Figurative polysemy: Insights into the lexicon from a contrastive perspective

Figurative polysemy (e.g. (3-a)/(3-c) alongside (1-a)/(2-a)), is a pervasive property of language. Though it is often studied from either a language specific or general cognitive (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980) perspective, we show that contrastive data (here, English/Spanish) offers deeper insights. Specifically, we explain similarities and differences in patterns of figurative verb polysemy in the two languages by distinguishing whether the polysemy is anchored in grammar (specifically the event- or scale-structure of the verb) or in what we will refer to as conceptual (or "root") content.

DIFFERENT EVENT STRUCTURE → DIFFERENT FIGURATIVE USES: Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998 and others argue that verbs have differentiated "templatic" and "root" meaning. What exactly these two components correspond to, and whether and how they should be distinguished, has been a matter of considerable debate, but one thing that is clear is that verbs that are uncontroversially treated as translation equivalents can vary in their respective event structure. For example, the verbs *sweep* and *barrer* are treated as equivalents in the IDS database (Key & Comrie 2015), and yet while *sweep* has long been argued to have the event structure of an activity verb (sometimes called "Manner", Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1991), *barrer* has been argued to describe a complex telic event (*actividad-resultado*, Auza & Maldonado 2005). Some evidence of the difference is seen in (1-b) vs. (2-b): *sweep*, unlike *barrer*, only allows the locatum participant to appear as direct object in the presence of an additional resultative phrase (cp. (1-c)); moreover, evidence exists that (1-a) and (2-a) have subtly different implications concerning change in the location argument.

One reason to consider these verbs conceptual counterparts is that they have many of the same patterns of figurative extension: both can describe overwhelming victory (3), generic removal (4), the passing of severe weather, and searching. However, **we show that the differences in event structure as well as different options in event composition induce sometimes subtle differences in figurative sense extensions**. For example, variation in the conditions on the licensing of a locatum object can feed an account of the contrast in (3) and explain the need for a resultative in the translation of (4).

DIFFERENT CONCEPTUAL CONTENT → DIFFERENT FIGURATIVE USES: However, sometimes two verbs in different languages largely share event structure and differ only in fine details of conceptual content, for example in selectional restrictions on their arguments. In such cases, the verbs will be translation equivalents and can describe the same types of situations as long as their respective selectional restrictons can be met, but not otherwise. We take *tear* and *rasgar* to exemplify this kind of situation. Both *tear* and *rasgar* denote comparable changes of state resulting in some loss of integrity via separation.

Though we have not found differences in their event structures (other than that *tear* has access to a larger variety of resultative predicates than *rasgar*), they differ in the selectional restrictions on the affected object: for *rasgar*, it must be an **unsubstantial material**, thus excluding, for example, thick substances (6-c). *Tear* is not restricted in this way: it easily takes thick solids (6-b), but (perhaps relatedly) also strongly implies that the separation involves **force in opposing directions** - thus the oddness of *tear* in (6-a). These **differences in conceptual content are clearly traceable in the figurative meanings**: While both verbs can describe figurative separation/destruction (if sometimes with a resultative in English, (7)), only *tear* allows figurative extensions exploiting force in opposed directions, for example to describe contrary feelings (8-b) or (often with an additional resultative phrase to entail completeness) figurative destruction implying strong force in opposed directions (9).

CONCLUSION: A contrastive perspective was essential to understanding the source of cross-linguistic variation in verbal polysemy. The success of our account highlights the importance of treating the event structural and conceptual content as distinct, if related.

(1) a. Patxi **swept** (the floor)
    b. #Patxi **swept** the sand.
    c. Patxi **swept** the sand **away/off the floor/into a pile**.

(2) a. Patxi **barrió** (el suelo)
    b. Patxi **barrió** la arena.

(3) a. El Madrid **barrió** al   Maccabi (79-53). (CdE)
       the Madrid swept   to the Maccabi (79-53)
       'Madrid **beat** Maccabi (79-53).'
    b. #Madrid swept Maccabi 79-53.
    c. To sweep a series at this time of year [...] feels pretty good (COCA).[1]

(4) Esa revolución que **barrerá**   todo vestigio de esclavitud. (CdE)
    that revolution that will sweep all   trace   of slavery
    'that revolution that will **sweep** #(**away**) all vestiges of slavery'

(5) a. Hungry sea lions **tore** the nets. (COCA)
    b. **Rasgó** la red que lo   retenía. (Internet)
       tore   the net that him retained
       'He tore the net that held him.'

(6) a. Si uno **rasga** el   barniz nuevo... (CdE)
       if one tears   the varnish new...
       'If one scratches/#tears off the new varnish'
    b. When you **tear** a piece of bread (Internet)
    c. #Cuando rasgas el pan

(7) atravesamos una discusión que **rasgó** la   sociedad. (CdE)
    crossed.1pl a   discussion that tore   the society
    'We passed through an argument that tore the society apart.'

(8) a. Martin was **torn** about the relationship to Cavman. (COCA)
    b. ??Martin estaba rasgado por la relación con Cavman.

(9) People tore the performance apart and some called it the "worst..." (Internet)

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[1]English examples are from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (flagged 'COCA,' Davies 2008), or internet searches. Spanish examples are from Corpus del Español (CdE, Davies 2016), or internet searches.