Polysemy in Translation - Selecting the Right Sense

Abstract

The present paper examines polysemy from a cognitive linguistics perspective in the context of translation. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on how the translator chooses the right sense of a polysemous word or phrase. A few case studies will be analyzed in order to see which factors may be relevant for the sense selection.

Keywords: polysemy, translation, meaning potential, matching of patterns, disambiguation markers/indicators

1. Introduction

Polysemy is omnipresent in language. It is based on the aspiration of natural human languages to be economical. Since it is usual for a language to have, on average, about 30 phonemes, taking into consideration that not all of these phonemes can stand next to each other, we can easily see that the number of possible combinations of these phonemes, i.e. the number of possible words is also very limited. For this reason people do not form a new word every time they want to express a new concept. On the contrary, people will often use exactly the same words or structures to refer to different concepts of reality, thus maximizing the utility value of language units.
The new meaning is derived from the old meaning in many different ways, two of the most important being the metonymic and the metaphoric extension. A more complicated way in which a word acquires a new meaning is the recently discovered conceptual blending. By the process of meaning change we get two or more words (or morphemes) of different (but related) meanings having an exactly identical form. These units with the same phonological form corresponding to different meanings are called polysemes, and the phenomenon itself is called polysemy.

If we take a quick look at a dictionary entry like get, or run, we will see that each of these entries has at least two dozen meanings. One important question arises: How do people distinguish all of these meanings? Well, taken out of context, people will presumably prefer the prototypical, i.e. the basic or the first reading, e.g. get ‘to receive or obtain something’ (Croatian: dobiti), run ‘to move fast on foot’ (Cr. trčati). But, at the same time, we will in all likelihood also be aware of the other readings. In different contexts, get and run will have different readings, the ones that are most salient in a given context. Here we can talk about the MEANING POTENTIAL of language forms. To put it differently, words do not have meanings but meaning potential. Different contexts prompt different readings. A given reading is just part of the meaning potential of a linguistic form. So, the crucial thing for the understanding of a word is context. The understanding of words in a context is the matching of patterns:

In ordinary language we do not match words and meanings one by one, instead we have learned to match (flexible and adaptable) patterns of meanings surrounding a polysemous word (based on natural conceptual patterns) with certain contextual patterns in which the word is embedded – we match patterns. People seem to be able to disambiguate polysemous words instantly and automatically by recognizing and adjusting certain correlations between the adaptable and changeable network of senses and the context of discourse in which a word is used habitually; but they can also leave multiple meanings “hanging in the air” if that serves their communicational purpose. (Nerlich 2005: 12)

In order to disambiguate polysemous words instantly and automatically we need a little help. What helps us to select the proper, intended reading of a polysemous word, are some indicators or markers serving as disambiguation tools. What I intend to do in this paper is to investigate, by contrasting the examples from BNC with their Croatian translation, which kinds of markers or

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1 Note that this “out-of-context” use of words almost never happens in natural human communication. A word is always used in a context. The notion of context is in this matter not restricted to the linguistic context (other words surrounding the polysemous word) but it also applies to the non-linguistic context (determined by the type of situation in which a word is uttered, the social status of the speaker and the hearer; the facial expression and the gestures accompanying the uttered word; the articulation, stress, and intonation of the uttered word, among other factors)


3 Original cursive.
indicators are most commonly used. This is of special importance for translators because they cannot afford themselves the luxury of conveying the wrong meaning.

Although one can talk about the polysemy of the so-called grammatical words, such as prepositions\(^4\) and conjunctions\(^5\), as well as the polysemy of word-forming morphemes\(^6\), due to the limited extent of this paper, the scope of this research shall be restricted to the polysemy of nouns and phraseological units.

In the second section of this paper some cognitive models of polysemy will be critically examined, especially those by Taylor (2003), and Fauconnier and Turner (2003). In the third section several case studies will be examined in order to gain some insight into the nature of the markers or indicators serving as disambiguation tools.

