

# (Becoming) Experts In Meaning Ambiguities

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## ABSTRACT

The discrepancy between the theoretical problems experts raise on polysemy, and the ease with which it is everyday understood by speakers, has been defined as the *polysemy paradox*. The same could be said for other forms of meaning ambiguity in the non-literal side, as for instance metaphor. A sort of *metaphor paradox* is raised by the fact that metaphor usually goes unnoticed for most people, even though experts claim that it constitutes a theoretical challenge for understanding human thought. In both polysemy and metaphor cases, people's intuitions clash with experts' intuitions. Moreover, experts seem to disagree on the very identification criterion of the linguistic phenomena. Deference to experts is anyway important in semantic applications, such as translation, where subtle distinctions in word meaning prove to be not only useful but also essential. However, the apparently wide gap between people's and experts' intuitions could be reduced once the paradoxes of meaning ambiguity are explained as a result of semantic underdetermination.

Keywords: Lexical ambiguity, semantic underdetermination, polysemy, metaphor, translation.

## 1. What's meaning ambiguity?

Ambiguity is pervasive in everyday language use and it can turn up in different shapes in our communicative encounters. A word is ambiguous when it has more than one meaning. The most widespread form of lexical ambiguity is *polysemy*, in which a term presents one (or more than one) literal meaning. Common words, as for instance the verb “cut”, can be used in a number of different meanings. We can *cut* cloth with scissors when we separate into parts a dress, but we can also *cut* our hair when we shorten them, we can *cut* a line

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from a poem when we delete it, or we can *cut* whiskey with water when we dilute it. We describe at least four very different actions with the same word: “cut”. This may sometimes be a source of confusion, but it normally raises no problem for everyday communication. As Falkum pointed out, «in normal circumstances, speakers can trust their audience to quickly and reliably figure out the meaning they intend to communicate when using a linguistic item that could take on a different meaning in a different context. On most occasions speakers and hearers are not even aware of the potential polysemy of the words they are using, and only upon reflection may they come to identify some of their other possible meanings» (Falkum 2009: 28). In fact, communication works even better if we can save our memory and use the same word, like a coin, to buy different things.

However, from a theoretical point of view, polysemy has proven to be a real challenge. Experts disagree as to how polysemy should be defined and represented in our mind: are all the different meanings of a polysemous word stored in our mental lexicon and how their relations are represented? The discrepancy between the theoretical problems which experts raise on polysemy, and the relative ease with which it is everyday produced and understood by speakers, has been described as the *polysemy paradox* (Ravin & Leacock 2000; Taylor 2003). Polysemy also poses a problem in semantic applications, such as lexicography and translation. For instance, how is a polysemous lexical item to be listed in a dictionary? This seems to be a problem just for experts, who categorize words and their meanings in dictionaries. In dictionaries, the meanings of the word “cut” are indeed classified under the same entry as literal meanings having a semantic relation. When the different literal meanings of a term have no semantic relation, we run into a rarer case of lexical ambiguity: *homonymy* (Frath 2001; Lyons 1977; Taylor 2003), whose meanings are classified in dictionaries as different entries. For example, the term *bank* is homonymous because it has two completely different literal meanings: “financial institution” and “riverside”; while the term *letter* is polysemous because it has two literal meanings, having a semantic relation: “symbol of the alphabet” and “written communication”. In the case of the word *bank*, we will find two entries in dictionaries, *bank*<sub>1</sub> and *bank*<sub>2</sub>, while in the case of the word *letter*, we will find just the entry *letter* with a list of meanings including “symbol of the alphabet” and “written communication”.

However, in dictionaries, we can find also figurative meanings listed under a polysemous word. This is the case of *lexicalized* or *dead* metaphors, whose

