SEMANTIC MAPS – A WAY OUT OF THE EQUIVALENCE CONUNDRUM?

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Abstract

Like other constructs within translation studies, the construct known as the unique item crucially depends on a concept of equivalence. However, when defining the unique item as a linguistic unit which lacks a linguistic counterpart in the source language, the propounder of the unique-items hypothesis, Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit, is laconic as to what she means by a linguistic counterpart. Although it has been suggested that one could, in one's definition, resort to a classical account of translation shifts, a better solution may be discovered in the field of linguistic typology. The present paper illustrates how comparing linguistic items across languages can be achieved with a typological approach based on the semantic-map model. It is shown on the example of indefinite pronouns that semantic maps offer a much more precise way of assessing the degree to which two items from different languages can be said to be equivalent. While semantic maps reveal as much as they conceal, they are developed on the basis of empirical data from numerous languages and can be falsified. They can therefore be considered a valuable asset to translation scholars.

Keywords

translation equivalence, unique-items hypothesis, translation shifts, semantic maps, linguistic typology, cross-linguistic comparison

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WHEN working on my master's thesis in translation studies (Špetla 2018), in which I tested Tirkkonen-Condit's (2000, 2002, 2004, 2005) unique-items hypothesis, I struggled with the issue of comparing linguistic items across languages. The approach I ended up adopting had been suggested by Chesterman (2007) and is partly based on the classical study of translation shifts by the Neo-Firthian linguist J. C. Catford (1965). As will be shown, however, this approach is far from ideal. At the time I did not think of another, potentially better way of comparing linguistic items across languages – that of using Martin Haspelmath's (1997, 2003) concept of semantic maps.

In the present paper I suggest how semantic maps could be exploited as a more solid ground to base translation equivalence on. The first section introduces the unique-items hypothesis and presents two ways of approaching the problem of cross-linguistic comparison – namely via translation shifts and semantic maps. The following section, called "Indefinite Pronouns," illustrates how the semantic-map model could be used in translation studies to determine the degree of equivalence of linguistic items across languages. The items chosen for this purpose are indefinite pronouns, since both Špetla (2018) and Haspelmath (1997) have dealt with them. Finally, some issues with the approach are pointed out and suggestions for further research given.

1.   The Equivalence Conundrum

1.1 Unique items

Ever since Mona Baker's (1993) paper, advocating the use of electronic corpora to reveal the nature of translated text, there has been a continuous effort to empirically substantiate claims about the so-called universal features of translation. One candidate for such a feature has been proposed by Tirkkonen-Condit:

> translated texts . . . manifest lower frequencies of linguistic elements that lack linguistic counterparts in the source languages such that these could also be used as translation equivalents (Tirkkonen-Condit 2002, 209)

This means that linguistic phenomena such as, for example, the Finnish verb of sufficiency *jaksaa* "has enough strength to" would occur less frequently in translations from English, which lacks a corresponding verb, than in original Finnish texts. This is because the English *has enough strength to* would be more likely to be translated into Finnish with the more literal construction *on tarpeeksi* "has enough" (Tirkkonen-Condit 2004, 181–82).

However attractive Tirkkonen-Condit's hypothesis may be to some translation scholars, it has a serious weakness: it is not clear what it means to lack a linguistic counterpart. For instance, what do items in two languages have to share if they are to be called "counterparts"? Tirkkonen-Condit does not specify this. Chesterman describes this problem as follows, "If we identify a unique item in terms of the non-existence of a straightforward, one-to-one equivalent in some other language(s), this depends in turn on what we mean by equivalence, and by this particular kind of equivalence" (2007, 7).

1.2 Translation shifts

Upon analyzing Tirkkonen-Condit's examples, Chesterman offers the following definition of a unique item: "it is [an item] for which the translation equivalent only maintains unit correspondence at some higher level or levels, not at given lower levels" (2007, 8). Thus in 1), for instance, *the old man* corresponds to the Czech *stařec* at the group level (i.e., the level of the phrase), but not at the word level, since the one-word Czech expression corresponds to three words in English.

