Polysemy as a Lexical Problem
in Translation

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1.1 The Problem:

Polysemous words give rise to problems in translation when they appear in decontextualized sentences, since there is no strongly biasing linguistic context that can remove their ambiguity and specify their meanings. The translator then has to resort to the context of situation to eliminate the ambiguity. However, polysemous words might give rise to problems even in the presence of the strongly biasing linguistic context, if the translator does not take the coatext into his consideration and stick to the core meaning of the word.

In order to resolve the ambiguity, the translator must take the context into consideration. Besides, the translator also has to realize that his translation is reasonable and that it makes sense.

1.2 The Concept of Polysemy in English:

Polysemy or multiplicity of meaning is considered a common feature of English and Arabic, since it exists in both languages. The existence of this linguistic phenomenon creates lexical problems in many cases, especially when they are dealt with as monosemous words or even when the translator is

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indifferent to the linguistic context and the relations that hold among the constituents of a linguistic stretch.

Many definitions have been given to the concept of polysemy. Ullman (1967: 159) defines polysemy as a "situation" in which the same word has two or more different meanings. He adds that polysemy is a fundamental feature of human speech which can arise in a multiplicity of ways. Nida (1969: 63), on the other hand, does not consider polysemy to be a crucial problem for the translator, since the different meanings of a single word are rarely in competition, for they not only have relatively well defined markers which help to differentiate the meanings, but so often they are so diverse as not to compete with one another for the same semantic domain. According to Crystal (1980: 274), polysemy is a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings. As for Palmer (1981: 100), polysemy is a case in which the same word may have a set of different meanings. Cruse (1986: 80) defines polysemy as a lexeme which has a number of senses. Lyons (1987: 146) refers to polysemy as a property of a single lexeme. Yule (1987:97) states that polysemy is a case in which one form (written or spoken) has meanings which are all related by extension. Kharma & Hajjaj (1989: 64) believe that polysemy is closely connected to homonymy and it occurs when a word has more than one meaning. Ghazala (1995: 98) regards polysemy as one of the major distinguishing characteristics of both English and Arabic, and it may be English more than Arabic. As for Finch (2000: 173), polysemy is a sense relation in which a lexeme has acquired more than one meaning. He

adds that a word which is capable of more than one meaning is polysemic. Löbner (2002: 45) believes that polysemy plays a major role in the historical development of a word meaning because lexemes continually shift their meanings and develop meaning variants. According to him, polysemy is abundant and it is rather the rule than the exception and a lexeme constitutes a case of polysemy if it has two or more interrelated meaning variants (ibid: 44).

From this, one can define polysemy as a case in which a single word has multiple meanings; each of these meanings has to be learnt separately in order to be understood. The following example illustrates our notion: the term flight, for example, can mean all of the following: (i) the power of flying; (ii) an air journey; (iii) a series of steps; (iv) a digression; (v) a unit of air force, (Finch:2000: 173).

1.3 The Concept of Polysemy in Arabic:

Arab linguists, on the other hand, referred to the concept of polysemy as "ištiräk lafzi". For Al-Jürjani (1954: 365), polysemous words tend to be unrelated and no clear relation among them can be realized. As-Suyüti (1971: 384) argues that polysemy would enrich the language and make it more capable of representing the physical world around us. But he denies that "ištiräk" is based on the idea that one word has different meanings. On the contrary, he argues that all kinds of "ištiräk" of one single expression had one general meaning. So, many meanings will be attached to the original meaning of a particular word and they will develop in the course of time of that expression (ibid). In contrast, Ibn Darstwïni (1974:

538), denies the existence of polysemous words in Arabic and he affirms that if the polysemous words exist, this would be due to two reasons: first, if they occur between two different languages and the second reason is the omission or the economy of speech. According to Al-Munjid (1999: 15) polysemy is one of the most common linguistic phenomena in all languages. He defines polysemy as multiplicity of meaning; a case in which one word has different meanings.

The following examples taken from the Holy Quraan can illustrate the phenomenon of polysemy in Arabic:

1. ?atä   Has at least six different meanings:
　　　　　　a. approach
　　　　　　b. grant
　　　　　　c. commit lewdness
　　　　　　d. come
　　　　　　e. bring
　　　　　　f. practice lusts

These six meanings of ?atä can be best understood as used in the following glorious ayäs:

a. Approach: (Al-Sabuni, vol.1, 1976: 142)

في قوله تعالى: (نِسَاؤُكُمْ حَرْثٌ لَكُمْ فَأْتُوا حَرْثَكُمْ أَنَّى شِئْتُمْ)

(البقرة: من الآية223)

(your wives are As a tilth unto you; so approach your when tilth or how ye will) (Al-Baqara: 223) (Yousif, A., 1989)

b. Grant: (Al-Sabuni, vol.1, 1976: 170)

