Figurative Senses of Lexical Items

We have already seen that a single word may have various senses and that these senses are signaled by the context; that is, the other words with which it occurs. We noted that the **primary sense** is the sense which will come to the minds of most speakers of the language when the word is cited in isolation, and the **secondary senses** are those which are dependent upon context for an indication of the sense intended. We also noted that **secondary senses** are related to one another and to the **primary meaning** by some thread of meaning.

In addition to the **primary and secondary senses,** words also may have **figurative senses. Figurative senses** are based on associative relations with ***the primary sense*** (Beekman and CallovrT973k94). Some types of figures of speech will be discussed below.

Metonymy

The use of words in a **figurative sense** involving association is called **metonymy.** For example, in English it is correct to say, *"The kettle is boiling."* However, a *kettle* cannot *boil.* In the special collocation with *boil, kettle* does not mean the *kitchen utensil used for boiling water,* but rather refers to the *water* which is in the *kettle.* It is the *water* which is *boiling.* But the *water* is associated with the *kettle,* it is inside the *kettle. Kettle* is being used in a **figurative sense** to mean *water.* A literal translation of *the kettle is boiling* would probably be nonsense in most languages. **Figurative senses cannot** usually be translated with literal form of the word.

In English, we also say, *"He has a good head." Head* is the place where the *brain* is located. It is being used in a figurative way to refer to the *brain.* Also, we say, *"The response from the floor was positive,"* using *floor* in a figurative way to represent the *people* who are in the audience which is seated on *the floor* (probably in chairs). There is an associative relationship which makes the **figurative sense** possible.

The examples given above are all based on a spatial relationship: the *water* in the *kettle,* the *brains* in the *head,* the *people* in chairs on the *floor.* The words *kettle, head,* and *floor* all have a figurative

meaning— *water, brains,* and *people* respectively. One word was "substituting" for another. But they are synonyms. *Kettle* is not a synonym for *water,* nor *head* for *brains. Kettle* has a **figurative sense** which occurs in collocation with the word *boil.* The **figurative sense** is also based on collocation. It has **the figurative sense** only when used with certain other words.

Association may have to do with temporal relationship as well as spatial. We say in reference to a holiday, *"We've waited for this day with anticipation." Day* referring to Independence Day, is used for the *holiday* which they will have on that *day*. A student may say to his friend, *"Your hour has come,"* meaning *"The time to take your exam has arrived."*

There are also **figurative senses** which are based on a logical contiguity rather than spatial or temporal. For example, one might say, *"Moses is read every day in the Jewish synagogues."* But one cannot read *Moses*. *Moses* is used in a figurative way to stand for *what Moses wrote— the law.* There is a logical relationship since Moses is the writer of the *law.* A translation might need to say *the laws written by Moses.* It is not uncommon to hear people say sentences in English like, "I *listened to Bach"* or, "I *read Shakespeare." Bach* is used to mean *the music he composed,* and *Shakespeare* is used to mean *the plays he wrote.*

Sometimes an object is used in a figurative way to stand for what it is used for. For example, *Martin Beni lives by his gloves* really means, *he makes his living by boxing.*

A statement like the following may be completely misunderstood if translated literally into some languages: *The Provincial Commissioner jailed all the fighters.* The Commissioner probably did not jail them, he simply ordered the police to do it. Although he did not do the action directly, he was responsible for it. The phrase may need to be translated differently so as not to leave the impression that the Commissioner himself did it. It might need to be translated *The Provincial Commissioner had the police jail all the fighters.*

The sentence, *The Prime Minister barred unskilled laborers from entering Papua New Guinea,* might also be misunderstood because the Prime Minister simply initiated the action, but the immigration officials carried it out. An adjustment might need to be made in translation.

An attribute may be used for the object which has the attribute. For example, *Don't substitute the good for the best. Good means good work* and *best* means the *best work.* The meaning is *Don't substitute good work for the best work.* Or an object may be used for the attribute it symbolizes as in *The arm of the law reached out to all corners of the country,* where *arm* is used to symbolize *authority.* A literal translation using the word *arm* would give a wrong meaning in some receptor languages.