2. Cognitive models of polysemy

In this section I will give a critical account of the cognitive models of polysemy as represented by Taylor (2003).

The cognitive models of polysemy are idealized models. As such, they necessarily offer a simplified view of the phenomenon. Thus, these models might not always be applicable to the linguistic data at hand.

Cognitive linguists maintain the traditional definition of polysemy as the association of two or more related meanings with a single phonological form.

In his article, Taylor (2003) draws attention to three mutually supporting cognitive models of language that are relevant to our understanding of polysemy. These are the semiotic model of language, the building block metaphor of syntagmatic combination, and the demarcation of lexicon and syntax. In each of these models, special significance is accorded to word-sized units, because it is words that are listed in the lexicon, and words are the building blocks that the syntax combines.

\(^4\) LDE lists 20 different meanings of the preposition to. The first meaning listed is ‘in a direction towards’ (the road to London = Cr. cesta prema Londonu), and one of the last meanings listed is ‘in honour of’ (a monument to the war dead = Cr. spomenik palim borcima), just to name two examples. BECD gives the following equivalents for to: u, do, na, prema, za, uz, o, do u, naprma, etc. In Croatian we often use an equivalent dative construction, like in the example spomenik palim borcima.

\(^5\) E.g. the conjunction and. LDE offers 9 different meanings of the given entry, such as ‘as well as’ (a knife and fork = Cr. nož i vilica), or ‘used instead of’ (to after come, go, try etc.’ (Try and get here before 4 o’clock = Cr. Pokušaj doći ovdje prije 4 sati.). BECD names the following Croatian equivalents for and: i, takoder, a, pa, pa zato etc.

\(^6\) E.g the suffix -able. In LDE there are two distinct meanings: 1 ‘that can be – ed’ (washable = that can be washed = Cr. koji se može oprati) 2 ‘having the stated quality or condition’ (knowledgeable = Cr. obračuvan, upućen).
2.1. The semiotic model

The semiotic model sees a language as a set of linguistic signs. Each of these signs associates a phonological structure with a semantic structure. This model was also the foundation for Saussure’s theory, where a “concept”, or signified, is associated with an “acoustic image” or signifier. It should be pointed out that Saussure defined these notions mentalistically. Neither the concept nor the acoustic image is absolute, and they are not to be identified with the specific conceptual or phonetic details of an actual utterance. Both sides of the linguistic sign are mental entities, which serve for the purposes of categorization. In other words, Saussure was careful to point out that we should never mistake an ideal for reality. After Saussure, many linguists, including Sapir (1921), Chomsky (1988), Pinker (1994), as well as Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987) have endorsed the semiotic model. In Langacker’s theory, the linguistic sign is called the “symbolic unit”.

In an ideal semiotic system we have a “one form, one meaning” situation, in which each signifier is paired off with a unique signified. However, there are degrees of increasing deviation from the ideal:

(i) Context-conditioned variations. Both pronunciation and conceptual content are liable to vary according to the context of use. Thus, upper may be articulated as /ʌpə/ or /ʌpə/, depending on speech tempo, degree of stress, and perhaps other factors, and eat is used both for eating a steak or eating an ice cream. Still, in both cases we can bring the variants under a single schematic representation.

(ii) As the degree of phonological and semantic variation increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to bring the variants under a single schematic representation. When we consider other uses of eat, e.g. the acid eats away at the metal, we may be inclined to associate eat with more than one semantic value, i.e. we regard the item as polysemous. A comparable variation in an item’s phonological form is called alternation, or polyphony. Thus, the indefinite article can appear as /ə/., /ən/, /æ/, /æn/, or /æl/.

(iii) At the other end of the scale, the semantic values may be so dissimilar that they are not perceived to be related at all, like in the famous example of bank (money) and bank (river); this constitutes homonymy. Here, Taylor (2003) adds a case where a semantic unit is associated with two unrelated phonological forms, such as /sɔufə/ and /kəuti/, which constitutes synonymy. In my opinion, synonymy does not belong here. While in the case of homonymy we can at least assume that homonyms were linked at some point in the past, we cannot even imagine a similar thing happening with synonyms, at least not with those such as sofa and couch, which are clearly morphologically unrelated.

