The Contextual Meanings of Kurdish Lexeme "BAŞ" and its Equivalents in English

Ibrahim Mohammed Ali Murad

Abstract— The meaning of a linguistic unit is normally tied to both linguistic and physical contexts- this is something inevitable. The present paper attempts to explore the meaning of a frequently used term in Kurdish daily interactions, namely BAŞ, via highlighting it in the above mentioned contexts to identify what meanings it may produce. Having done this, the study pinpoints the appropriate counterpart in English for each of the meanings detected.

Index Terms— Discourse marker, Equivalence, Interaction, Kurdish language, Linguistics context, Physical context, Translation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Kurdish is one of the living languages, which has unexpectedly flourished rapidly without losing its momentum during the last two decades due to the political and economic changes in Kurdistan region of Iraq especially. A great number of books in various domains were translated into Kurdish from different languages and found their way on the shelves of Kurdistan public and private libraries. And up till now, the market of knowledge is starving for more and more reliable academic, literary and scientific universal products to be rendered into Kurdish. This need has encouraged many translation theoretical studies with special reference to Kurdish versus English to appear trying to polish this process and guide those who work in this realm to perfect their performance, as well as comparative linguists.

The present paper is an attempt to have a contribution in linguistic studies in the fields mentioned above. The light is to be shed on a wide commonly used Kurdish linguistic unit that inevitably appears in daily social interactions, which is namely BAŞ /baʃ/.

BAŞ is an adjective and basically means "good". Being adverbial is also another frequent form it may appear in. "Baş" is sometimes a brief answer and sometimes a discourse marker or a gap-filler. This colorful usage of this term results in a semantic variation in terms of its precise reference and consequently –when translated- its convenient counterpart. A variation as such may cause troubles to translators and confuse them while trying to select the appropriate equivalence for BAŞ in the target language (TL).

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2 The Aim

This study aims at identifying the essential uses of the term in question touching upon its linguistic and contextual meanings in the Kurdish language. Having this done, the search will switch to identifying the functional equivalence of BAŞ in English as a TL.

3 The Significance

The significance of this paper lies in scanning the uses of BAŞ in its source language (SL) interactions- a topic that has never been approached before (to the best of the researcher's knowledge). Thus, the study is about to furnish linguists of comparative interests and translators with detailed knowledge of the most convenient and authentic counterparts of this term in the English language.

4 Definition of Key Terms

4.1 Contextual Meaning

It is the meaning of a term or an utterance as derived from the linguistic and nonlinguistic context. Portner (2006) envelopes the two in a simple coined term namely "speaker's meaning" which he interprets as "what I intend to communicate, beyond literal, semantic meaning of I said".

As for context, David Crystal, in his Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics, defines it as "[a] general term used in linguistics and phonetics to refer to specific parts of an utterance (or text) near or adjacent to a unit which is the focus of attention". And he stresses the vitality of context in deciding the meaning of an utterance by stating "[w]ords, it is suggested, have meaning only when seen in context." Baker bears the same idea concerning the central role a context plays in forming the meaning an utterance may imply by accounting for context as "the context in which an utterance occurs determines the range of implicatures that may sensibly be derived from it (2011:249).

Yule (1976:129-130) goes further by distinguishing two types of context: linguistic context and physical context. He alludes that identifying which meaning is intended of an utterance and how it is interpreted are tied to context with both its types.

4.2 Translation

To Crystal (1992:394) translation is "the process or result of turning the expressions of one language (the "source language") into the expressions of another language (the "target language"), so that the meanings correspond."

Briefly but precisely, Catford (1964:20) defines translation as "the replacement of a textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)". Nida (1982:12) provides some essential details in his definition stating that translation is "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style".

4.3 Equivalence

Translation occurs when an utterance in the SL is rendered into the TL with an utterance that conveys the intended meaning of the SL utterance. The essentiality of equivalence in translation is so clear in Robinson's words "the entire purpose of translation is achieving equivalence. The target text must match the source text as fully as possible" (2003:37).

