TEMA 11: *La palabra como signo lingüístico. Homonimia. Sinonimia. Antonimia. "False friends".Creatividad léxica.*

Revisado: Fernando Colomer Serna

Contents:

1. Words as meaningful units.

2. Lexical relations.
   - 2.1. Homonymy.
   - 2.2. Synonymy.
   - 2.3. Antonymy.
   - 2.4. "False friends".

3. Lexical creativity.
   - 3.1. The existence of productivity.
   - 3.2. Productivity and creativity.

4. The future in Language teaching

5. Conclusions

6. Bibliography.

Email: info@preparadores.eu • Web: http://www.preparadores.eu

1. WORDS AS MEANINGFUL UNITS

It is generally agreed that the words, phrases and sentences of natural languages have meaning, that sentences are composed of words (and phrases), and that the meaning of a sentence is the product of the words (and prases) of which it is composed.

But what is a word? And do all natural languages, in fact, have words? These questions are not as easy to answer as they might appear to be at first sight. One reason is that the term `word´ is ambiguous, both in everyday usage and also as it is employed technically by linguists.

Words may be considered purely as *forms*, whether spoken or written, or, alternatively, as composite *expressions*, which combine form and meaning. Another reason why it is not as easy to say whether something is or is not a word as non-linguists might think - or to say whether all natural languages have words - is that several different criteria come into play in the definition of words, both as forms and as expressions, and these criteria are often in conflict. Moreover, some of the criteria employed by linguists, taken separately, are such that they do not sharply divide words from non-words.

Knowing that the word `word´ is ambiguous since it may be considered either as forms or as expressions, we are going to begin then by asking in what sense of `word´ it is true to say that sentences are composed of words. There are, in fact, two quite different distinctions to be taken into account, as we address this question. It is important not to confuse the one with the other. The first is what the American philosopher C.S.Peirce (1839-1914) referred to as the distinction between words as tokens and words as *types*. This is readily explained by means of a simple example. Consider the following sentence:

(1) ` He who laughs last laughs longest´.

From one point of view, it can be said to contain six words: it is six words long. From another point of view, however, it can be said to contain only five words, since two of the words - the third and the fifth (*laughs*) - are identical: they are different tokens (or *instances*) of the same type. Put like this, the notion of type/token identity is not difficult to grasp. And, generally speaking, it is clear enough in everyday life when the term `word´ is to be understood in the one sense rather than the other with respect to Peirce´s distinction.

There is, however, a second distinction to be taken into account, which is more relevant to our present concerns. This distinction too may be explained by means of a simple example.

How many words are there in the following sentence:

(2) `If he is right and I am wrong, we are both in trouble´?

Once again, there are two correct answers to the question. But the fact that this is so has nothing to do with the type/token distinction. It rests upon the difference between words as *forms* and words as *expressions*. There are thirteen forms in the sentence in question, and each of them *instantiates* a different type. From this point of view, however, three of the words - *is, am,* and *are* - would traditionally be regarded as different forms as the same words. In one sense of `word´, therefore, sentence (2)is composed of thirteen words; in another, equally common and equally correct, sense of the term, it is composed of only eleven words.

Let us express this difference in the meaning of `word´ by saying that the sentence is composed of thirteen word-forms and eleven word-expressions. It is word-expressions, not word-forms, that are listed and defined in a conventional dictionary. And they are listed according to an alphabetic ordering of their citation-forms: i.e., what are commonly referrred to as the *headwords* of dictionary entries.

In order to assign a meaning to the word-forms of which a sentence is composed, we must be able to identify them, not merely as tokens, or instances, of particular types, but as forms of particular expressions. And tokens of the same type are not necessarily forms of the same expression. For example, in the sentence

(3) `They have found it impossible to found hospitals or charitable institutions of any kind without breaking the law´, the third and seventh word-tokens (*found*) are tokens of the same type, but not forms of the same expression.