frequent use has brought them to a status similar to that of polysemous, literal terms. For instance, the word *ghost* has the literal meaning “spirit of a dead person”, but also the non-literal meaning “a slight or faint trace”, when it is used in *a ghost of a smile* (Ervas & Gola 2013). In dictionaries, meanings such as the latest one are classified as frequent uses of language, as modulations similar to the lexical entries of polysemous terms. This is why they are called “dead” metaphors. As a linguistic phenomenon, metaphor is a transfer of a meaning from one source domain to a (usually more abstract) target domain, on the basis of some similarity between the source and target domains. In this transfer some properties are selected, while others are ignored according to some relevance criteria, which are based on the context and the conceptual frameworks of the domains involved. An example is the term *star*, which has two different meanings, the literal meaning “celestial body” and the non-literal meaning “famous actor”, whose semantic fields partially overlap for some properties: being bright, unachievable, etc. As in the case of polysemy, the two meanings have a semantic relation represented by the shared properties. The shared properties are so fixed in the cultural/linguistic knowledge of native speakers, and so well-established in their mental lexicon, that they are easily grasped even when just a sentential context is given. Moreover, dead metaphors often represent so widespread a schema of properties associations that it is possible to find them in other languages and/or cultures, in exactly the same form (Bazzanella 2011; Handl 2011). For example, the English term “star” has a translation equivalent in Italian (“stella del cinema”) and in French (“étoile du spectacle”).

As in case of polysemy, we could talk about a *metaphor paradox*: metaphor represents an important theoretical challenge for experts, even though it is so common in language use that it usually goes unnoticed for people. Metaphor is for most people a poetic device and a matter of experts’ rather than “the man in the street”’s language. Indeed, people are usually unaware of dead metaphors and do not need to know the original literal meaning to understand them. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as a linguistic phenomenon, as a matter of words, rather than thought or action. For all these reasons, most people usually think they can get along perfectly well without metaphors. However, according to the experts, they do not lose their impact on our thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), just because we are not aware of them or we think they are smoothly neglectable. On the contrary, experts think that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, and that not just our language but also

our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. Metaphors are not just a linguistic phenomenon, they are rooted in our experience and cannot be placed on the same level of any metaphorical linguistic expression in spoken or written speech. Conceptual metaphors, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, SADNESS IS DOWN, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, TIME IS MOTION, are widespread in our way of thinking and acting. Many linguistic metaphors can be derived from such conceptual metaphors: for example, sentences such as “Your claims are *undefensible*”, “Your criticisms were right on *target*” and “He *attacked* every weak point in my argument” are different manifestations of the same ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor. Dead metaphors are so rooted in our experience that we would face difficulties in thinking and acting without them: «Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But we would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. It would seem strange even to call what they were doing “arguing”» (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5).

The case of *live metaphors* - people usually have in mind - is somewhat different, because this class involves a completely new and creative use of language, not referable to a frequent (and already classified in dictionaries) use of language. Metaphors which suffer overuse, degenerate into stereotyped expressions, which is one process by which a living metaphor can expire and become lexicalized, dead. Whereas dead metaphors are not recognisable as metaphor by non-experts, live metaphor is metaphor which we are all conscious of interpreting. Live metaphors usually appear in literary contexts. For instance, in *I Have Often Met the Pain of Living* (1925), Eugenio Montale employs metaphors in the form of “objective correlatives”, i.e. denotation of specific things/situations, to evoke a feeling. The well-known “pain of living” is thus evoked by “the strangled brook that gurgles”, “the curling of the shriveled leaf” and “the collapsed horse”. These metaphors are highly creative ways to represent the suffering of being-in-the-world in physical terms, without referring to psychological states (Bomprezzi 2014). Live metaphor comprehension requires a more demanding effort to find out the shared properties intended by the speaker and a finer knowledge of the context and its features (Glucksberg & Estes 2000; Indurkha 2007). Therefore understanding a live metaphor depends on a very deep understanding of the

cultural-specific environment (Kövecses 2005). This is the reason why no well-established schema or patterns of shared properties are found in other languages and/or cultures (Callies & Zimmermann 2002).

## 2. Experts' intuitions on meaning ambiguity

Of course, meaning ambiguity is not confined to cases of polysemy and metaphor, but this is just to give an example of the most widespread forms of meaning ambiguity in both the literal and the non-literal side of everyday language use. People simply do not realize that they live by metaphors, as experts would say, or more generally by meaning ambiguities. In case doubts should arise, people usually rely on dictionaries. This would make even for the most unswerving speaker who wants to know the meanings of every single word, but it would not be enough for the experts in the field, who disagree on the very criterion of distinction among different forms of meaning ambiguity. Experts propose a number of criteria for the distinction between homonymy and polysemy, the most important ones could be considered the *etymological*, the *psychological* and the *translation criteria*. Moreover, each of these criteria run into experts' disagreement (Lyons 1977; Nerlich 2003).

