

Multiple Senses of Lexical Items

Defining "secondary sense"

In the previous chapters, lexical items have been looked at from the point of view of the meaning components of which a given word is composed. For the most part, this meaning is discovered by contrasting one lexical item with another in a system. Pairs of words which have some meaning in common may be contrasted; whole semantic sets may be contrasted. Taxonomic studies, componential analyses, the study of antonyms and synonyms, and the "unpacking" of the concepts or meaning components contained in a word all deal with the fact that the same meaning may occur as part of the meaning of various words. So far, we have been talking only about one sense of a given word, the primary meaning. However, most words have more than one **sense**.

As was noted in chapter 1, it is characteristic of words that a single lexical item may have several meanings other than that which most readily comes to mind. These meanings are often called **secondary meanings, or secondary senses**. The **primary sense** is the meaning suggested by the word when it is used alone. It is the first meaning or usage which a word will suggest to most people when the word is said in isolation. It is the meaning learned early in life and is likely to have reference to a physical situation. But the same word may have a different meaning when used in context with other words. For example, the word *run* in isolation will mean something like *move rapidly by moving the legs rapidly*. But if the same word is used in the context of *river* as in *the river runs*, *run* has nothing to do with legs or rapidity, although the idea of motion is still there. *Run* in the context of *river* means *to flow*. **Secondary senses** are dependent on the context in which a word is used.

A speaker of Mbembe (Nigeria) will tell you that *chi* means *eat*. This is the **primary meaning**. But a speaker of Mbembe will also use this same word in phrases like (from Barnwell 1980:32):

MBEMBE	LITERAL ENGLISH	IDIOMATIC ENGLISH
<i>chi akpuka</i>	eat money	(embezzle)
<i>chi edein</i>	eat path	(go first)
<i>chi ngwou</i>	eat bride	(marry)
<i>chi akpein</i>	eat life	(live it up)
<i>chi onong</i>	eat person	(cheat someone)

When the word *chi* occurs with the word *akpuka*, it means *to embezzle*’, when it occurs with the word *edein*, it means *to go first*’, when it occurs with the word *ngwou*, it means *to marry*; etc. The meaning changes depending on the words with which *chi* occurs. The words *akpuka*, *edein*, *ngwou*, *akpein*, and *onong* are all *collocates* of the word *chi*. A word which occurs along side of another word is called a *collocate*, i.e. they co-occur.

A person who knows a language very well usually knows immediately by the other words which occur in the phrase or sentence which **sense** of the word is being signaled. Persons who are learning a second language often have a great deal of trouble learning to use a word in its many **secondary senses**. It is usually much easier to translate the **primary sense** of a lexical item than a **secondary sense**. This is because the receptor language will often have a lexical equivalent for the **primary meaning** which very nearly matches the meaning of the lexical item in the source language. However, the **secondary senses** of those same two words will probably not match at all. We noted an example in chapter one of *run*, where the English uses of *run* each had to be translated with a different word in Spanish:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
boy <i>runs</i>	boy <i>runs</i>
motor <i>runs</i>	<i>motor functions</i>
nose <i>runs</i>	nose <i>drips</i>

Any word used in a non-primary sense will probably not be translated by the word in the receptor language which is equivalent to its primary sense, but by a different word. For example, the **primary sense** of *key* would be translated into Spanish with *llave*. But notice the following list which shows how they differ in translating **secondary senses**:

ENGLISH TO SPANISH

key - llave (of a lock)
key - clave (of a code)
key - tecla (of a typewriter)

SPANISH TO ENGLISH

llave – key

llave – faucet

llave - wrench

Analyzing senses of words

The process for discovering the various **senses** of words is rather complicated but can be very crucial for making dictionaries, learning a second language, and may also be helpful to the translator when no dictionaries are available which give an adequate description of the **senses** of words in the language. (See Beekman and Callow 1974, chapters 4 and 5 for more detail.) A translator who is truly bilingual in the source and receptor languages will usually recognize a **non-primary sense**. Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that a literal translation of a word may be used in a secondary sense. This literal translation sets up a strange collocation and wrong meaning.