1) English: The old man held out his hand to her.
   Czech: Stařec   k ní   napřáhl   ruku.
           old.man:NOM   to her held.out:3SG   hand:ACC

Chesterman's approach, based partly on Catford's (1965) translation shifts, has several downsides to it. The most serious of them relate to the concepts that lie in the core of Catford's theory. Catford worked with two kinds of equivalence: textual equivalence and formal correspondence. Textual equivalence is basically whatever "a competent bilingual informant or translator" (Catford 1965, 27) identifies as such. Thus, unless it is evaluated by a number of subjects, it is not a very objective measure. Formal correspondents, on the other hand, are various linguistic categories, such as sentence, word, subject, preposition, and number, which can be said to "occupy the 'same' place in the 'economy'" (Catford 1965, 27) of each of the languages in question. We could see in example 1) that *stařec* in Czech and *the*, *old*, and *man* in English are considered words and that *stařec* and *the old man* function as groups within the sentences. In Catford's conception, it is "departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the [source language] to the [target language]" (73) that constitute translation shifts. Meanwhile, textual equivalence is assumed to hold.

Catford himself admits that since the categories of formal correspondence are "defined [for each language] in terms of relations holding within the language itself[,] it is clear that formal correspondence is nearly always approximate" (1965, 27). In addition, as Chesterman points out, "the definition of the basic units themselves may not be so obvious if we turn to less commonly studied languages outside Standard Average European" (2007, 8). We can take, for example, the apparently unproblematic category of word. Since not all languages delimit words by spaces in writing (not to mention unwritten languages), one cannot work with an orthographic word, and it is notoriously difficult to define the word in another way (see Haspelmath 2011 for an overview).

1.3 Semantic maps

A different solution to the equivalence conundrum would be to adopt an approach from the field of linguistic typology. This seems like a reasonable step, as comparing languages and finding parallels between them is the field's primary goal. One such solution is to make use of the semantic-map model developed by Martin Haspelmath (1997, 2003). Unlike the structuralist approach, in which "grammatical meanings are typically identified on the basis of their contrasts with other elements in the system with which they are in opposition" (Haspelmath 2003, 214), the semantic-map approach deals with cross-linguistically attested functions.

The main point in this approach is that a linguistic unit may have multiple functions – that is, different senses and/or uses – and it may coincide in some functions with a unit from another language but differ in others. A semantic map, in Haspelmath's words, "is a geometrical representation of functions in 'conceptual/semantic space' that are linked by connecting lines and thus constitute a network" (2003, 213). Haspelmath chooses only to deal with grammatical units (affixes included), which he calls "grams." As he explains,

> a function is put on the map if there is at least one pair of languages that differ with respect to this function . . . [In addition,] the functions must be arranged in such a way that all multifunctional grams can occupy a contiguous area on the semantic map. (Haspelmath 2003, 217)

The latter requirement is sometimes referred to as the connectivity hypothesis (e.g., Croft and Poole 2008, 4).

As noted earlier, this approach is typological from the outset. The maps are developed through a comparison of a multitude of (preferably) unrelated languages of the world. Comparability is, therefore, its principal criterion. Moreover, should contradictory evidence be found, a semantic map can be falsified and subsequently corrected (Haspelmath 2003, 232).[1] In the following chapter it is shown how these maps can be used in identifying unique items.

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[1] There has emerged a new model that was meant to replace the one described here. First presented by Croft and Poole (2008), it uses multidimensional scaling or other multivariate statistical techniques to visualize similarities between pairs of items by way of distance between them in a two-dimensional Euclidian plane. The product of this method is sometimes called the proximity map. The old semantic-map model has survived, however, since both models have their own merits. For a comparison between them, see Georgakopoulos and Polis (2018).

