1. Introduction

Between 1997 and 2003 we compiled with a dedicated group of specialists at the Arabic department of the University of Nijmegen a twin set of Arabic-Dutch and Dutch-Arabic dictionaries. Kees Versteegh, Manfred Woidich, and myself were the responsible editors.¹

It may be clear, that the compilation of these dictionaries not only resulted in their publication, but also in the gathering of a lot of valuable experience leading to some striking conclusions. One of these was the observation that, in the Dutch-Arabic volume, many source (Dutch) language units could not be paired with an equivalent in Arabic, since they appeared to be non-existent in Arabic. As a matter of fact, almost 25% of all Dutch entries (words or expressions) could only be translated by means of paraphrases. Paraphrased descriptions are, in most cases, explanations and not direct equivalents of the source language word or expression.

From this observation the question did arise: do these ‘untranslatable’ units represent lexical gaps in Arabic? In other words: do they represent concepts without any lexicographically acceptable one-to-one translation in Arabic?

It goes without saying that all dictionary compilers also benefit from the work of others. Also the authors of the Nijmegen dictionary referred to a large number of existing monolingual, bilingual and multilingual dictionaries in order to single out adequate equivalents for the Dutch entries selected to occur in the dictionary. Too often we concluded that the other dictionaries also contained paraphrased descriptions or definitions instead of one-to-one translations.

¹ The whole process of compiling has been described on the project site (www.let.ru.nl/wba).
Upon this observation we came to the following hypothesis: when a certain entry is translated into Arabic by means of a paraphrased description or definition while all, or almost all, bilingual dictionaries, included in this enquiry, translate the same entry in the form of a description or definition, it is justified to conclude, that the entry concerned does not have a one-to-one equivalent in Arabic, and that we, therefore, are dealing with a lexical gap in Arabic. In order to verify this hypothesis, a large sample of entries from the Dutch-Arabic dictionary, with one-to-one source equivalents in various other dictionaries, was gathered to compare their translations into Arabic.

The source language units can be divided in simple words (lexical units), compound words and expressions. Compounds in Dutch are simply written together as one word and consequently have to be entered as independent lemmas in the dictionary.

This article limits a comparison of translations for simple words from various bilingual dictionaries, since it turned out difficult to find unambiguous translations in English, French or German for Dutch compounds. The lack of those translations as a starting point for a comparison of Arabic translations would result in data that would be difficult to compare with each other.

2. Definition of description

As stated in the introduction, descriptions are, in most cases, not direct equivalents of the word or expression in the source language, but explanations, i.e. expressions of more than one word which provide the dictionary user with an explanation in the target language. Since a description is a combination that is not lexicalized, it is not entered in the database as an expression in the target language.

Descriptions represent a unidirectional translation relation, i.e. they are not included in the reversion process to produce the reverse part of the dictionary. Assuming the description describes a concept that represents a lexical gap in the target language, it is obvious this concept could not be entered in the reverse part of the dictionary as an entry.

First of all, a sample of 25 Dutch simple words translated with descriptions was gathered. These words were chosen randomly from the underlying database. These words can be found in Table 1 below.