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## APPROACHING LEXICAL-SEMANTIC AMBIGUITY IN TRANSLATION: WHAT RESEARCH DEMANDS

### NECESIDAD DE INVESTIGACIÓN DE LA AMBIGÜEDAD LÉXICO-SEMÁNTICA EN LA TRADUCCIÓN

Clara Alina Escalona Falcón<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [claraa@uo.edu.cu](mailto:claraa@uo.edu.cu)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2860-3108>

Katja Lochtman<sup>2</sup>

E-mail: [katja.lochtman@vub.be](mailto:katja.lochtman@vub.be)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0663-5256>

Adrian Abreus González<sup>3</sup>

E-mail: [aabreus@ucf.edu.cu](mailto:aabreus@ucf.edu.cu)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4643-3269>

Yaritza Tardo Fernández<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [tardo@uo.edu.cu](mailto:tardo@uo.edu.cu)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9710-1371>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad de Oriente. Santiago de Cuba. Cuba.

<sup>2</sup>Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Belgium.

<sup>3</sup>Universidad de Cienfuegos "Carlos Rafael Rodríguez". Cuba.

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#### RESUMEN

This article aims at defining the role of lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation studies. Lexical-semantic ambiguity has been the focus of many research areas, especially in the field of psycholinguistics and foreign language acquisition. The primary focus in this kind of research has been on demonstrating how lexical-semantic ambiguity affects information retrieval in language users. In translation studies, the role of lexical-semantic ambiguity has been under researched. The current article is aimed at exploring the approach to lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation studies through a literature overview, demonstrating the need for further research on the topic.

#### Palabras clave:

Translation, lexical-semantic ambiguity, second-language acquisition.

#### ABSTRACT

La ambigüedad léxico-semántica ha sido abordada en varias investigaciones, especialmente en las áreas de la psicolingüística y la adquisición de lenguas extranjeras. Sin embargo, en las investigaciones traductológicas la ambigüedad léxico-semántica ha sido insuficientemente abordada. El presente artículo por tanto tiene como objetivo explorar los enfoques de la ambigüedad léxico-semántica a través de una revisión bibliográfica, lo cual contribuye a demostrar la necesidad de investigación acerca del tema.

#### Keywords:

Traducción, ambigüedad léxico-semántica, adquisición de segundas lenguas.

## INTRODUCTION

Lexical-semantic ambiguity has been widely defined in studies, by authors like Klepousniotou (2002); Daham & Garret (2007), among others. This article aims at finding the relationship between lexical-semantic ambiguity and translation. To this purpose, the definition of lexical-semantic ambiguity offered by Daham a& Garret (2007), is the most suitable one: *“lexical-semantic ambiguity is the property of being ambiguous; that is, a word, term, notation, sign, symbol, phrase, sentence, or any other form used for communication is called ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way”*.(p11)

The difficulty caused by lexical-semantic ambiguity is given by a rupture in the relationship between meaning – the concept or idea associated with a sign in communication - and sense - the part of meaning that grants unity and coherence between words and the statements in which they are produced.

The term lexical-semantic ambiguity has mostly been applied to mother tongue cases. Daham, & Garret (2007), state that lexical-semantic ambiguity occurs mostly in spoken-word recognition in general language. Hernández (2006), describe it in an academic environment, specifically in the interventions of a class of Statistics. Gallagher (2013), applies eye-tracking experiments to measure the degree of lexical-semantic ambiguity, based on the time students take to read. The interest of this group of studies therefore lies in demonstrating the occurrence of lexical-semantic ambiguity, both in written and spoken language, but mainly in addressing information retrieval in the mother tongue.

Authors like Geeraerts (2013); Ramirez (2015), among others, have approached lexical-semantic ambiguity from the cognitive point of view. They have focused on the categorization of lexical-semantic ambiguity in two main types: homonymy and polysemy, and have defined these two categories, stating the dichotomy between them, end explaining how language users recognize them. Homonymy is defined in terms of different meanings, not related semantically, whereas polysemy is defined in terms of different senses, which are semantically related, e.g. metonymy or hypernymy-hyponymy (Ramírez, 2015). Whereas these studies are a significant point of departure for any research on lexical-semantic ambiguity, insights as to its occurrence in foreign languages are still missing in them.

