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Figurative Polysemy

Insights into the lexicon from a contrastive perspective

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Figurative polysemy ((3a)/(3c) vs. (1a)/(2a)) is pervasive. Though often studied from a language specific or general cognitive (e.g., Lakoff/Johnson 1980) perspective, we show that contrastive data offers deeper insights. We explain similarities and differences in patterns of figurative verb polysemy in English vs. Spanish by distinguishing polysemy anchored in grammar (specifically the event- or scale-structure of the verb) vs. conceptual (or “root”) content.

(Rappaport Hovav/Levin 1998) and others argue that verbs have distinct “templatic” and “root” meaning. What these components correspond to and to distinguish them is a matter of debate, but one thing that is clear is that verbs that are uncontroversially treated as translation equivalents can vary in their respective event structures. For example, *sweep* and *barrer* are treated as equivalents in the IDS database (Key/Comrie 2015), yet while *sweep* has the event structure of an activity verb (Levin/Rappaport Hovav 1991), *barrer* describes a complex telic event (Auza/Maldonado 2005). The difference is seen in (1b) vs. (2b): *sweep*, unlike *barrer*, only allows the locatum participant to appear as direct object in the presence of an additional resultative phrase (1c); moreover, (1a) and (2a) have subtly different implications concerning change in the location argument.

One reason to consider these verbs conceptual counterparts is their similar figurative extensions: e.g., both describe victory (3) or generic removal (4). However, we show that the differences in event structure as well as in options for event composition induce differences in figurative extensions. For example, variation in conditions on the licensing of a locatum object explains the contrast in (3) and the need for a resultative in the translation of (4).

However, sometimes two verbs in different languages share event structure and differ only in details of root content, e.g., in their selectional restrictions. In such cases, the verbs will be translation equivalents and describe the same types of situations only if their respective restrictions can be met. *Tear* and *rasgar*, which denote comparable changes of state resulting in some loss of integrity via separation, exemplify.

Though we have not found differences in their event structures *tear* and *rasgar* differ in the selectional restrictions on the affected object: for *rasgar*, it must be an unsubstantial material, excluding, e.g., thick substances (6c). *Tear* is not so restricted: It takes thick solids (6b), and strongly implies that the separation involves force in opposing directions – cf. the oddness of the translation with *tear* in (6a). These differences in root content surface in figurative meanings: While both verbs can describe figurative separation/destruction (if sometimes with a resultative in English, cf. (7)), only *tear* allows uses exploiting force in opposed directions, e.g., in describing contrary feelings (cp. (8a-b)) or figurative destruction (9).

A contrastive perspective is crucial to understanding crosslinguistic variation in verb polysemy. Our account highlights the need to treat event structural and conceptual content as distinct, if related.

Examples

- (1) a. Patxi swept the floor
 b. #Patxi swept the sand
 c. Patxi swept the sand away/into a pile
- (2) a. *Patxi barr-ió el suelo*
 Patxi sweep-PST.3SG the floor
 ‘Patxi swept the floor.’
 b. *Patxi barr-ió la arena*
 Patxi sweep-PST.3SG the sand
 ‘Patxi swept the sand.’
- (3) a. *El Madrid barr-ió al Maccabi (79-53) (CdE)¹*
 The Madrid sweep-PST.3SG to 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)²
- (4) *esa revolución que barrer-á todo vestigio de esclavitud (CdE)*
 this revolution that sweep-FUT.3SG all vestiges of slavery
 ‘that revolution that will sweep #(away) all vestiges of slavery’
- (5) a. Hungry sea lions tore the nets (COCA)
 b. *Rasg-ó la red que lo reten-ía (Internet)*
 tear-PST.3SG the net that 3.SG.ACC withhold-IPFV.3SG
 ‘He tore the net that held him’
- (6) a. *si uno rasg-a el barniz nuevo*
 if one tear-PRS.3SG the varnish new
 ‘If one scratches/#tears off the new varnish’
 b. When you tear a piece of bread (Internet)
 c. #*Cuando rasgas un trozo de pan*

¹ Corpus del Español (CdE, Davies 2016).

² Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, Davies 2008).

- (7) *una discusión que rasgó la sociedad* (CdE)
a argument that tear-PST.3SG the society
'an argument that tore the society apart'
- (8) a. Martin was torn about the relationship (COCA)
b. #Martin estaba rasgado por la relación
- (9) People tore the performance apart (Internet)

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