2. Indefinite Pronouns

2.1 Introduction

As Špetla (2018) has found some unique items among indefinite pronouns in Czech and Haspelmath (1997) has developed a map for indefinites and analyzed them in English, it is on indefinite pronouns that the possibilities and drawbacks of the semantic-map approach will be examined. Indefinite pronouns usually come in series, and "in the most common case, [they] consist of (i) a stem indicating the ontological category, plus (ii) a formal element shared by all members of an indefinite pronoun series, such as *some-* and *any-* in English" (Haspelmath 1997, 22). The latter, dubbed "indefiniteness marker" by Haspelmath, is "the grammatical morpheme whose functions are to be mapped in semantic/conceptual space" (Haspelmath 2003, 220).

Haspelmath's (1997) semantic map of indefinite pronouns can be seen in Figure 1.[2] He devised it on the basis of two samples: a 100-language sample and a 40-language sample. The former was well balanced among the world's language families, but due to the unavailability of information on some languages, it was "investigated with respect to very few superficial parameters" (Haspelmath 1997, 16–17). The latter sample was biased towards Indo-European languages but investigated in detail. Although Haspelmath comments on the Czech language in several places, it was not included in either of the samples.
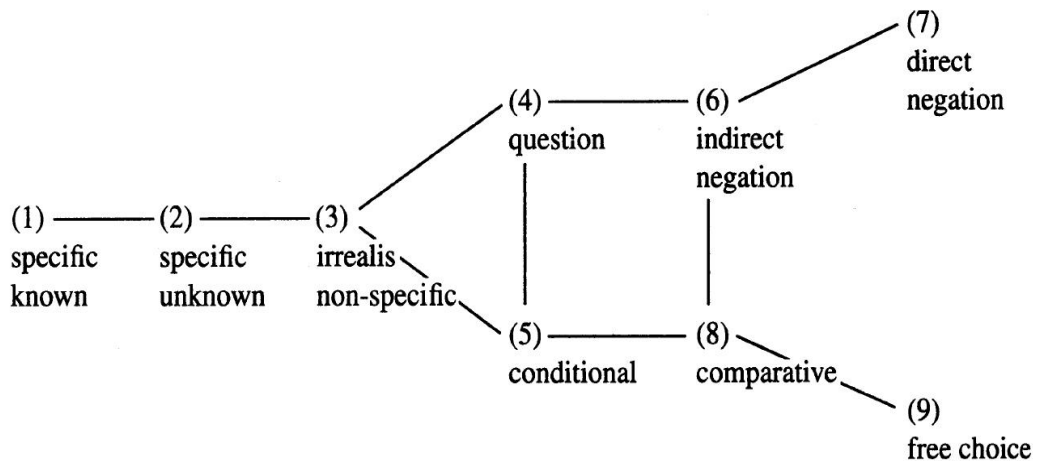

Figure 1: Haspelmath's semantic map for indefinite pronouns (1997, 64).

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[2] I cannot go into detail about the individual functions here, but examples from Czech are given later in this paper. For a description of the functions, see Haspelmath (1997, chap. 3 and elsewhere in the book).

In Špetla (2018, 40–41), I worked on the assumption that the Czech indefiniteness markers *ně-* and *-koli(v)* coincide semantically with the English *some-* and *any-*, respectively, and that the additional indefiniteness markers, such as *-si, kde-, lec-, leda(s)-,* and *všeli-*, are extras and therefore "unique" to Czech in the sense of Tirkkonen-Condit. The results showed that all the "extra" markers were underrepresented in translations from English into Czech, which is in agreement with the unique-items hypothesis. The semantic-map method, however, might have made it possible to substantiate the initial assumption, as I try to show below. First, I devise a semantic map for Czech, which I subsequently compare to Haspelmath's (1997) map for English.

2.2 Inventory

Unlike in English, where indefinites are formed from generic nouns or interrogative pronouns (Haspelmath 1997, 248), in Czech, they are just interrogative-based.[3] Furthermore, the indefiniteness marker in Czech is either prefixal or suffixal. For the current purposes, I divide Czech indefinites into four groups:

(i)   main series (i.e., *ně-, ni-, -koli(v), -si*),

(ii)   free-choice series (i.e., *leda(s)-, lec-, všeli(s)-, kde-*),

(iii)   rareness series (e.g., *sotva-, zřídka-, málo-*), and

(iv)   epistemic series (e.g., *bůhví-, čertví-, kdoví-, nevím-*).