The exploration of lexical-semantic ambiguity in Second Language Acquisition, however, has awakened the interest of other authors. Houdková (2012), analyzes the role of lexical-semantic ambiguity in advertisements written in German, in view of whether these cases are the result

of polysemy or of vagueness. She also conducts a study on lexical-semantic ambiguity between languages; that is, in bilingual contexts. Noor (2016), provides examples of lexical-semantic ambiguity with quantifiers in English. These studies, although not showing any pathway for the treatment of lexical-semantic ambiguity, are relevant to demonstrate that this phenomenon can also be present in between-language cases.

The previously stated references reveal a growing interest to define and to explain lexical-semantic ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon either from the mother tongue perspective or from foreign language acquisition. However, due to the fact that non-native speakers, affected by their mother tongue, may understand or choose for a given word in foreign language a meaning that is not suitable to the context, lexical-semantic ambiguity is also applicable to target text-source text relationships; in other words, to Translation.

Although research on Translation does not have a long historical tradition, many studies have been conducted in the last years which address it, at least in theory, as a process (Baker, 2011). Nevertheless, linguistic elements like ambiguity have been approached in a rather broad way. Lexical-semantic ambiguity specifically, has generally been vaguely associated to Translation, although translated texts are often affected by it. Consequently, the relationship or link between this language skill and lexical-semantic ambiguity will be the core point of this work.

The paper is developed in three main sections: the definition of lexical-semantic ambiguity, based on the literature overview (section 1), the approach to lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation (section 2), and the approach to lexical-semantic ambiguity from the perspective of second-language vocabulary acquisition (section 3).

### *Defining Lexical-Semantic Ambiguity*

Ambiguity is an inherent property of any natural language. Given its frequent occurrence in both texts and discourse, and its influence on communication, language ambiguity has been a topic of interest for philosophers and linguists ever since the times of Aristotle and Quintilian. In specialized literature, authors often categorize language ambiguity in terms of the linguistic element causing it. Some authors base themselves on a linguistic level, thus categorizing ambiguity as grammatical, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic (Zempleni & Renco, 2007). They have given different denominations to ambiguity types, for instance, they present a study of the occurrence of structural or syntactic ambiguity. They exemplify it with the sentence: *I saw the man with the telescope*. The propositional phrase *with*

*the telescope* may either modify the noun phrase *the man* or the verbal phrase *saw the man*. The possessor of the telescope is the man in the former and the speaker in the latter. Likewise, double prepositional-phrase attachment to a noun phrase creates structural ambiguities as well. A closer look at the example offered leads to the conclusion that the categories syntactic ambiguity and referential ambiguity may coincide in some cases, since it is the syntactic position of the referent which causes the phrase to be ambiguous.

In the sentence: *Prostitutes appeal to Pope*, there is not any other possible position for the verb *appeal*; however, the meaning of it, and the fact that it is placed between two nouns makes the understanding of the sentence quite difficult. This is a case of semantic ambiguity, which is approached by some authors as a combination of lexical and syntactic ambiguity, which is why these categories often overlap in the literature (Zempleni & Renco, 2007).

The sentence *"I'm on my way"* is a clear example of pragmatic ambiguity. It does not only have to do with the meaning of the words in the sentence, or of the sentence in general, but with the intention of the speaker/writer of the phrase. The intention might have been either announcing that he/she was going somewhere, or calming the impatience of someone who is waiting.

Finally, the sentence *"They are heading for the bank"* is also regarded as ambiguity triggering. Is *bank* referring to the monetary institution or the bank of a river? Since the word *bank* has these two meanings, and both suit the context, it is difficult to determine which bank the speaker means. This is lexical-semantic ambiguity Zempleni, & Renco (2007), which is the object of study of the present research.

Although many authors consider lexical-semantic ambiguity as an independent category within ambiguity as a whole, the literature generally divides lexical ambiguity into two types: lexical and semantic ambiguity. Semantic ambiguity refers to differences in meaning. This explains why in some studies the category appears as lexical-semantic ambiguity. To the purpose of the present study, lexical-semantic ambiguity will be assumed, defined as a word's capacity to carry two or more obviously different meanings.

Authors like Geeraerts (2013); Ramirez (2015), amongst others, have focused on the categorization of lexical-semantic ambiguity into two main types: homonymy and polysemy, stating the dichotomy between the two and explaining how language users recognize them. Homonymy is defined in terms of different meanings, not related semantically, whereas polysemy is defined in terms of

different senses, which are semantically related, Ramirez (2015). However, whether polysemy or homonymy, lexical ambiguity indicates vagueness, lack of clarity, and indefiniteness. Therefore, the classification into polysemy and homonymy is not very relevant in regards to translation.