5 The lexical meaning of BAŞ

Consulting several Kurdish-English and English-Kurdish dictionaries for the meaning(s) of BAŞ in Kurdish, it has been noticed that the central meaning of the term is "çak, qanc/qinc" meaning "good" which in its turn has the meaning of "baş, sudmend, çak", (see Shexani Kurdish-Kurdish Dictionary (2009) and Yad's English-Kurdish Dictionary(2001). In terms of synonymy, BAŞ has "çak" as a very close-in-meaning alternative, but never an identical one.

*Çonît kake, başît?   Çonît kake, çakît? (lit. :how are you, good?)

*Em pênuse başe.   Em pênuse cake (lit. : this pen is good)

But, mostly in terms collocations or idioms, they cannot be exchangeable in expressions like :

Swarçakswarbaş* (lit.: a knight)

(Serçakkirdin)   (serbaşkirdin)* (lit. : haircut)

Çaksazî (başsazî)* (lit.: reformation)

In examples (1) and (2), BAŞ cannot replace ÇAK owing to collocation aspects whereas in 3 the reason is idiomatic. "çaksazî" is made up of (çak +the suffix "sazî",which suggests the concept of "creation or production", so the term literally means "reform making or reform creation". Actually, in contexts related to maintenance or handicraft ÇAK is often used rather than BAŞ.

On the other hand, in certain collocations, only BAŞ can be used. Sheikhani (2009), under BAŞ entry, gives these examples:

-Başhembaĺ (lit.: a skillful porter)

- Baştucar (lit.: a successful businessman). The reason behind this is the fossilization of the expression.

Hasan (2007:142) lists fourteen meanings of BAŞ in his dictionary without exemplifying for any. He mentions it with the meaning of: çak:good/ok), cwan:(pretty/beautiful), pak: (clean/clear/pure), panupoŕ: (chubby), tendrust: (healthy), besud: (useful), sazgar: (sweet), xoş (tasty/delicious),bedîn/lexwatirs: (Good-fearing/ believer), zor: (many/much),diĺsoz, diĺnerm(sincere/kindhearted), beŕêz, mezin (honorable), ŕefîqdost(social), behoş, zîrek (cautious/ intelligent).

6 Methodology

The study is basically theoretical and descriptive as the texts to be analyzed are taken from Kurdish everyday communications in which the term "BAŞ" is used. After investigating each conversation thoroughly with special focus on the semantic and pragmatic aspects, the effort turned to identify the adequate translation and the dynamic equivalent for BAŞ in the English language.

7 BAŞ in Contexts and English Equivalents

The interactional occasions in which BAŞ is typically used in both written and spoken forms of Kurdish language are clearly exhibited in the authentic examples below:

1. Em kitêbe zor başe.

Here, the referential meaning of BAŞ is intended. It occupies a regular adjectival position modifying the preceding noun "kitêb" and labeling it as "good". Thus, this sentence may be rendered into English as:

-"This book is very good",

In this translation, each word in the Kurdish sentence is smoothly realized by a natural equivalent in English. As for "a" attached to BAŞ, it is deictic that refers to "kteb: book). This tail attached position is often occupied by such deictic suffixes as ""-e, -im, -in, -ît, -în" that go in agreement with the subject.

* Min başim (I'm good/fine) – ême başîn (we're good/fine)– to başît (you're good/fine) –ewan başin (they're good/fine) – êwe başin (you're good /fine <plural>)

2. "Çonît, Nalî? Başît"

In example (2), this question is regularly used to ask about others' health, or simply a greeting used for what Jacobson

(1960:350-377) calls PHATIC reasons just to establish communication with others. BAŞ in this linguistic context cannot be translated into "good" since the inquiry is about health owing to collocation reasons in English. A natural counterpart would dictate such a translation like:

-"How are you. Nali? Are you fine?"

Or replacing "fine" with "OK" or "alright"; "good" is an unusual counterpart here.

3. "Baş piŕî bikerewe."

