

The State of Lacunarity In A Linguistic Context

Baxtiyorova Gulhayo

Basic doctoral student at Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages named after Iskhokhon Ibrat, Uzbekistan

Received: 12 February 2026; **Accepted:** 09 March 2026; **Published:** 31 March 2026

Abstract: The article examines lacunarity as a linguistic, semantic, and linguocultural phenomenon manifested in asymmetries between languages at the lexical, grammatical, phraseological, and pragmatic levels. The study aims to clarify the theoretical status of lacunarity in modern linguistics and to show how lacunar relations operate in contrastive analysis, translation, lexicography, and intercultural communication. The research is based on descriptive, comparative, and interpretive methods and synthesizes findings from lexical semantics, translation studies, and multilingual lexical database research. The analysis demonstrates that lacunarity should not be reduced to the simple absence of a word in one language. Rather, it reflects deeper mismatches in conceptual segmentation, communicative priorities, cultural salience, and grammatical encoding. Particular attention is paid to the distinction between lexical gaps and referential gaps, to specification and generalization mismatches, and to the problem of equivalence in translation. The article argues that lacunarity is not a defect of language but a normal consequence of the selective way in which languages lexicalize experience. It is further shown that lacunarity has methodological value: it reveals culturally marked concepts, tests the limits of bilingual equivalence, and exposes the need for explanatory, contextual, and compensatory strategies in translation and lexicography. The conclusion states that lacunarity is one of the most productive analytical categories for understanding how linguistic systems differ while remaining mutually interpretable in discourse.

Keywords: Lacunarity, lacuna, lexical gap, linguistic context, contrastive linguistics, non-equivalent lexis, translation, intercultural communication.

Introduction: The problem of lacunarity occupies an important place in contemporary linguistic thought because it touches the core question of how languages represent reality differently. Whenever two linguistic systems are compared, researchers encounter cases in which one language possesses a lexicalized, grammatically fixed, or culturally conventionalized form for a concept that another language does not encode in the same way. In many traditions of linguistics, especially in English-language scholarship, such cases are often discussed under the heading of lexical gaps; in contrastive linguistics, bilingual lexicography, and translation studies, however, the broader notions of lacuna and lacunarity have become especially useful because they capture not only absent words, but also absent distinctions, absent discourse routines, and absent culturally presupposed meanings.

Classical work on lexical gaps treated them as important evidence for the structure of semantic fields, while later translation theory and multilingual lexical-database research showed that gaps are central to the problem of equivalence across languages.

The relevance of lacunarity is explained by the fact that languages do not map the world in identical units. One language may generalize where another specifies; one may lexicalize a culturally salient practice, while another must describe it analytically; one may encode a semantic contrast in morphology, while another leaves the contrast to syntax or context. Research on multilingual lexical databases has shown that conceptual mismatches between languages create persistent problems for interlingual mapping, because lexical units rarely align perfectly across systems. Wordnet-based studies likewise demonstrate that

cross-linguistic comparison regularly uncovers lexical gaps, referential gaps, differences in perspective, and morpho-syntactic mismatches. Such observations shift the discussion away from the naïve idea that every word must have an exact counterpart in another language and toward a more dynamic understanding of partial equivalence.

This article proceeds from the assumption that lacunarity is best understood not as an accidental anomaly but as a regular manifestation of the selective nature of linguistic categorization. The aim of the study is to define the state of lacunarity in linguistic contexts, to identify its principal forms, and to evaluate its significance for contrastive analysis, translation, lexicography, and language teaching. The novelty of the discussion lies in combining insights from lexical semantics, translation theory, and cross-linguistic lexical-resource studies into a single conceptual framework. The central thesis is that lacunarity emerges wherever a mismatch exists between the nominative, semantic, grammatical, or pragmatic resources of two languages, and that such mismatches reveal differences in the way communities segment knowledge and experience.

The research has a theoretical and analytical character. Its materials consist of major works in lexical semantics, translation studies, bilingual lexicography, and multilingual lexical-resource research that address the problem of non-equivalence, lexical gaps, and cross-linguistic mismatches. The methodological basis combines descriptive analysis, contrastive comparison, semantic interpretation, and translation-oriented contextual analysis. These methods make it possible to treat lacunarity not simply as a dictionary problem, but as a multidimensional relation between linguistic systems.

The first methodological step is definitional. A lacunar relation is identified when a linguistic unit, semantic distinction, grammatical category, or discourse convention in one language cannot be matched by a single equivalent unit of the same functional status in another language. The second step is classificatory: the analysis distinguishes between lexical lacunarity, referential lacunarity, morpho-syntactic lacunarity, and pragmatic or discourse lacunarity. The third step is interpretive: illustrative examples are examined not merely as isolated words, but as manifestations of

deeper asymmetries in conceptualization and use. The fourth step is applicative: the consequences of lacunarity are considered for translation, lexicographic description, and intercultural communication. This approach follows the logic of recent research showing that gaps cannot be studied adequately without reference to meaning, form, and use at the same time.

