Lexical Conflict: The Difficulties of Establishing Lexical Equivalence

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Roman Jacobson stated that languages differ not in what they can convey but what they have to convey. Thus English as to refer to either foot or leg while Slavic languages can use нога/noga/noha for both, Mandarin Chinese has to differentiate between younger and older brother (dìdì, and gēgē, ) while English covers both with the word brother. These cases exemplify cross-linguistic lexical differences where one cannot establish full equivalence between two languages. In this talk, based on the author’s forthcoming monograph with Cambridge University Press (http://www.cambridge.org/9781107116153), three types of lexical conflict are discussed: zero equivalence (e.g., Nenets тёмба(сы) to hang fishing nets on a drying rack, Shona kurova guva the ceremony in which the spirit of the deceased is brought home on the anniversary of his/her death), multiple equivalence (the fact that Russian мозг covers brain and spine, or that Yandruwanda uses ngarndri for mother, her sisters, and their daughters), and partial equivalence (e.g., that the desert called floating island is “nothing soup” in Polish, “birds milk” in Romanian, and “snow eggs” in standard German or that one o’clock in the morning in Swahili corresponds to seven a.m. in English. The author builds a taxonomy of these differences and discusses their applied-linguistic ramifications.

Danko Sipka is a professor of Slavic languages and applied linguistics at Arizona State University, where he teaches Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Polish, and Slavic linguistics in the School of International Letters and Cultures. He also holds a titular (presidential) professorship conferred upon him by the president of the Republic of Poland. His previous experience includes stints at the universities of Sarajevo, Belgrade (former Yugoslavia), Poznan, Wroclaw, Warsaw, the Jagiellonian University (Poland), and the universities of Munich and Dusseldorf. Dr. Sipka served as a senior linguist or consultant to numerous language industry companies, such as McNeil Technologies, Microsoft, Inxight, Comprehensive Language Center, Glyph, TranExp, Avant Assessment, Franklin Electronic Publishers, Microsoft Proofing Unit and others. He hold a Ph.D. in linguistics from the U. of Belgrade, a doctorate in psychology from the Polish Academy of Sciences, and an M.A. in Russian from the University of Poznan. Prof. Sipka is an ACTFL-