7 Quoted from Taylor (2003).
Figure 1.
A continuum of deviation from the semiotic ideal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal</th>
<th>context-conditioned</th>
<th>polysemy</th>
<th>homonymy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semiotic System</td>
<td>variation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meningitis</td>
<td>eat an ice cream</td>
<td>eat an ice cream</td>
<td>ball ‘spherical object’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eat a steak</td>
<td>the acid eats away</td>
<td>ball ‘social event’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at the metal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The deviations from the semiotic ideal (especially (ii) and (iii)) will generate ambiguity, which, if not properly resolved, may lead to communication failure. On the other hand, the possibility that new meanings can accrue to existing word forms may actually enhance the semiotic potential of a language. Langacker maintains that polysemy constitutes the normal, expected state of affairs in lexical semantics. Other linguists (Coseriu, Kirsner, Wunderlich, Van der Leek) have tried to remain true to the semiotic ideal, explaining the meaning variation not as a consequence of polysemy, but as arising from the different usage of invariant linguistic signs.

2.2. The building block metaphor

According to the building block metaphor, complex expressions are formed by putting together “building blocks”, i.e. smaller units, which are called constituents, every one of which contributes a fixed and determinate semantic and phonological content to the whole. The meaning of a complex expression is seen as a function of the meanings of its constituent parts.

Applying the building block metaphor to complex expressions is likely to result in an explosion of polysemes. Take, as an example, the adjective old. It means ‘aged’ in old man, ‘of long standing’ in old friend, or ‘former’ in old student of mine. In order for the meanings of these Adj-N combinations to be built up compositionally, we need to postulate three distinct senses of old, only one of which is selected for the compositional process. Now, if old is indeed polysemous in this way, how does the hearer select the right sense? The answer is: because a word of a given semantic type may force a specific reading of a word with which it combines. Hence, the interpretation of old in old friend will de-

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8 See Taylor (2003).
9 Ibid.
10 Cf. The Conceptual Integration Theory below
pend on the semantic structure of *friend*. This very much resembles the idea of matching of patterns mentioned above, in the introduction part.

The way in which the meanings of individual words, as building blocks, contribute to the meaning of larger expressions in which the words occur, is examined in studies of construction. Taylor (2003) mentions Goldberg’s often-cited example of a person «sneezing the napkin off the table», where the unconventional, caused-motion sense of sneeze ‘cause a thing to go to a place by sneezing on it’ - is contributed by the syntactic construction [V NP PP] in which it occurs. If we accept the primacy of construction over its parts, we could avoid polysemy at the level of words, but the polysemy is liable to re-emerge at the level of constructions.

2.3. The lexicon and the syntax

Traditionally, language description is based on the lexicon (words) and syntax (the rules for the combination of words, or: grammar). This view rests on the notion of compositionality, namely, an idea that an expression is a compositional function of its parts. But, it is a well-known fact that some things in language, like idioms, collocations, fixed expressions, formulaic expressions etc., have to be learned by heart because they cannot be assembled in the syntax. The meaning of such expressions cannot be (equally) distributed over their constituent parts. In other words, not all of the words in a complex expression are of (equal) relevance to the composite meaning. The realization that the expression is not a compositional function of its parts has put the division of language into the lexicon and the syntax, into question.

2.4. Beyond the models

Although Taylor (2003) has focused on some of their problematic aspects, he admits that each of the three models is true to some extent. After all, the models are, as stated earlier, merely an idealization of a language, hence, they cannot possibly reflect the real state of affairs in language.

The need to postulate polysemy follows from the fact that the meaning of a complex expression is not always a compositional function of the meanings of the component words. As the example of *old* has shown us, sometimes in order to derive the compositional meaning, it is necessary to associate a word with a range of different meanings, only one of which is selected for a particular expression.

