

Problems of access to meaning in the foreign language among Malaysians students

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ABSTRACT

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Every learner of a foreign language is confronted, especially at the beginning of his / her learning, at the sequences of signs (oral or graphic). Sometimes, the learner does not apprehend them immediately because "meaning always appears as an immediate data". In fact, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate in which forms appears the idea of an approximate meaning of the French words that have been used by Malaysian students. Thus, the polysemic character of an utterance or of the meaning of a word which remains definitely elusive or confused, because of the "evanescence" of meaning in one language as in the other. Moreover, the inadequacy of the semantic universes of words from one language to another is due to "linguistic relativism" or to the uncontrolled use of words, which manifests through an instability of meaning in the target language.

Keywords:

Linguistic relativism, evanescence of meaning, approximate semantic features, lexical confusion and spatial localization

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1. Introduction

For a long time, the preferred means of access in the sense of foreign words was translation. Learning a foreign language involved learning semantic equivalences, whether lexical (word lists) or grammatical (grammar rules translated into the mother tongue)[1-3]. The revival of the teaching of languages has depreciated this ancient means, in order to substitute it by another, equally ancient, but until now it had not been used systematically in the teaching of foreign languages. It is no longer an interlingual but intralingual translation [4]. Nevertheless, access to meaning still creates problems when the words are polysemic (see evanescence of meaning) or cultural coding: This phenomenon manifests itself within a given society, which may or may not be co-extensive with a linguistic community [5]. Thus, there are other meanings in the strictly linguistic sense: for example, the dog is associated with fidelity for us, although it is not part of the linguistic (lexicographic) meaning of the word. In addition, the lowest degree of coding is the personal association: for

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example, the dog evokes for me my brother, who already had one[6]. This type of meanings and the modalities of its productions are studied in a psycholinguistic perspective[7]. Moreover, several types of meaning are distinguished in the existence or not of a direct relation between the utterance and the act of the enunciation because, the language functions in two simultaneous ways: as an abstract system of symbols and as activity occurring in a particular context[8]. Some elements of this context are coded and integrated into the language, as well as information about the identity and status of the two parties, according the time and place of the enunciation[9]. In this sense, we have often sought for words a meaning derived from the intrinsic meaning of the sounds (or letters) that compose them (the phonetic symbolism) [10].

This meaning would be due to the conditions of the articulation and, possibly, the perception. For example [i] sharp, [O] roundness, etc [11]. Notwithstanding, the statistical and psycholinguistic studies devoted to these problems, we cannot affirm the universality of such meanings.

2. Linguistics Relativism

The expression of the temporal notion is first acquired with the mother tongue, where we generally learn how to express it by lexical processes: the use of adverbs, and grammatical times. Thus, the linguistic and temporal organization of the world is translated into languages by forms and images that become their own.

According to the hypothesis of the linguist determinist of Sapir - Whorf [12]. Differences between languages influenced the way of to think, to analyze and to perceive the reality. In fact, the genesis of linguistic determinism derives its origin from the researches of Sapir and Whorf concerning the indigenous peoples of America. Thus, they concluded that these indigenous peoples spoke, thought and acted in a totally different way from Europeans, because of their language and culture [13].

In other words, the human being is forever imprisoned in his language and culture, which impose a way of seeing the world. It is in this perspective that linguistic relativism was borne, which represents a moderate version of linguistic determinism.

Indeed, linguistic relativism emphasizes that differences between languages illustrate differences in the thinking of their speakers, but he did not think that thought is totally determined by language [14].

Furthermore, Whorf in his book *Linguistics and Anthropology* [15], was interested in the notion of time among the Hopi who spoke an Amerindian language. According to Whorf the Hopis had no intuition of time as a continuous current, coming from the past and heading for the future. The Hopis did not regard time as a continuous current but as a perpetual repetition of all things created at a later stage. This means that when they spoke of an event, they did not situate it on the temporal axis, but they simply marked it as a known thing, mythical or distant.

