

Gaps of Kinship in the Yakut Heroic Epic *Olonkho*

A Brief Analysis and Implications for Translation

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Abstract: This research considers issues of interaction between language and culture; it studies the phenomenon of lacunarity in general, as well as identifying lexical gaps in *olonkho* texts and ways of eliminating them in translation. Here, we investigate the need for more in-depth study of the translation of works of art in which a culture-specific component has a high degree of presence; the importance of studying the lacuna phenomenon as one of the main factors influencing translation, and, in turn, the need to study to the misunderstanding of a text by a foreign reader. The problem of translating culturally related phenomena necessitates a description of their origins and development, and attention to notions of linguistic worldview and linguistic universals regarding culture-specific vocabulary, including lexical gaps.

Keywords: culture-specific vocabulary, kinship, lexical gaps, linguistic universals, linguistic worldview, *olonkho*, Yakut (Sakha) heroic epic

The Yakut (Sakha) Heroic Epic *Olonkho* and its Translation

Translation of works into world languages allows for expanding the horizons of existing experience and serves as an instrument of transmitting and conserving the epic and folklore traditions of the ethnic communities under study. The importance of this topic is justified by the special features in the development of traditional societies in the

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modern era; the cultural heritage of these societies is under the threat of extinction because of the processes of globalization, which are aggressively penetrating various areas of human activity, including the cultural sphere.

Olonkho is the largest genre of Yakut (Sakha) folklore, encompassing representations of the Yakut people regarding the creation of the world, the system of moral values, traditional beliefs and customs, and their linguistic and cultural abundance. In 2005, UNESCO proclaimed the *olonkho* epic as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity; hence, there is a need for creating *olonkho* translations into other world languages. But long before UNESCO drew attention to the Yakut epic, I was conducting preparatory work for the translation of such an epic. In 2003, the concept of a translation from the Yakut language into English was completed, and a team of translators was assembled. That year, the Department of Translation at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of the M. K. Ammosov Yakut State University (now known as the Institute of Modern Languages and International Studies of the M. K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University) came up with an ambitious large-scale project for the English translation of the most widely known and popular Yakut epic, the *olonkho Djuluruyar Njurgun Botur* by Platon Oyunsky.

Unlike the Russian translation of 1975, this translation of Oyunsky's epic into English was made directly from the Sakha (Yakut) language. At the pre-production stage, scrupulous scientific research work was conducted as well as preliminary translation work. At long last, the full-text English translation of all nine songs of the *olonkho Nurgun Botur the Swift* as written by Oyunsky (Oyunsky 2011) was published in 2014 by the Renaissance Books Publishing House in Folkestone, England, United Kingdom.

Lexical Gaps

"Two national cultures never coincide completely. This follows from the fact that each consists of national and international elements" (Vereschagin 1990: 18–19). The verbal culture of a language exists primarily within its lexical items; N. G. Komlev, pointing to the close relationship between lexical meaning and the culture of a people, also notes that a significant share of the cultural component lies within the meaning of words (Komlev 1996: 43–44). Lexical gaps create inconvenience in speech practice. It is no coincidence that native speakers strive

to eliminate a dismembered designation of reality, trying to express in one word some ideal content that is for the time being devoid of a lexical shell. Thus, O. S. Akhmanova and I. E. Krasnova note the inherent tendency in English to express any thought, no matter how complex it may be, with a single word, which, according to native speakers, has much greater meaningful and expressive capabilities than a phrase: “the creation of so many derivative and complex words in the English language is based on the unconscious belief that what is said in many or several words is never as convincing, bright, capacious, and never conveys the whole idea as fully and deeply as what is said in one word” (Akhmanova and Krasnova 1974: 39).

