A CRITICAL STUDY OF POLYSEMY: A PERSPECTIVE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE AND ITS PARTS OF SPEECH

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Abstract
The objective of this study is to explicitly examine the reflections of polysemy in some French parts of speech. In a multilingual society where French is spoken as a foreign language; it is pertinently noted that a great deal of users of certain words and expressions in French do not go by the contexts and the situations that such words and expressions are used. Some of them are not kept abreast of the fact that contexts supersede surface meanings, and a word can have more than one sense, they must acquire some competence in this domain. This study tends to seemingly depict the rudiment of pragmatics in the use of some French parts of speech (parties du discours). In this study, in order to gather our data, we have decided to make use of random sampling and as a result of the nature of this study; the method employed is descriptive and analytical. Systemic theory will be equally employed; this theory seems language as a system for the construction of meaning in context. At the concluding part of this study, we shall be exposed to some instances of salient problems encountered as a result of lack of knowledge of the term such as: misconception, lack of comprehension, ambiguity and restriction on the use of popular meanings mindless of the technical meanings.

Keywords: *Context, meaning, misconception, part of speech, polysemy.*

Introduction

The basic ingredient of language is for effective communication. It is a tool of peace and conflict resolution; as well it is an antidote of confusion and disorderliness depending on level of understanding of both the speakers or writers and the audience. This perception solely depends on knowledge of the use of a language. It must be noted at this point that the effective communication skill is very important in our daily activities without which may result to crises. Dalton E. (1974: 566) sees communication as the process by which meanings are exchanged so as to produce understanding among human beings. From the citation, we deduce that the purpose of communicating is to enhance understanding. Knezevich (1975:66) communication is a process in which a communicator attempts to convey an image to communicate; it essentially entails the sharing of ideas, notions, feelings and experiences between the sender and the receiver of the message. The expected outcome of any effective communication is to decode very thoughtfully the meaning of the message of the speaker or writer without any ambiguity. From this perspective, the term polysemy advocates the tendency for effective communication and brings about meanings from meanings (semantics). The term 'Polysemy' is traditionally defined as the existence for a single lexical word having multiple meanings solely depending on how it is used in context. The notion of

polysemy is often opposed to homonymy, which is characterized by multiple, unrelated meanings for a single form (Lyons, 1977: Kleiber, 1999). Equally, Atkins (2000) argues that polysemous word's senses via relation such as similarity, metaphor and metonymy. It is highly expedient to note that some users of both French and English languages are not kept abreast of the linguistic unit, this is a basic fact, therefore, polysemy depicts that a word can have more than one meaning. As is stated in palmer (1981, 100):

> …….not only different lexemes have different senses; it is also the
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> Case that the same lexeme may have a set of senses, this is polysemy
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> and such a lexeme is polysemous. Thus, polysemy is a property of a single
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> lexemes, which is the characteristics of most lexemes in French and English.

According to Leech (1974:228) (one word having two or more senses) is recognised if the senses concerned are related in two ways historically and psychologically which do not necessarily coincide. Two senses are historically related, they are traced back from the same source or one sense is derived from the other and two senses are psychologically related. Furthermore, (Herrman, 2003, P.349) defines 'polysemy study as of fundamental importance to any inquiry study into the semantic structure of a language.

Polysemy study is of fundamental importance to any enquiry into the semantic structure of a language (Herman, 2003, p.349). They are intuitively felt to be related and are assumed to be different uses of the same word by present day users of languages. The users of French words/expressions should master the grammatical features of the words of the two languages with that of their semantic structures which help to make the communication successful. In a bilingual stance, the proper understanding of English and French words in terms of vocabularies and semantics therefore becomes great values to teachers, learners and generally the users of the two languages.

Lowen (2007: 248-51) wrote:

> despite their importance, it seems that polysemous words have
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> not been a target of systemic enquiry in the field of second
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> language acquisition and teaching. There are a number of possible
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> reasons for this relative lack of attention. First, there seems to be a tacit
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> assumption that learners can learn various senses word implicitly without
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> being internationally taught.