Polysemy can be straightforwardly defined in terms of deviation from the semiotic one-form-one-meaning ideal.

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11 Take, for example, the semantically opaque idiom *kick the bucket*. 
3. The conceptual integration theory

This is a theory developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2003), as an attempt to come to grips with the dynamics of on-line meaning construction. They suggest that we should forget notions such as "meaning of an expression", and to think instead of the "meaning potential" of a language form, as the essentially unlimited number of ways in which an expression can prompt dynamic cognitive processes, such as conceptual connections, mappings, blends, and simulations.

Fauconnier and Turner (2003) want to show how various kinds of polysemy occur as a result of blending.

Conceptual blending is the result of selective projection of elements from two or more input spaces. The input spaces are not taken randomly; there is a cross-space mapping connecting counterparts in each of the spaces. There is also a generic space containing the structure and elements taken to apply to all of these spaces, and it is the generic space where certain meanings of the inputs are selected for projection in the blend. The result of conceptual blending is a dynamic structure that cannot be found in any of the inputs. Conceptual blending is, in other words, the process in which words accumulate or develop new meanings through some sort of accommodation to new contexts in the process of on-line meaning construction.

At the core of their Conceptual Integration or Blending Theory is the view that linguistic expressions prompt for meaning rather than represent meaning. And 'massive, though often unrecognized polysemy' is a byproduct of conceptual integration.

Fauconnier and Turner (2003) argue that category extension, as the most obvious case of 'harnessing an existing word to express new meaning', is not simply an operation of adding and deleting features, but occurs by blending. They give the example of a same-sex marriage. The expression same-sex comes from one input space with the relationship between two adults of the same sex, while marriage comes from another input space with the frame of conventional marriage. These elements from the two mental spaces are blended together, whereby marriage assumes a new meaning.

The integration network for conceptual blending often contains a fully activated and highly important mental space that is counterfactual to the blend. Fauconnier and Turner name several examples, such as caffeine headache, nicotine fit, easy error, money problem. For example, a nicotine fit is not caused by nicotine; on the contrary, it is caused by a lack of nicotine. The term nicotine is taken from the counterfactual scenario in which the person does not have the fit. Terms like caffeine headache are polysemous (the headache is caused either by caffeine or by lack of it) because there is more than one blending possibility. This is possible due to the existence of two highly active input spaces where one is directly counterfactual to the other in some crucial respect.

Fauconnier and Turner (2003) also show how gradients of blending yield gradients of polysemy effects. Conceptual blending changes the domain of the application of a word, unnoticeably in most cases. The more the distance between the emergent meaning in the blend and the domain of the input from which the words in the blend came, the more conspicuous is the polysemy.
4. Case study I: mug

If we want to understand a word in context, we must first know what the established readings of a word are. To put it differently, we must know which patterns of meaning usually surround a polysemous word. These patterns of meaning, i.e. that network of senses are represented by dictionary entries.

When I compared the dictionary entries for the noun mug in the first two dictionaries that came to hand, I instantly noticed that there is some disagreement as for the meaning of the entries. For the purpose of comparison, I will quote the entries from both dictionaries.

The LDE: mug, n 1 a round container for drinking especially hot liquids such as tea and coffee, having straight sides and a handle, and used, without a saucer in the home or on informal occasions but not at formal events — compare cup 2 also mugful the contents of a mug: two mugs of coffee 3 BrE infml a foolish person who is easily deceived—see also mug’s game 4 slang the face or mouth: his ugly mug. The FECD: mug1, s vrč, pehar, vrčić; sl usta, lice, faca; mug2, s sl (dobra) budala, lakovjerna osoba

The following things can be observed:

1. The LDE lists 4 meanings, while the FECD lists 3 meanings.
2. The mug1 corresponds to 1 and 4. The mug2 corresponds to 3. The 2 is based on the CONTAINER FOR CONTENTS metonymy, and it is not listed in FECD.
3. The LDE lists all of the meanings under one entry, which would imply that all of these meanings are polysemes. On the other hand, the FECD has two separate entries (mug1 and mug2), which would imply that the meanings listed under mug1 are polysemes, and that mug1 and mug2 are homonyms.

