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**Translating Polysemy**

### **1. Introduction**

Translation plays a significant role in communication between different communities. Occasionally, it is a difficult task to find the equivalent words in the target language to produce a clear message. This is not the only challenge that students experience but they also face many other problems in translating texts from English into Arabic and vice versa. Lexical or grammatical aspects may cause these problems. One of these problems is the lexical problems that need to be investigated in order to find appropriate solutions. Translating English polysemous words into Arabic is one of the lexical problems faced by students.

Ghazala [1] states that a polysemy is a word which has more than one meaning as opposed to monosemy which describes a word with only one single meaning. The problem of translating polysemous words arises in context. Many students have the difficulty of understanding the context to choose the suitable meaning that fit the given context. They only depend on the common meaning of such words. Therefore, it is no doubt that context plays an important role in choosing appropriate meanings for polysemic words.

Moreover, understanding the context helps in understanding the meanings of polysemous words and conveying the right message to the audiences. In this respect, Orero [2] states that having knowledge of context helps a translator to understand the varieties of context including the historical setting of a written text, the cultural components that make a text unique, and the types of audiences for which the translation is intended. Having such knowledge also helps the translator to use the most effective ways of producing a satisfactory representation of the source text (ST).

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Translation problems in some cases may arise at the word level, specially in translating from English into Arabic. Students sometimes find difficulties in recognizing the appropriate meanings of the English polysemous words, particularly the key words, to produce a clear Arabic text. Therefore, they usually fail in transferring the message of the ST. This problem is often serious when the students involve in translating texts from English into Arabic. Thus, this study is an attempt to avail the BA students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education- Saber, University of Aden the opportunity to come across such translation problems and it also aims to investigate how the third level students deal with this difficulty while translating the polysemous words from English into Arabic. Consequently, this study attempts to discover the solutions for such problems. In addition, it tries to find out the best ways used in translating the polysemic words which can make the message unambiguous while translating. In order to solve this problem, the researcher hypothesized that: The BA Students will not face difficulties in translating polysemous words if they take the context into consideration.

- 1. What are the obstacles encountered by students in translating polysemous words from English language into Arabic language?***
- 2. How can the students deal with translating polysemous words from English into Arabic?***

### **Polysemy:**

Polysemous words give rise to the 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. A translator, accordingly, has to resort to the context of situation to eliminate the

ambiguity. However, polysemous words might induce problems even in the presence of the strongly biasing linguistic context, especially if a translator does not take the context into his consideration and stick only to the core meaning of the word. Thus, in order to resolve the ambiguity, a translator must take the context into consideration. Besides, a translator also has to realize that his/her translation is reasonable and it makes sense.

### **The Concept of Polysemy in English**

The term "polysemy" was tackled quite differently by many scholars to an extent that it causes confusion may undoubtedly occur. In this respect, different views are presented in order to come up with accurate definitions.

Ullmann [3] states that polysemy refers to "the use of the same word with two or more distinct meanings". Leech [4] holds the similar view and defines polysemy as "one word having two or more senses". Furthermore, he adds that polysemy is the "existence of more than one semantic specification for the same lexical item". Steiner [5] describes polysemy as "the capacity of the same word to mean different things". Lyons [6] argues that polysemy refers to "one lexeme with several different senses". Baldinger [7] defines polysemy as "a case where one acoustic image symbolizes different realities, in that it can possess different contents or significations". Palmer [8], Leech [9] and Fromkin [10] have the opinion that polysemy refers to one word which has several meanings. Panman [11] gives a more specific definition when he says that it is "the phenomenon that two or more identical forms have different, but related meanings". Lyons [12] in my opinion, gives a more precise and adequate definition which is "polysemy is a property of single lexemes; where a single lexeme has several distinguishable meanings and these meanings should be synchronically related". Harold [13] remarks that polysemy refers to the fact that