It is apparently crucial to understand that the origin and cultural source of words/expressions need to be known before giving meanings to such words/expressions. It is as well observed that most English users of French language are ignorant of the principles related to semantics at the level of polysemy. Going by this view: some learners, teachers, interpreters and translators etc, restrict semantics to its literal meaning and regulates all figurative associations to pragmatics, and many find this distinction difficult to defend. Most users of the two languages abuse the words in terms of meanings given in the course of communication. However, if we consider some French words/expression, they are so polysemous that the francophone users of the language can simply make errors in their applications. Those

words/expressions have different background at the cultural, semantic and language community levels. The rudiment of polysemy (la polysémie) and false friends (Faux-Amis) is keenly interrelated, but distinctly different in application. A French word possibly can be used to suit many situations but does not mean that words can be used anyhow. This study tends to expose us to certain words/expressions that are polysemous in its usage French language.

We are equally interested in the study of the words/expressions according to their common uses and according to their parts of speech. Generally, parts of speech are expedient instruments of bringing out cohesive sentences according to their classes and grammatical rules. Parts of speech can also be viewed as the combination of grammatical function for the purpose of forming sentences. Parts of speech are categories to which words are assigned in accordance with their syntactic functions. It can as well be seen as a class of words sharing important syntactic or semantic features; a group of words in a language that may occur in similar positions or fulfill similar functions in a sentence. It is any of the classes into which in a language have traditionally been divided on the basis of their meaning, form or syntactic function. In languages, words can be considered as the smallest elements that have distinctive meanings. Based on their use and functions, words are categorized into several types or parts of speech. According to Wiktionary (a wiki-based open content dictionary): a part of speech is a linguistic category of words sharing syntactic or morphological behaviour and semantic properties such as noun, verb, pronoun, adverb, adjective etc. Furthermore, a part of speech is a category of words (or, more generally, of lexical items) which have similar grammatical properties. Words that are assigned to the same part of speech generally display similar behavior in terms of syntax-they play similar roles within the grammatical structure of sentences.

Theoretical framework

In this study, we are poised to employing systemic approach. Systemic approach evolved from the work of J.R. Firth and was later developed by one of his students M.A.K Halliday in his seminar paper in the early sixties. This theory is interested in the content of a language according to how it is used in the society. Systemic approach emphasizes the content-based discourse as well as the choices of people in their inter-personal communication. The systemic approach also examines the function that language has developed to serve the society. It is prominently based on the Firth systemic-structure theory, but derives more abstract principles from Hjemslev and owes many ideas to the Prague school (Halliday 1994: xxvi). Systemic approach sees language as a social semiotic, a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meanings in context. A language is a system for the construction of meanings: a semantic system with other systems for encoding the meanings it produces. The word 'semantics' does not simply refer to the meanings of words; it is the entire system of meanings of language expressed by grammar as well as by vocabulary. Words must be interpreted according to their contexts; no meaning can be inferred from a word without considering how it is used in context. In other words, language is therefore, a systemic resource for expressing meanings in context. This view of language as a system for meaning potential implies that language exists and therefore should be studied in contexts.

In the view of Courture (1986) the systemic model points to a correspondence between organizations of text features and context of situation to account for the ways in which meaning in language arises out of speaker's and listener's recognition of conversational

social situations which are associated with linguistic choice. According to the theory, though the meaning of a linguistic choice may be intrinsically indeterminate, participants rely on their situated knowledge to disambiguate utterance. In other words, systemic analysis of text features is premised on the notion that participants always experience a situation, and so organize their linguistic resources cooperatively in the production and reception of meaning.

A functional grammar of language is designed to analyze this wording and interpret the wording by reference to what it means because language is defined as systemic resource, the organizing principles in linguistic description is the system rather than structure. Since language is viewed as a semiotic potential, the description of language is their description of choice.

The work of Hake and Williams (1981) proceeds from the central premises of systemic linguistics that language functions in context and, comprehension of text features are regulated by that hierarchy specific to a particular context. As an analytical method, systemic approach as it has been developed under the influence of M.A.K Halliday is relevant in that, given the indeterminacy of the source text meaning. This theory is quite relevant in both linguistic studies and in translation. We have decided to make use of the relevant aspects of the theory in this study. In French language, it is believed that there are some words that may have more than one sense, the users of French language must be observant on how such word is used according to context, from this perspective, one can give appropriate meanings to the messages.

Polysemy in French Language

The rudiment of polysemy is more than when a word is synonymous in nature. (Lakkoff, 1987; Taylor, 1988) Polysemous words are words or phrases with multiple and related meanings. It is a cognitive semantics; the basic tenet of cognitive semantics is that various senses of a given polysemous word are neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic but instead systemic and semantically motivated. This is showing us that polysemy has great things to do with semantics. The term 'polysemy' has copious types, some of its types are as follows; lexical, inter-lexical and cognitive polysemy.