Because the article is conceptual rather than experimental, its validity depends on explanatory consistency and on the convergence of several research traditions. Classical translation theory supplies the notion that equivalence is never absolute; lexical-gap studies show how semantic fields leave unlexicalized positions; and multilingual lexical-database research provides systematic evidence that languages lexicalize shared conceptual domains differently. These converging perspectives justify treating lacunarity as an independent analytical category rather than a marginal translation inconvenience.

The analysis shows, first, that lacunarity is broader than the notion of a missing word. A lexical gap is only the most visible form of a more general phenomenon. In linguistic terms, lacunarity arises when two languages fail to establish one-to-one correspondences between formal expressions and conceptual distinctions. This may happen because one language lexicalizes a contrast that another language leaves unlexicalized, because one language possesses a culture-bound referent unknown in another speech community, because grammatical information is distributed differently, or because pragmatic routines are conventionalized in unequal ways. Thus, lacunarity must be treated as a state of asymmetry between linguistic systems rather than as an isolated lexical deficiency.

Second, the study confirms that a crucial distinction must be drawn between lexical and referential gaps. Lexical gaps concern concepts known across cultures but not lexicalized in the same way in all languages. Research in multilingual lexicography illustrates this through cases such as English finger and toe versus languages that use one umbrella term for both, or through contrasts in which one language has a general term while another divides the semantic field into more specific units. Referential gaps, by contrast, arise when the concept itself belongs primarily to one culture and

therefore lacks an ordinary referent in another. This distinction is essential because lexical gaps can often be resolved through semantic restructuring, while referential gaps usually require cultural explanation.

Third, lacunarity regularly reflects differences in semantic granularity. Languages do not distribute meaning with equal precision in all domains. English has the umbrella noun sibling, but many languages prefer separate lexical items equivalent to 'brother' and 'sister' and require an analytic expression to denote the superordinate kinship category. Conversely, English cousin neutralizes distinctions that other languages may lexicalize more precisely by line, gender, or relative family branch. The same logic appears in verbal domains: some languages separate the acts of teaching and learning lexically, while others can encode both within one broader verb depending on context. These examples show that lacunarity often results not from the absence of knowledge, but from different principles of semantic partitioning.

Fourth, the results indicate that grammatical and morphological lacunarity is just as important as lexical lacunarity. Cross-linguistic research demonstrates that some mismatches arise not because a concept is unknown, but because languages lexicalize or grammaticalize it by different formal means. One language may encode distinctions of gender, number, diminutiveness, or countability morphologically, whereas another expresses the same meanings lexically or contextually. Wordnet-based analysis has identified such contrasts as morpho-syntactic mismatches or morphological gaps. Their significance lies in the fact that equivalence may still be possible at the level of message content, even when the structural paths used to build that content differ substantially.

Fifth, lacunarity also manifests itself in discourse and pragmatics. Languages conventionalize politeness, implication, textual cohesion, and speech routines in different ways. A formula that is socially expected in one language may sound marked, excessive, or insufficient in another. Translation theory emphasizes that these cases cannot be reduced to word-level substitution, because the source of difficulty lies in communicative norms and inferential habits rather than in isolated lexical items. For this reason, lacunarity must be analyzed within actual contexts of use. The same lexical item can appear fully translatable in

denotative terms but remain lacunar in pragmatic force, stylistic value, or cultural resonance.

Sixth, the study shows that lacunarity does not imply absolute untranslatability. Jakobson's well-known argument that languages achieve "equivalence in difference" remains decisive here. When direct formal equivalence is unavailable, translation can proceed through paraphrase, circumlocution, borrowing, neologism, explanatory addition, or contextual compensation. In other words, lacunarity changes the strategy of translation, but it does not cancel the possibility of meaning transfer. The translator's task is shifted from substitution of code-units to reconstruction of communicative value at the message level. This confirms that lacunarity is best viewed as a challenge of mediation, not as a proof of semantic impossibility.

Finally, the results make clear that lacunarity has strong diagnostic power in linguistic analysis. It helps reveal which concepts are culturally central, which semantic distinctions are lexicalized or neutralized, and which grammatical features are obligatory or optional in a language. It also makes visible the tension between universal cognition and language-specific categorization. The state of lacunarity, therefore, is not merely a secondary observation made after translation fails; it is a primary analytical clue to how languages organize meaning differently while still retaining the capacity for interlingual interpretation.

The findings of the study allow several conclusions of broader theoretical importance. To begin with, lacunarity should be interpreted as a positive analytical category. Traditional discussions sometimes presented gaps as defects or absences in one language when compared with another. Such a view is misleading because it assumes that one language provides a complete template against which the other must be measured. In reality, every language is simultaneously rich and lacunar, depending on the domain examined. A language that lacks a concise equivalent for a foreign cultural practice may have, in another semantic field, a far finer lexical articulation than the comparison language. Lacunarity is therefore relational and perspectival.