In addition, Whorf stipulated that for the Hopis, the time as understood by the speakers of Indo-European does not exist. For the Hopi:

“Time disappears and space is altered, so that there is no longer the homogeneous and immediate temporal space of our so-called intuition or the classical Newtonian mechanics.” [16]

This thesis has been the subject of several controversies in the history of cognitive anthropology. For example, psychologists Roger Brown [17] and Eric Lenneberg [18] tested the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis from experimental observations and demonstrated that the lexicon of

colors seemed to have a real influence on the perception and memory of speakers speaking different languages.

However, two anthropologists, Brent Berlin [19] and Paul Kay [20], invalidated the theory of Sapir and Whorf thanks to their study on the color categories of more than one hundred languages.

The variation on the decomposition of the color spectrum and on the denomination of colors exists well; it is determined by the coding color, via the cells of the human retina. Or, The linguistic relativism of the colored spectrum has nothing to do with the structure of the language; it depends instead on the physiology of the human retina. In addition, it is clear that language cannot influence retina and reconnect ganglion cells, but it may have a role in the creation of so-called conceptual space of colors (The manner in which the division of the color spectrum is made).

Despite the important criticisms aimed at the refutation of linguistic determinism. At the present time, we were expecting it to have almost fallen into disuse.

On the contrary, it is experiencing a renaissance in the space domain. For example, Levinson recent work [21], which emphasizes that the relative frame of reference used in most Indo-European languages to express spatial relationships is far from being the only one and that some languages use other frameworks of reference. While some linguists think that the hypothesis of the relationship between time and space, in particular that of Jackendoff [22], according to which "cognition of space precedes time".

3. Evanescence of Meaning

The idea of "the evanescence of meaning" is apprehended in terms of polysemy. Thus, like many other linguistic concepts; a concept which is very easily addressed in a global way, but which is more difficult to define rigorously [23]. Despite the importance of the linguistics discipline for the description of the main features of a particular object. But quickly these descriptions remain informal, and that one tries to exceed this superficial level, in order to characterize exactly this term, and to determine the limits according to definitional criteria [24]. So, the necessity of constructing a global theoretical framework, and its set of axiomatic definitions and postulates that is always questionable, which keep us from the immediate relationship.

In order to reduce the degree of our impression, we shall proceed from an informal characterization of polysemy in the case of polysemy.

Thus, Bréal [25] introduced the term polysemy at the end of the last century to characterize the capacity of words to "take on a new meaning" which coexists with the old:

"The new meaning, whatever it may be, does not put an end to the old. They exist both side by side. The same term can be applied in turn to the proper meaning or to the metaphorical sense, to the restricted sense or to the extended sense, to the abstract sense or to the concrete meaning ... As a new meaning is given to the word, The air of multiplying and producing new specimens, similar in form, but different in value. We will call this phenomenon of multiplication polysemy" (Bréal: 1997, pp. 154-155).

According to this definition, the criterion of the polysemy has been defined. For example, the word "office" in French is considered polysemous because, its different senses allow it to designate as well a piece of furniture on which we writes; a piece containing this type of piece of furniture; Work with this type of room; that a group of workers working in this type of place, etc. Derived from the successive metonymies, from the same primary meaning, which has disappeared at this moment; (office began by designating a woolen cloth used to cover tables).

The important idea is that it is the same word, which has several meanings, unlike homonymy, which characterizes radically distinct words whose form is "accidentally" the same. For example, in

French, the verb ``voler``, which can mean either ``to fly or to steal``.

In this case, we have two different words and therefore two categories. However, polysemy refers to several different meanings, but closely related and associated with the same lexical item. For example, the word ``calf``, to which corresponds the on the plate of the extensions the categories: ``animal``, ``meat of this animal`` and even ``skin of this animal`` [26].

If the idea of the uniqueness of the word remains the essential reason for distinguishing polysemy from homonymy, moreover, the etymological criterion has been abandoned, at least as a sufficient condition to ensure this uniqueness in synchrony.