It is often known that French language is rich in the use of phrasal verbs (verbs à particule), idiomatic expressions (expressions idiomatiques) and other expressions. As closely related to that, a French word can be used in different contexts and in distinct meanings just as it is applicable in all languages. Most often what is practicable in a local language such as Yorouba is not somewhat applicable in French language; in Yorouba language, we have lots of words that are polysemous but their polysemies are indicated by the accents of different kinds. In this view, it can be observed that this is not the order of the day in French language. Most verbs in French language are polysemous- they have more than one sense. In this study, we have decided to consider the polysemous words/expressions in some French parts of speech.

Polysemy in French Verbs

Verbs are said to be action words or doing words, in fact, verbs can be regarded as actions that are embedded in grammatical structure. Some French verbs can be used polysemously;

this is because French as a language is full of expressions. Some of the French verbs they are polysemous are the following:

Faire et se faire, passer, avoir, mettre, plaindre et se plaindre, dire

- Le verbe 'faire' can be used as (to make or do or worry to indicate time): for instance:

verb	sentences	Translation
Faire	Je fais mon travail.	I do my work
Faire	Ils font un projet.	They make a project.
Faire	Il fait froid.	It is cold.
Faire	Il fait chaud.	It is hot.
Se faire	Il se faire à la mort de son oncle.	He is worried about the death of his uncle.
Se faire	Elle se faire à mémoriser le poème.	She is worried to memorize the poem.

Discussion

The verb 'faire' can be used differently with distinct interpretations and meanings. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd have the same function. This is the first phase of its usage; the ordinary application of the verb (connotation) such as to do or to make. The 4th sentence depicts another usage of the verb 'faire'; the polysemy is based on (weather), il fait chaud and il fait froid and sentences that tell us about weather ; it is hot and it is cold. From the given sentences, we can see that the 'verb' 'faire' can be used polysemously. Considering a very close usage of the verb 'faire' in a reflexive form (verbs pronominaux) it has a different meaning from the two cited examples. Il se fait a la mort de son oncle and il se fait a mémoriser le poème.

- Le verb 'passer' can be used to indicate (to pass, go, call, happen) for instance:

verb	sentences	Translation
passer	Le camion ne passé pas dans notre rue.	The lorry does not come along our street.
passer	Je ne fais que passer	I am not stopping.
passer	Si nous passions au salon ?	Shall we go into the sitting-room?
passer	Comme le temps passe!	As the time flies!
Se passer	La fête va se passer la semaine prochaine.	The festival is going to take place next week.

Discussion

From the cited sentences, we can observe that a meaning cannot be inferred from a word in isolation without considering its context and the expression. We can see from the four sentences that the sentences have different meanings and functions though the verb 'passer' is used to bring about the distinctions. From the use of the reflexive verb, the meaning of the 5th sentence has changed as it is used in context. The reflexive pronoun 'se' in 5th sentence has changed the meaning of the sentence.

- The verb 'avoir' can be used to indicate (to have, obtain,to be,) for instance;

verb	sentences	Translation
avoir	J'ai une grande maison.	I have a big house.
avoir	Il a eu sa licence en 2000.	He graduated in 2000.
avoir	Cette armoire a une jolie ligne.	The cupboard is a nice shape.
avoir	Quel âge avez-vous ?	How old are you?

Discussion

It is prominent that the word 'avoir' is used in various capacities to suit the situations by which one wants to use it. The situations are; (to have, to obtain, to be)

- The verb 'mettre' can be used to indicate (to put, put on, wear, make angry, start doing etc)

verb	sentences	Translation
mettre	Je mets ma chemise et mon pantalon.	I wear my shirt and my trouser.
mettre	Elle met son crayon sur la table.	She puts her pencil on the table.
Se mettre	Il se met en colère.	He is made angry
Se mettre	Nous nous mettons à faire quelque chose.	we start doing something.

Discussion

The verbs need to be considered according to how they are used in context, we can see it from the above cited sentences, the verb 'mettre' has been used in different pragmatic capacities. This is applicable to all polysemous verbs in French language. Words must not be treated in isolation; their interpretations must be linked with the prevailing meanings, situations and the cultural stances. Words that are used anyhow can seemingly bring about ambiguity.

