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Module: Translation / Level: 2nd year / Lecturer: C. Bounaas

Lesson two: Polysemy vs. Monosemy

The linguistic sign

An utterance consists of signs. Signs are used within a mode of expression (the disclosure of the speakers' social status, characters and mood). A translator must consider the sign and the mode of its expression at the same time. The study of the mode is supported by the background information translators need for handling texts which do not form part of their daily routine.

A sign is a complex concept. According to F. de Saussure's definition the sign is the inseparable union of a concept (signified) and its written or spoken linguistic form (signifier). The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; it's only a matter of convention. The linguistic sign is therefore a double-sided psychic entity, which can be represented, as in Saussure's Course in General Linguistics, by a figure or an acoustic visual image. The sign is the interaction of the two halves (the signified and the signifier).

The work of translators is concerned with the interaction from signifier to signified (vertically) in a hand and with the interaction between signs (horizontally) in the other hand; all in the process of comprehension of the message.

Monosemy vs. polysemy

Monosemy: The Greek roots are **mono** "one" and **sēma**, "sign". It is the case when Words, symbols, expressions or phrases have a single meaning; absence of ambiguity i.e. a one-to-one match between a word and a meaning. *The word* "lucrative" (producing a profit), for example, has only one meaning, and is therefore monosemous. The word *aunt* only means "the sister of your mother or father," and is an example of monosemy also. According to William Croft, "Monosemy is probably most clearly found in specialized vocabulary dealing with technical topics.

Polysemy: from Greek: **poly** "many" and **sēma**, "sign". It is the case when words, symbols, expressions or phrases have a number of meanings, interpretations or understandings i.e. the association of one word with two or more distinct meanings. *The word* book, which means both "pages bound together" and "to arrest" is polysemous. According to some estimates, more than 40% of English words have more than one meaning.

Notice that the fact that some words (or lexemes) are polysemous is due to semantic changes (historical, cultural, religious or scientific) that often add meanings to the language without subtracting any.

In the same context we strictly stress the difference between polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy is the capacity for a sign (such as a word, phrase, or symbol) to have multiple meanings all related by contiguity of meaning within a semantic field (words have a central origin). However, homonymy, in which the multiple meanings of a word are unconnected or unrelated, is the case when words share the same pronunciation, whether written the same way or not.

Man is polysemous

1. The human species (i.e., man vs. animal)
2. Males of the human species (i.e., man vs. woman)
3. Adult males of the human species (i.e., man vs. boy)

Bank is polysemous

1. A Financial institution
2. The building where a financial institution offers services
3. A synonym for 'rely upon' (e.g. "I'm your friend, you can bank on me"). It is different, but related, as it derives from the theme of security initiated by 1.

However a river bank is a homonym to 1 and 2, as they do not share etymologies. It is a completely different meaning.^[15] River bed, though, is polysemous with the beds on which people sleep.

Book is polysmous

1. Collection of pages
2. A text reproduced and distributed (thus, someone who has read the same text on a computer has read the same book as someone who had the actual paper volume)
3. To make an action or event a matter of record (e.g. Unable to book a hotel room, a man sneaked into a nearby private residence where police arrested him and later booked him for unlawful entry).

Newspaper is polysemous

1. A company that publishes written news.
2. A single physical item published by the company.
3. The newspaper as an edited work in a specific format (e.g. They changed the layout of the newspaper's front page).

The different meanings can be combined in a single sentence, e.g. "John used to work for the newspaper that you are reading."

Milk is polysemous

1. The white liquid that we drink.
2. The verb milk (e.g. he's milking it for all he can get) derives from the process of obtaining milk.

Wood is polysemous

1. A piece of a tree
2. A geographical area with many trees

Crane is homonymous

1. A bird
2. A type of construction equipment

Context and co-text

A language is a way to see and understand the world. It is the vehicle of our ideas, thoughts and perspectives of this world. However since we perpetually interact with our environment, when and where we are interacting determines what actually we are meaning. For example 'March' is an act as well as month. The meaning depends on when, where and how.

Translation is understood as an act of carrying the meaning of a text from one language to another. This process involves interpretation of meaning of the source text and producing the same meaning in another language. Texts however cannot exist out of context. By context what is meant is the entire environment or background in which the word, sentence or text is expressed or stated. While seeking the context of a text there may be two categories of factors that may influence the meaning the **co-text** (linguistic context) or the situational **context**.

Linguistic context or co-text: It is the linguistic factors influencing the meaning of the text. Any word in the text is not present in isolation but interacts with other words in the text and with the whole text at large. This interaction among words determines their meaning rather than its isolated meaning

Situational context: It refers to the factors of situation and circumstances influencing the meaning of a text. These factors are little harder to be recognized than linguistic ones. The situational factors may pertain to the facial expressions, gestures, and the social, political and economical milieu and the culture at large. Conventions and the whole value system differ from one culture and society to another. What is 'right' and what is 'wrong' differs. Ideologies may also be a factor to refer to the context. Language therefore should be considered a part of culture and understood in its context.

Translator must be giving over the top stress to understand the context so as to produce a good translation.

See more:

William Croft, *The Handbook of Linguistics*, 2003.

M. Lynne Murphy, *Lexical Meaning*, 2010.