The expressions of a language fall into two sets. One set, finite in number, is made up of *lexically simple* expressions: *lexemes*. These are the expressions that one would expect to find listed in a dictionary: they are the vocabulary-units of a language, out of which the members of the second set, *lexically composite* expressions, are constructed by meansof the grammatical rules of the language.

Most word-expressions, in all languages that have words, are lexically simple. However, in many languages, there are productive (*derivational*) rules for what is traditionally called *word-formation*, which enable their users to construct new word-expressions out of pre-existing lexically simpler expressions.

For example, `politeness´ is constructed from the lexically simpler expression, `polite´, by means of a productive rule of English word-formation. Although many conventional dictionaries do in fact list `politeness´ as a vocabulary-unit (i.e., provide for it a separate entry with its own headword and definition), it is unnecessary to do so, since both its meaning and its grammatical properties (as well as its pronunciation) are fully predictable by rule.

Most phrasal expressions, in contrast with word-expressions, are lexically composite. Indeed, all natural languages would appear to contain rules for the construction of an infinite number of lexically composite phrasal expressions. And it is an important principle of modern formal semantics that the meaning of all such lexically composite expressions should be systematically determinable on the basis of the meaning of the simpler expressions of which they are composed. Lexically simple phrasal expressions (i.e., phrasal lexemes) include idiomatic phrasal lexemes.

The meaning of the lexically simple, idiomatic, phrase is not systematically determinable (by rule) from the meaning of its constituent lexemes. The distinction that has just been drawn between lexically simple expressions (lexemes) and lexically composite expressions will depend upon the model or theory of grammar with which the linguist is

operating. But at whatever point the distinction is drawn between the grammar of a language and its vocabulary (or lexicon), there will always be borderline cases of expressions which can be classified, with equal justification, as lexically composite. But some such distinction is, and must be, drawn in the grammatical and semantic analysis of natural languages.

Different forms of the same lexeme will generally, though not necessarily, differ in meaning: they will share the same *lexical meaning*, but differ in respect of their *grammatical meaning*. For example, the forms *girl* and *girls* have the same lexical meaning (or meanings); but they differ in respect of their grammatical meaning, in that one is the singular form (of a noun of a particular subclass) and the other is the plural form (of a noun of a particular subclass); and the difference between singular forms and plural forms, or - to take another example - the difference between the past, present and future forms of verbs, is semantically relevant: it affects sentence-meaning. The meaning of a sentence is determined partly by the meaning of the words (i.e., lexemes) of which it is composed and partly by its grammatical meaning.

On the other hand, the relation between lexical and grammatical meaning varies from language to language: what is encoded lexically (*lexicalized*) in one language may be encoded grammatically (*grammaticalized*) in another. The grammaticalization of meaning is not simply, or primarily, a matter of inflection (even in languages whic, unlike English, have a very rich inflectional system). Far more important are the *syntactic* differences between one grammatical construction and another.

At this point, however, it may be noted that, when word-forms are considered, not just as forms, but as forms invested with grammatical meaning, yet another sense both of \`form´ and of \`word´ comes to light. Consider, for example, the following sentences:

(4) \`That sheep over there belongs to the farmer next door´
(5) \`Those sheep over there belong to the farmer next door´.

Is the second word-form of (4) the same as the second word-form of (5)?The distinction that we have drawn between forms and expressions doesnot, of itself, suffice to answer the question in a case like this. Let usgrant immediately that the two word-forms are identical in respect both of their phonological form (in the spoken language): they are *formally identical*. But they are not *grammatically identical.*

Whether we say that the second word-form of (4) is the same as the second word-form of (5) depends, therefore, on whether, in putting this question, we are concerned with formal identity alone - phonological or orthographic, as the case may be - or with both formal and grammatical identity. he two word-forms that occur in the second position of (4) and

(5) are formally identical, but grammatically distinct, forms of the same lexeme. More precisely, they are inflectionally, or *morphosyntactically*, distinct forms of the same lexeme. The way in which this phenomenon is handled by grammarians will differ according to the model of grammar which they adopt.