According to the advocates of the *etymological criterion*, ambiguity is a mere historical accident, randomly causing a superposition of terms. On the one hand, homonymous terms such as *file*, present two meanings having different etymological roots: the French word *fil* as the origin of the linguistic form meaning "folder or box for holding loose papers" and the Old-English word *fēol* as the origin of the linguistic form meaning "tool with roughened surface". On the other hand, polysemous terms such as *letter*, have meanings which share the same etymological root (Falkum 2011; Lyons 1977; Taylor 2003). While in the case of homonymy the meanings of a term, in general, do not share any property, in the case of polysemy a semantic overlap between the two meanings can be observed. The etymological criterion is a valuable tool in analysing the phenomena, however it is too relative to speakers' knowledge. For instance, the term *cardinal* has two meanings historically related: "leader of the Roman Catholic Church" and "a songbird". Experts know that the songbird inherited this name just because of its red coat, similar to the cardinal's mantle, but native speakers could ignore such a relation and the term *cardinal* could seem homonymous to them (Falkum 2009; Lyons 1977).

The *psychological criterion* precisely states that the polysemy/homonymy distinction is up to native speakers' intuitions: if native speakers judge a linguistic form as having unrelated semantic representations, then such a form is homonymous; if native speakers judge a linguistic form as having different but related semantic representations, then such a form is polysemous (Cruse 1995; Pinkal 1995). The difficulties with a complete agreement of a psychological criterion relate to the fact that it is not easy to identify the role of speakers' intuitions. According to experts, we cannot rely on speakers' intuitions, because there are no clear intuitions on 1) the "causal ancestors" of a word and 2) the "new usage" of a word (Lepore and Hawthorne 2011). For instance, for the word "dance", a linguistic community could have 1) performance standards of the dance, but also 2) an evolution of that dance, performed in different times, and 3) no agreement on what to consider as a new dance. After all, as Wittgenstein stated, this is anyway compatible with having an image of that dance: "in order to *want* to say something one must also have mastered a language; and yet it is clear that one can want to speak without speaking. Just as one can want to dance without dancing. And when we think about this, we grasp at the *image* of dancing, speaking, etc." (Wittgenstein 1953: § 338).

The psychological criterion also depends on the languages considered, as Falkum pointed out: "While the English word *open* is seen as exhibiting polysemy in "open the door" and "open the curtains", and hence the two senses are taken to be semantically related, a semantic relation between the Norwegian lexicalisations *åpne* and *trekke for* in the translations *åpne døra* ("open the door") and *trekke fra gardinene* ("open the curtains") is much harder to perceive" (Falkum 2009: 25). The *translation criterion* relies indeed precisely on the fact that ambiguity is usually not preserved in translation. As Kripke noted, «We can ask empirically whether languages are in fact found that contain distinct words expressing the allegedly distinct senses [...]. There is no reason for the ambiguity to be preserved in languages unrelated to our own» (Kripke 1979: 19). Therefore, if the translation of a term into a different language forces to choose among different translation equivalents, or if there is no one-to-one equivalence in translation (Ervas 2008), then that term is homonymous. For instance, the meanings of the English term "bark" – which denotes either the characteristic abrupt cry of a dog or the outer layer of a tree – could be disambiguated in the translation into Italian respectively with "latrato" and "corteccia". The term *bark* is indeed homonymous, as well as the

Italian term *credenza* which can be translated into Spanish with “creencia” (when the meaning is “belief”) and with “aparador” (when the meaning is “piece of furniture”). However, the experts address some criticism to the translation criterion too (Zwicky & Sadock 1975). Against the claim that homonymy can be identified because it forces a choice among different translation equivalents, they point out that there are also polysemous words which are translated into different terms in other languages. Consider, for example, the word “fish”, which could be translated into Spanish in either “pez” (live fish) or “pescado” (already caught fish): the term “fish” is indeed polysemous in English and other languages, such as Spanish, can codify subtle nuances of meaning not codified in English. The same could be said for some Italian polysemous words, such as “nipote”, which can be translated into French by either “nièce” or “petite-fille”, according to the family relationship (Ervas 2012).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, polysemy is strictly related to the conceptual network of metaphors: «the conceptual metaphor explains the systematicity of the polysemy» (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 248). Metaphors is indeed considered one of the most important ways to give birth to new meanings (Bartsch 2002). A dead metaphor is just part of our ordinary literal vocabulary and not regarded as metaphor at all, as in case of a literal polysemy, but it can be “delexicalised” or “revitalised” (Pawelec 2006). Experts’ distinction between dead and live metaphors faces indeed some difficulties, involving, in some sense, the “death” and the “resurrection” of a metaphor. There is an intermediate category, the *moribund metaphors*, which consists of expressions we use without being aware of their metaphorical nature, even though we can easily realize that they are unmistakable metaphors once we reflect on them. These metaphors are in the process of expiring, but they can be easily revived. As Grey wrote, «One notorious way in which their metaphorical character can be resuscitated is when they are used in conjunction with other metaphors, producing mixed metaphor. The conjunction of disparate metaphors is curiously prevalent in political rhetoric [...]. They are juxtapositions of ideas which might have been descriptively effective used separately but in conjunction produce an ugly result» (Grey 2000).