- The verb 'plaindre' and 'se plaindre' can be used to indicate (to pity, to complain, to grudge, to moan)

verb	sentences	Translation
plaindre	Il est bien à plaindre.	He is to be pitied.
plaindre	Je vous plains de vivre avec elle.	I pity you or sympathize with you for having to live with her.
se plaindre	Il se plaint que les prix montent.	He is complaining/ grudging/ moaning about the rising prices.
Se plaindre	Elle se plaint à qui de droit.	She is complaining to the appropriate person.

Discussion

From these examples, it is observed that 'plaindre' and 'se plaindre' have different meanings, interestingly; the two verbs can be used as expressions to depict distinct senses. The verbs are just like the verbs 'ennuyer' and 's'ennuyer', their meanings can only be reflected on their usage. It depends on the construction of the sentences as used as expressions. In fact, we cannot treat all the verbs in this study, this is because most of French verbs are polysemous, and the sampling that we have made is quite pertinent to make it general.

Polysemy in French Nouns

In general, a noun has been regarded as one of the important parts of speech in languages. As pertinent to french language, it is observed that nouns have served as a useful instrument as regards the concept of polysemy. Most French nouns are polysemous, the exemples below exemply nouns as polysemies.

- For example: the noun 'café' is of a single lexeme with several distinguishable senses. To English users of the word, it is a place where one can buy drinks and simple meals free from the sale of alcohol. Contrarily, 'café' is more than restaurant; it may be coffe, depending on how it is used in context.
- The word 'reconnaissance' can as well be used polysemously in French language. It can be used to express gratitude, gratefulness equally, it can be used as recognition and acknowledgment and all these depend on how it is used in context.
- The word 'bourgeois' is used in both French and English. It is referred to shopkeepers living in towns in the middle ages. Now, the term is derogatory and it applies to persons attitudes and practices which are conventionally middle class. If one does apply the meaning according to how it is used in context, it may cause ambiguity.
- The French word 'récupération' can be used as 'recovery' or 'take out'.for instance: la capacité de récupération de l'organisme……..The body's power of recuperation or recovery. It can be usage to express salvage and reprocessing.

- The French word 'pierre' is ordinarily known as 'stone' for instance: la pierre d' acoppement which means 'stumbling block'. The same word can be used as a proper noun; the name of person which can be translated into Peter.
- The word 'plénitude' can be used in different dimensions, for instance; as fullness, richness, completeness- l'homme réalise ses désirs dans sa plenitude-The man realizes his desires in his entirety. Dans la plénitude de sa beauté- in the fullness of her beauty.
- The word 'produit' can be used as goods, profit, revenue and chemical. For expression, we have produit brut (gross profit), produits des ventes (income), produit national brut (gross national product).
- The word 'main' can be used as hand, symbol of authority (la main de Dieu), manner and skill (reconnaître la main de l'artiste), lose the lead (avoir perdre la main), lucky (avoir la main heureuse).
- The word 'yeux' can be eyes, ambassador/ representative (vous êtes mes yeux).
- The word 'marché' can be market, transaction/bargain, accept or refuse (mettre le marché en main a quelq'un).
- The word 'tête' can be head, face (il a une tête sympathique), self-will (c'est une forte tête), measure (il a une tête de plus-he is ahead taller), temperament (avoir la tete froid/ chaud).
- The word 'toilette' can be ablution, wash (un brin de toilette- to have a thorough/quick wash), cleaning, dress (en toilette de bal- dress) for a dance/in a dance dress.
- The word 'relation' can be relationship, account/report (faire la relation des evenements-to give an account of the events).

Polysemy in French Adjectives

The major function of adjectives is to qualify nouns/pronouns. In this study, it can be realised that French adjectives are very rich in the concept of polysemy. For example:

- The word 'petit' can be used in context as little, small, tiny.
- The word 'cher' can be used in context as dear (mon cher- my dear), expensive (le pantaloon coûte cher- the trouser is expensive).
- The word 'gros' can be use in context as big, enormous, fat, huge.
- The word 'grand' can be used in context as tall, big, great.
- The word 'moral' can be used in context as moral (j'ai pris l'engagement moral de le faire-) I have morally committed myself to doing it, courage/support (j'ai la certitude morale que- I am morally certain that….. / I feel deep down that……).
- The word 'moyen' can be used in context as average, medium, moderate (une maison de dimensions moyennes), means/way (il y a toujours un moyen- there is always a way).
- The word 'bon' can be used in context as good, kind, right/fit (au bon moment- at the right time), (bon anniversaire- happy birthday), (bonne année), (bon- ok), (il fait bon ici– it is pleasant here), (bonne amie – girl friend).
- The word 'brilliant' can be used in context as shiny, glossy, sparkling, bright /brilliant, outstandingly intelligent. For instance: (donner du brilliant à un cuir – to polish up a piece of leather).
- The word 'red' can be used in context as red, expression used for lipstick (rouge à lèvre)

- The word 'usuel' can be used in context as usual, ordinary, often.(c'est un usual- it has become an habit).
- The word 'vain' can be used in context as empty, in vain (vain pâture – common grazing land).
- The word 'vivant' can be used in context as living or as (le pain vivant – the bread of life).