Křížková notes of indefinites from groups (i) and (iii) that they mark a feature of "quantitative involvement" (1971, 367). The former group denotes "a considerable part/number," while the latter "a small part/number" (Křížková 1971, 368). These groups are actually on the borderline of what Haspelmath (1997, 9–13) regards as indefinite pronouns – the rareness series being perhaps past it – because rather than expressing indefiniteness, they almost exclusively express quantity.

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[3] The only exception is the pronoun *žádný* "none," which seems to have developed from an adjective meaning "the one required or desired" (Machek 1968, 721). Not considered are expressions such as *jeden, všechen,* and *jistý* that do not occur in series and that Haspelmath (1997) excludes from his conception of the indefinite pronoun.

Both groups, however, can be labelled as mid-scalar quantifiers,[4] which tend to be lumped together with indefinite pronouns due to formal similarities (Haspelmath 1997, 11–12). Out of these two groups, the free-choice series can at least convey free choice, as Křížková remarks(1971, 361–62), which implies some degree of indefiniteness.

In this paper, I deal only with groups (i) and (i), that is, the main series group and the free-choice series group.

Table 1 and Table 2, both adapted from Karlík and Šimík (2017), present the individual series of these groups. Note that there are 13 ontological categories in Czech, whereas the number of "categories most often expressed by simple means in the languages of the world" is seven – person, thing, property, place, time, manner, and amount – according to Haspelmath (1997, 30).

Table 1

Czech main indefinite pronoun series

category	interrogative	ně-	ni-	-koli(v)	-si
person	kdo	ně-kdo	ni-kdo	kdo-koli(v)	kdo-si
thing	co	ně-co	ni-c	co-koli(v)	co-si
quality	jaký	ně-jaký	ni-jaký	jaký-koli(v)	jaký-si
determiner	který	ně-který	žádný	který-koli(v)	který-si
place	kde	ně-kde	ni-kde	kde-koli(v)	kde-si
origin	od-kud	od-ně-kud	od-ni-kud	od-kud-koli(v)	od-kud-si
goal	kam	ně-kam	ni-kam	kam-koli(v)	kam-si
path	kudy	ně-kudy	ni-kudy	kudy-koli(v)	kudy-si
time	kdy	ně-kdy	ni-kdy	kdy-koli(v)	kdy-si[*]
beginning	od-kdy	od-ně-kdy	*od-ni-kdy*	od-kdy-koli(v)	od-kdy-si[*]
manner	jak	ně-jak	ni-jak	jak-koli(v)	jak-si
amount	kolik	ně-kolik	!žádný/nula	kolik-koli(v)	kolik-si
possession	čí	ně-čí	ni-čí	čí-koli(v)	čí-si

Note. Italics mark pronouns unattested in the SYN corpus version 7 (Křen et al. 2018). The meaning of the units *kdysi* and *odkdysi* has mostly narrowed down to refer to a point in the past.

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[4] By "mid-scalar quantifiers" Haspelmath refers to expressions that "can be arranged on a scale from maximal to minimal quantity (*all – most – many – several – few – none*, cf. Horn 1972, 61), where they occupy the middle" (1997, 11–12), that is, not the extremes.

