

Tolerable Friends

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0. Introduction

A language learner encounters a word, and taking it to be cognate with a known word in his own language, presumes the new word to mean the same as the old. Sometimes this sense of security is false—when, for instance, an American in Paris checks in his broken French to see whether there are any *préservatifs* in his yoghurt—hence the term *false friend*. False friends trick us because we so readily take surface form to indicate probable meaning. Luckily as second language learners we may quickly discover our error thanks to native speakers' unexpected reactions, or even overt corrections. But sometimes, even despite natives recognizing that we have used a word in a non-native way, we are not alerted to any inaptness. Hearers know what we wanted to say, and we get what we want without being corrected. Perhaps even more often, although a speaker and hearer have different concepts of what a word means, this difference never surfaces. The word's communicative effect is compatible with more than one version of its meaning. This is not a false friend, but a tolerable friend. With a tolerable friend, your version of the word's meaning might not quite match the listener's version, but you will never realize it. And the difference will never make a difference. Like the false friend, appearances deceive, but with the tolerable friend this deception never matters.

This paper discusses tolerable friends in the context of fieldwork in a multilingual setting. The fieldworker, like any second language learner, finds himself readily seeing equivalences between words in neighboring languages. But do these words really have exactly the same meanings? This is not only a cautionary tale for the field linguist and semanticist, it also raises fundamental doubts for our natural assumption that to know the meaning of a word is to know its unique, correct semantics.

1. Case study: Kri lexicography

Kri is a Vietic language of the Eastern Mon-Khmer branch of Austroasiatic. The only description prior to Enfield and Diffloth (2006) was a list of around 200 words collected by French colonial administrators in the late 18th century. The language is spoken in an upland area just inside the Lao border with Vietnam, around 300 km due east of the Lao capital, Vientiane. The Kri home area is a small, upper section of a river valley known in Kri as *Ñrong*. Kri speakers practice cyclic shifting agriculture within a relatively small home range. My own recent fieldwork (2004-6) has concentrated on primary ethnography, lexicography, and initial work on the grammar. Current work is on phonology and lexicography (Enfield and Diffloth 2006).

Kri speakers live in an area of intense multilingualism. It has been a trade route for centuries, linking the Mekong basin with the coast of Vietnam, as documented since the early 17th century (Quy 2002). There is significant sociocultural and linguistic diversity in the social environment, with at least three major ethnolinguistic groups represented: Katuic, Tai, and Vietic. Vietic languages of the area are highly endangered. Languages like Thémrou and Ahlao are spoken by a few families living within larger villages of other ethnicities such as Brou (Katuic). These groups come into only occasional contact with the Kri. (See Ferlus 1996 on the languages and peoples of the Vietic group more generally.) The Kri have regular contact with speakers of Vietnamese, likely already for hundreds of years. These Vietnamese are mostly itinerant hiker-traders, passing through Kri territory to buy, sell, and barter. The Kri also have regular but not intensive contact with speakers of Lao. This includes local dialects of Lao spoken in lowland villages downriver, as well as the modern national language (Enfield 2007), as spoken, for instance, by visiting government workers. Kri adults typically speak several languages, including Vietnamese, Saek, Brou, and Lao. Young children and some older women are monolingual.

One of my main tasks in initial phases of describing the Kri language has been lexicography. When I began collecting words and recording their meanings in both Lao and English, I noticed something very striking. In case after case, a Kri word would have a direct, one-to-one translation into Lao. This kind of semantic convergence is expected in neighboring languages (Matisoff 1978), but this makes it no less striking. In an example, Lao and Kri have two monomorphemic words meaning ‘to soak’: one means ‘to soak (anything in water)’, the other means ‘to soak glutinous rice in water to prepare it for steaming’.

Kri	Lao	English
<i>tàm</i>	<i>sèèl</i>	to soak (anything in water)
<i>tabaah</i>	<i>maal</i>	to soak (glutinous rice before steaming)

Both Lao and Kri have distinct monomorphemic verbs denoting the action of ‘putting a pot on the fire’ and ‘taking a pot off of the fire’.

Kri	Lao	English
<i>takoong</i>	<i>khaang4</i>	put (pot) on fire
<i>kôôjh</i>	<i>pong3</i>	take (pot) off fire

Both Kri and Lao lexically distinguish exactly three ways of getting something out of one’s mouth: 1. opening one’s mouth and letting a solid fall out (for example when discarding the inedible refuse of sugar cane, once chewed), 2. spitting something (usually liquid) out in a controlled, aimed way (such as when directing excess drool from tobacco-smoking down through a crack in the floor), and 3. spitting something out forcefully such that it sprays from the mouth.