2. LEXICAL RELATIONS

There are a number of different types of lexical relation, as we shall see. A particular lexeme may be simultaneously in a number of these relations, so that it may be more accurate to think of the lexicon as a *network*, rather than a listing of words as in a published dictionary.

An important organizational principle in the lexicon is the *lexical field*. This is a group of lexemes which belong to a particular activity or area of specialist knowledge. One effect of lexical fields is that lexical relations are more common between lexemes in the same field.

When we look at words as meaningful units we also have to deal with the fact that, on the one hand, a single form may be combined with several meanings and, on the other, the same meaning may be combined with several word-forms. This fact is well recognized in traditional grammar and lexicography and will be discussed later from a fairly traditional point of view, in terms of the concepts of *homonymy, synonymy and antonymy*.

2.1. Homonymy

Homonyms are unrelated senses of the same phonological word. Some authors distinguish between *homographs*, senses of the same written word, and *homophones*, senses of the same spoken word.

We can distinguish different types depending on their syntactic behaviour, and spelling, for example:

1) lexemes of the same syntactic category, and with the same spelling:
   e.g. *lap* `circuit of a course´ and *lap* `part of body when sitting down´.
2) of the same category, but with different spelling: e.g. the verbs *ring* and *wring.*

3) of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb *keep* and the noun *keep*; of different categories, and whith different spelling: e.g. *not, knot.*

Of course variations in pronunciation mean that not all speakers have the same set of homonyms. Some English speakers for example pronounce the pairs *click* and *clique*, or *talk* and *torque*, in the same way, making these homonyms which are spelled differently.
Homonyms are traditionally defined as different words with the same form. This definition can be immediately improved by substituting \`lexeme´ for \`word´. But the definition is still defective in that it fails totake account of the fact that, in many languages, most lexemes have not one, but several, forms. Also, it says nothing about grammatical equivalence.

Let us begin, therefore by establishing a notion of **absolute homonymy**. Absolute homonyms will satisfy the following three conditions (in additionto the necessary minimal condition for all kinds of homonymy - identity of at least one form):

(1) they will be unrelated in meaning;
(2) all their forms will be identical;
(3) the identical forms will be grammatically equivalent.

Absolute homonymy is common enough: *\`bank1´, \`bank2´; \`sole1´*(“bottom of foot or shoe”), *\`sole2´* (“kind of fisk”); etc.

But there are also many different kinds of what is called as **partial homonymy**: i.e., cases where:

- there is identity of (minimally) one form and
- one or two, but not all three, of the above conditions are satisfied. For example, the verbs *\`find´* and *\`found´* share the form *found*, but not *finds, finding,* or *founds, founding*, etc., and *found* as a form of *\`find´* is not grammatically equivalent to *found* as a form of *\`found´*. In this case, as generally in English, the failure to satisfy (2) correlates with the failure to satisfy (3). However, it is important to realize that the last two conditions of absolute homonymy made explicit in the previous paragraph are logically independent.

2.2. Synonymy

Expressions with the same meaning are **synonymous**. Two points should be noted about this definition.
First it does not restrict the relation of synonymy to lexemes: it allows for the possibility that lexically simple expressions may have the same

meaning as lexically complex expressions. Second, it makes identity, notmerely similarity, of meaning the criterion of synonymy.

In this latter respect, it differs from the definition of synonymy that will be found in many standard dictionaries and the one with which lexicographers themselves customarily operate. Many of the expressions listed as synonymous in ordinary or specialized dictionaries (including *Roget´s Thesaurus* and other dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms) are what may be called **near-synonyms**: expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical, in meaning. Near-synonymy is not to be confused with various kinds of **partial synonymy**, which meet the criterion of identity of meaning, but which, for various reasons, fail to meet the conditions of what is generally referred to as absolute synonymy. Typical examples of near-synonyms in English are `*mist*´ and `*fog*´, `*stream*´ and `*brook*´, and `*dive*´ and `*plunge*´.