It appears that the first meaning under mug1 corresponds to 1, but is that really the case? Take, as an example, a sentence such as: She poured the coffee into the mug. This sentence is not likely to be translated as: *Nalila je kavu u vrč/pehar/ vrčić, because the container out of which we drink coffee is not usually called vrč/pehar/vrčić, but šalica. So, the correct translation would be: Nalila je kavu u šalicu. Now, if we try to translate this Croatian sentence back into English we could get something like: She poured the coffee into the cup. The problem is that the Croatian word šalica covers both the meaning of mug and of cup. Nevertheless, šalica should be listed as an equivalent for mug. Now, what about vrč, pehar, vrčić? They would correspond to another meaning of mug, namely, ‘a container for drinking alcoholic drinks, that are not (usually) hot, like wine, cider, or beer’. She poured the wine into the mug may, then, be translated as Natočila je vino u vrč? pehar? vrčić. The problem is that vrč, pehar, and vrčić are not synonymous. Whether we will use one or the other depends on the context and the style of writing. Vrčić is a small vrč, and pehar has a different shape, namely, it resembles more a wine glass because it has a stem. Besides, pehar is either archaic or
poetic, when used in the meaning of a drinking container. Greek gods or medieval knights drank out of them. *Pehar vina* can be found in poetry, and even in that context it is more likely to be translated as *a goblet of wine* than as *a mug of wine*. The expression *a mug of beer* in a contemporary context is more likely to be translated as *krigla piva* than *vrtč piva*, because the letter is reminiscent of the past, when beer-mugs were made of clay.

After the meaning patterns, the second important factor for the sense selection is the contextual patterns in which the word is embedded, i.e. the context of discourse. We select a sense of a polysemous word by matching the meaning patterns with contextual patterns. In order to make the right choice, we must recognize and adjust certain correlations between the adaptable and changeable network of senses and the context of discourse in which a word is used habitually.

Let us now take a look at the examples of polysemous I found in the BNC in order to see how these contextual patterns are realized, how to recognize them, and how they help us select the intended reading of a polysemous word. These contextual patterns will also be referred to as disambiguation indicators/markers. The sentence in which the ambiguous word appears will be referred to as the target sentence. Most of the examples are provided with a couple of sentences preceding or following the target sentence. In some cases there was no need to reach for a wider context, because the target sentence itself contained enough disambiguation markers:

(1a) A few moments later, he returned with a *mug of coffee* and placed it in front of me. Compliments of the chef, he informed me. I smiled again. Thank you, I said. He went away again. I took the *mug in my hands.*

It is clear that *mug* in the target sentence stands for *‘a mug of coffee’*, because this is explicitly stated in the text, a couple of sentences before. With this knowledge we are able to translate the target sentence as:

(1b) ... Uzeo/uzela sam šalica u ruke.

Let us take another example:

(2a) Sara began to look for a *cup*. "In that case I’ll have one too." Nick took a pack of Silk Cut from his pocket. Sara found a dirty *mug* on the draining board and washed it... Sara poured *coffee* and sat down.

This little paragraph is loaded with disambiguation markers. First, we have *a cup*. The first association is *‘a cup of tea/coffee’*. Then, there is *have one meaning ‘to have a cup of tea/coffee’*. Obviously, *mug* is used here as something that can serve instead of a cup. So, it is either *‘a mug of coffee’* or *‘a mug of tea’* that is implicated; in both cases it will be translated as *šalica*. In the next sentence, there is *a pack of Silk Cut*, which is a packet of cigarettes. In my mind, cigarettes are tightly associated with coffee, more so than with tea. All of these indicators came up in the text before the ambiguous *mug*. The sentence after the target sen-
tence confirmed my intuition by explicitly mentioning coffee. We can translate the target sentence as:

(2b) ... Sara je pronašla prljavu šalicu kod sudopera i oprala ju...