Kri	Lao	English
<i>kuqjaah</i>	<i>khaaj2</i>	let fall out from inside mouth
<i>kqjuuh</i>	<i>thom1</i>	spit out (controlled, directed)
<i>phruujh</i>	<i>phuut4</i>	spit out (sprayed)

In the sensory domain of flavor, both Kri and Lao make distinctions that lack equivalents in English. One of these means something like ‘bland’, but more precisely specifies ‘not enough salt’ (thus, unlike *bland*, is compatible with very spicy food which has little or no salt). Three further terms refer to flavors with no equivalent or near-equivalent in everyday English. In eliciting the meanings of these three terms, Kri and Lao speakers offer similar or identical prototypes: 1. the ‘hot, minty’ flavor of mint leaves, 2. the ‘biting’ flavor of the tiny eggplant *Solanum aculeatissimum*, eaten raw, and 3. the ‘chalky’ flavor of unripe banana or strong, cold tea.

Kri	Lao	English
<i>mlaac</i>	<i>caang3</i>	not salty (enough)
<i>hùl</i>	<i>hùn2</i>	‘hot, minty’, e.g., of mint leaves
<i>heek</i>	<i>khùn1</i>	‘biting’, e.g., of small eggplant <i>Solanum aculeatissimum</i>
<i>côôq</i>	<i>faat5</i>	‘chalky’, e.g., of unripe banana, strong tea

Both Lao and Kri make fine distinctions in verbs of carrying, each with seven monomorphemic terms. (Two pairs appear to be cognate: *kààp/khaap4* and *spààj/phaaj2*.) This case is particularly striking, with Lao and Kri carving the semantic space at the same seven joints.

Kri	Lao	English
<i>qajààk</i>	<i>hiw5</i>	carry/hold in one's hand
<i>kààp</i>	<i>khaap4</i>	carry/hold in one's mouth
<i>kalêêng</i>	<i>haap5</i>	carry on a shoulder-pole (with load at both ends)
<i>takiìn</i>	<i>pêê4</i>	carry on back, with shoulder straps (backpack-style)
<i>jôôl</i>	<i>bèèk5</i>	carry on upper back or top of shoulder
<i>spààj</i>	<i>phaaj2</i>	carry hanging down on one shoulder (handbag-style)
<i>tkèèw</i>	<i>haam3</i>	carry together (two people hold at each end, load at center)

And there are many further cases of apparently direct lexical equivalences, such as those listed here:

Kri	Lao	English
<i>daak</i>	<i>nam4</i>	water or liquid
<i>cràng</i>	<i>maj4</i>	wood or tree
<i>ñcaarq</i>	<i>saat5</i>	woven floor mat
<i>tuluurq</i>	<i>khaj1</i>	an egg or to lay an egg
<i>lêêq</i>	<i>qaw3</i>	take (in hand)
<i>vàñq</i>	<i>bit2</i>	twist off, separate off by twisting
<i>tidool</i>	<i>taj1</i>	teeter on, climb, crawl on
<i>qusôk</i>	<i>khon3</i>	body hair or feather

Suffice these cases (there are many more) to illustrate the nature and extent of semantic commonality in the Lao and Kri lexica. Because Lao and Kri are not related genealogically, but are closely related areally, the standard assumption would be that these data are the result of a historical process of convergence.

There is of course a possible objection to the claim that this apparent linguistic convergence is due to language contact. Could it be shared **practices** that cause the languages to have these same semantic patterns? In the case of the carrying verbs, both speech communities happen to have these same practices of carrying. Is this what causes the two languages to have a parallel set of names for them? As the carrying verbs example makes clear, we should not be interested merely in the diffusion of words and their meanings, but also of the states of affairs that are the referents of these words, in this case recurring types of events that constitute manners of carrying. But the mere shared presence of a state of affairs in two speech communities does not ensure that these states of affairs will be linguistically labeled in both. In English-speaking settings we observe many of the same types of carrying, but they are not given a dedicated linguistic label.

2. The individual's perspective on convergence

We naturally imagine that the words of our languages have objectively correct meanings, independent of anyone's individual version of those meanings. This is

captured in Frege's (1892) notion of **sense**, the relatively abstract, communally shared concept that all uses of a word have in common. It is distinct from a word's **reference**, the class of things in the world it picks out. Now neither sense nor reference are matters of individual cognition. For Frege, while sense is indeed conceptual, it transcends the mental representations of any single member of a community. Sense is collective property and is 'not a part or mode of the individual mind'. It is what we might think of as the definition of a word.