Polysemy in french Adverbs

Adverbs are said to be words used to modify verbs, adjectives and another adverbs. Adverbs describe how something is being done. It can be formed in different forms, like it applicable in English language that the suffix 'ly' is added to the adjective to make up an adverb. The same structure is often common in the formation of French adverb. The suffix 'ment' can be added to the adjective to make up an adverb in French language. For instance: the adjective 'facilement' is formed from the adjective 'facile'.

In this study, it is exposed to us that the adverbs can also be termed to be polysemous in nature; an adverb can used in different dimension to have different meaning in context. We have different types of adverb in French language as we have it in English language. E.g., adverb of time, place, concession, manner, purpose, comparison, condition, degree, frequency, result, long adverb etc. All these adverbs have the way and manner at which they can be placed. The placement of French adverbs depends to some extent upon the type of adverb and the word that it is modifying, invariably, this can lead to its state of polysemy. For instance:

- The word 'bien' can be used in context as good, nice, okay. (Nous mangeons bien- we eat well), (Nous avons bien mange – we ate well), (c'est bien- it is good/nice).
- It is as well observed that adverbs of frequency are usually placed after the verb. (je fais toujours mes devoirs- I always do my assignment).
- The word 'vite' can be used in context quickly, fast, rapidly, swiftly, (il travaille vite- he works quickly), (changer de vite- to change gear) etc.

It should be noted that all parts of speech can serve as polysemies but some parts of speech place more emphasis on the concept than other. For instance, french parts of speech such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles, interjections and pronoun are less used on the part of polysemy.

Findings and Discussions

According to our proposed theory 'systemic approach' Systemic approach sees language as a social semiotic, a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meanings in context. A language is a system for the construction of meanings: a semantic system with other systems for encoding the meanings it produces.

From the data, it can be observed that most polysemous words/expressions in French language are widely attached to French verbal and nominal groups. It is as well observed that most verbs in French language are polysemous; they can be used in different dimensions. Furthermore, out of all the nine parts of speech in French language (parties du discours), noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition, interjection, conjunction and article. Only verbs can be said to have been rich in the use of polysemy in French language.

It is as well observed from our study that French is very rich in expressions; a single verb can be used to express different thoughts in different structure as it is applicable in other languages. It is pertinent to know that lack of the knowledge of words and expressions that are polysemous can lead to misconception, ambiguity, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misreading, get the wrong idea about something, get the wrong impression about something, get the wrong end of the stick, misapprehension and miscomprehension. From the study so far, in order to bring about peace, conflict resolution and to avoid misinterpretation, individual word needs to be well studied and consider how it can be used at the level of connotation and denotation.

Conclusion

In this study, the results gathered from our data show that homonymy and polysemy are two known semantic problems. In fact, polysemies bring about confusion, misunderstanding and a level of discord if meanings of the chosen words or expressions are not in line with the contextual approaches of their usage. Therefore, words and expressions should not be used in isolation; they need to be interpreted according to the context. It is equally observed that individual word or expression cannot be used in isolation to bring the expected meaning of a sentence, a word needs to be used in sentences to be able to bring out what is conveying to the entire audience.

Furthermore, it is as well noted that the dictionary meaning brings about literal meaning. This is closely related to the concept of connotation and denotation. This will show us that meaning can be triggered either by the context or by rules. The denotation of words sees beyond ordinary or surface meanings that are embedded in connotative meanings. The structural representation of words/expressions in term of their usage will bring about the minds of the users or interlocutors.It is equally noticed that not all French parts of speech can be polysemous; the rudiments of polysemy is keenly and interestingly attached with certain parts of speech in French. Most often the parts of speech such as verbs, nous, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions take a greater place in the stance of polysemy. In this study, we can stand on the position that individual word and expression should be learned in different contexts that can be used so that to avoid misconstrue and ambiguity.

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