Let us move on to the next example:

(3a) I muttered under my breath as Taff pulled out the cork and commenced pouring the wine into the two mugs. "Down the hatch, Piper!" said Taff, raising his mug, "Same to you, Taff," I replied, picking up my mug with one hand and the bottle with the other.

Here we have a plenty of indicators suggesting the meaning of mug. It is clear from the first sentence that the intended meaning is 'a mug of wine' (circumstatiated by pulling out the cork and pouring the wine). In the second sentence a toast is being proposed (circumstatiated by the formulaic expression down the hatch! and the raising of a mug). In our target sentence there is the formulaic expression same to you, which is here used as a reply to a toast. Then, there is the bottle, probably 'a bottle of wine'. We can translate the target sentence as:

(3b) ... "Do dna, Taff!", odgovorio sam, podižući jednom rukom svoj vrč, a drugom rukom bocu.

(4a) ...Either use a suitable sized stencil or trace off letters, from the magazine to spell DAD. Mark the letters in reverse on the wrong side of the sticky orange paper, cut them out ready to stick across the front of the mug. Then cut out a fun motif to decorate the mug...

What I was able to read out of the context of the target sentence is that these are instructions of some sort for decorating the exterior of a mug with letters cut out of sticky orange paper. Judging from my knowledge of the world, this instantiation of mug should refer to 'mug of coffee/tea...' because mugs of this kind are often decorated with all sorts of (often funny) pictures, names of the owners etc. In the sentence preceding the target sentence the word dad is mentioned, who is probably the future owner of the mug, and the sentence following the target sentence explicitly mentions the decoration of the mug with a fun motif. This is how I translated the target sentence:

(4b) Iscrtajte slova kao u zrcalu na poledini ljepljivog narančastog papira te ih izrezite kako bi ih mogli zalijepiti na prednju stranu šalice.

The next example shows that sometimes we need a much larger context in order to read out and translate the meaning of a word.

(5a) She coughed and looked down at the floor. "I've run out of sugar. I'll need to buy some if I'm making cakes and bottling bilberries." There was a horrible silence. Jinny picked up her mug and drank, to hide her face. It happened every time. Why wouldn't Bella learn? Joe hated people not to plan ahead. Especially when it meant spending money.
There are no indicators here that would suggest the exact meaning of the ambiguous mug. We need a larger context; probably the indicators are to be found earlier in the text. But, as we do not have the whole text, the safest way is to assume the most common reading of mug, and that is ‘mug of coffee/tea’ (Cr. šalica):

(5b) ... Jinny je uzela šalicu i pila, kako bi sakrila lice ...

Consider the following example:

(6a) Tea up! A face appeared out of a wagon door further along the track.
Mug for you, sir?

We can clearly picture a situation such as this, on a train, with an attendant serving tea. Let us translate the target sentence:

(6b) ... Jeste li za šalicu čaja, gospodine? (= Mug of tea for you, sir?).

The translation *jeste li za šalicu, gospodine? (= Mug for you, sir?) sounds strange in Croatian, so that it seemed necessary to apply the expansion procedure, for the purpose of clarification. It is also possible to translate the sentence as:

(6c) ... Jeste li za čaj, gospodine? (= Tea for you, sir?)

In this case we actually get čaj (tea) as an equivalent for mug. This is no wonder because sometimes in order to have a functional equivalence between two texts in different languages we have to translate also what is implied, and not just what is actually said.

Let us move on to the next example:

(7a) ... He cupped his hands round hers, lifting the soup to her lips. He tilted the mug. She could drink or turn her head away.

The context indicates that it is ‘a mug of soup’ that is in question. Šalica juhe is a satisfying translation because today we have instant soup that is drunk out of the same containers as coffee or tea.