Table 2
Czech free-choice indefinite pronoun series

category	interrog.	kde-	leda(s)-	lec-	všeli(s)-
person	kdo	kde-kdo	leda(s)-kdo	lec-kdo	*všeli(s)-kdo*
thing	co	kde-co	leda(s)-co(s)	lec-co(s)	všeli(s)-co(s)
quality	jaký	kde-jaký	leda(s)-jaký	lec-jaký	všeli(s)-jaký
determiner	který	kde-který	leda(s)-který	lec-který	všeli(s)-který
place	kde	*kde-kde*	leda(s)-kde	lec-kde	všeli(s)-kde
origin	od-kud	*od-kde-kud*	od-leda(s)-kud	od-lec-kud	*od-všeli-kud*
goal	kam	kde-kam	leda(s)-kam	lec-kam	všeli(s)-kam
path	kudy	kde-kudy	leda(s)-kde	lec-kudy	všeli(s)-kde
time	kdy	*kde-kdy*	leda(s)-kdy	lec-kdy	*všeli(s)-kdy*
beginning	od-kdy	*od-kde-kdy*	*od-leda(s)-kdy*	*od-lec-kdy*	*od-všeli-kdy*
manner	jak	kde-jak	leda(s)-jak	lec-jak	všeli(s)-jak
amount	kolik	*kde-kolik*	*leda(s)-kolik*	*lec-kolik*	*všeli(s)-kolik*
possession	čí	kde-čí	*leda(s)-čí*	lec-čí	*všeli(s)-čí*

Note. Italics mark pronouns unattested in the SYN corpus version 7 (Křen et al. 2018).

2.3 Distribution

In this section I comment on and give examples of the distribution of the selected indefinite-pronoun series across Haspelmath's functions. Most of the examples have been based on those given by Haspelmath (1997), and the acceptability judgements have been made through introspection.

Let us begin with the *-si* series. Křížková asserts that the *-si* series is mostly restricted to the past and present tenses (1971, 344), that is, realis contexts, and both Křížková (1971, 353) and Haspelmath (1997, 149–50) say of *-si* that it is specific. However, they fail to mention whether it can refer both to something unknown to the speaker and to something known to them. I have some doubts about the latter. For instance, in 2)2) *kdosi* sounds odd in the least. However, 2)b sounds somewhat better, albeit aloof and archaic.

2) specific known
a. ***Ně-kdo*/ˀ*kdo-si*** *ti* *volal. Hádej kdo.*
   INDEF-who/who-INDEF you:DAT called guess who
   "Somebody[5] has called you. Guess who."

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[5] There are two stems in English for the ontological category of person, *-one* and *-body*. Although they can be used interchangeably, the former stem may sometimes be perceived as more formal than the latter. A similar distinction can be observed between *ně-kdo* and *kdo-si* in the specific unknown function, where both are possible.

b. *Do **koho-si**   jsem se   zamilovala. (Ale neřeknu ti do koho.)*
   into who:ACC-INDEF   AUX REFL   fell.in.love:ISG
   "I fell in love with someone. (But I won't tell you with whom.)"

In the specific unknown function, both the *-si* and the *ně-* series are possible.

3) specific unknown
   Kdo-si*/*ně-kdo   *přichází   zadní branou.*
   who-INDEF/INDEF-who   comes   back gate:INSTR
   "Someone is coming through the back gate."

In irrealis non-specific contexts, only the *ně-* series can occur.

4) irrealis non-specific (Karlík and Šimík 2017)
   *Vypravuj nám   ***jakou-si*/*ně-jakou***   příhodu   z   dětství.*
   narrate   us: DAT   what-INDEF/INDEF-what   incident   from   childhood
   "Tell us a story from your childhood."

In questions, *-koli(v)* sounds odd. Haspelmath notes the same about its Polish cognate *-kolwiek*, but assigns it the question function anyway (1997, 272). In 5)a *-koliv* is extremely odd, while in 5)b it is acceptable. I would venture that the difference lies in whether the question refers to something that has happened 5)a or to something hypothetically possible 5)b.

5) question
a. *Potkals   po   cestě   ??**koho-koliv**?*
   met:3SG   on   way   whom-INDEF
   "Did you meet anyone on your way?"
b. *Jste   připraven   unést   **jakou-koli**   pravdu?* (Křen et al. 2018)
   AUX   ready   bear   what-INDEF   truth
   "Are you ready to bear any truth whatsoever?"

However, in the protasis of a conditional sentence and in indirect negation contexts, both the *ně-* and the *-koli(v)* series are possible.