Step 1. Collecting data. One must first collect as many examples of the use of the word as possible. If a person knows the language he can simply think of all the possible combinations with other words. If not, he will need to find the word in as many texts as possible. A concordance done on the computer will greatly speed up the search, learning a language, or hoping to make a dictionary, will want to begin early in his research to collect data on each word of the language, building up more words and more examples of their co-occurrence with other words. The goal is to list as many collocates as possible. For our purposes, we shall now assume that we have found the following (the examples are those used by Beekman and Callow 1974, chapter 6):

The bird runs.

The boy runs.

The car runs.

The eye runs.

The dog runs.

The faucet (tap) runs.

The jelly runs.

The nose runs.

The horse runs.

The paint runs.

The solder runs.

The sore runs.

The stocking runs.

The stream runs.

The ivy runs.

The watch runs.

The woman runs.

The bean plant runs

Step 2. Sort the collocates into generic classes. Each grammatical form should be analyzed separately. In this example, we have used only intransitive verb forms. If the noun *run* occurred, this noun form would need to be separated and analyzed separately. One begins by making best guesses, refining the analysis as he goes.

1. Animals (bird, dog, horse)
2. Humans (boy, woman)
3. Parts of the body (eye, nose, sore)
4. Solids (jelly, solder)
5. Liquids (faucet, paint, stream)
6. Vines (ivy, bean plant)
7. Knitted clothing (stocking)
8. Mechanical objects (car, watch)

Notice that, although animals and humans are given as two different generic classes, the sense of *run* is the same for both. Therefore, a more generic class may be given—animate beings with legs. Also *eye*, *nose*, and *sore* are classified as parts of the body. But in connection with *run*, it is not the part of the body but the liquid that comes from the *eye*, *nose* or *sore* which *runs*. Therefore, they can be grouped together with liquids. *Jelly* and *solder* are liquids also in that they *run* even though they become solids later. Therefore, they are also grouped with liquids. This new classification would be as follows:

1. Animate beings with legs, e.g. *bird, dog, horse, boy, woman*
2. Liquids, e.g. *stream, paint, faucet, eye, nose, sore, jelly, solder*
3. Vines, e.g. *ivy, bean plant*
4. Knitted clothing, e.g. *stocking*
5. Self-powered mechanical objects, e.g. *car, watch*

Step 3. Regroup the contexts according to the collocates which belong to the same generic classes as follows:

Animate beings with legs:

The bird runs.
The boy runs. The
dog runs. The
horse runs. The
woman runs.

Vines:

The ivy runs.
The bean plant runs.

Knitted clothing:

The stocking runs.

Liquids:

The nose runs.
The faucet runs.
The stream runs.
The sore runs.
The eye runs. The
paint runs. The
solder runs. The
jelly runs.

Self-powered mechanical objects:

The watch runs.
The car runs.

Step 4. List and label the senses of the words. Once the data is reorganized by the generic classes of the collocates, it is much easier to see the senses of the word. For *animate beings with legs*, the meaning

seems to be *to move oneself from one place to another rapidly*; for *liquids*, simply *to flow*, for *vines*, the meaning is *to grow*, etc.

- Sense 1.** to move oneself from one place to another rapidly (or to move rapidly using feet) (of animate beings with legs)
- Sense 2.** to flow (of liquids)
- Sense 3.** to grow in a spreading way (of vines)
- Sense 4.** to develop a defect involving movement of threads (of knit clothing)
- Sense 5.** to function effectively (of mechanical objects or motors)

This general method can be helpful in looking for translation equivalents in that the primary meaning will probably be translated by the literal correspondence, the second sense listed above may need to be translated with the corresponding word for *flow*, the third sense with a word for *grow*, etc. By analyzing the senses of the source language in this way, the translators will gain ideas for possible translations.

Translating the various senses

If the above analysis were of the receptor language word, that is, if one were translating into English, the analysis would point up the necessity of including, in the context of *run*, a collocate from the generic class mentioned in order to insure the correct meaning. When the meaning is signaled by the context in which the word occurs, it is very important that the context be built into the translation.