In each example mentioned above, the relationship was one of association. Therefore, they are examples of **metonymy. Metonymy** occurs in most languages but will not match the specific examples of the **metonymy** of another language. Where the source language uses the name of a city to refer to the inhabitants, many languages in Papua New Guinea will eliminate the **metonymy** by translating the full meaning. For example, *London had elections last week* is translated *the people of London had elections last week.* Translators translating the Bible from English into Motu and Pidgin (Papua New Guinea) adjusted the **metonymy** in the sentence I *am innocent of this man's blood by* using *this man's death* since *blood* is not used in this figurative way in those languages (Deibler and Taylor 1977:1077).

Synecdoche

Figurative senses based on part-whole relationships are also quite common in some languages and are called **synecdoche.** This figure of speech is very common in Greek, so there are many occurrences of it in the New Testament. For example, in the Lord's Prayer it says, "Give us this day our daily *bread."* One specific member, *bread,* of the class *food,* is substituted *for food.* The prayer is really talking about *food,* not just *bread* which is one part of the whole class *of food.* Sometimes a part of an object is used for the whole object. A person may say, "I am not going to let him come under my *roof." Roof,* which is a part of the *house,* is substituted for *house. Roof* is being used in a **figurative sense.** *Word* is used figuratively in the sentence *"His word* can be trusted," which means *"What he says* can be trusted." Notice the following additional examples of a **part** being substituted for the **whole:**

1. *Only 8 hardy souls showed up for work.*	**persons**
2. *There are a lot of lonely* **hearts** *out there.*	**persons**
3. *She said it to* **my face.**	**me**

Translating metonymy and synecdoche

In discussing the translation of secondary senses, it was suggested that each sense will probably be translated with a different word in the receptor language since there is usually no match of secondary senses between languages (except perhaps between dialects or languages of the same family). The same is true of figurative senses. The figurative sense of a word almost invariably will need to be translated with a word or phrase which is not the literal translation of the word in the source language. “A single word in one language is likely to be translated into

another language using almost as many different renditions as there are senses" (Beekman and Callow 1974:104).

There are three general ways in which metonymy and synecdoche are to be translated . First, the sense of the word may be translated nonfiguratively; that is, the intended meaning may be made plain so that there is no longer figurative sense in the receptor language translation. *The kettle is boiling* would then be translated *the water is boiling. The response from the floor* would be translated with something like *the people in the audience responded... He has a good head* would be translated *he has a good brain* or *he is very intelligent. Moses is read in the synagogue* would be translated *the law is read in the synagogue. The arm of the law* would be *the authority of the law; he went to the gallows* would be *he was hanged*; and *Martin Beni lives by his gloves* would be *Martin Beni makes his living by boxing.*

A second possibility, which may be better in some situations, is to retain the word in the original, but to add the sense of the word. This should be used if there seems to be a component of emotions or impact which might otherwise be lost, as in poetry. For example, *Moses is read in the synagogue* might be translated *the law (book) written by Moses is read in the synagogue. He just gave the weather* might be translated *he just gave a weather report* (or *forecast). The world is mad* might be translated by the *people of the world* for *world*; *your hour has come* by *the hour for your exam has come. He drank three cups* might be translated *he drank three cups of tea*\ and *the government wanted to reintroduce the electric chair* could be translated *the government wanted to reintroduce execution by using the electric chair.*

The third possibility is to substitute a figurative expression of the receptor language for the figurative expression of the source language. It is important that the same meaning is retained. In Aguaruna of Peru, *pan* meaning "bread," would not carry the figurative sense of "food," but *yujumak,* which means "manioc," would. In one language, *tongue* may be used with a figurative meaning of "speech," in another language *lips* may have this figurative sense. In Aguaruna, *mouth* has a figurative sense of "speech."

There will also be times in the translation when there is no figurative expression in the source language, but the best translation will be the of a figurative expression in the receptor language. For example, *he gave them strict orders* might well be translated in Mbembe (Nigeria) with the figurative expression *he pulled their ears* . The goal of translation is not to eliminate all secondary and figurative senses. It is to use only secondary and figurative senses which are peculiar to the receptor language and eliminate any strange collocations or wrong meaning caused by a literal translation of source language secondary and figurative senses.