6) conditional

Pokud **ně-kdo**/**kdo-koli** *zavolá,* *informujte* *mě.*
if INDEF-who/who-INDEF calls inform me
"If anybody calls, let me know."

7) indirect negation

Nechtěla *jsem,* *aby* *o tom* **ně-kdo**/**kdo-koli** *věděl.*
not.wanted:1SG AUX to about it INDEF-who/who-INDEF knew
"I didn't want anybody to know about it."

In the comparative and in the free-choice functions, some indefinites from the free-choice group fit some contexts better than others. For example, in 8), *kdekdo* is very likely the least probable choice given the context. This suggests that there are semantic nuances between the individual series from the free-choice group. In other words, *lec-* may have a slightly different meaning than *kde-*.

8) comparative

Běhá *rychleji* *než* **kdo-koli**/**lec-kdo**/**kde-kdo** *jiný* *z* *naší* *třídy.*
run:3SG faster than who-INDEF/INDEF-who/INDEF-who else from our class
"He/she runs faster than anyone else in our class."

9) free choice
a. *Přijď,* **kdy-koliv** *se* *ti* *to* *hodí.*
come when-INDEF REFL you it suits
"Come whenever it suits you."
b. *Můžeš* *si* *vybrat* **všeli-cos**.
can:2SG REFL choose INDEF-what
"You can choose all sorts of things."
c. *To* *dokáže* **lec-kdo**/**kde-kdo**.
it manages INDEF-who/INDEF-who
"Anybody can do that."

Finally, the Czech *ni-* series is the same as the Polish one, in that it "occurs only in the direct-negation function, co-occurring with verbal negation" (Haspelmath 1997, 272).

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10) direct negation

Ni-kdo	o	tom	**ni-c**	*nevěděl.*
NEG-who	about	it	NEG-what	not.knew

"Nobody knew anything about it."

From the above information one can develop a semantic map such as the one presented in Figure 2 below.
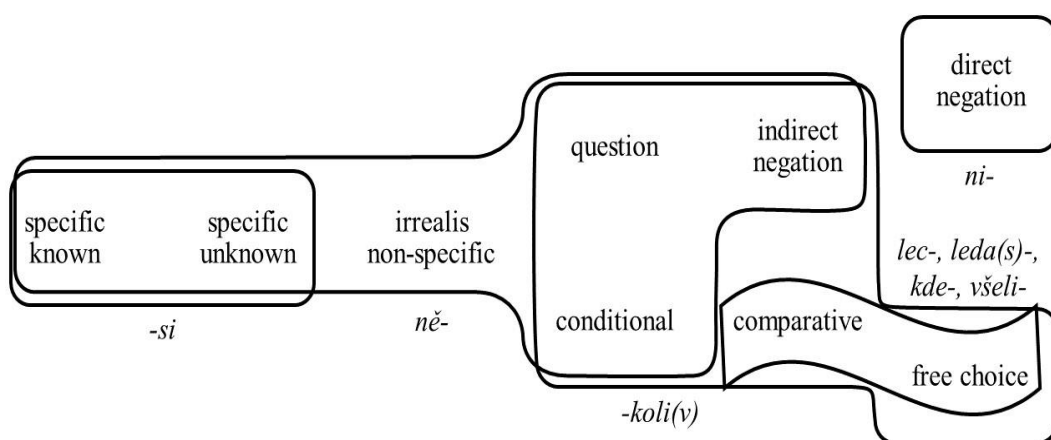

Figure 2: Semantic map of the main and free-choice indefinite pronouns in Czech.

2.4 Comparison

Having developed a semantic map for Czech indefinites, we can now compare it with the map Haspelmath made for English indefinites, which is reproduced in Figure 3. The most obvious difference is that the *-si* series and the free-choice series do not seem to have counterparts in English. A few additional differences can be observed between the *ně-* and *some-* series and the *-koli(v)* and *any-* series. Unlike *ně-*, *some-* cannot be used in the indirect-negation function, and unlike *any-*, *-koli(v)* cannot be used in the direct-negation function. Some doubts have also been cast about the use of *-koli(v)* in questions. Nevertheless, the *ně-* and the *-koli(v)* series do indeed resemble the English *some-* and *any-* series.