V. L. Muravyov makes what seems to be a methodological remark regarding the fact that “lexical gaps need to be studied not only in a synchronic way, but also from the point of view of historical development” (Muravyov 1975: 23). This position can serve as a “starting point,” the most general, fundamental criterion for classifying the entire variety of gaps, which, according to Muravyov, “are by no means a once and for all established category but evolve along with the development of the vocabulary of the language and its everyday concepts” (ibid.). It is fundamentally important to divide these lexical gaps into linguistic and extralinguistic (cultural). Linguistic and cultural gaps occupy an intermediate position. Gaps identified when comparing languages or units within a language are called linguistic: they reveal discrepancies (voids and gaps) between units of comparable languages (interlinguistic lacunae) or units (real and potential) within one language (intra-lingual lacunae). In this report, I cover the phenomenon of interlingual (inter-linguistic) lexical gaps in the *olonkho*.

Regardless of types, lexical gaps can be characterized by the obscurity, exoticism and foreignness of lexical items and their associated concepts found in the source language (L1) that do not have immediate equivalents for the recipient in a target language (L2). A native system of concepts—a basis for a linguistic worldview—involves either concepts having nominative forms of expression (i.e., linguistically [lexically] expressible) or those not expressed by a native language (i.e., linguistically inexpressible) (Barkhudarov 2008: 21). That said, concepts unexpressed lexically still do actively participate as much as lexicalized concepts in the collective cognition of an ethnic group. Moreover, words without analogues in comparable languages—that is, lexical gaps—are cognitively inaccessible phenomena to an L1 speaker. In other words, they are not always consciously noticeable and therefore may be unrecognizable in monolingual communication. Therefore, to uncover

lexical gaps in L1, a “mirror language,” or L2, is needed, and vice versa. This relationship can be represented as a formula:

$$\text{GAP } \{L1 \rightleftharpoons L2\} \rightarrow \text{Lexical unit } L1 / L2$$

The formula can be read in the following way: given two languages L1 and L2, a lexical gap (GAP) of L1 can be obtained as a lexical unit L1, if L2 is used as a comparison language; conversely, a lexical gap (GAP) of L2 can be obtained as a lexical unit L2, if L1 is used a comparison language. Furthermore, the description of a lexical gap in L1 is L2-dependent; its properties are directly dependent on the properties of the mirror language. Also, as the double arrows in the above formula indicate, the relation between L1 and L2 is bidirectional, and the question of which language is L1 or L2 depends on the language under investigation. For example, the Yakut \rightarrow English relationship uncovers lexical gaps in Yakut language on the basis of English, and the Yakut \leftarrow English relationship uncovers lexical gaps in the English language on the basis of the Yakut language. Next, several lexical gaps of the Yakut \rightarrow English relationship type are presented and analyzed.

Songs 5 and 6 of the Yakut heroic epic *olonkho Nurgun Botur the Swift* by the prominent Yakut writer Platon Oyunsky were used as experimental material (Oyuunuskai 1959; 1960). The English translation was made at the Department of Translation of the M. K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University. The main reason for the choice of the experimental material was the fact that the Yakut language as used in *olonkho* is artistically rich and colorful. As such, it was assumed that it would contain a large number of lexical gaps, as it would be highly unlikely that it would easily be transformed into an equivalent form in the English language.

The comparison of semantically similar lexical units from two different language systems helps to reveal if they are directly mutually translatable. If not, then it is reasonable to hypothesize a lexical gap as the source of the difference. For instance, in comparison with the Yakut language, the following lexical gaps in English were identified.

- мэний (*mengii*)—to run quickly
- сэгэт (*seget*)—to open slightly
- бэрдимсий (*berdimsii*)—to pretend to be better than it actually is
- харалдьык (*kharald'yuk*)—thawed patch
- эдьий (*ed'iii*)—elder sister

Current Russian scholars provide many detailed classifications of linguistic gaps (for example, Markovina 1982, Sorokin 1998, and others).

Lexical gaps discovered in *olonkho* were classified using the part-of-speech principle—classifying individual instances of lexical gaps on the basis of their belonging to a particular part of speech. Here, the focus was on noun-gaps and verb-gaps.