Frege had a third category that he called **idea**, suffused with subjective feeling and imagery. Frege's 'idea' is something like a token of the sense as type. 'The idea is subjective', he wrote: Two men 'cannot have the same idea' because they cannot have 'the same consciousness'. But how can sense be exempt from also possessing this deep subjectivity inherent in the individual mind? Where could sense be anchored if not in the mind, and therefore in **individuals'** minds? Where would this disembodied average reside? In thin air, in ink marks, in magnetic traces? Whatever sense is, it must be mentally represented, in part or in whole. How is it, then, that individuals' representations of word meaning converge so faithfully on a community average? My aim is to take issue with the presupposition of that question. (Cf. Keysar 2008 for a similar stance.) **Does** each individual's representation of word meaning converge faithfully on a community average? It need not. Speakers' internal representations of the same linguistic categories need not be identical. They need only be functionally equivalent, similar enough that their deployment in communicative contexts leads to mutually adequate referential outcomes. They can be different as long as their differences are within a threshold of tolerability and awareness. It is logically possible—and common, it would seem—for two speakers' representations of a word to differ in specifiable details, yet where these differences are of no consequence for communication, and thus never come to our attention.

Locke noted that while word meanings are cognitive in nature—he saw them as 'marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men'—we do not inspect the mental states of those others directly: 'Men stand not usually to examine whether the idea they and those they discourse with have in their minds to be the same, but think it enough that they use the word as they imagine in the common acceptance of that language.' (Locke 1961/1706, 3.II.4) That we steam ahead presuming that others share our states of mind is typical of the egocentric strategies widely used for minimizing effort in communication (Barr and Keysar 2004, Keysar 2008).

Locke's point that people don't normally make an effort to inspect or confirm others' mental representations is readily observed in the case of the second language learner in a language contact situation. It is behind Weinreich's idea that when learning a new language, bilinguals make 'interlingual identifications' (Weinreich 1953:7ff). If a second language learner meets a word in the new language that could conceivably have the same meaning as a word he already has

in the old language, then there is no need to assume that the two meanings differ. To the contrary, it is a good economical heuristic to assume that they mean the same. If I already have a handy meaning that looks like it is probably right for a new word I'm encountering, then I keep the old meaning and just use a new label (Muysken 1981, 2000, Lefebvre 2004). 'Bilinguals develop strategies aimed at lightening the cognitive load of having to remember and use two different linguistic systems' (Silva-Corvalán 1994:207). This echoes Weinreich's argument that interlingual identification facilitates transfer of structure across languages in contact.

We have concentrated so far on the conceptual side of meaning and on the implications of our lack of telepathy for community convergence (or lack thereof) in mental representations. If to know what a word means is to know how to respond to it appropriately (Wittgenstein 1953), then the possibility of generating an appropriate response can only come from having an adequate hypothesis consistent with the data. Roger Brown characterized word learning in this way, calling it the 'original word game' (Brown 1958). His argument was that children learn words by developing hypotheses as to their meanings, and revising these on the basis of further instances (cf. also Bowerman 1982a, b). He suggested that this might well continue into adulthood.

The point applies to second language learners, as suggested in the above comments about bilinguals. Focused linguistic fieldwork is second language acquisition of a special kind. The field semanticist's job requires not just picking up new words, but systematically probing their meanings. But as learner of a new language, the field worker is also learning words on the fly, like any second language learner must. Take some cases from fieldwork on Kri. Jotting down words and their meanings, I encountered more than one red herring that led me to develop a hypothesis compatible with the original context of learning, but that soon turned out to be wrong. For example, when I asked the meaning of the word *pacoojh*, a Kri speaker defined it by pointing, Quine-like, to the front verandah of the house we were sitting in. I wrote in my notes: *pacoojh* = 'verandah'. Days later on a forest walk the same speaker pointed to a bamboo thicket and said 'Look, *pacoojh* – remember?'. Aha, he was pointing at the material, not at the structure (cf. Wittgenstein 1953). In a second example, most evenings my Kri hosts would serve soup made from small river fish, full of sharp, tiny bones. As I would begin to eat, they would invariably warn me, 'Be careful (of) *qôdlq!*'. In my notes: *qôdlq* = 'fishbone'. It was two years later when I learnt that the word meant not fishbone but 'choke (on something)'. What they were saying was 'Beware of choking (on fishbones)', and I had interpreted them as saying 'Beware of (choking on) fishbones'. In this recurrent context, these two versions of the meaning could not be distinguished because both were equally applicable. In a final example, I first noted down the definition of *mllaac* as 'bland, tasteless'. This was based on instances in which Kri speakers complained of food as being *mllaac*,

then adding salt to remedy this. One day much later I tasted an extremely spicy soup that was said by a Kri speaker to be *mllaac*. This was clearly not compatible with my hypothesized meaning of ‘tasteless’, and it was quickly revised when I learned that the problem was ‘not enough salt’.