What I assumed in the thesis (Špetla 2018, 40–41) was therefore roughly correct. But with the semantic map it is possible to substantiate such claims and gain a clearer picture. The criteria that I set in my thesis for an item to be unique still

apply. In the specific functions, translators can choose between *ně-* and *-si* when translating the English *some-*, but *ně-* is functionally much closer to it. Therefore *-si*, not having a direct counterpart in English, can be considered a unique item. The same logic would apply in the case of the free-choice series.
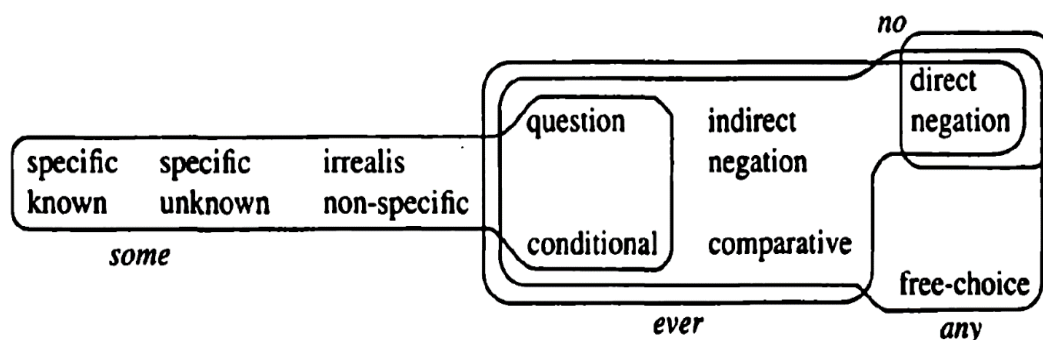

Figure 3: Haspelmath's semantic map of the main indefinite pronouns in English (*Indefinite Pronouns* 1997, 249).

The semantic-map approach, however, does not allow to compare stylistic differences between the items. Arguably, the *-si* series is stylistically marked and one does not encounter it very often in everyday speech. The way in which and the degree to which this affects *-si*'s occurrence in translated text remains unclear.

Conclusions

The semantic-map approach seems to be, at least in the case of indefinite pronouns, a better way of comparing linguistic items across languages. Thanks to the semantic maps, one can see that the Czech *ně-* and *-koli(v)* are not exactly equivalent to the English *some-* and *any-*, respectively. While *ně-* has an extra function, *-koli(v)* lacks (at least) one. Moreover, the *-si* series and the free-choice series lack counterparts in English. Compared to the translation-shift approach, this method does not rely so much on preconceived notions such as the word. It focuses instead on cross-linguistic applicability – which is an advantage of linguistic-typological methods in general.

However, a number of disadvantages can also be pointed out. For one thing, to analyse and compare indefinite pronouns across so many languages and to come up with the semantic map must have taken Haspelmath a long time and much effort, not to mention the vast array of informants (see acknowledgements in Haspelmath

1997, vii–viii). Another downside is that the semantic map creates a false impression of unambiguousness and definiteness. It does not, for example, tell us anything about stylistic value or frequency of use. For further criticism see, for instance, Cysouw (2001), Croft and Poole (2008), or Malchukov (2010). A more general overview of the method is given by Georgakopoulos and Polis (2018).

Despite the problems, the semantic-map model offers many avenues for research. A larger study could be carried out involving multiple languages from Haspelmath's sample (1997). Using his analyses of indefinite pronouns, one could identify unique items in several pairs of unrelated languages and use them to further test the unique-items hypothesis. As for the semantic map of indefinite pronouns, further research could focus on the categories of expressions that are frequently lumped together with indefinites, such as mid-scalar quantifiers: Would their functions complement the map? Would there be any inconsistencies? If successful, this could be used as further support for van der Auwera's (2013, sec. 4) argument that it is possible to increase the complexity of the original semantic maps.

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