This perspective is especially productive for translation studies. Word-level equivalence is often impossible

precisely because languages lexicalize experience unevenly. Translation theory has long argued that the translator must operate with several layers of equivalence, including lexical, grammatical, textual, pragmatic, and semiotic ones. Lacunarity explains why such layered analysis is necessary. A culturally marked unit may be denotationally interpretable yet remain stylistically or pragmatically underdetermined in the receiving language. Hence successful translation depends less on “finding the same word” than on identifying which dimension of meaning is most salient in context and then selecting the appropriate compensatory strategy.

The implications for lexicography are equally important. Bilingual dictionaries often conceal lacunarity by presenting approximate correspondences as if they were full equivalents. Yet lexicographic research shows that explicit marking of lacunar items improves both linguistic awareness and dictionary use. In multilingual lexical databases and wordnets, the problem becomes even more visible because computational mapping forces lexicographers to distinguish strong equivalence from weak equivalence, cultural mismatch, and non-lexicalized concepts. This means that lacunarity is not only a theoretical concept but also a practical criterion for the design of lexicographic resources and semantic networks.

The discussion also suggests that lacunarity has direct pedagogical value. In foreign-language teaching, learners frequently assume that vocabulary acquisition is a matter of attaching new labels to pre-existing concepts. Lacunarity shows that this assumption is incomplete. Learning another language often requires learning another pattern of conceptual segmentation, another pragmatic norm, and another hierarchy of cultural relevance. When learners are made aware of lacunar zones, they become better prepared for semantic approximation, explanatory reformulation, and intercultural interpretation. In this sense, lacunarity contributes not only to linguistic competence, but also to intercultural competence.

From a broader linguistic point of view, the study supports the claim that the analysis of lacunarity provides a meeting point for semantics, pragmatics, morphology, lexicography, translation studies, and computational linguistics. It reveals how lexical systems are shaped by both cognitive and cultural pressures. It

also demonstrates that formal asymmetry does not prevent communicative adequacy, because language users continuously compensate for gaps through paraphrase, contextualization, and interpretive inference. For that reason, lacunarity should be treated as one of the central indicators of linguistic diversity in a world where multilingual communication is increasingly common.

The study has shown that the state of lacunarity in linguistic contexts is a multidimensional condition arising from asymmetries in lexicalization, grammatical encoding, semantic granularity, cultural reference, and pragmatic convention. Lacunarity is not limited to the absence of a single lexical unit; it encompasses broader divergences between how languages structure and communicate experience. The distinction between lexical and referential gaps, together with the recognition of morpho-syntactic and pragmatic lacunae, makes it possible to describe non-equivalence more precisely. The article has also demonstrated that lacunarity does not entail untranslatability. Rather, it requires a shift from formal substitution to interpretive mediation. As a result, lacunarity proves to be a powerful tool for contrastive linguistics, translation theory, lexicography, language teaching, and intercultural communication. Future research may deepen this framework through corpus-based studies and through language-specific analyses of lacunar zones in discourse, terminology, and cultural semantics.

REFERENCES

1. Baker, M. In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation. 3rd ed. London; New York: Routledge, 2018. 390 p.
2. Bentivogli, L., Pianta, E., Pianesi, F. Coping with Lexical Gaps when Building Aligned Multilingual Wordnets // Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC'00). Athens, Greece: European Language Resources Association, 2000.
3. Catford, J. C. A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics. London: Oxford University Press, 1965. 103 p.
4. Jakobson, R. On Linguistic Aspects of Translation // On Translation / ed. by R. A. Brower. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959. P. 232–239.

5. Janssen, M. Multilingual Lexical Databases, Lexical Gaps, and SIMuLLDA // International Journal of Lexicography. 2004. Vol. 17, no. 2. P. 137–154.
6. Lehrer, A. Notes on Lexical Gaps // Journal of Linguistics. 1970. Vol. 6, no. 2. P. 257–261.
7. Miller, G. A., Beckwith, R., Fellbaum, C., Gross, D., Miller, K. J. Introduction to WordNet: An On-line Lexical Database // International Journal of Lexicography. 1990. Vol. 3, no. 4. P. 235–244.
8. Rudnicka, E., Grabowski, Ł., Piasecki, M., Naskręt, T. In Search of Gaps between Languages and Wordnets: the Case of Polish-English WordNet // International Journal of Lexicography. 2023. Vol. 36, no. 1. P. 68–92.
9. Szerszunowicz, J. Lacunarity, Lexicography and Beyond: Integration of the Introduction of a Linguo-Cultural Concept and the Development of L2 Learners' Dictionary Skills // Lexicography. 2015. Vol. 2, no. 1. P. 101–118.
10. Vincze, V., Almási, A. Non-Lexicalized Concepts in Wordnets: A Case Study of English and Hungarian // Proceedings of the 7th Global WordNet Conference. Szeged: University of Szeged, 2014. P. 141–147.
11. Vinay, J.-P., Darbelnet, J. Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995. 358 p.
12. Vossen, P. EuroWordNet: A Multilingual Database with Lexical Semantic Networks. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998. 179 p.