Indeed, there are many words that are considered perfect homonyms, while they share a single etymon.

A well-known example is the strike, which, from the sense of short of the beach, gradually took on the meaning of stoppage of work through the name of the ``Place de Greve``; A place where merchandise was transported on the Seine River, in Paris, and which had become the meeting place for workers: being on strike meant in the 18th century to look for work, by extension of the meaning to wait for hiring in place of strike. In order to define polysemy, we must take into account other semantic criteria.

In fact, through the study of polysemous words, it is the whole of the problems of emergence and determination of meaning that are approached in bulk. In this logic underlined Benveniste [27]:

"What is meaning?" If one looks closely, one notices that the dictionaries juxtapose many disparate things. If we seek the sun we find a more or less developed definition of the star that is so called. If we seek to do, we will find fifteen headings. In the Littré dictionary, with the subdivisions there are 80. Is it the same meaning? Is that a lot of sense? We do not know. [...] So, in general, it is said: the use of the language regulates all that. But then we go on to fundamental questions: how does language accept this "polysemy"? How is meaning organized? [27].

4. Methodology

Generally, to undertake a linguistic analysis on a written corpus, it is strongly recommended to specify its origin. Our corpus was chosen in several samples of students of the university Putra Malaysia.

Our approach consists, in first, selecting representative sentences of the phenomenon that we wanted to study, then, presenting the sentence of the corpus in French, and translating it into English.

Finally, we have inserted some substitutions into the original sentence, in French to make it a correct example in French, which has also been translated into English. Thus, the reader will see the errors of the learners.

5. Approximately Semantic Features

The idea of inadequate semantic features occurs when the learner is mistaken in the choice of the verb because; he does not sufficiently master the meaning. Thus, we have found in the corpus, examples that the verb used does not seem to correspond to the reality that the learner would like to describe.

This difficulty is related to the existence of polysemic verbs with unidentified syntactic contours. This examples drawn from the written corpus, and explain the difficulty of these learners, in the polysemic case of the verb to give.

- a. [ce qui est illegal peut donner le probleme]

- a1. [all illegal can give the problem] Literal translation into English
a2. Ce qui est illegal pourrait creer un probleme.
a3. All illegal could create a problem.

These two examples show that the meanings that, the verb to give could not be mastered by these learners. Indeed, the substantive problem in the first example requires the use of the verb to create. In this case, we cannot give the problem but we create it.

- b. [l`argent ne donne pas le bonheur pour moi]
b1. [the money don't give happiness for me] Literal translation into English
b2. L`agent ne m`apporte pas le bonheur.
b3. b2. Money does not bring me happiness.

Moreover, the meaning attributed to the verb to give in the second example, also, it is not compatible with the word happiness because, it could be the source of the happiness, and in this case, we use the verb to bring.

We can deduce, an inadequate semantic feature produces an approximate meaning in the target language (French); more or less compatible with this previous linguistic knowledge. It is in this sense Porquier [28] summarized:

"L1 (and possibly L2, L3) as a linguistic experience, is the place and the material of the knowledge of the world through language: it is through this particular linguistic system that cognitive structures and Vision of the individual".

6. Lexical Confusion

The phenomenon of lexical confusion occurs when the learner makes less serious mistakes, but could create as much disturbance in the interlocutors.

- c. [ilm`aamene a la riviere]
c1. [He brings me in the river] Literal translation into English
c2. Il m`aemmene a la riviere.
c3. He brings me in the river.

In this example, the learner seems ignore the rule syntax of French because, for human subjects, we must use the verb `emmener`, whereas, for non-human subjects (objects), we have to use the verb `amener`. On the other hand, we say:

[nous emmenons les enfants] / [we bring the children's]

and,

[nous apportons la nourriture] / [we bring the food].