في قوله تعالى: (يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْراً كَثِيراً)

(البقرة: من الآية269)

(He granteth wisdom to whome he pleaseth; And he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing)

(Al-Baqara: 269) (Yousif, A., 1989)

c. Commit lewdness: (Al-Sabuni, vol.1, 1976: 265)

في قوله تعالى: (وَاللَّاتِي يَأْتِينَ الْفَاحِشَةَ مِنْ نِسَائِكُمْ فَاسْتَشْهِدُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ أَرْبَعَةً مِنْكُمْ) (النساء: من الآية15)

(If any of your women are guilty of lewdness, take the evidence of four witnesses from amongst you)

(Al-Nisāa: 15) (Yousif, A., 1989)

d. Come: (Al-Sabuni, vol.3, 1976: 11)

في قوله تعالى: (يَا حَسْرَةً عَلَى الْعِبَادِ مَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ) (يّس:30)

(Ah! Alas for (My) servants! There comes not an apostle to them but they mock him!)   (Ya-sin: 30) (Yousif, A., 1989)

e. Bring: (Al-Sabuni, vol.2, 1976: 2106)

في قوله تعالى: (آتُونِي زُبَرَ الْحَدِيدِ)(الكهف: من الآية96)

(Bring me blocks of iron) (Al-Kahf: 96) (Yousif, A., 1989)

f. Practise lusts: (Al-Sabuni, vol. 1, 1976: 457)

في قوله تعالى: (إِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِنْ دُونِ النِّسَاءِ بَلْ أَنْتُمْ قَوْمٌ مُسْرِفُونَ) (الأعراف:81)

(For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed A people transgressing beyond bounds)

(Al-A'raf: 81) (Yousif, A., 1989)

2. Al-najim   Has at least two different meanings:

            a. star

            b. herb

      The two meanings of Al-najim are clearly viewed in the following two glorious ayäs:

a. Star: (Al-Sabuni, vol.2, 1976: 122)

في قوله تعالى: (وَعَلامَاتٍ وَبِالنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ) (النحل:16)

(And marks and sign-posts; and by the stars guide themselves)

                      (Al-Nahl: 16) (Yousif, A., 1989)

b. Herb: (Al-Munjid, 1999: 122)

في قوله تعالى: (وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ) (الرحمن:6)

(And the herbs and the trees both bow in adoration)

                      (Al-Rahmän: 6) (Yousif, A., 1989)

3. Al-măs   has at least four different meanings:

            a. touch

            b. consummation of marriage

            c. befall

            d. madness

      The following glorious ayäs clearly illustrate the different meanings of the polysemous word Al-măs:

a. Touch: (Al-Sabuni, vol.3, 1976: 315)

في قوله تعالى: (لا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ) (الواقعة:79)

(which none shall touch But those who are clean)

                      (Al-Wāqia': 79) (Yousif, A., 1989)

b. Consummation of marriage: (Al-Sabuni,vol.1, 1976: 152)

في قوله تعالى: (لا جناح عليكم إن طلقتم النساء ما لم تمسوهن)

(البقرة: من الآية236)

(there is no blame on you if ye divorce women before consummation) 　　　(Al-Baqara: 236) (Yousif, A., 1989)

a. Befall: (Al-Sabuni,vol.1.1976: 225)

في قوله تعالى: (إِنْ تَمْسَسْكُمْ حَسَنَةٌ تَسُؤْهُمْ) (آل عمران: من الآية120)

(If aught that is good befalls you, it grieves them)
　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Āl-i-Imrän: 120) (Yousif, A., 1989)

b. Madness: (Al-Sabuni,vol.1. 1976: 174)

في قوله تعالى: (الَّذِينَ يَأْكُلُونَ الرِّبا لا يَقُومُونَ إِلَّا كَمَا يَقُومُ الَّذِي يَتَخَبَّطُهُ الشَّيْطَانُ مِنَ الْمَسِّ) 　　　　　　(البقرة: من الآية275)

(Those who devour usury will not stand except as stands one whom the Evil one by his touch hath driven to madness)
　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Al-Baqara: 275) (Yousif, A., 1989)

4. Al-affü　　　has at least two different meanings:
　　　　　　　a. blot out
　　　　　　　b. beyond need money

　　　The following glorious ayäs show the different meanings of al-affü:

a. Blot out: (Al-Sabuni,vol.1.1976:238)

في قوله تعالى: (وَلَقَدْ عَفَا اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٌ)

(آل عمران: من الآية155)

(But God has blotted out their fault: for God is often-forgiving most forbearing)   (Āll-i-Imrän: 155) (Yousif, A., 1989)

a. Beyond need property: (Al-Sabuni, vol.1, 1976:140)

في قوله تعالى: (وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنْفِقُونَ قُلِ الْعَفْوَ) (البقرة: من الآية219)

(They ask thee how much they are to spend; say: "what is beyond your need")   (Al-Baqara: 219) (Yousif, A., 1989)

It is evident from the above examples that polysemy occurs in Arabic as well as English. Such polysemous forms must be handled with utmost care by the translators because they can not be translated out of their context.