Such an expression might be heard in a situation where a container is needed to be filled up. BAŞ, in this context, is simply used to stress the action, piŕkirdin (filling), as the addresser recommends the container to be completely full. Transferring this utterance into a natural English text would result into the following:

-"Fill it up", and if the container is a car tank, the pronoun *it* will be *her*- fill her up.

Lexically, the English *up* adequately expresses the semantic load of Kurdish BAŞ for the fact that *up* is an intensifier and implies the idea of "to a higher or greater level" which may be used to emphasize or exaggerate (see Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

4. Baş bîr le babeteke bikerewe.

In this sentence, the adverbial "BAŞ" (literally means well/carefully/ deeply) is collocated with the predicate " bîr bikerewe" (literally means to think) . The meaning formed by this word group can be corresponded by a single word in English that fully carries the meaning, which is namely *consider*. "To consider" denotes "to think about something carefully, especially to make a decision", see (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). Accordingly, if wordiness avoided and swiftness targeted, the typical translation of this Kurdish BAŞ-included utterance would be:

* Consider the topic.

However, in example 5, where BAŞ is also adverbial with the meaning of "well/ carefully", rendering BAŞ explicitly is a must.

5. Baş babeteke bixwênerewe.

* Read the topic carefully.

6. Êsta çî bikeyn başe?

In the interrogative (6), which is often used to ask for suggestions when the speaker is confused and cannot make a decision in a certain situation, the term BAŞ behaves adjectivally modifying "çî" (lit. :what)"-the thing that is supposed to be done. A translation which keeps the meaning of all the explicit components of the sentence may seem like the following:

* Now, what's the good (thing) we should do?

The problem with this translation is that it does not sound so natural, for the English express the very same idea in the following form in which BAŞ is not matched:

-What shall we do now?

7. Başe, êsta çî bikeyn?

What can be noticed in sentence (7) is that BAŞ occupies a pre-pattern position unlike sentence (6) which was part of the sentence structure occupying a final position. In the sentence under discussion, the term of "Başe" functions as a discourse marker which holds the speaker's attitude towards what he/she states next. The speaker, in this utterance, uses "Başe" for one of these purposes:

1) Making a link between this expression and what has been mentioned before as if a conclusion is to be drawn or a decision is to be made.

2) Gaining time to organize or to put the idea in a proper form by the speaker.

In this term, it is a discourse marker. Discourse markers, as Swan (1980:159) defines, are "words and expressions used to show how discourse is constructed. They can show the connection between what a speaker is saying and what has already been said or what is going to be said". With this meaning implied, BAŞ, here, may be naturally rendered by either SO or WELL.

Typically, "so" is used to show that what is said follows logically what has been said before", and "well" is a gap-filler which is used to gain time while thinking of what to say, (ibid).

Bearing this discussion in mind, the message of (7) can be generally transferred into English as one of these alternatives"

-Well, what shall we do now?

-So, what shall we do now?

Also as a discourse marker, "BAŞE" appears in (8) with a different denotation:

8. A: Dergake dabixe   B: Başe be ser çaw.

In this interaction, A asks B to close the door and B replies positively and politely. B's reply is of two parts spliced a comma: first, he/she announces that he/she has got the message; second, he/she welcomes it. Dynamically, what fits "Başe" here ,as an equivalent in English, is "OK". "Sure" and "certainly" would be adequate counterparts as well. As for the second part of B's speech, "beser çaw", which literally means "on (my) eye", is a polite response to the requests standing for the normal "I will!" and for the polite "With pleasure"(see "with pleasure" under the entity of "pleasure" in Longman Dictionary). Thus, (8) can be translated as:

* A: Close the door. B: OK, with pleasure!

Hasan (2007) in his Shwan Dictionary lists "leṣsaẋ: being healthy" as one of the meanings of BASH. Dialogue (9) is an attempt to highlight this detected meaning.

9. A: Erê kake bawkit cone? B: Weĺahî ew başe nîye, maweyeke her piştî dêşê. A: hîç nîye, baş ebêt înşaeĺa.

(9) is an interaction in which A asks B about his/her father's health. B says that his/her parent isn't well as he suffers from his back and in his/her reply, B wishes him a soon recovery.