Like any natural language, both the Yakut and English languages exhibit both universal and specific ways of organizing and labeling the world. Language-specific meanings represent a system of concepts, reflective of a cultural group's collective cognition, which obligatorily "imposes" itself on its speakers. Perception and interpretation of reality, specific to a particular language, is partly universal and partly nationally specific.

Noun-gaps found in *olonkho* can be divided into five subgroups: 1) nouns that are connected with the main practices of the Sakha people, such as cattle breeding; 2) nouns that describe social and kin relations; 3) nouns that describe nature, environment, and life; 4) nouns that describe parts of the body; and 5) nouns that describe time and space. In this article, the second subgroup of noun-gaps was analyzed. This subgroup, *kinship noun-gaps*, has both culture-free (i.e., universal) and culture-specific elements. Therefore, there should be both overlaps and divergences in lexical units from the Yakut and English languages that belong to this subcategory of lexical gaps. That is, certain elements in the hierarchy of social and kin relations should be the same, and others, for various reasons, should be different. In the latter case, certain lexical items of one language would be impossible to directly translate into the another. Table 1 presents ten lexical units compared across three languages—Yakut, Russian, and English. Note that the words "mother" and "father" are absent because they were not found in the experimental material. These words, however, are not lexical gaps, as there are direct equivalents between the two languages under study.

The chart above shows that the comparison of the Yakut and English lexical units denoting kinship uncovers lexical gaps in describing elder and younger relatives, as well as father's and mother's relatives in the English language. According to the *Dictionary of the Yakut Language* by Eduard K. Pekarskii, the word "аҕас" (*aḡhas*) means "1) elder sister; аҕаһым (*aḡahym*)—my elder sister; 2) father's elder female relative; таай аҕас (*taaj aḡhas*)—mother's elder female relative" (Pekarskii 1958). Clearly "аҕас" does not have a direct English equivalent. Therefore, it must be translated in English either as a set phrase "elder sister" or as an analogue "aunt," which means "the sister of your mother or father, or the wife of your uncle," depending on situation and context. The word in Yakut and its near equivalent expression in English have a

Table 1. Yakut and English kinship terms

	Yakut	Russian	English
1	аҕас	1) старшая сестра; аҕаһым (=моя старшая сестра); 2) старшая родственница со стороны отца; таай аҕас (=старшая родственница со стороны матери).	1) elder sister, my elder sister; 2) aunt - elder female relative (father's line); aunt - elder female relative (mother's line);
2	Балыс	1. младший (по возрасту); меньший; 2. младшая сестра.	1) a younger relative; 2) a younger sister
3	Оҕонньор	1) старик, старец; 2) в притяж. ф. муж; оҕонньорум (=мой муж); 3) ирон. разг. старик (об основателем, спокойном, а также зрелом не по годам человеке); 4) почтенный (почтительное обращение к старшему по возрасту); убайым оҕонньор, хаһан кэлэбин? (=наш почтенный старший брат, когда ещё приедешь?)	1) old man; 2) in the possessive form – husband: my husband; 3) ironically, familiar – serious, old person beyond years; 4) distinguished, respectable man (form of address): “our respectable brother, when are you going to come?”
4	Эдьий	1) старшая сестра (родная); 2) старшая родственница (по линии отца или матери); тётка; 3) тётя, тётенька (обращение к женщине средних лет).	1) elder sister (one's own); 2) aunt-elder female relative (both father's and mother's lines); 3) form of address to the middle-aged woman
5	Эмээхсин	1) старуха, старая женщина; 2) разг. жена, супруга.	1) old woman; 2) informal. – wife, spouse
6	саҕас	жена старшего родственника (по отношению к лицам обоего пола).	sister-in-law – wife of an elder relative (this term is used by both females and males)
7	абаҕа	дядя (старший брат отца)	uncle – elder brother of father
8	таай	дядя (по материнской линии безотносительно к полу говорящего)	uncle – brother of mother (this term is used by both females and males)
9	убай	1) старший родной брат; 2) старший родственник по линии отца (моложе отца); 3) дядя, дядюшка (обращение к старшему).	1) elder brother (one's own); 2) uncle – elder relative (father's line); 3) uncle (form of address)
10	Ини	1) младший родной брат; 2) младший родственник по линии отца (по отношению к сыновьям последнего).	1) younger brother (one's own); 2) uncle – younger relative (father's line) towards father's sons