On the contrary, in English, we have only the verb to bring, which explains the origin of the error.

d. [j`ai voulu venir encore parce que j`aime la vue]

d1. [I want to come a gain because I like de view] Literal translate into English.

d2. J`ai voulu encore revenir parce que j`ai aimee la vue.

d3. I wanted to come back again because I liked the view.

This example shows for us an idea about the lexical confusion of these learners because of the

misunderstanding of the syntactic value of the adverb still, which requires in French to use of a prefix verb before the adverb still. It means a second time or more, which implies using of the verb `` to come back``, not the verb `` to come``.

In this logic, Benveniste [29] defines the meaning of a linguistic unity: "as its capacity to integrate a higher-level unit", or "by all its uses, by their distribution and by the types of connections which Result ". Thus the sense of a unity would be defined by its capacity for connection, on the syntagmatic axis, in other words by the set of contexts (codes or free) that this unit can admit, by distribution of this unit. The syntagmatic interpreter therefore depend either on the imperatives of syntax when the contextual "interpreter" is coded, or on the imperatives of the situation, when the "interpreter" is free.

7. Spatial Localization

The idea of reference manifested in the relation to the world that bilinguals maintained through their enunciation [30]. Thus, to take an account and how the space / time are structured and organized [31]. This situation exist in the following examples:

- e. le village est situe a Bourgogne.
- e1. [the village is located on Bourgogne] Literal translation into English.
- e2. Le village est situe en Bourgogne.
- e3. The village is located at Bourgogne.

This example chows for us the difficulty of the learner to use a correct preposition. He imagines the village is located on a hill more or less high. This may be due to his personal experience and socio-cultural background [32].

- f. nous sommes allees a un grand magasin.
- f1. [we went at the gig shop] Literal translation into English.
- f2. Nous sommes allees dans grand magasin.
- f3. WE went in the gig shop.
- g. ils vont accepter la peine ou entrent a la prison.
- g1. [they will accept the pine or they enter at prison] Literal translation into English.
- g2. Ils vont accepter leur peine ou bien ils entreront en prison.
- g3. They will accept the pine or they will enter in prison.

These two examples show for us how the learners represent their socio-linguistic realities. In this case, they translate from English to French. At the same time, they forget the referential constraints [33]. In fact, the word store requires the preposition in, because [we enter in store], like [we put someone in prison]. Because, these places are delimited, closed and isolated from the outside.

- h. l'argent est tres important pour vie.
- h1. [the money is much important for life] Literal translation into English.
- h2. L'argent est tres important pour vivre/dans la vie.
- h3. Money is very important in life.

This last example confirms the difficulty of the learners to use appropriately the prepositions in French. In this sense, the learner is punished doubly. On the one hand, his lack of mastery of the syntax rule, which consists to put the verb in the infinitive form (to live) after the preposition for. On the other hand, the sentence is ambiguous, because the referent life. This expresses the interest of syntax, which has long been regarded as the study of the relations between signs and semantics as well as the study of the relations between signs and objects. According Benveniste[34]:

"meaning is ... the fundamental condition to be met by any unity at any level to obtain linguistic status a", which implies that the meaning of a sign depends on its status In the system.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, this study is only a modest attempt to understand the difficulties of Malaysians students in mastering the polysemic sense and some homonyms.

In deed, we have been able to understand the difficulty of learners, to correctly use the meaning of polysemic words, because of their "evanescent nature". This phenomenon is not entirely new because the linguistic eminence, Saussure [35] has already said:

"` A language is radically powerless to defend against the factors that move instantly from the relation of the signified and the significant. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrariness of the sign "(p.112).

Moreover, the other major obstacle for French learners is the using of the prepositions that require real contextualized explanations. In addition, it is necessary to take an account the socio-cultural context and syntactic constraints.

Finally, this study of psycholinguistic analysis, through a written corpus, allowed us to know the main difficulties for learning of the French language among Malaysians learners because, we expected to work on the typicality of the errors among the learners. In the future, we would like to extend our research in order to know how these learners accede to the meaning in terms of listening and what are the eventual difficulties?

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