BAŞ in B's reply is used as an adjective modifying the health state of B's father, "ew başe nîye" which literally means "not that good". Ellipsis is detected here as BAŞ modifies "tenderusti: health" which is not explicit in the speech. "Baş" is used once more in the dialogue but this time by A, "baş ebêt înşaeĺa" meaning "he'll (soon) get better, God willing!". The informal "to get better", not the formal "to recover", may appropriately correspond "bash abet" since it sounds a casual talk between two acquaintances (see "recover" in Longman Dictionary). The translation of the whole text, then, will be in the following shape:

* A: How's your father, guy? -B: "Actually, he isn't that good. Lately, he's been suffering from backache. -A: "Take it easy, he'll get better, God willing".

In the translation of (9), these points should be noticed to understand the process of its translation better:

a- The Kurdish "erê kake" which literally matches "Oh, brother/ bro" can be rendered as "guy, fellow, or man" relying on the social context. However, in the context of conversation (9), it seems more natural to render "erê kake" into the discourse-marker of "by the way" as the SL text implies a sudden start. The appropriateness of "by the way" lies in its use to indicate opening a subject by a speaker.

b- The term "weĺahî", used in B's reply, literally seems as swearing to God, but functionally, it's merely a discourse marker meaning "actually" or "in fact".

c- "hîç nîye" in A's speech means "it's nothing" in English, but in such a context, the English say expressions like "take it easy" or simply "don't worry" (see EASY in Longman Dictionary).

d- "înşaeĺa" which is matched by "God willing" in English may also be rendered as "soon" as "God willing" indicates that there is a high certainty that something will happen, so high that only God could prevent it.(see http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/God+willing)

10. Tuxwa, başim nekird yarmetî Hesenim da?
* Haven't I done right…….

11. A: Kake Ŕeza zor nexoşe.   B: Ey başe bo naçêt bo nexoşxane?

In this dialogue, A informs B that Kak Ŕeza is too ill. B replies wondering why he does not go to the hospital. BAŞ is uttered by B's response "Ey başe" which is used to express his surprise. "Başe" within this context does not modify a noun or a verb; it cannot be understood as "good" or "well" for it'll be pragmatically awkward. B expresses his/her surprise about the contradictory states of "Kak Ŕeza" who is too sick, yet he doesn't go to hospital. To sound natural and authentic in the TL text, "but" would be totally convenient:

* A: Kak Raza is too ill. -B: But, why doesn't he go to the hospital?

What might be amazing is that BAŞ may be used for threatening as the interaction below clarifies:

12. A: Bawke, Daray Biram zor haruhajî kird. B: (addressing Dara) Başe başe, Dara bê heya, duwayî îlacit ekem.

In short, A tells his/her father that his/her brother, Dara, has been too naughty, and the parent threatens that he'll punish him. The translation may show the details:

* A: Dad, my bro Dara has been too naughty. B: Wait, cheeky Dara wait, I'll take care of you later on!

It's worthy to notice that the illocutionary act of "I'll take care of you, cheeky Dara" is threatening to punish the naughty child NOT looking after him.

13. A: Hesen, yek toz seyareket bihêne duwawe.   (Hasan driving backward) A: Başe, başe, elêre ŕaygire.

In (13), "Başe" turns up with a new meaning. A tells Hasan to move his car a bit backward as it seems that it's not parked properly, and he does. While moving backward, Hasan is asked to stop in the place which is supposed to be convenient. BAŞ, which is often repeated twice in such contexts for emphasis or warning, implies the satisfaction of the speaker's desire of the action being performed. Hence, translating it as "enough" or "OK", or even "stop" will fit the context and sound very much English. In terms of ellipsis, it is noticed here just like the SL text as the subject in both is not overt in A's second utterance:

A:Hasan, move your car to the back a little bit. (Hasan driving back), A: Enough, enough. Park it right here.

As a conclusion-marker, BAŞ is also used in certain situations meaning "then". The interaction below depicts this usage clearly. A addresses B asking where his/her mobile phone is. B negates having an idea about it, which makes A conclude wondering about its destination.