Idioms

One class of figurative expressions which occurs in all languages, but which is very language specific, is idioms. Idioms are expressions of "at least two words which cannot be understood literally and which function as a unit semantically (Beekman and Callow 1974:121). In English, we say, *he has a hard heart,* meaning "he is indifferent to the needs of others." But the same expression, *to have a hard heart,* in Shipibo of Peru means "he is brave." Shipibo does, however, have an idiom which means "he has a hard heart," but translates as *his ears have no holes.* In English, we say, *horse of a different color,* but in Spanish the corresponding idiom would be *harina de un costal muy diferente* (flour from a very different bag); English uses *hands of a clock,* but Mbembe uses *the tongue of a clock.*

The Apinaye language of Brazil has numerous idioms based on body *pearls—eye, eyelid, head, ear,* etc. Examples are given below by giving a very literal translation in the first column and an idiomatic English equivalent in the second column (Ham 1965:2).

LITERAL ENGLISH	IDIOMATIC ENGLISH
/ don't have my eye on you.	*/ don't remember you.*
I've already buried my eye.	*I'm already ready to go.*
I'll pull your eyelid.	*I'll ask a favor of you.*
My eye is hard on you.	*I remember you.*
My head is strong.	*I'm stubborn, insistent.*
I'll do it with my head.	*I'll do it the way I think it should be done.*
His ear is rotten.	*He is spoiled.*
I ate in your tooth cavity.	*I ate in your absence.*

In English, there are many figurative usages of *heart* which will best be translated using *liver* in some African languages. Notice the following example (Nida 1955:59):

> To identify psychological states the Nilotic languages make considerable use of words meaning either "heart" or "liver" (the latter is more common). In Anuak there are scores of such expressions employing *cwing,* 'liver', of which the following are typical: he has a *cwiny* (he is good), his *cwiny* is good (he is generous), his *cwiny* is bad (he is unsociable), his *cwiny* is shallow (he gets angry quickly), his *cwiny* is heavy (he is sad), his *cwiny* is stubborn (he is brave), his *cwiny* is white (he is kind), his *cwiny* is cold (he will not be impolite in eating ahead of others), his *cwiny* is burned (he is irritable), and his *cwiny* is sweet (he is happy).

The same translation principles apply for **idioms** as for other figures of speech. Sometimes it will be necessary to translate with a nonfigurative expression, but sometimes a good receptor language **idiom** may be used. The translator needs to learn to recognize the **idioms** and other figures of speech of the source text. The real danger comes in translating an **idiom** literally, since the result will usually be nonsense in the receptor language.

The translator also needs to develop a sensitivity to the use of **idioms** in the receptor language and use them naturally to make the translation lively and keep the style of the source language. There will often be words in the source language which are not **idioms,** but are best translated with an **idiom.** For example, the word *peace* is often translated with the **idiom** *to sit down in the heart* in Africa (see Nida and Taber 1969:106).

Euphemism

A euphemism is a figurative expression which is in some ways like a metonymy. There is the substitution of one word for another, or one expression for another. But a **euphemism** is used to avoid an offensive expression or one that is socially unacceptable, or one that is unpleasant (see Beekman and Callow 1974:119). All languages have **euphemisitic expressions which** substitute for certain words, especially in the area of sex, death, and the supernatural. The Jews avoided mention of the name of *God* by using the word *heaven*. Most languages have ways of saying *die* without using the word which has the primary meaning *die*. English uses *pass away* and many other terms. Hebrew used *gone to the fathers. Gone to sleep* and *is sleeping* may also be used for *die*. In Mangga Buang of Papua New Guinea, the **euphemism** *your daughter's eyes are closed* is preferable to *your daughter is dead*. In the Twi language (Africa), *he has gone to his village* means *he died.*

Sex in many languages is referred to **euphemistically.** Such expressions as *to know, to touch, to come together,* and *to sleep with* are used. Other things are referred to **euphemistically** as well. In the United States, old people are now called *senior citizens*. Among the Choi of Mexico, a new baby is always talked of in negative terms such as *ugly* in order to deceive the spirits so they won't want the baby. In Chontal, the devil is **euphemistically** called *older brother* because using his name might make him think he was being called. In Finnish, *he is sitting in his hotel* means "he is in prison."

Euphemisms will often need to be translated by a comparable **euphemism** in the receptor language. The important thing is for the translator to recognize the **euphemistic** nature of the source language expression and then translate with an appropriate and acceptable expression of the receptor language whether euphemistic or direct. For

example, the Greek expression *he is sleeping with his fathers* might be translated *he went to his village* in Twi. However, some languages might simply say *he died* and to them it would be inoffensive.