The word *dress* occurs in the following contexts, each signaling a different sense of the English word. It is possible to restate the meaning in English.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. I <i>dressed</i> myself. | I <i>put</i> my clothes on. |
| 2. I <i>dressed</i> a chicken. | I <i>defeathered</i> a chicken and took its innards out. |
| 3. I <i>dressed</i> timber. | I <i>made</i> the logs smooth. |
| 4. The soldiers <i>dressed</i> rank. | The soldiers <i>lined up</i> in straight rows. |
| 5. I <i>dressed</i> the wound. | I <i>put</i> medicine on and <i>bandaged</i> the wound. |

The idea of "making or preparing something in a presentable form" is common to all the senses. The common thread of meaning shows that we are dealing with a single word rather than with two or more separate words (Beekman and Callow 1974:97), but each sense will result in a different form for the translation. Note the following equivalents in Pidgin of Papua New Guinea to the preceding sentences:

PIDGIN

LITERAL ENGLISH

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Miputim</i> klos. | I <i>put</i> clothes. |
| 2. <i>Mi re dim</i> kokoruk bilong kukim. | I <i>readied</i> a chicken for cooking. |
| 3. <i>Mi pi en im</i> plang. | I <i>planed</i> a plank. |
| 4. Ol ami oli <i>stretim</i> lain bilong ol. | The army <i>straightened</i> the line of them. |
| 5. <i>Mi putim marasin</i> long sua. | I <i>put medicine</i> on the sore. |

The Spanish equivalent, i.e. the translation into Spanish, is given below. Notice that only the primary meaning of *dress* can be translated with the word *vestirse*.

SPANISH

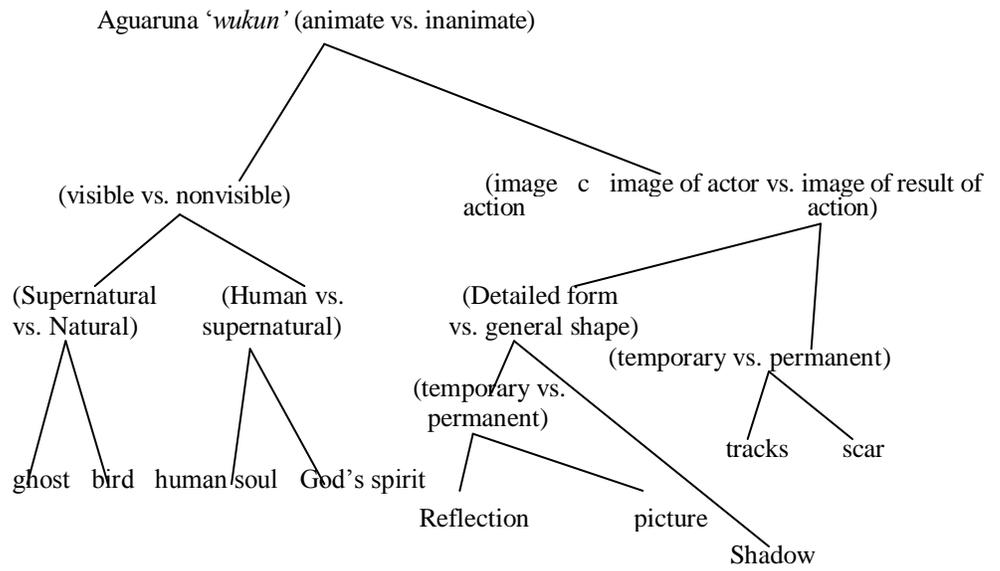
LITERAL ENGLISH

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Yo me <i>vesti</i> . | I myself <i>dressed</i> . I <i>worked</i> |
| 2. Yo <i>labraha</i> madera. | <i>lumber</i> . I <i>plucked</i> and <i>cleaned</i> |
| 3. Yo <i>pelaha y destripaha</i> la gallina. | the hen. |
| 3. Los soldados se <i>alinearon</i> . | The soldiers <i>lined up</i> . I |
| 5. Yo <i>vendaba</i> la herida. | <i>bandaged</i> the wound. |

A secondary sense will almost always need to be translated by a different word than the word which denotes the primary sense.