Absolute synonymy, in contrast not only with near-synonymy, but also with the broader notion of synonymy, covers both absolute and partial (i.e., non-absolute) synonymy. It is by now almost a truism that absolute synonymy is extremely rare - at least as a relation between lexemes - in natural languages. / It is not rare of course as a relation between lexically composite expressions.) Two (or more) expressions are absolutely synonymous if, and only if, they satisfy the following three conditions:

(1) all their meanings are identical;
(2) they are synonymous in all contexts;
(3) they are semantically equivalent (i.e., their meaning or meanings are identical) on all dimensions of meaning, descriptive and non-descriptive.

Although one or more of these conditions are commonly mentioned in the literature, in discussions of absolute synonymy, it is seldom pointed out that they are logically independent of one another; and non-absolute, or partial synonymy is not always clearly distinguished from near-synonymy.

Other definition of synonyms is that of different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings. Some examples might be the pairs below:

couch / sofa   boy / lad   lawyer / attorney   toilet / lavatory   large /big

Even these few examples show that true or exact synonyms are very rare. As Palmer (1981) notes, the synonyms often have different distributions along a number of parameters. They may have belonged to different dialects and then become synonyms for speakers familiar with

both dialects, like Irish English *press* and British English *cupboard*. Or the words may belong to different **registers**, those styles of language, colloquial, formal, literary, etc. that belong to different situations.

Thus *wife* or *spouse* are more formal than *old lady* or *missus*.

The synonyms may portray positive or negative attitudes of the speaker: for example *naive* or *gullible* seem more critical than *ingenuous*.

One or other of the synonyms may be collocationally restricted. For example the sentences below might mean roughly the same contexts:

- She called out to the young lad.
- She called out to the young boy.

In other contexts, however, the words *lad* and *boy* have different connotations; compare:

- He always was a bit of a lad.
- He always was a bit of a boy.

Or we might compare the synonymous pair (6) with the very different pairin (7):

(6) a big house: a large house
(7) my big sister: my large sister.

As an example of such distributional effects on synonyms, we might take the various words used for the police around the English-speaking world:*police, officer, cop, copper,* etc. Some distributional constraints on these words are regional, like Irish English *the guards* (from the Irish *garda*), British English *the old Bill*, or American English *the heat*.

Formality is another factor: many of these words are of course slang terms used in colloquial contexts instead of more formal terms like *police officer*. Speaker attitude is a further distinguishing factor: some words, like *fuzz, flatfoot, pigs* or *the slime*, reveal negative speaker attitudes, while others like *cop* seem neutral.

Finally, as an example of collocation effects, one can find speakers saying *a police car* or *a cop car*, but not very likely are *a guards car* or an*Old Bill car*.

2.3. Antonymy

In traditional terminology, **antonyms** are words which are opposite in meaning. It is useful, however, to identify several different types of relationship under a more general label of **opposition**.

There are a number of relations which seem to involve words which areat the same time related in meaning yet incompatible or contrasting:

1) Simple antonyms: This is a relation between words such that the positive of one implies the negative of the other. The pairs are also sometimes called **complementary pairs** or **binary pairs**. In effect, the words form a two-term classification. Examples would include:

dead / alive (of e.g. animals)
pass / fail (a test)
hit / miss (a target)

So, using these words literally, *dead* implies *not alive*, etc. which explainsthe semantic oddness of sentences like:

- My pet python is dead but luckily it´s still alive.

Of course speakers can creatively alter these two-term classifications for special effects: we can speak of someone being *half dead*; or we know that in horror films the *undead* are not alive in the normal sense.

2) Gradable antonyms: This is a relationship between opposites where the positive of one term does not necessarily imply the negative of the other, e.g. *rich / poor, fast / slow, young / old, beautiful / ugly*. This relation is typically associated with adjectives and has two major identifying characteristics: firstly, there are usually intermediate terms so that between the gradable antonyms *hot* and *cold* can find:

(8) hot (warm tepid cool) cold

This means of course that something may be neither hot nor cold. Secondly, the terms are usually relative, so *a thick pencil* is likely to be thinner than *a thin girl*; and *a late dinosaur fodssil* is earlier than *an early Elvis record*.