common semantic component—“a relative of one of the parents”—and on the surface, at least, it makes them look very similar. But аҕас has an additional semantic component—a seme denoting “generation (e.g., elder),” which implies a lineal form of kinship, while the English word *aunt* does not have it.

The same occurs with the translation of other nouns. For example: “эдьий” (*ed’ij*)—1) elder sister (one’s own); 2) elder female relative (among mother’s or father’s relatives); 3) aunt (address to a middle-aged woman); “убай” (*ubaj*)—1) one’s elder brother; 2) father’s elder male relative (younger than father); 3) uncle (address to an elder person); “таай” (*taaj*)—uncle (mother’s relative without reference to the speaker’s sex); “абаҕа” (*abagha*)—uncle (father’s elder brother); “ини” (*ini*)—1) one’s younger brother; 2) father’s younger male relative (in relation to the sons of the last-mentioned), and so on.

The above comparison of the Yakut and English terms referring to kinship shows that the two languages are rather different. In the Yakut language there are different words to describe father’s relatives, mother’s relatives, elder relatives, and younger ones, but not in English.

Table 2. *Aunt and sister as a kinship gap*

Көхсүтгэн тэһииннээх	The children of Kun-Aiyy
Күн-айыы оҕолоро,	With the reins on their backs,
Арҕаһыттан тэһииннээх	The daughters of Akhtar-Aiyy
Ахтар айыы кыргытара,	With the reins on your napes,
Аҕастарым-эдьийдэрим!	My aunts and sisters!

Source: Oyuunuskai 1959: 125

Comparing the meanings of the Yakut kinship words with the English kinship noun-gaps (i.e., translations) prompts one to conclude that the Yakut and the English semantic components differ in terms of their differential semes: аҕас (elder sister, elder father’s female relative) vs. aunt (the sister of your mother or father, or the wife of your uncle); эдьий (one’s own elder sister, elder female relative, aunt, mistress) vs. sister (a daughter of your parents; a female nurse in charge of a hospital; a nun; an affiliate organization; woman friend; a woman to whom loyalty is felt). For example, the English term *sister* does not have the seme denoting “elder,” and moreover, this word has a number of other meanings not found in the Yakut language (e.g., nurse, nun).

Much the same can be said of the other kinship noun-gaps. The scheme below shows the semantic relations of the kinship terms from both languages. Each term in the Yakut language has more than one corresponding term in the English language. However, some terms overlap more frequently: таай, абаҕа, убай = uncle; and аҕас, эдьий, балыс = sister:

Table 3. Yakut and English kinship gaps

1.	Саҕас	—	sister-in-law
2.	Таай	—	uncle
3.	Абаҕа	—	uncle
4.	Аҕас	—	aunt
5.	Эдьий	—	sister
6.	Балыс	—	sister
7.	Ини	—	brother
8.	Убай	—	brother

Another important aspect to be considered when comparing L1 and L2 words is the relative degree of deviation of their semantic field components. For example, the Yakut term саҕас can be translated into English as “sister-in-law” because the general components of these terms are similar. However, their specific semantic components are different. The Yakut term саҕас means “wife of an elder relative,” and its specific semantic component denotes the idea of “generation” or “age” and, depending on a context, it may be translated as “aunt” if refers to the wife of any elder relative. In comparison, while the English term “sister-in-law” has a broader meaning (“sister of your husband / wife” or “the wife of your brother”), its differential semantic component is “sister.” While it is true that the translation of саҕас (*sangas*) as “sister-in-law” roughly conveys the proper meaning of the Yakut term (i.e., wife of an elder relative toward both male and female relatives), it also seems to be the case that some differential semantic components of the Yakut words may be lost in translation.