In the Aguaruna language of Peru there are many words which refer to entities in the spirit world. They include *iwanch*, *wakan*, *tsugki*, *pasun*, *pasuk*, *nugkui*, *pagki*, *iwaji*, *ajutam*, and others. All belong to a common semantic set and can be contrasted and components of meaning analyzed as presented in the previous chapter. The nuclear component of each would be SPIRIT BEING. *Iwanch* has the contrastive component *evil*, *wakan* has the contrastive component of being a *human*, *soul*, etc. That is, each of these contrasts with the others in the semantic set. But in addition, each of these words has a **primary sense** and a number of **secondary senses**. Some of them are being used in a **secondary sense** when they are included as part of the semantic set, SPIRIT BEING. For example, *pagki* has the **primary meaning** of *boa constrictor*. However, it also has a **secondary meaning** of *spirit being which lives in water and is evil* in contrast to *tsugki*, which is a *spirit being which lives in the water but is good*. A word may be a member of various semantic sets. In some, it will be used in its **primary sense** and in others in one of its **secondary senses**. This, of course, adds to the complications of translation. (See displays 10.1 and 10.2.)

In the display which diagrams the **senses** of the word *wakan*, notice that nine **senses** have been identified. (The kind of analysis which leads to this type of charting is described in Nida 1964:99-113. Nida's analysis of



Display 10.1

the English word *spirit* is included to show the contrast with *wakan*.) In the display, the senses are numbered at the bottom with the primary sense as number one. In the discussion of secondary senses above, we showed how the sense is signaled by the collocates that go with the word. However, it may not always be a specific word that signals the meaning but the presence of some signal of the components of meaning within the word when used in that **sense**. For example, to signal the **sense** of *bird*, rather than *ghost*, for *wakan*, something in the context must signal *natural* rather than *supernatural* since *supernatural* (*ghost*) is the primary meaning of *wakan*.

Wakan has at least nine **senses**. But the meaning will be signaled only if the translation into Aguaruna has built into the context the semantic components that will trigger the meaning. If not, the wrong meaning may result even when the right word is used. For example, if we use the

collocate *tiger* for the context, the meaning would still be ambiguous. It could refer to his ghost, his reflection, his shadow, a scar made by him, his tracks, or a picture of him. If an Aguaruna said, "I saw a tiger's wakan," it would immediately be understood that it was a ghost, i.e. a supernatural being in the form of a tiger. The meaning *supernatural* is signaled by the verb *see* which indicates a *ghost*. If someone said, "There is a tiger's wakan in our new book," it would immediately signal a picture, since it must be inanimate, an image of detailed form, and permanent. The collocate *book* signaled this. The choice of meaning is signaled by including in the context some other lexical item which will activate the semantic components indicated at the nodes of the chart. *John had a tiger's wakan on his leg* is understood to be a *scar* because the location *leg* indicates this sense. *John saw a tiger's wakan in the sand* would mean *tracks* because of the collocate *sand*.

The two main rules about secondary senses are 1) **the secondary senses** of the source language can probably not be translated literally but will need to be understood in order to find a good equivalent, and 2) the **secondary sense** of words in the receptor language will only mean what they are intended to mean if the context includes collocates which will signal the sense desired.

Ambiguity caused by senses not clearly signaled

It should also be noted that lack of context will lead to **ambiguity** in many cases example, the phrase *this suit is lighter* is **ambiguous**. It could mean that *the suit does not weigh as much as another* or that *the color of the suit is not as dark as another*. The ambiguity comes because of the two senses, and lack of context to make it unambiguous. It would be possible to simply say *this suit is lighter in weight* or *this suit is lighter in shade*. However, it is more likely that something else in the context will signal the right meaning. There is no confusion of sense between *this suit is tighter, since it is made of vicuna cloth* and *this suit is lighter than even those spring pastels*. It is often a wider context that signals the secondary sense. But there must be something that causes the reader (audience) to know which sense is meant.

It is important to know the meaning components of the primary sense.