According to the experts, lexicalization is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the death of metaphors, because: i) different dictionaries do not recognize the use, or ii) they could be “resurrected”. The etymological

criterion has been put forth by experts in those cases as well. Terms such as *silly*, *pedigree*, or *daisy*, whose origins trace back to middle and old English, own literal meanings having a metaphoric etymological root. For instance, *daisy* is considered a corruption of the old English metaphor *dægges ēage*, “day’s eye”: during the night the flower closes its petals over its yellow centre, the “eye”, to unfold them again at dawn. Experts propose then *literalization* as the “real death” of a metaphor (Alm-Arvius 2003, 2006; Goatley 1997). The cases process of literalization can follow three main directions. In the case of *silly*, which is an alteration of the dialect *seely*, happy, and later *innocent*, *feeble*, the corresponding literal meaning is dead. In the case of *daisy*, a fusion of a metaphorical compound at both a phonological and a semantic level has happened. In the case of *pedigree*, whose origins are from late Middle English, from Anglo-Norman French *pé de grue* ‘*crane’s foot*,’ a mark used to denote succession in pedigrees, literalization is due to translation or linguistic loan from another language (Alm-Arvius 2006; Onions, Friedrichsen & Burchfield 1966/1994). Therefore, differences among cases are somehow flawed and seem a matter of degree. There is thus a sort of continuum from live metaphors, which are directly and transparently connected to the corresponding literal meaning, over moribund metaphors, which do not need to be interpreted in relation to their still existent source meaning, to dead metaphors, which are no longer connected with their original reading. As Alm-Arvius noted, «the difference between dead metaphors and merely moribund ones is thus that the latter retain a polysemous connection with some source contents, while this historical semantic link has been erased in dead metaphors» (Alm-Arvius 2006: 11-12).

### 3. Translators as intercultural experts in meaning ambiguity

Meaning ambiguity, in both polysemy and metaphor shape, also poses a problem for experts in semantic application fields, such as translation. Translation per se is already a complex process that involves many specific skills. Moreover, it is a quite common experience for translators, facing the problem of transposing meaning ambiguities into another language, to be forced to choose between two or more expressions which encode in different ways the lexical meaning of the words composing the original sentence. Sometimes, a semantic equivalence can be maintained in translation, but



sometimes it cannot (Ervas 2008). Kade's analysis of lexical equivalence in translation, given in terms of correspondence or lack of correspondence between two languages' lexical items, clearly shows that the one-to-one correspondence is just a fortuitous case. The most common translation cases are those of *facultative equivalence* (or one-to-many correspondence) and *approximative equivalence* (or one-to-part-of-one correspondence) (cf. Kade 1968. For a detailed analysis of lexical equivalence in translation, see also Bagge 1990; Hartmann 1985; Tomaszczyk 1976).

Legal translation offers a number of examples, where subtle differences in meaning can play an important role in law interpretation (Šarčević 1997; Alcaraz & Hughes 2002). Legal translation needs experts highly knowledgeable in legal terms and practices. Deference to legal translators is necessary for the translation of many things, including birth certificates, technical patents, application letters, financial statements, deposition records, litigation materials, evidence documents, and business contracts. Translators should not only possess general knowledge of legal terminology (Chromá 2004), they should also know the differences between legal systems which often entail the lack of equivalent terms (Legrand 1996). For instance, in the European case of DCFR (Draft Common Frame of Reference), it is possible to find many examples of interpretive choices translators make in order to make the target text equivalent to the source text (Ervas 2014). Legal translators sometimes need to draw out a term playing the same role in the target culture, even though differing in meaning when compared to the source term. As an example, the translation of the English term "agent" into Italian and French forces the translator to choose between a semantic equivalence, such as there would have been with "agente" in Italian and "agent" in French, and a pragmatic equivalence, such as "mandatario" in Italian and "représentant" in French, which maintain the same role of the source term.