How is it that we can be such poor judges of word meaning? Put yourself in the shoes of any early-phase second language learner. We learn new words all the time and naturally we apply the effort-minimizing strategies that are second nature to us in all areas of cognitive life (Gigerenzer et al 1999). My evidence for the meanings of those three words seemed adequate, and in the cases of *qôôlq* and *mllaac* my hypotheses were repeatedly confirmed (actually, not disconfirmed; see below). As time went on, I had no reason to doubt that my analyses were correct. I therefore felt able to lock off any further interpretation in deciding what this meant. Near enough is good enough.

This is not just a learner’s phenomenon. Language is like this for everyone, all the time. It’s just that as native speakers, our hypotheses about the language we speak are grounded in extensive empirical data. We encounter a lot of cases, in a lot of contexts. But note that these contexts are not controlled or planned. We can go for months or years oblivious to our apparent misrepresentations, and then wonder how we ever got by. As a learner of Lao, when I first learned the body part term *baal* it was translated as ‘shoulder’. I had no reason to doubt that it had the same sense as the English word *shoulder*, and I promptly made this interlingual identification and thought no further of it. It was not until I started to systematically investigate the semantics of terms for parts of the body in Lao (Enfield 2006) that I realized that the reference (and thus the sense) of the two words is not the same. The Lao word *baal* refers only to the horizontal part of the body between the base of the neck and the top of the deltoids, where the arm joins to the torso. English *shoulder* only partially overlaps with this, referring to the area around the joint between arm and torso, including the uppermost part of the arm itself.

A scientific ideal would be to articulate one’s own hypotheses of word meaning, formulate their predictions (e.g., in terms of the appropriateness of words in specified contexts), and test those predictions either by searching texts for examples, or, with quicker results, by checking what native speakers think. This is how the most careful semantic analysis is done (cf. e.g., Cruse 1986, Wierzbicka 1996, among many others). But such thorough analysis is typically applied to a handful of words at a time, not to whole languages. In the frantic early months of fieldwork on a previously undescribed language, when faced with the task of amassing a large lexicon in a short time, we take what we can get, much like everyday second language learners do.

In the examples discussed so far, a learner tests his or her hypothesis on the basis of observed usage by native speakers, who are presumed to be using the language appropriately. Another basis on which to revise one's hypothesis is explicit feedback in response to how we use a word. This is how I learned that *qôôlq* means 'choke on' and not 'fishbone'. I had scotch-taped a fishbone into my field notebook as a record of the dangers of fieldwork. When a Kri speaker saw this and asked what it was, I replied '*qôôlq*', thinking I was saying 'fishbone' when in fact I was saying 'to choke on (something)'. As it happened, this was the first time my hypothesis had been tested in a context in which only one of the two readings was applicable. From the ensuing confusion, I realized my error, and revised my notes accordingly.

In reality we don't always get this kind of negative feedback. Social interaction is driven by richly informed intention-attribution (Grice 1989, Sperber and Wilson 1995, Levinson 2000, Enfield and Levinson 2006, Enfield 2009), and so much can be derived from context that most of the time people know full well what we mean, even when we're butchering their language. Take an example from fieldwork with Kri speakers, who are second language learners of Sek, a northern Tai language spoken in neighbouring villages. Many Kri—particularly the men—can speak Sek very well. Others speak it less well. On one occasion, I was travelling on foot between villages with a native speaker of Sek. We encountered a Kri speaker coming in the other direction. The two men spoke in Sek for a few minutes, and then we parted and continued on our way. After a minute, my companion laughed and said 'He speaks such lousy Sek'. I asked, 'Why?'. He explained, 'There was a violent dispute in his village last night, but he said it happened **tomorrow**'. When the man said 'It happened tomorrow', it was obvious to my companion that he meant 'yesterday'. In the urgency of everyday interaction—in this case, amid eagerness to learn more about the village dispute—there is neither time nor inclination to pause for language lessons. As a result, the man's error was left uncorrected, and he went on his way, none the wiser.

