

## Role of Semantics in Translation

### Lexical Semantics, Componential Analysis, NSM, DCFM

#### Lexical Semantics:

- Lexical semantics plays an important role in translation study. Lexical semantics is the study of word meaning which involves either the internal semantic structure of words, or the semantic relations that occur within the vocabulary. Within the first set, major phenomena include polysemy (in contrast with vagueness), metonymy, metaphor, and prototypicality. Within the second set, dominant topics include lexical fields, lexical relations, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, and frames.
- Establishing which meanings a word has is arguably the basic step in lexical semantic research. *Polysemy* is the common term for the situation in which a lexical item has more than one meaning, such as when *late* can mean ‘after the usual, expected, or agreed time’ (*I am late again*), ‘advanced in day or night’ (*a late dinner*), or ‘no longer alive’ (*my late aunt Polly*). Terminologically speaking, polysemy needs to be contrasted with homonymy and, more importantly, vagueness. When two (or more) words have the same shape, such as *bank* (‘slope, elevation in sea or river bed’) and *bank* (‘financial institution’), they are homonyms; whereas polysemy refers to multiplicity of meaning within a single word, the multiplicity is distributed over various words in the case of homonymy.
- Relational semantics looks for such an apparatus in the form of sense relations like synonymy (identity of meaning) and antonymy (oppositeness of meaning): the fact that *aunt* and *uncle* refer to the same genealogical generation is a fact about the world, but the fact that *black* and *white* are opposites is a fact about words and language. In the actual practice of relational semantics, ‘relations of that kind’ specifically include—next to synonymy and antonymy—relations of hyponymy (or subordination) and hyperonymy (or superordination), which are both based on taxonomical inclusion.

#### Componential analysis

- Componential analysis is a method that takes its inspiration from structuralist phonology: just like phonemes are described structurally by their position on a set of contrastive dimensions, words may be characterized on the basis of the dimensions that structure a lexical field. Componential analysis is also called *feature analysis* or *contrast analysis*, and

it refers to the description of the meaning of words through structured sets of semantic features, which are given as “present”, “absent” or “indifferent with reference to feature”.

- Componential analysis provides a descriptive model for semantic content, based on the assumption that meanings can be described on the basis of a restricted set of conceptual building blocks—the semantic ‘components’ or ‘features.’
- A brief illustration of the principles of componential analysis is as following: we can take the terms *siège*, *pouf*, *tabouret*, *chaise*, *fauteuil*, and *canapé* (a subfield of the field of furniture terms in French). The word which acts as a superordinate to the field under consideration is *siège*, ‘seating equipment with legs.’ If we use the dimensions s1 ‘for seating,’ s2 ‘for one person,’ s3 ‘with legs,’ s4 ‘with back,’ s5 ‘with armrests,’ s6 ‘of rigid material,’ then *chaise* ‘chair’ can be componentially defined as [+ s1, + s2, + s3, + s4, – s5, + s6], and *canapé* ‘sofa’ as [+ s1, – s2, + s3, + s4, + s5, + s6], and so on.
- Componential analysis is a method typical of structural semantics which analyzes the structure of a word's meaning and thus reveals the culturally important features by which speakers of the language distinguish different words in the domain. This is a highly valuable approach to learning another language and understanding a specific semantic domain; for examples: *man* = [+ male], [+ mature], *woman* = [– male], [+ mature], *boy* = [+ male], [– mature], *girl* [– male] [– mature], *child* [+/- male] [– mature]. This approach is very valuable in translation.
- However, as Newmark says, componential analysis (CA) in translation is not the same as componential analysis in linguistics; in linguistics it means analysing or splitting up the various senses of a word into sense-components which may or may not be universals; in translation, the basic process is to compare a SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning, but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components. Normally the SL word has a more specific meaning than the TL word, and the translator has to add one or two TL sense components to the corresponding TL word in order to produce a closer approximation of meaning.
- The sense components of a lexical unit may be referential and/or pragmatic. Comprehensively, a SL word may be distinguished from a TL word on the one hand in the composition, shape, size and function of its referent; on the other in its cultural context and connotations, as well as in its currency, period, social class usage and its degree of

formality, emotional tone, generality or technicality and, finally, in the pragmatic effect of its sound composition, e.g., onomatopoeia or repetitive phonemes or suggestive symbolical consonantal clusters.