As it has been pointed out, «instead of each term having a meaning of the sort necessary for deductive operations to go on in the first place, each term in a legal rule has a range of possible meanings, among which choices will have to be made. [...] The intellectual process of law is one of arguing and reasoning about which of them is to be preferred» (White 1982: 427). Sometimes the translator is forced to choose between a semantic equivalent and the conservation of the source term in the target language. This could happen when 1) the target language lacks an appropriate semantic equivalent (and/or the correspondent concept) or 2) when the target legal community needs to

borrow the source term (and/or the correspondent concept) for historical-political reasons. In the first case, the lack of an appropriate semantic equivalent entails a failure in translation, which might be highlighted by the fact that the translator is forced to add a footnote. The footnote is often used to explain the reasons why the translator decided to choose one translation instead of another, or why there is no “perfect” semantic equivalence between the source and the target words. Sometimes, as in the case of locution “Interpretation and development”, the translator is forced to leave a gap in translation because a semantic equivalent of the English term “development” does not make sense in the translation into Italian, or the translator needs a paraphrase, such as “comblement des lacunes” in the translation into French, to avoid a complete failure of translation. In the second case, the translator needs to resort to calque or loan translation. As an example, “trust” itself is the translation of the word “trust” into Italian, because not only the English word “trust”, but also the concept of trust is shared along different legal communities. In other cases, as for the French translation of “trust” with “fiducie”, the legal tradition of the target community weighs on the translation, thus avoiding the loan translation or the concept use in another, historically opposed legal tradition (Kocbek 2008).

For most people failures in translation could seem just a problem for experts, whose occupation is grabbing polysemy nuances of a language onto the web of meaning ambiguities of another language. However, failures in legal translation could cause a huge loss to people. For instance, the concept of *compensation* cannot be understood without considering the concept of *charges*: «Therefore it must be determined whether the broader and related concept of *charges* includes *compensation for use*. If interpreted broadly, *charges* would include the latter, and the consumer might be asked to pay» (Pasa & Morra: 7). Cases like that would make people - and not just experts - sensitive to translation problems! People usually think that translation problems arise in literary texts: that is quite true, even though meaning ambiguities might cause practical - and more serious - consequences in other translation fields, as exactly in legal translation. This does not mean that literary translation does not deserve problems for translators, whose creativity is put on probation not only (and not so much) by polysemy, but rather by live metaphors. In translation, lexicalized metaphors could have a behaviour very similar to polysemy, probably because they share very similar conceptual frameworks in source and target languages. Many polysemies, for example,

may be translated using a corresponding polysemy in the target language, because both words are ambiguous in a similar way in the source and target language. For example the Italian term “appendice” might refer to both the last part of a book or to a body part and can be translated into English with the word “appendix” in both cases. In the same way, lexicalized metaphor might be fully translatable: for instance, “quadretto” in Italian can be translated into English with the term “picture”, preserving both the literal (“little picture”) and the metaphorical senses (“family”) (Ervás & Gola 2013). Sometimes, as in case of polysemy, translators might not find an equivalent metaphor in the target culture and they are therefore forced to find a pragmatic equivalent, i.e. a different metaphor having the same function in the target language. For example, the Italian term “abbozzo”, used in the dead metaphor “abbozzo di un sorriso”, could be translated into English with the term “ghost” in the lexicalized metaphor “ghost of a smile”.