1.4 Polysemy and Homonymy:

Finch (2000: 165) states that it is difficult for linguists to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. At t he theoretical level, the distinction is clear enough in that homonyms are separate lexical items, the relation between them is purely accidental (ibid). Löbner (2002: 44) refers to homonymy as a rare and accidental phenomenon while polysemy is independent of homonymy: of two homonyms, each can be polysemous.

Lyons (1987: 146) argues that polysemy is a property of a single lexeme, and this is what differentiates it, in principle, from homonymy. As for Yule (1987: 97) the distinction between polysemy and homonymy is not always clear cut. He adds that one indication of the distinction can be found in the typical dictionary entry for the words. If a word has multiple meanings then there will be a single entry with a number list

of the different meanings of the word, while if two words are treated as homonyms, they will typically have two separate entries (ibid).

In the opinion of Lyons (1977: 550), if two identical forms have different origins, i.e., "belong to different etymologies", they are treated as homonyms, while if they belong to the same etymology they are treated as polysemous. According to Palmer (1981: 101), polysemy is the case of one word having several meanings, and homonymy refers to the case of several words with the same shape. He adds, the dictionary has to decide whether a particular item is to be handled in terms of polysemy or homonymy.

It seems that most of the scholars have depended on the etymological information and unrelatedness vs. relatedness of meaning in their attempt to draw a distinction between polysemy and homonymy as the principal criterion. But, that would lead us to decisions which are counter-intuitive. This criterion was criticized by Finch (2000: 165), the polysemic word "pupil", for example, refers to "eye" and "student" and they have a common origin and are therefore, by an etymological criterion, polysemic, but the senses are so unrelated that most people would intuitively classify them as separate lexical items as homonyms.

According to what has been stated above, the distinction between polysemy and homonymy is still lacking and not clear cut.

1.5 Data Analysis:

The following data were chosen from two English – English dictionaries to be translated by "20" fourth year students at the translation Dept., College of Arts. University of Mosul(Academic year 2008-2009)the students were asked to pay attention to the underlined words.

1. She is British but also she has German **Connections**. (Oxford, 1995: 243)

2. Cover the food with a piece of plastic **film**. (Longman, 1989: 380)

3. The man died without **issue**. (Longman, 1989: 559)

4. We were looking for Adam, while he was in the headmaster's **study**. (Longman, 1989: 1051)

5. A strong new wine goes well with this **game**. (Longman, 1989: 427)

6. I did a **spell** in the army before becoming a policeman. (Longman, 1989: 1014)

7. My husband **relations** are my **relations** by marriage. (Longman, 1989: 877)

8. I saw **troops** of children going out of the school. (Oxford, 1995: 1278)

The following tables give the renderings of the polysemic words as given by the subjects.

1.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Connections	أقارب	3	A
	ارتباطات	4	B
	أصول	5	C
	صلات	6	D
	روابط	5	E
	أصدقاء	3	F

2.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Film	طبقة رقيقة	4	A
	فرشة	3	B
	سوليفان	4	C
	فلم مطاطي	6	D
	شريط بلاستيكي	3	E

3.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Issue	مبرر	6	A
	أطفال "ذرية"	4	B
	قضية	5	C
	تهمة	2	D
	سبب	3	E

4.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Study	يطالع	7	A
	يقرأ	4	B
	في الدراسة	4	C
	يدرس	5	D

5.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Game	الشوط	5	A
	طريدة	3	B
	محاولة	7	C
	لعبة	5	D

6.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Spell	مدة قصيرة	3	A
	فترة قصيرة	6	B
	سحر	5	C
	رقية	6	D

7.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Relations	أصدقاء	6	A
	علاقات	2	B
	أقرباء	3	C
	خاصة زوجتي	5	D
	ارتباطات	4	E

8.	Renderings		
	Items in Arabic	**No. of subjects**	**Groups**
Troops	مشاة	7	A
	جنود صغار	3	B
	حشود "مجاميع"	2	C
	مقاتلين من الأطفال	1	D
	طلائع	7	E