(7b) ... Nagnuo je šalicu...

Consider the following example:

(8a) Does that mean he's a mug?

Although at first glance the sentence seems to be ambiguous, it is not. The phraseological unit to be a mug has only one (default)\textsuperscript{12} reading: ‘to be a foolish person who is easily deceived’. The markers here are the personal pronoun he and the copula verb is (’s). Now it becomes clear why the FECD lists mug\textsuperscript{2} as a separate entry, and the reason is its idiomaticity. It is not difficult to translate this sentence:

\textsuperscript{12} Other, obscure, readings may be possible, such as: ...’ he pretends to be a mug (container), e.g. in a game .. or ... ‘he thinks he is a mug (container), due to a mental illness’
(8b) Znači li to da je on budala?
(9a) The corner shop comes into view, with JJ’s ugly mug peering round it...

In this example I was instantly able to select the meaning ‘face’ because of the indicators peering round it and the corner shop.

(9b) Vidi se dućan na uglu i JJ-ova ružna faca kako izviruje iza ugla, ...

Conclusions:
1 In this case study, I have come across the following equivalents for the noun mug:
   a) šalica (a mug of coffee/tea/soup)
   b) krigla (a mug of beer)
   c) vrc, pehar, vrcić (a mug of wine/beer)
   d) usta, lice, faca (slang He has an ugly mug.)
   e) budala, lakovjerna osoba (slang He’s a mug.)
2 The translation sometimes reflects also what is implied, and not just what is actually said. (6c)
3 There are indicators/markers that serve as disambiguation tools in almost all of the examples (except in (5a)). When there are no such indicators/markers, it is impossible to select the right meaning with certainty.
4 The indicators/markers come before or after the ambiguous word. Often they come both before and after.
5 The indicators/markers are to be found either in the same sentence in which the ambiguous word occurs (8a)(9a), or elsewhere in the discourse (1a)(2a)(6a)(7a), or both in the target sentence and in the surrounding sentences (3a)(4a).
6 The indicators can be:
   a) collocations13 (mug of coffee (1a)),
   b) references to the function of the object (reference to the contents, e.g. coffee (2a), wine (3a), tea (6a), soup (7b); reference to objects with the same function (cup (2b))
   c) references to the circumstances14 (2a) (3a) (4a) (6a) (9a)
   d) specific syntactic structure (8a)

13 In fact, most of the examples I found in the BNC contained collocations, but I did not include such examples here on purpose because those are the most transparent cases, which present no problems either for understanding or for translation.
14 What is meant by circumstances is anything that fits into the conceptual domain of a word. In order to recognize the meaning of a word by references to the circumstances, we have to know in which context a word is habitually used, which requires activating all our knowledge of the world.
5. Case study II: *join the club, (to be) in the club*

This second case study is an attempt to come to grips with the polysemy of phraseological units, specifically to see how their idiomatic use is marked in contrast to their literal use.

Let us first examine the example of the PU *join the club* (literally: ‘become a member of the club’, idiomatically: ‘said when other people are in the same situation’):

(10a) Ogley agreed to *join the club* on non-contract terms until the end of the season.

The literal use of *join the club* is marked here in two ways. First, *non-contract terms* are mentioned, which brings to mind the picture of a real club, a sports club in which every player gets a contract. Second, there is a *season*, which again suggests that a sports club is in question.

(10b) Ogley je pristao pristupiti klubu bez ugovora do kraja sezone.

Consider the following example:

(11a) Under existing arrangements for weather satellites, the US, USSR, Japan and Western Europe operate weather craft that either hover above the Equator or pass over the poles. India will soon *join the club*.

Since there is no such club that would bring together countries that own weather satellites, at least not to my knowledge, and since its existence is not indicated in the given example, I am inclined to believe that this is an idiomatic expression. Accordingly, I translated the target sentence as:

(11b) Indija će im se uskoro pridružiti.