14. A: Tara, mobayilekem lay toye? B: Na, lay min çî ekat! A: Başe ebêt kê birdibêtî?

Having an ample view of the situation in (14), a translator might put it in English in this way:

* A: Tara, is my mobile phone with you? -Tara: Nope, what should it do with me? A: Then, who could've taken it?

"Then" in A's conclusion is a dynamic equivalence of BAŞ in the SL text. A can never mean "good" or "well" when saying "başe" as the context exposes.

Also, in sentence15, the speaker uses BAŞ accounting for the status of Mam Zorab, which literally means that Mam Zorab's status is very good; he'd bought two new houses only this year. It's worth noticing that pragmatic factor has been decisive in unveiling the intended meaning of the speaker. This may be a convenient occasion to draw translator's attention to the vital role of physical context in which a speech event goes off.

15. Maşeĺa mam Zorab haĺî zor başe, her lem saĺda du xanuy tazey kiŕî!

Lexically, the NP "haĺî zor başe", BAŞ in (15) is adjectival meaning "good" follows the noun "hal, lit.: status" modifying it, and "zor: very" is merely an intensifier. However, knowing the intended meaning of SL text which is (he is wealthy) , this NP, if rendered as "his status is very good" won't make sense or sound natural since such an English expression does not mean being rich. Thus, a translator must be aware of the idiomatic sense hidden here and transfer it properly. A suggested translation can be as follows:

* Mashallah, Mam Zorab is so loaded; this year only, he's bought two new houses.

"Loaded" is more appropriate than "rich/ wealthy", for *loaded* is also idiomatic meaning *extremely rich* (see Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). *Rolling in it* may be a possible alternative for being a synonym of *loaded*.

16. "Başit nezanî" said a teacher to a learner who totally failed to answer a question correctly.

In this utterance, the speaker (the teacher) expresses his/her surprise to the addressee (the learner) for not being able to answer the question. The speaker, to show his/her shock, intensifies the learner's inability and the linguistic instrument is BAŞ, i.e. Baş is the intensifier (Başit nezanî).

Syntactically, the sentence is made of: (Adverb + Subject+ Verb (Negation prefix +Verb)) realized by   (Baş + it + ne+ zanî)

The irony is this utterance is suggested by intensifying the idea, which is negative, by BAŞ which is of a positive denotation.

Taking this analysis into consideration, this image may be rendered into English in this way that preserves the illocutionary force of the utterance:

* You're absolutely wrong.

Here, "absolutely" is an intensifier that serves as an equivalent for "BAŞ". It should be noticed that the semantic difference between the two lies in the point that in terms of connotation, "BAŞ" is positive whereas "absolutely" is neutral.

If one argued that the Kurdish text can be translated in a way with all the constituents realized – especially the negative and the positive meaning of BAŞ - like the following

* You haven't known well.

The inadequacy of this translation can easily be seen in the point that here the sentence implies that the addressee already knows something but that knowledge is not satisfactory, unlike the SL text which negates any least idea about the topic.

8 Conclusion

The study comes out with the following findings:

a. A context with its types cannot be discarded when the meaning of a linguistic unit is targeted.

b. Dictionaries are not always helpful to find out the meaning of a word. Thus, studies like the present paper may be essential to fill in the gaps found in there.

c. "BAŞ" is an indispensible Kurdish everyday term that is of multiple meanings which vary vitally due to semantic and pragmatic reasons.

d. Comparative linguists and translators need special awareness when dealing with terms that seem to be so basic or simple like BAŞ.

e. BAŞ in Kurdish is generally adjective, but sometimes functions adverbially and sometimes as a discourse marker.

f. BAŞ is not always of positive connotation; it may stand for both "very" and "too" in English.

9 Pedagogical Implications

This study, besides its significance as aiding tips for translators, can be of specific importance to those who teach translation at English departments in Kurdistan Region. It can be a clear example to show the learners the magnitude of context in shaping meaning, and know its communicative value then how to translate the linguistic product adequately.

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