Live metaphors pose instead more serious problems in literary translation. In Paul Valéry’s poem *Le cimetière marin*, the live metaphor of the roof as the sea works because in Paris the roofs have a blue-slate colour under the sun, but the metaphor is not easily translatable in another context where the roof are imagined as red-coloured (Eco 2003). In such a case cultural-contextual cues could entail a failure in translation. In such cases, the translator has to resort to alternative strategies such as paraphrases, similes or completely new and creative metaphors. An example is represented by the spider as the metaphor of a man who captured a fly (a woman) in its cobweb in Paola Capriolo’s *La grande Eulalia* (1988). The translation risks to lose exactly the image of human relationships evoked by the metaphor of the spider/fly. For instance, the feminine Italian term “mosca” (“fly”) is translated into French with the feminine term “mouche”, but also the masculine Italian term “ragno” (“spider”) is translated with a feminine term, “araignée”. Therefore the figurative man/woman relationship is lost in translation. The same problem is involved in the translation into German, where both the term “Spinne” (“spider”) and “Fliege” (“fly”) are feminine (Capriolo 2002). Another example is Eugenio Montale’s translation into Italian of Emily Dickinson’s *The storm* (1896), where the “Emerald Ghost” is the metaphor of wind having the green colour of a snake whose shiver provoked the movement of the grass on the earth. The metaphor contains a net of semantic associations and phonetic features which are not easily translatable into Italian. Montale decided to lose

part of the semantic content to maintain the same rhythm of the original metaphor in order to create a new poetic image in the target culture.

#### 4. How to “become” experts in meaning ambiguities

In all the examples considered up to now, the perceived difference between the original and the alternative translations is the result of a change in the degree of explicitness in translation. What is crucial to translation is the fact that languages differ in the strategies used to make meaning explicit. This problem is rooted in the well-known “semantic underdetermination” phenomenon: when people use language they encode semantic representations which are just partial representations of their thoughts (Carston 2002). These semantic representations constitute a “guide” for the thoughts that the interpreter must recover to grasp the communicated thought. In Carston’s words: «the linguistic semantics of the utterance, that is, the meaning encoded in the linguistic expressions used, the relatively stable meanings in a linguistic system, meanings which are widely shared across a community of users of the system, underdetermines the propositions expressed (what is said). The hearer has to undertake a pragmatic inference in order to work out not only what the speaker is implicating but also what proposition she is directly expressing» (Carston 2002: 19-20). One language may be equipped to encode very subtle nuances by means of specific linguistic devices, whilst another language may commonly express equivalent nuances by linguistic devices which encode very vague semantic constraints on the interpretation. This forces translators to resort to a sort of “enrichment” of the source text in the target text order to derive the original intended meaning. That is why there can be failures in translation: before the translator recovers fully determinate thoughts, she must engage in a process of development of the logical form which can be represented in different ways in different languages. As Wilson and Sperber comment: «although the logical form of an utterance is recovered by decoding, its fully propositional form is obtained by inferential enrichment of the linguistically encoded logical form. It is the propositional form of an utterance, not its logical form, that determines the proposition expressed» (Wilson & Sperber 1993: 6).

The process of enrichment, therefore, involves a completion of the logical form (i.e. the semantic representation encoded by the utterance). Enrichment

draws information, not only from the original sentence, but also from the context, to go from semantic representations to fully developed propositions (Rosales Sequeiros 2002). The translator may also choose to enrich the original text on some other grounds, as for instance by her own knowledge and expertise in a specific field. Some examples discussed above show that some interlingual enrichments are required on linguistic grounds. This is due to the way languages typically express some meanings. The consequence of not carrying out the enrichment in these conditions gives rise to failures in translation. Thus, the target language forces the translator to explicitly encode a meaning which was only implicit in the (semantic representation of the) original text. However other examples show that enrichment, in turn, may be due to a choice of the translator on some other grounds, i.e. a wider context, as for instance the cultural context and its differences from the original one. Culture, in simple terms, is viewed here as a set of assumptions shared by a given community. Shared assumptions are expected to be easily accessible and retrievable by members across that community, creating a shared cognitive environment (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986: 38-46; Scollon & Scollon 1995: ch. 7).