The next example is similar to the previous one:

(12a) Have you been *struck down with flu this year*? If you have, then *join the club*. Thousands of us have been laid low already *with a flu virus*...

It would make no sense to assume the existence of a club that would join together thousands of people who have had influenza this year. So, the target sentence must be idiomatic, and we will translate it as:

(12b) ...Ako jeste, niste jedini...

Let us now take the PU *(to be) in the club* (literally: ‘to be a member of the club’, idiomatically: ‘(to be) expecting a baby, (to be) pregnant’):

(13a) I’m *a lady-in-waiting*. When you’re *in the club*...

In the sentence preceding our target sentence there is a clear indicator that *in the club* is used idiomatically, in the form of a synonymous PU, meaning ‘pregnant’. We could translate the target sentence as:

(13b) ... Kada ste u drugom stanju...
We can easily construct a sentence, where *in the club* is used literally. For example:

(14a) He has been *in the club* since May.

Obviously, this sentence can only have a literal reading because we know that men cannot have babies. Accordingly:

(14b) On je *u klubu* od svibnja.

Imagine the following situation:

(15a) She has been *in the club* for twenty years.

It is a well-known fact that a pregnancy usually lasts for nine months. Therefore, this sentence can have only literal reading:

(15b) Ona je *u klubu* već dvadeset godina.

Conclusions:

1 In each of the chosen examples there are indicators suggesting the literal or non-literal/idiomatic meaning of the PU.

2 The indicators/markers are to be found either in the target sentence, in which a PU is used, or in the sentence preceding or following the target sentence.

3 The indicators/markers come either before or after the PU, or both before and after.

4 The indicators can be:
   a) references to the circumstances (10a) (11a) (12a) (15a)
   b) a synonymous PU (13a).

6. Conclusion

The two case studies analyzed confirm that a polysemous word can only be understood in its context, i.e. the intended reading is always marked in some way. These disambiguation indicators/markers correspond to what Nerlich (2003) calls contextual patterns. As these case studies suggest, in most cases, in order to disambiguate polysemous words, we are forced to activate our knowledge of the world, and not just our linguistic knowledge. This is very important because it underlines the fact that the knowledge of language is not isolated from other cognitive abilities.

The process of the understanding of a word comes down to the matching of meaning patterns with contextual patterns. The notion of meaning patterns roughly corresponds to Fauconnier’s and Turner’s (2003) notion of meaning potential, and it could be defined as ‘that which a word can mean’. The emphasis is
on the word can because, as Fauconnier and Turner (2003) put it, "linguistic expressions prompt for meanings rather than represent meanings".

It is very important to delimit the scope of these findings. What I did not take into consideration in this research is the non-linguistic context (determined by the type of situation in which a word is uttered, the social status of the speaker and the hearer; the facial expression and the gestures accompanying the uttered word; the articulation, stress, and intonation of the uttered word, among other factors). It remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, the disambiguation markers/indicators differ in the spoken communication in contrast to the written language. Another thing that calls for further research is other types of polysemy, such as the polysemy of grammatical words or morphemes, or the polysemy of synactic structures. It would also be useful to further explore the nature of the correlation between the meaning patterns and the contextual patterns, as well as to further classify the disambiguation markers/indicators. There are also cases of people making use of polysemy, e.g. leaving multiple meanings "hanging in the air" to produce a certain effect, which are also worth studying because they show that people are aware of polysemy, and also of the existence of disambiguation markers/indicators, which they are able to leave out, if it suits their purpose.

The study of polysemy can help translators, by giving them certain guidelines, as to how to think about words, and how to make use of the context to resolve the ambiguity of polysemous words. As Fauconnier and Turner (2003) pointed out, most polysemy is, indeed, invisible. But, it becomes visible for the translator, who is, in most cases, forced to resolve it in the translation. Hence, it is very important for the translator to understand the way polysemy is developed, and the way it is marked in the discourse.

References


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