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a "particular lexical item may have multiple meanings, which may have something in common with each other". Moore [14] shows that polysemy originates from Greek. 'Poly' in Greek means 'many' and 'semy' means relating to meaning. Al-Hadithi [15] provides an eclectic definition and says "polysemy is a case where a single lexeme possesses a set of different synchronically related meanings". This case is advantageous to the economy and efficiency of a language. The following examples serve to illustrate this argument:

1. They **grow** a lot of apples in this part of the country. (produce) (ينتج)
2. John is **growing** a beard. (Developing) (ينمي)

They are questionable, different meanings in the case of "grow", but rather of variants of a single meaning. "Grow" should be considered to be a single word with a number of senses, i.e., variant, closely related meanings. Such words - and this includes many words in common usage- are said to be polysemous; they are cases of polysemy or multiple meaning. Hence, it is apparent that, one can define polysemy as the case involving a single lexeme, which has a number of related senses or related variants of a single meaning.

**The Concept of Polysemy in Arabic**

Arab linguists, on the other hand, referred to the concept of polysemy as verbal sharing ( اشتراك لفظي ). 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. However he denies that sharing ( اشتراك ) is based on the idea that one word has different meanings.

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On the contrary, he argues that all kinds of sharing (اشترك) of one single expression have one general meaning. So, many meanings will be attached to the original meaning of a particular word and they will be developed in the course of time As-Suyüti (1971:384). In contrast, Ibn Darstwini (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 Quran, can illustrate the phenomenon of polysemy in Arabic:

1. (أتى): this verb has at least four different meanings:

- |                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| a. Grant           | منح            |
| b. Commit Lewdness | ارتكاب الرذيلة |
| c. Come            | يأتي           |
| d. Give            | يعطي           |

These four meanings of (أتى) can be best understood as used in the following glorious verses:

**a. Grant:**

في قوله تعالى:

(يؤتي الحكمة من يشاء ومن يؤت الحكمة فقد أوتي خيرا كثيرا وما يتذكر إلا أولوا الألباب)  
(البقرة الآية 111).

(He **grants** Hikmah to whom He pleases, and he to whom Hikmah is **granted**, is needed abundant good. But none remember (will receive admonition) expert men of understanding). (Ali, 1989).

**b- Commit Lewdness:**

في قوله تعالى: (واللاتي يأتين الفاحشة من نسائكم فاستشهدوا عليهن أربعة منكم). النساء الآية 15

(And those of your women who **commit** illegal sexual intercourse, take the evidence of four witness from amongst you against them). (Ali, 1989)

**c- Come:**

قوله تعالى: (يا حسرة على العباد ما يأتيهم من رسول إلا كانوا به يستهزؤن) يس الآية 30

(Alas for Mankind! There never **came** a Messenger to them but they used to mock at him) (Ali, 1989).

**d- Give:**

قوله تعالى: (آتوني زُبُر الحديد) الكهف من الآية 66

(Give me pieces (blocks) of iron) (Ali, 1989)

**Translating English Polysemous Words into Arabic:**

Polysemy, as defined by [1], is "a word that has more than one meaning as opposed to monosemy which describes a word with one single meaning only". This multiplicity of word meanings creates a problem especially in translation because students may know only the core meaning of a word and translate it by its equivalence in Arabic. For example, the students may know the common meaning of the verb "break" as (كسّر), and use it as its equivalence in Arabic or as (تكسير) when the verb "Break" is used as a noun; as in:

- The boy broke the window. كسّر الولد النافذة.
- We expected the break of the window. توقعنا تكسير النافذة.

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Using the word (كسر) as an equivalence to the word "Break" is applicable to special expressions like:

- This job breaks the back. هذا العمل يكسر الظهر.

Using the meaning of (حطم / هشم) as synonyms to the word (كسر) while translating the word "break" into Arabic is also possible in sentences like:

- The runner tried to break the world record. حاول العداء تحطيم الرقم القياسي.
- Why did you break his face? لماذا هشمت وجهه.

However, the word 'break' can be used for other meanings in Arabic in addition to the word (كسر) as the following examples illustrate:

- Please, do not break your promise. من فضلك، لا تخلف وعذك.
- The crowd broke when the match had ended. تفرق الجمهور عند انتهاء المباراة.
- She will break the news soon. سوف تفشي بالأخبار قريباً.