From this perspective, even non-experts might realize that context is the key to understand both polysemy and metaphor in everyday language use. Thus the difference between homonymy and polysemy is based on different pragmatic processes which rely on the distinction between *narrow* and *broad contexts* (Bach 2012; Carston 2002; Perry 1997, 2001; Recanati 2004). In case of homonymy, the selection of the relevant meaning works by default on the basis of the pre-semantic context, or the *narrow context*. In case of polysemy, the selection of the relevant meaning involves a process of pragmatic enrichment on the basis of the post-semantic context, or the *broad context*. In a narrow, sentential context using both the meanings of a homonymous term, such as “bank”, an anaphora would have the effect that “something does not work” not only for experts, but for most people. For instance, the sentence “He put some money in a bank and then he swam to it” puts together unrelated semantic fields and at best it could be interpreted as a joke referring to completely different readings of the term. On the contrary, a polysemous term such as “window” might be used via anaphora and might be read in both its meanings (“window of a house” and “window on the computer screen”) preserving the impression that the overall sentence works in both cases. For instance, the sentence “He opened the window and then went through it”, a

broader context is required to understand which meaning of “window” is used, otherwise both readings would be equally possible (Frazier and Rayner 1990; Garrod, Freudenthal and Boyle 1994).

In polysemy, indeed, the word contributes to an indefinite number of other meanings, which are the results of the enrichment process (Recanati 2004, 2010). There is a clear gap between what is literally expressible and what speakers may need to express, between the encoded concepts and the intended ones (Carston 2002; Wilson & Carston 2007; Hirst 1987). Enrichment is a pragmatic process that fills this gap by pragmatically inferring the intended (“ad hoc”) concepts on the basis of the encoded concepts «in response to specific expectations of relevance raised in specific contexts» (Carston 2002: 322). The adjustment producing the “ad hoc” concepts, consists of narrowing or broadening the encoded concepts (on the nature of “ad hoc” concepts, see Allott & Textor 2012). In the case of narrowing, the semantic field of the encoded concept is reduced to a sub-set, as in the sentence “I do not like to drink when I have to work”, where “drink” means “drink alcohol”. In the case of broadening, the semantic field of the encoded concept is enlarged to a super-set, as in the sentence “This guy is crazy”, where “crazy” does not mean that the guy has a psychiatric disease, but rather that he looks “strange”.

This explanation of the explicit meaning of sentences challenges the traditional distinction between literal and nonliteral uses of language, as what is considered “literal” is the result of a pragmatic process of modulation (Carston 1997, 2002). Literal and nonliteral uses of language are just different solutions to the same problem: understanding in each communicative encounter and for each exchanged message, which its more relevant interpretation is, i.e. the interpretation optimizing the costs/benefits relationship between processing effort and cognitive effect. Therefore, in a relevance perspective, the dichotomy between literal and nonliteral uses of language is just an experts’ invention. There is instead a “continuum” between literal and nonliteral language, metaphor included. Appealing to this “unified approach” to literal and nonliteral uses of language, Carston explained the case of metaphor interpretation in a way similar to the polysemy case: as in polysemy, metaphor interpretation is an enrichment process whose result is an “ad hoc” concept (Carston 2002, 2010; Vega Moreno 2004). For instance, the sentence “Leonardo is an angel” contains a metaphor which is not to be understood as if Leonardo were immaterial, had wings and feathers, etc. on the basis of the lexicalized concept of ANGEL. The interpreter builds an alternative

concept, the “ad hoc” concept ANGEL\*, according to which Leonardo shares other properties with an angel, as for instance the properties of being good, calm, quiet, etc. Dead metaphors are therefore interpreted via a local pragmatic process of enrichment of the lexicalized concept, resulting in an “ad hoc” concept. In the case of live metaphors, the literal meaning would just be maintained in a more global pragmatic process resulting in a range of communicated affective and imagistic effects (Carston 2010; Carston & Wearing 2011).

In this perspective, an on-line pragmatic adjustment of the encoded lexical meaning is required in both polysemy and metaphor cases, on the basis of speakers’ encyclopaedic knowledge, the available contextual cues and the mutually shared cultural environment. Such an interpretative process is not a prerogative of experts, but it is the common way people solve meaning ambiguities in both their literal and nonliteral shapes. The experts/non-experts divide remains, but it has been tone down by the fact that there are no substantial differences to be investigated among linguistic phenomena, all being part of the same literal/nonliteral spectrum. The polysemy and metaphor paradoxes are no longer such, if we think that both the phenomena are unawarely handled by people exactly because they shared a similar pragmatic-contextual cognitive process able to derive the intended meaning. Paying attention to the context and to interlocutor’s intention, everyone can grasp the communicated meaning in case of meaning ambiguities. Experts still holds the ability to make this process more explicit by exploiting their knowledge and competences in a specific context, but the difference with “the man of the street” is just a matter of degree.

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