The issue of tolerable friends is not merely a multilingualism issue. It holds for within-language situations, too. The possibility of variance in mental representations of linguistic meaning across a speech community is central in recent models of semantic change (Wilkins 1996, Evans 1992, 2003, Evans and Wilkins 2000, Enfield 2003, 2005; cf. Sweetser 1990, Traugott 1989, Traugott and Dasher 2002, among others). Evans and Wilkins' (2000:550) definition of **bridging contexts** captures cases like *qôôlq* 'choke/fishbone': In a bridging context, 'speech participants do not detect any problem of different assignments of meaning to the form because both speaker and addressee interpretations of the utterance in context are functionally equivalent, even if the relative contributions of lexical context and pragmatic enrichment differ'. In other words, it is 'a speech context in which something inferable as utterance-meaning from an input

sentence-meaning happens also to be true, and thus not defeasible in that context' (Enfield 2005:318). Like the *qôôlq* 'choke/fishbone' example, the use of a word may be confined to a narrow context, and as long as usage is routinely confined to that context, native speakers, too, may vary in their personal coding of word meaning. In an example from English pointed out to me by Nick Evans, the word *instep* is thought of by some people as referring to the **top part** of the middle section of the foot, by others as the **bottom part**, by yet others as the **whole** middle section of the foot. Why isn't this a problem? Look at the contexts of use for this low frequency word: we use it almost exclusively when talking about the fit of shoes. If this is the only context in which we use the word, it doesn't really matter which of these hypotheses you have. If the lower part of the middle section of the foot is high, chances are the upper part is too. Speakers walk away with well-fitting shoes, blissfully unaware of any ill fit of their semantic representations. It suggests a testable prediction: Lower frequency words will show greater variation in meaning across speakers. Because the usage contexts of these words are less varied, speakers will have been deprived of the chance to rigorously test ongoing hypotheses.

The idea that tolerably equivalent convergence in conventions can emerge through interaction between relatively uninformed members of a population is supported by current research in agent-based modelling (Barr 2004). Some of this work has dealt directly with the emergence of conventional symbolic systems, akin to language (e.g., Hutchins and Hazlehurst 1995, Kirby 1999, Nettle 1999). Barr's work pursues the idea that conventions can emerge at the macro level (something like Fregean sense) yet without individuals having to individually represent an 'explicit global representation of community behaviour'. Barr argues for the emergence of macro structure based on very limited micro settings, much like the emergent structure of V-formations of geese on the wing. No single goose need strive to produce this V. It emerges from a minimal local (i.e., egocentric) setting at each individual.

3. Conclusion

The arguments laid out above support the view that convergence in the mental representations of meanings in a population of speakers is not consummate but merely adequate. In reality we know less than we think about what is in others' minds, just as Locke could have predicted. As a result, 'we don't know how often miscommunication goes unnoticed' (Keysar 2008:291). 'Sense' is a figment not just of Frege's imagination, the idea seems intuitive to **everyone**. We all think that our version of the word's meaning **is** the word's meaning. And why not? We get adequate communication at minimal cost. And there is such a thing as too much information, as Sapir once warned: 'in the normal business of life it is useless and even mischievous for the individual to carry the conscious analysis of his cultural patterns around with him. That should be left to the student whose business it is to understand these patterns' (Sapir 1949:558). Which brings us to

the methodological upshot for field linguists. The Lao/Kri lexical materials presented in Section 1, above, were touted as examples of convergence. But how convergent are these words really? I bet that upon closer inspection, differences between the Kri and Lao equivalents will emerge, unraveling my claims of convergence. The haste of those claims can be traced to the familiar bilingual strategy: 're-label the nearest word and retain its existing meaning, unless forced to do otherwise'. But suppose that I return to the field, to carefully probe the differences between these tolerable friends, and suppose I do find differences. I may take this to mean that the Lao and Kri words mean something different after all. But would these carefully teased-out differences across languages be more significant than the kinds of difference that can be uncovered between speakers **within** a language?

These reflections draw attention to methodological pitfalls of fieldwork and other cases of language learning in multilingual settings. This field worker found himself naturally jumping to conclusions of semantic equivalence, yet not always with sufficient evidence. But when one digs deeper, looking for finer detail of people's concepts of word meaning, does one go too far, that is, further than native speakers go? The above explorations also draw attention not only to the problem of using one language as a guide to the structure of another, but to something deeper about the asymmetry of mental representations of meanings: their merely adequate rather than consummate equivalence, their convergence in function but not necessarily content. As learners of other languages, we are susceptible to tolerable friends. Our natural tendency is to take success in communication to **confirm** our hypotheses, where in fact it only **fails to disconfirm** them. Karl Popper (1972) taught us that this is the best we can hope for in science, but as many have pointed out, ordinary people don't think like scientists should.

Words work because they reliably result in communicatively adequate outcomes. This adequacy is defined by success in communication, or more accurately, absence of evidence of failure in communication. While we tend to regard our words as dearly trusted friends, it seems that they are never more than merely tolerable.

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