1.6 Discussion:

A huge number of English words are polysemous, some of which have several meanings. Students are required to bear this in mind when translating a word which seems strange if translated into its common meaning. For example, most of the subjects of our study failed to handle the meaning of the polysemic lexeme "connections" of sentence no. 1 by rendering it as "ارتباطات", "أصول", "صِلات", "روابط", "أصدقاء". Only group (A) has succeeded in giving the concise meaning of the polysemic lexeme which matches with the linguistic context by translating it into "أقارب". The polysemic lexeme "film" in sentence no. 2 was translated into Arabic by most of the subjects as "شريط بلاستيكي", "فرشة", "سوليفان", "فلم مطاطي". None of these meanings are clear cut or convincing. Only group (A) gave the right translation "طبقة رقيقة". The subjects may know only the common meaning of the polysemic lexeme and usually use it in their translation into Arabic without giving attention to any of its other possible meanings. Again most of the subjects were unable to give the right translation of

the polysemic lexeme "issue" by rendering it into "سبب",
"تهمة" ,"قضية" and "مبرر", while some of the subjects gave the
right translation "أطفال" ,"ذرية". In fact, the translator should not
stick to the core meaning of the word without considering the
type of the text or even the context. The subjects were
indifferent to consult a comprehensive dictionary since
dictionaries are of great use in such cases. The polysemic
lexeme "study" in sentence no.4 has been translated into
Arabic as "يدرس", "في الدراسة" ,"يقرأ" and "يطالع". In fact, all the
subjects failed to give the right translation because they did
not consider the collocational relation between the preposition
"in" and the noun "study". This type of collocation refers to
the place of the study or reading and it does not refer to the
action at all. Text type is another good guide to students. For
instance, the polysemic word "game" in sentence no.5 is in a
text about hunting not about anything else. So, it likely to be
translated into "طريدة" according to the text and the context in
which it has occurred. Most of the subjects translated it into
"لعبة", "محاولة" and "الشوط" except group "B" who has rendered
it into Arabic as "طريدة". A similar case is that with the
polysemic word "spell" in sentence no.6; the polysemic word
has been translated by few number of the subjects as "تعويذة",
"رقية" and "سحر". Such renderings are clearly irrelevant to such
context and seem unreasonable. Other subjects succeeded in
giving the right translation by depending on the cotext to find
out a reasonable translation to this word by translating it as
"فترة قصيرة" or "مدة قصيرة". As for sentence no.7, group "C" was
able to give the polysemic word "relations" the concise

translation which goes with the given context by rendering it into Arabic as "أقرباء" while other subjects gave irrelevant translations: "ارتباطات" ,"علاقات" , "خاصة زوجتي" , "أصدقاء". Finally, the polysemic word "troop" in sentence no.8 has been translated by most subjects into Arabic as "طلائع" ,"مشاة" , "جنود and "صغار" ,"مقاتلين من الأطفال", while other subjects were able to provide the right translation which goes with the context as "حشود".

It can be concluded that translators, whose task is to produce a TL text that bears a close resemblance to the SL text, should be aware of polysemic words when translating from English into Arabic or vice-versa. Therefore, it is not enough for the translators to know only the core meaning of the words but they must chose other meaning variants that match with co-text and they must give a great attention to co-text, text type, and the collocational relations as well, since they play an important role in determining the meaning of the polysemic words.

1.7 Conclusion:

The following points are concluded:

1. Most of the subjects did not give an attention to the co-text in their attempt to translate the polysemic words and since polysemous words are co-text dependant, the subjects failed to translate them correctly.

2. The majority of the subjects resorted to the "central or core" meanings of the polysemous words regardless of other associated meanings or "meaning variants".

3. Most of the subjects treated the polysemous words has a monosemic ones, consequently, they committed serious mistakes.

4. Although collocational relations are of a great assistance in guessing the meaning of polysemous words, most of the subjects did not depend on them in their renderings.

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الاشتراك اللفظي كمشكلة في الترجمة

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الملخـــص

الاشتراك اللفظي "تعدد المعاني" ظاهرة لغوية شائعة جداً، ويحدث الاشتراك اللفظي عندما يكون للمفردة معنى واحد شائع ومتعارف عليه بصورة أكبر من غيره من المعاني المقترنة بالمفردة التي هي أقل شيوعاً. ولأن ظاهرة الاشتراك اللفظي إحدى أهم مسببات الغموض المفرداتي فهي تشكل عقبة للمترجمين الذين يواجهون صعوبة في البحث عن المفردة المقابلة في اللغة المراد الترجمة إليها.

تقع الدراسة في قسمين: الأول يهدف إلى البحث في ظاهرة الاشتراك اللفظي، أما الثاني فيركز على دراسة المشكلات الأساسية التي تواجه المترجمين في محاولتهم ترجمة المشتركات اللفظية من أجل وضع الحلول التي تساعدهم في التغلب عليها.

تشمل الدراسة مفهوم الاشتراك اللفظي في كل من اللغتين العربية والإنكليزية والاختلافات ما بين الاشتراك اللفظي والمجانسة اللفظية مع تحليل ومناقشة المعطيات ومن ثم الاستنتاج الذي توصلت إليه الدراسة.

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