For example, in the Chuj language of Guatemala, the word *say* turned out to be a problem for the translator. The word *say* was used in the sentence, "The people said, "This man is God."" In the story where this was used, the man was not God. The people said it, but it was not true. However, what the translator did not know was that the word *say* in its primary sense includes the component of *the truth*. The word *say* in Chuj means *to say the truth*; that is, the unmarked meaning. In order to indicate that what they said was not true, *say* must be marked. So it had to be translated "The people said falsely, "He is a God,"" to avoid wrong meaning.

No equivalent lexical items will have the same senses from language to language. Even primary meanings that look the same at first may have additional components that can distort the meaning if used without care. One of the most important things in translation is to be sure that the context is sufficient to mark the meaning desired. **Ambiguities** often arise when the translator knows only one or two senses of a word and does not know the context needed to signal the correct meaning.

Notice the three Aguaruna sentences below:

1. *pagki tepawai* (boa lies)
2. *pagki wajawai* (boa stands)
3. *pagki ayawai* (boa they-are)

The first means that *there is a boa snake*, the second that *there is a rainbow* and the third that *there are water spirits*. All of them use the word *pagki* which has the primary sense of *boa*. This is the unmarked meaning which all native speakers would give as the meaning of *pagki*. But as soon as the word is used in other contexts, the collocates give the other senses. A translator working on the Biblical account of Noah was trying to translate the statement made by God, "I will set my bow (rainbow) in the cloud." The only lexical item in the language for rainbow is the word *pagki*. In order for it to mean rainbow, the word *wajawai* (stand) must be in the context. The first suggestion for translation was "I will cause a boa to stand in the clouds," but the addition of a causative made it refer to an animate object, namely a snake. Also, rainbows cannot be possessed in Aguaruna. The final solution came in using the sentence, "I will cause you to see it, the standing boa." The context *standing* had to be present and other possible misunderstandings eliminated.

EXERCISES-Multiple Senses of Lexical Items

A. In each of the following, the word which is in italics is being used in a **secondary sense**. What is the meaning and what is the thread of meaning that links it to the **primary sense**?

1. He *carries* many happy memories with him.
2. The government has once *again jacked up* the price of oil.
3. "I've got to *catch* a plane," he said, looking at his watch.
4. Children *adopt* values and attitudes of their parents.
5. He had to *carry* the humiliation with him the rest of his life.
6. They are supposed to *drill* the soldiers regularly.
7. The work stoppage by municipal employees virtually *crippled* this city.

8. The working conditions of Granit fall *behind* those of the more modern El Reno.
9. An *island* for newborn care should be provided in the delivery room.
10. They aren't *stirred-up* enough about inflation.

B. In each of the following, the meaning is **ambiguous** because the word which is in italics has at least two senses. Rewrite with two sentences, one adding enough context to signal one meaning and a second adding enough context to signal a second meaning. Do not change the words given below, only add context.

1. I bought a book *on* Broadway, (location, subject matter)
2. I *saw* what he was talking about, (object, idea)
3. I *ran* into Mr. Jones yesterday.
4. John *stood up* for Mary.
5. John *rose* rapidly.

C. Show how the sentences in B would best be translated into another language you speak so as to communicate the two meanings.

D. Choose a word from your mother-tongue (*run*, *eat*, or *see*) and list as many contexts as you can easily think of, then analyze by the steps given above.

E. Using the following data as in step 1 (collecting the data), follow the above procedures (steps 2, 3, and 4) to discover the senses of *foot* in English. How would each sense be said in another language you speak?

foot of the man
foot of the rabbit
foot of the table
foot of the page
foot of the stairs
foot of the list
foot of the bed
foot of the mountain
foot of the hill
foot of the tree

F. Using the following data as step 1 (collecting the data), follow the above procedures (steps 2, 3, and 4) to discover the senses of *hot* in English. How would each sense be said in another language you speak? (Selected from Barnwell 1980:36.)

a hot iron
a hot curry
hot tea
hot soup
hot water
a hot rhythm
the child is hot
the patient is hot
hot pepper
a hot argument
a hot day