A third characteristic is taht in some pairs one term is more basic and common, so for example of the pair *long / short*, it is more natural to ask of something *How long is it?* than *How short is it?* For other pairs there isno such pattern: *How hot is it?* and *How cold is it?* are equally natural depending on context. Other examples of gradable antonyms are: *tall / short, clever / stupid, near / far, interesting / boring.*

3) Reverses: The characteristic **reverse** relation is between terms describing movement, where one term describes movement in one direction, →, and the other the same movement in the opposite direction, ←; for example the terms *push* and *pull* on a swing door, which tell you in which direction to apply force. Other such pairs are *come / go, go / return, ascend / descend.* When describig motion the following can be reverses: (go) *up / down,* (go) *in / out,* (turn) *right / left.*

By extension, the term is also applied to any process which can be reversed: so other reverses are *inflate / deflate, expand / contract, fill / empty* or *knit / unravel*.

4) Converses: These are terms which describe a relation between two entities from alternate viewpoints, as in the pairs:

(9) *own / belong to*
above / below
employer / employee

Thus if we are told *Alan owns this book* then we know automatically *This book belongs to Alan*. Again, these relations are part of a speaker´s semantic knowledge and explain why the two sentences below are **paraphrases**, i.e. can be used to describe the same situation:

(10) *My office is above the library.*
(11) *The library is below my office.*

5) Taxonomic sisters: The term anotonymy is sometimes used to describe words which are at the same level in a taxonomy. Taxonomies are classification systems; we take as an example the colour adjectivesin English, and give a selection below:

(12)(12)

red	*orange*	*yellow*	*green*	*blue*	*purple*	*brown*

We can say that the words *red* and *blue* are sister-members of the same taxonomy and therefore incompatible with each other. Hence one can say:

(13) *His car isn´t red, it´s blue*.

Other taxonomies might include the days of the week: *Sunday, Monday, Tuesday,* etc., or any of the taxonomies we use to describe the natural

world, like types of dog: *poodle, setter, bulldog,* etc. Some taxonomies are **closed**, like days of the week: we can´t easily add another day, without changing the whole system. Others are **open**, like the flavours of icecream sold in an ice cream parlour: someone can always come upwith a new flavour and extend the taxonomy.

2.4. "False Friends"

"False friends" or "false cognates" are words or expressions which have the same form but different meaning. They may occur inside a same language (intralinguistics) or between two or more languages (extralinguistics).

Its origin is very diverse and the reason may be cause of changes of sense through the time ("gay" = a cheerful person, has changed to have a completely different meaning = homosexual), to geographical distances ("biscuit" has the meaning of "galleta" in British English and "bizcocho" in American English), or to cultural phenomena ("feminist" in Japanese is generally used for describing a man who is too respected with women).

Although the translator must not be afraid of the literal translation of the words which seem to mean the same in both languages; however it is necessary that the translator knows the "false friends" which are produced inside the language and between the two languages in contact,for taking them into account in the translation.

The last ones, that is to say, the extralinguistic false friends, are interferences which contaminate the idiom, and which may produce totally wrong translations. The examples below show that a word in Spanish is not equivalent to one word in English only by its physical similarity; the spelling is equal, but the meaning is different.

"Actual" does not mean "actual" in Spanish, but "efectivo" or "real"; or "eventually" does not mean in Spanish "eventualmente", but "por fin", "a la larga" or "en definitiva", while the corresponding English term for the Spanish "eventual" will be "casual, provisional". Let us see several examples:

(14) "*A happy occurrence*" = "Un *acontecimiento* feliz".
(15) "*A very novel style of dressing*" = "Un estilo *muy original* de vestir".
(16) "*What are you miserable about?* = "¿Por qué estás tan *triste*?".
(17) "*A miserable life*" = "Una vida *desgraciada*".
(18) "*He is making his life a misery*" = "Le está *amargando* la vida".

(19) "*Peculiar situation*" = "Situación *especial* (rara, insólita)".
(20) "*I cannot resist ice-creams*" = "*Me encantan* los helados".
(21) "*This food is very rich*" = "Esta comida es *muy pesada*".
(22) *"A sensible answer*" = "Una respuesta *sensata* (razonable)".
(23) "I do really sympathize" = "Lo siento de verdad".

