure the students have all written down the correct translations on a separate sheet of paper. Tell the students to translate their English sentences back into Turkish without a dictionary.

Follow up Activities:

Depending on the level of the class, open up the floor for discussion on dictionaries. Below are a number of questions that could be discussed as a class or in groups. Do something appropriate for the level, but even at the lowest levels they can still do sentences such as, “We should/shouldn’t use Turkish-English dictionaries because...” After the activity, inform the students that you will be banning dictionaries for the reasons already discussed.

Note: I’ve tried doing more game oriented activities with this lesson like having a gambling tournament where they put money down on if they translated it correctly or not. But, after the 3rd sentence where not a single person can translate such simple sentences, moral begins to take a

dive and students get really depressed. For this reason it's just better to do it quickly and not torture the students over a long period of time.

Questions for Discussion

Are Turkish-English dictionaries a good way to learn new vocabulary? What are some other ways to learn new words?

Do Turkish-English dictionaries help students to think in English? Why or why not?

What are some problems with using a Turkish-English dictionary?

Is it more important to translate chunks of meaning or individual words?

Do you think English and Turkish are similar? How does this affect translation?

Looking at this activity, do you think it's helpful to ask your classmates to help you translate?

If you don't know a word in English, what are some ways to learn that new word without a dictionary?

Why might not using dictionaries be an important skill? Can you think of times when you will be speaking English, but you won't have a dictionary?

What happens if you use a Turkish-English dictionary and translate a word wrong at a business meeting or with your English-speaking boss?

What are some things you learned about dictionaries and translation from this activity?

What changes will you make to your English study habits after this activity?

What do you think the point of this activity was?

Translation Explanations & Guide

These are set up as:

Turkish

Literal, word-for-word translation

Correct translation. (Of course, there are some other possibilities as well).

Yarın önemli ve zor sınavım var. Çok heyecanlıyım.

Tomorrow important and difficult exam/test-my there-is. Really/very excited-I-am

I have an important and difficult exam/test tomorrow. I'm really/very nervous.

Explanation: There is no word for “nervous” in Turkish. Most dictionaries translate it as “*sinirli*”, which actually means angry or annoyed. Some dictionaries will translate it as “*gergin*”, which is “tense”, or “*endişeli*” which means “worried”. To drive this point home, ask students to translate “*kaçınca*”, “*kendimce*”, “*diken diken olmak*”, or “*kıro*.” These are very Turkish words that have no real equivalents in English. “*Kaçınca*” roughly means “How manyeth”, “*kendimce*” is related with personal feelings, thoughts, and opinions, “*diken diken olmak*” is the emotion associated with having goosebumps (sort of like “I got a chill down my spine”) and “*kıro*” is the Turkish version of a player, but usually an older, womanizing one with a mustache (Ibrahim Tatlıses is a classic example).

Çanakkale Savaşında çok şehit verdik.

Canakkale Battle-in a-lot-of martyr gave-we.

In the Battle of Gallipoli, a lot of soldiers died.

In the Battle of Gallipoli a lot of soldiers lost their lives. (This is probably the best translation.)

A lot of soldiers died in the Battle of Gallipoli.

Explanation: In Turkish, “*şehit*” means “martyr”, but it is used in Turkish culture for any soldier that dies in battle or otherwise. Even civilians killed as a result of fighting can be considered “*şehits*.” Also, technically, the word only applies to Muslims. And in Turkish the society “gives martyrs”, they don’t just die.

Hastayım. Ateşim var.

Sick I-am. Fever-my there-is.

I’m sick. I have a fever.

Sigara içmek istiyorum. Ateşin var mı?

Cigarette to drink wanting-I-am. Lighter-your there-is?

I want to smoke a cigarette. Do you have a lighter?

Bir kütük daha ateşe atabilir misin?

A log more fire-to throw-can you?

Can you throw another log on the fire?

Explanation: Here we are using the word “*ateş*” in just a few of its many meanings.

Gözlerimin önüne bir hayalet çıktı.

Eyes-my front-to a ghost appeared.

A ghost appeared in front of my eyes.

Yukarıya çıkalım.

Up-to go-let’s.

Let’s go upstairs.

Saat beşte evden çıkacağım.

Hour five-at home-from to leave-going-to-I-am.

I'm leaving/going to leave the house at 5 o'clock.

Note: Turks also use "ev" to mean home, so it couldn't also mean "apartment" or "flat" here.

Explanation: Here we're using "çıkma", which has something like 30-40 possible meanings in English depending on context and words used before it. I just used a few of the most common.

Beş dakika sonra sınıfa gideceğim.

Five minute later class-to go-going-to-I-am.

I'll go/'m going/'m going to go to class in five minutes.

Explanation: This is one that students just won't believe you on. Drill it relentlessly over the rest of the course. I guarantee you some students will assume you are translating it wrong and try to translate "in" as "inçinde", which actually brings the meaning of "within."

Mike: *Nasılsın?*

Deniz: *Teşekkür ederim.*

Mike: How are you?

Deniz: Thank you.

Mike: How are you?

Deniz: I'm fine.

"*Teşekkür ederim*" is a generic response to the question "*Nasılsın*". It doesn't necessarily indicate anything about the state of the speaker. Of course, in English, "I'm fine" serves the same function. We can be good or bad, tired or excited, but the response is polite and generic. You will probably get at least 1 student that gets very upset about this one. I haven't had a class yet where someone didn't. You have to constantly reinforce the idea that we are translating meaning, not words. More importantly, culture determines the meaning of a word or words. I often like to give the example of the Czech language. In Czech, you can't ask, "How are you?" People find it strange and they will take it literally. They'll actually answer you like, "Well, my knee hurts and grandma's in the hospital, but I'm generally ok." In Czech you say and respond with "*dobry den*", which means "good day."