- Sense components have been variously called semantic features or semes. If translation is taken as an ordered rearrangement of sense components that are common to two language communities then the value of CA in identifying these components becomes clear. Peter Newmark has discussed the use of CA in translation.
- The first and most obvious use of CA, according to Newmark, is in handling words that denote combinations of qualities, or combinations of actions and qualities, that appear to show up a lexical gap in the target language: English words such as 'quaint', 'gawky', 'murky', 'loiter', 'hop', 'sleazy', 'dingy'; French words like *reche*, *rendder*, *bourru*, *relais*, *filiere*, *braderie*, *bricoleur*, *moche* etc.
- The second use of a componential analysis is in translating cultural (and institutional) words that the readership is unlikely to understand; whether the CA is accompanied by an accepted translation (which must be used in all but the most informal texts), transference, functional equivalent, cultural equivalent and so on will depend, firstly, on the particular text-type; secondly, on the requirements of the readership or the client, who may also disregard the usual characteristics of the text-type; and thirdly, on the importance of the cultural word in the text.
- Newmark says that CA can be used to differentiate SL synonyms in context, to translate neologisms and to distinguish the meanings of SL cultural sets or series, when their TL 'equivalents', even if they have transparently similar names, have widely different functional and or descriptive (substantive) components.

### **Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)**

- Another approach in meaning which is also very useful for translation study is a theory proposed by Anna Wierzbicka (1996) known as Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) which employs simple culturally-shared meanings (semantic primes or semantic primitives) as its vocabulary of semantic and pragmatic description. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory is based on evidence supporting the view that, despite their enormous differences, all languages share a small but stable core of simple shared meanings

(semantic primes), that these meanings have concrete linguistic exponents as words or word-like expressions in all languages, and that they share a universal grammar of combination, valency (the number of arguments controlled by a verbal predicate, including the subject of the verb), and complementation. That is, in any natural language one can isolate a small vocabulary and grammar which has precise equivalents in all other languages. Examples include the primary meanings of the English words: *someone/person*, *something/thing*, *people*, *say*, *words*, *do*, *think*, *want*, *good*, *bad*, *if*, *can* and *because*. Semantic primes can be combined, according to grammatical patterns which also appear to be universal, to form simple phrases and sentences such as: ‘people think that this is good’, ‘it is bad if someone says something like this’, ‘if you do something like this, people will think something bad about you’, and so on. The words and grammar of the natural semantic metalanguage jointly constitute a surprisingly flexible and expressive “mini-language”. Thus, knowing this theory is very beneficial in translation.

### **Universal Semantics:**

- Semantic universals are the properties the semantics of all languages have in common. Universal semantics is that part of semantic theory which is concerned with general semantic properties of language (singular) as opposed to the specific semantic properties of particular languages (plural). In other words, universal semantics is about semantic universals.
- Zhenying Wang in his paper ‘Universal Semantics in Translation’ talks of ‘semantic primitives’ mentioned by Zolkovskij and Wierzbicka and their theory of natural semantic primitives for meta-language or NSM. Wang states that besides a core composed of primitives, among various natural languages there are still many other commonly shared items that are relatively more complicated than and can be defined or interpreted with semantic primitives. He calls these items ‘universal sememes’ in his paper, and the meaning contained in universal sememes is labelled as universal meaning or universality, which lies universally in all kinds of language. All this may serve, according to Wang as the theoretical foundation of universal semantics which can contribute further to the practice of translation.

- A great number of bilingual memory studies suggest the existence of shared representations in the semantic memory for the words in two languages. A dominant model in the field is the *distributed conceptual feature* model of bilingual memory and its enhanced form, the *distributed conceptual representation model*; both models are referred to as the DCFM. According to DCFM, the determinants of word translation are, to a large extent, the word type. In this model, the meaning of a word is distributed in nodes at the semantic level. Two translation equivalents can share all their nodes or just some nodes. When translating, the word's semantic representation is activated and as it shares a part of its representation with its translation equivalent, the more nodes the two words share, the faster the translation is. Concrete words are hypothesized to share more of their nodes with their translation equivalent because they have a more precise meaning which is often shared between languages. The meaning of abstract words, on the other hand, is more dependent on linguistic context and, therefore, the semantic overlap between translation equivalents is smaller. Cognate words (words with very similar or identical spelling and the same meaning in two languages, such as station in French and English) are also supposed to share more nodes than non-cognate words. A considerable number of experiments have shown results which confirm that concrete words and cognates are processed faster than abstract words and non-cognates.
- From the above explanation we can conclude that semantics plays a very important role because it provides theories, approaches or methods to meaning that are very useful in translation study.

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