As can be seen by the examples, similar significants of both languages have different meanings, for what the suitable expression must be chosen to define the idea that the speech requires.

3. LEXICAL CREATIVITY

3.1. The existence of productivity

So far it has been implicit that word-formation is productive, but this position has not been argued for. In fact, it is probably not controversial to claim that it is productive according to Adams (1973), Jespersen (1942), Bauer (1978), Quirk (1972), etc. Nevertheless, productivity remains one of the most contested areas in the study of word-formation, and several articles and books have written specifically on this area. Thisis not because there is dispute over whether particular processess of word-formation are productive; the dispute concerns the extent to which word-formation can be said to be productive in general.

It is worth reiterating that certain processes of word-formation, at least, are clearly productive. In German, any infinitive can be used as a noun, independent of whether it has previously been used that way or not. In English, *-er* can be added to any new verbal base to give a new lexeme which means `the person who carries out the action of the verb´.

Also in English the suffix *-ful* can be added to the name of any container to provide a noun: *canful, pocketful, skipful,* etc.

The productivity of word-formation has, over the centuries, been a major factor in providing the huge vocabulary of English, and the fact that the process of creating new lexemes with new forms has not faded out can be seen by consulting a dictionary of neologisms, such as Barnhart *et al.* (1973).

New forms also occur regularly in the press (particularly in headlines andadvertisements), and letters to the editors such prestigious journals as *The Times* often show just how aware the reading public is of new forms and new uses of old forms. In this sense the productivity of word-formation can be taken as a fact which any theory of word-formation will be called upon to explain.

3.2. Productivity and creativity

Following Lyons, a distinction will be drawn here between **productivity** and **creativity**. Productivity is one of the defining features of human language, and is that property of language which allows a native speaker to produce an infinitely large number of sentences, many (or most) of which have never been produced before. It is assumed that productivity is to be accounted for by the rules of a generative grammar. Creativity, on the other hand, is the native speaker´s ability to extend the language system in a motivated, but unpredictable (non-rule-governed) way.

Both productivity and creativity give rise to large numbers of neologisms.

4. THE FUTURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The different aspects of word meaning mentioned in this study are also relevant to learning Foreign language vocabulary. Differences between learners' native vocabulary Language (L1) and foreign language (L2) can lead to the following types of problems: First, false friends are cases in which L1 and L2 predicates have identical (or similar) butdifferent forms.
Second, differences in L2 are not performed at the first level (i.e. city/village vs City/Ciudad).This study considers the word as a linguistic sign within the scope of lexical semantics in order to establish it.
The relative similarities between the two languages will be useful to Spanish-speaking students to learn English if their attention is drawn to these links. ESL Spanish for adults and students often notice that there is a big gap between Spanish and English, but he gets it

5.BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, V. (1973). “An Introduction to Modern English Word-Formation”. Longman. London.
- Bauer, L. (1989). “English Word-Formation”. Cambridge University Press. London: New York.
- de la Cruz, I. (1999). “La Homofonía en Inglés Contemporáneo: Estudio Histórico”. Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Alcalá. Madrid.
- Jespersen, O. (1942). “A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles. Part VI. Morphology”. George Allen *et al* (eds). London.

- Lyons, J. (1995). “Linguistic Semantics. An Introduction”. Cambridge University Press. London.
- Lyons, J. (1997). “Semantics”. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press. London.
- Palmer, F. (1981). “Semantics. Second Edition”. Cambridge University Press. London. New York.
- Quirk, R. *et al*. (1972). “A Grammar of Contemporary English”. Longman. London.
- Saeed, J. (1997). “Semantics”. Blackwell Publishers. London. New York.
- Valero, C. (1995). “Languages in Contact. An Introductory Textbookon Translation”. University Press of America, Inc. Lanham. London. New York.

Email: info@preparadores.eu • Web: http://www.preparadores.eu