In fact, the students may not memorize all these meanings for the word "Break". So, they have to bear in mind, while translating it, that this word has other meanings besides its common one. The same is applicable to the word "sound" which has other meanings that are mostly unfamiliar to students, and this can cause problems while translating it into Arabic. [1].

In order to overcome the problem of translating a polysemous word, Ghazala [1] suggests the following points that have to be considered:

1. Great number of English words are polysemous words which having several meanings. Therefore, when the students translate a polysemous word in a sentence using its common meaning, and it seems strange, this

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indicates that the word has another meaning which is different from its common one.

2. The type of a text is also a guide in understanding the meaning of a word. For example, in a text about "birds", the word "sound" is likely to be translated into its common meaning (صوت).
3. The context in which a word occurs is also important in guessing the meaning of a polysemic word. This means that a translator has to look at the preceding and the following sentences or clauses or at the general context of a whole text while translating a sentence.
4. Knowing the grammatical class of a word (verb, noun, adjective... etc.) is also an indication to guess the meaning of a word. The word "sound", for example, is known as a noun to students. So, when it is used as a verb or an adjective, it acquires another meaning as in: "Your suggestion sounds reasonable". The word "sound" is used as a verb and it is equivalent to the verb "seem" in this case. Its equivalence in Arabic is (يبدو). However, in another example like "It is a sound basis", the word "sound" in this example is used as an adjective having the equivalence of (صائب) in Arabic.
5. The relation of a polysemous word with other words in a sentence is also a guide in guessing its meaning. A good example would be the word "Break" which can be combined with physical objects like (Window, Door, Car, Hand...etc.). So, when the word "Break" is combined with other unphysical words like (Law, Promise, Dawn...etc.), it acquires another meaning which needs to be discovered by students.
6. Using a word as a phrasal verb is also an indication to its polysemic nature, where the word can be followed by an adverb or preposition as the following examples illustrate:



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a- You cannot break with your family. The meaning of the word 'break' in this sentence is 'يُخَاصِم', as: (لا يمكنك أن تخاصم عائلتك).

b- The thief broke away from the police. The meaning of the word 'broke' in this sentences is 'فر', as : (فَرَّ اللص من الشرطة)

Concisely, students must take into consideration the above suggestions in order to convey the intended meaning of the polysemous word in a given sentence for the sake fulfilling a good translation while translating polysemous words in a given context from English into Arabic. [1].

**Context**

Context is an important concept in a language study. According to the theory of systematic-functional linguistics, context of situation determines the meaning system of a text and, therefore, translation is a process of reestablishing situation context in the TL. Since no identical contexts exist, different translation strategies should be made. Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary [16] defines context as the situation in which something happens and that helps to understand it. A context is the words that come just before and after a word, a phrase or a statement and help to understand its meaning. Hence, one may be able to guess the meaning of a word from the context.

A translator should understand the meaning of a text before he/she translates it. To determine the meaning of a text, a translator should look into the context. Context refers to the total environment in which a word, an expression, or a sentence appears. The meaning of a lexical unit of a text can be found not only in the surrounding words or the same sentence, but also in the other parts of a text.

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Here a translation test consisting of 10 sentences was developed. The sentences are containing five polysemous words in different contexts which were extracted from different sources. Each polysemous word was presented in two sentences in different contexts. It was done to know whether the students use the context in translating such words or not. So, the students asked to translate the following sentences into Arabic;

1. A fierce war may **break** out between the two countries.
2. If you **break** the rules, you will be punished.
3. Can you imagine? He **made** his will just a day before he died.
4. Cristiano Ronaldo **makes** thirteen million Euros a year.
5. They decided to take a walk around the **park**.
6. The athletes were indescribably hyperactive that day at the **park**.
7. Sushi can be eaten **raw** in salads or cooked.
8. There were a number of errors in the **raw** data.
9. Honey had a good **mouth**.
10. He told him that he had a pimple in his **mouth**.