It is important to note that this is not a question of polysemy. The aforementioned examples overlap in their general components of meaning, but the spectrum of their differential semantic components is wider for the Yakut terms than for their English counterparts. The meaning of

a word is not its most elementary semantic unit; there are other smaller meanings, *semes*, which produce meanings not by an elementary mechanical addition, but by certain hierarchies. A speech act presupposes the actualization of the relevant meanings of lexical units; however, it is also the case that while certain *semes* or components are expressed, others that are not relevant to the communicative situation may be neutralized (i.e., lose their meaningfulness).

The next fragment contains the example of a lexical gap “sibling” meaning “brother” or “sister.”

Table 4. *Brother and sister as a kinship gap*

Убайдаах балыстыы	How could two siblings
Куйахалара күүрэн	Sit horror-struck
Куттана быһыытыйан	With their hair standing on end...
Олоруохтара баара дуо...	

Source: Oyuunuskai 1960: 170

This example illustrates the regularity inherent in the use of semantic specification and generalization. Here, in contrast to the hierarchical semantic structure of *убай* (*ubaj*) (= 1) elder brother [one’s own]; 2) uncle—elder relative [father’s line]; 3) uncle [form of address]), the word *балыс* (*balys*) (=sibling—brother / sister) does not have a distinct *seme* denoting “gender” and therefore has a more generalized, gender-neutral meaning. From a communicative perspective, its semantic function is to express a global, inclusive notion of kinship; in this example, a more gender-specific meaning of “sibling” is not required by the communicative context.

Many factors come into play when translating lexical gaps: linguistic, cultural, psychological, contextual, and stylistic, as well as the need to translate not only the objective meaning(s) of a lexical unit, but also its connotative signification, which reflects its use within a particular sociocultural environment. The comparative analysis between the Yakut kinship terms drawn from songs 5 and 6 of the Yakut epic *olonkho* with their lexical near-equivalents from the English language shows that these terms differ with respect to the semantic structure of their constituting semantic element (i.e., *semes*). Based on the results of the analysis, it is safe to say that the Yakut kinship terms have a broader range of differential *semes* and by extension a more

hierarchically organized semantic structure than the terms of kinship in the English language. This implies that in order to convey the same notion expressed in the Yakut language by a single term, a speaker of English must resort to employing different lexical strategies, such as circumlocution, neologisms and/or adoption of loanwords. Thus, we identified ten lexical gaps in the English language corresponding to ten Yakut kinship terms based on *olonkho*.

English lexical gaps have a direct impact on attempts to translate *olonkho* into the English language. Like the English speaker, the translator must also put to use various techniques in order to ensure an accurate transmission of information without considerable loss of meaning—especially deep, connotative meaning—from the original text. A translator can employ several strategies, such as hypernymic transformation (generalization), hyponymic transformation (specification), explanation, analogue, transliteration, transcription, and loan translation. The choice of the strategy depends on the purpose and the conditions of a translation task. For example, if one of the requirements is economy and efficiency of translation, then using an accessible transliteration (e.g., writing эдьий as *edjei*) may be a better choice over explanation, which is usually more extensive in terms of content and labor.

Lexical gaps— notions for which there is a word in L1, but not in L2—poses an important and challenging problem for the translator, especially one concerned with the translation of classical or folklore texts such the Yakut epic *olonkho*. It is imperative that translators are aware and are able to competently use some or all of the techniques devised for dealing with lexical gaps. Such techniques can help preserve the full spectrum of meaning of the original text and ensure the more genuine transmission of culturally vital information from one culture to another.

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