Hyperbole

"A hyperbole is a metonymy or synecdoche with more said than the writer intended the reader to understand. The exaggeration is deliberately used for effect, and is not to be understood as if it were a literal description" (Beekman and Callow 1974:118). For example, the expression *they turned the world upside down* is an exaggeration. *World* is used to stand for *people,* in this case *many people* but probably not *all the people in the world*. It is a deliberate exaggeration. In English, we say things like *Fm starving* meaning *I'm very hungry; I'm frozen to death* meaning *I'm very cold;* and *he's mad* meaning *he's doing something very foolish.* Such deliberate exaggerations in the source language text may be understood as untruths if they are translated literally. Much care must be taken to be sure that the desired effect is retained in the receptor language but that the correct meaning is also retained.

Notice the following additional examples of hyperboles (from Simons and Young 1979):

Pijin: *Desfala kofi nao, ating evri suga nomoa i go insald.*
I think someone has put all the sugar in the world in this coffee.

Maori: *Ehara i te puu, kia pakuu, kia rongohia ai.*
It's not a gun that goes off so you can hear it. (Literal translation which actually means, "It is very quiet.")

EXERCISES—Figurative Senses of Lexical Items

A. In the following, one word or phrase is italicized. Is that word or phrase used in its primary sense, a secondary sense, or a figurative sense?

1. I've got to *catch* a plane.
2. The OPEC ministers had once *again jacked up* the world price of oil.
3. Children *adopt* values and attitudes of their parents.
4. I'm *starved.* Let's grab a *bite* to eat.
5. They have the custom *of lighting* windows at Christmas.
6. He was obviously taking *heavy* betting action.
7. They were supposed to *ring* the office regularly.

8. *California* seems to have solved the problem of *gas closings.*
9. Who knows the secret memories he and many of his contemporaries *carry 1*
10. Gazing across the green, rolling landscape his smile *faded.*
11. Carter *spent* the Fourth of July with his family at the Camp David retreat.
12. They aren't *stirred-up* enough about inflation.
13. She was born in the *heart* of one of the worst slums in Argentina.
14. The *eyes* of the world are on those two, not on Collins.
15. We did not know a *soul* in the class.
16. I'm *boiling* mad.

B. Identify the usage in the following. Restate figurative nonfiguratively.

1. My tan is peeling.
2. I enjoy listening to Beethoven.
3. Two hundred souls perished in the crash.
4. The arm of the law reaches the whole country.
5. He drank three cups.
6. He went to the gallows.
7. Don't hurt his good name.
8. It takes forever to cook this meat.
9. The world is mad.
10. He was lost in action in Vietnam.

C. Study the Apinaye **idioms** listed above (page 115). How would these be said in a language you speak (other than English)? Is there an appropriate **idiom** with the same meaning?

D. The following **idioms** are from Supyire of Mali, West Africa. (Data from Robert Carlson.) Is there an **idiom** in another language which you speak which has the same meaning?

SUPYIRE IDIOM	MEANING
My stomach got black.	*I forgot.*
My stomach fell on it.	*1 remembered it.*
My stomach is sweet.	*I'm happy/content.*
My stomach is hot. My stomach is cold. M\ stomach is tasteless.	*I'm in a hurry. I'm tranquil. I'm unhappy/sad.*

E. Multiple senses project

1. Find three examples of each of the following in a magazine or newspaper.

    a. secondary sense
    b. figurative sense

2. Give the following information for each example:

    a. the primary sense of the word
    b. classification as to whether it is secondary or figurative
    c. a translation of the citation using only primary senses of words.

Examples:

1. hold

    M. Whitcomb Hess is a writer and former teacher who lives in Athens, Ohio. She *holds* the A.M. from Ohio University. *(Christianity Today,* January 31, 1975. Vol. 19, No. 9, p. 4)

    The primary sense *of hold* is *to have in one's hands.*

    The secondary sense used here is *to possess.* The shared component meaning is *to have.*

    The meaning is, "She possesses an A.M. degree which was awarded her by Ohio University."

2. hoof

    An entire economy on the *hoof,* Ice Age animals supplied man with food, garments, and tools. *(National Geographic,* January 1975, p. 73)

    The primary meaning *of hoof is the foot of certain animals.*

    The figurative sense used here is that of part-whole: constituent for whole, e.g. *hoof for* animals.

    The meaning is "An entire economy depended on Ice Age animals for food, garments and tools."