Lexical-semantic ambiguity is context-dependent: the same linguistic item (be it a word, phrase, or sentence) may be ambiguous in one context and unambiguous in another context. For a word, lexical-semantic ambiguity typically refers to an unclear choice between different definitions as may be found in a dictionary. In the sentences: *"Her slides were perfect"* and *"She made a good use of the slides while presenting"*, the word *slides* is ambiguous in the first one. The context in the first sentence does not help to determine whether slides refers to power point slides or moves in ice skating.

When processing lexical-semantic ambiguity, it is useful to distinguish three main stages: (1) accessing the information about the ambiguous word; (2) decoding the input and matching it with a lexically ambiguous word; and (3) integrating the information with the preceding context (Geeraerts, 2013). Although meant for the processing of L1 lexical-semantic ambiguity, these stages are the cognitive basis to study and understand the processing of lexical-semantic also by foreign- language users and by translators (Escalona, 2017).

The following section presents lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation and from the SLA perspective as two of the most common approaches to this phenomenon.

#### *Lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation*

Although lexical-semantic ambiguity in its concept (Daham & Garret, 2007) shows features that differentiate it from other kinds of ambiguity, i.e., semantic ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity (see section 2), in translation studies the term ambiguity is used to refer to any phenomenon that causes misinterpretations in a translated text.

The term translation ambiguity was introduced by Degani, Prior, Eddington, Arêas da Luz Fontes & Tokowicz (2002), who posit that it occurs when more than one translation is possible for a given word. According to these authors, such translation ambiguity can be a result of ambiguity within the source language, or of semantic features of the target language.

When it comes to target texts, (regardless of the language of the source text), the focal point does not exactly lie in ambiguity but rather in the lexical unit that causes such ambiguity.

Escalona (2017), offers an analysis of the linguistic behavior of lexical-semantic ambiguity in academic texts. They provide a number of examples taken from project reports and research reports, in which ambiguity has greatly affected the relationship between sense and meaning in the three stages of the translation process: interpretation or comprehension, decoding and re-expressing (Venuti, 1998). Based on the typology of translation errors provided by Kusmaul (1989); they identify the types of errors caused by ambiguous words in the texts selected. Although this linguistic analysis of lexical-semantic ambiguity is a significant departing point for raising the awareness on how it affects written production, insight as to what caused the ambiguity is still insufficient.

Fernández (2005); and Espí (2011), have referred to the need of deepening into the study of meaning and sense in translation from the didactic point of view. They identify lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation as a rupture in the relation sense-meaning, and offer a didactic contribution (didactic model) to treat it. Nevertheless, the causes that lead to lexical-semantic ambiguity as a sense-meaning contradiction are not clarified sufficiently.

Fernández (2005); Espí (2011); and Escalona (2017), based their analysis on the translated text; in other words, the translation product. Therefore, their work still lacks some insights as to how to treat lexical-semantic ambiguity in the three stages of the translation process stated by Venuti (1998): interpretation and decoding of lexical-semantic ambiguity in the source text, and the re-expression of ambiguous elements in the target text.

Houdková (2012), sees ambiguity as a phenomenon that causes fuzzy messages in the source texts. In the view of these authors, ambiguity prevents the understanding of source texts, and in turns their accurate translation. The relevance of this view is that the authors look first into the source text and its understanding, which is where translators generally encounter lexical-semantic ambiguity. Nevertheless, they disregard the next translation processes (decoding and re-expression); in other words, they do not look into the way lexical-semantic ambiguity is treated, once it has been detected in the source text.

Other authors have devoted their analysis to the occurrence of lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation, based on specific lexical units, like idioms, proverbs, puns in advertisements, and false friends Kroschewski (2000); Tang (2013); Escalona (2017); amongst others. Since false friends, as shown in the studies of cross-language lexical-semantic ambiguity are the most recurrent triggers of lexical-semantic Kroschewski, (2000); and Tang (they will

be analyzed and taken as a sample case in the present research.

Kroschewski (2000); and Tang (2013), Escalona, amongst many others have approached lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation caused by false friends in a descriptive way. In other words, they have provided a number of examples of how they affect a translated text, and offered lists of false friends with their translation, so as to lessen the difficulty. However, their studies are limited as to the process-approach to translation; in other words, they only refer to the last stage of the translation process: re-expression (Baker, 2011).

A closer look at the stages of the translation process proposed by Venuti (1998), shows a clear link with the cognitive stages for the processing of lexical-semantic ambiguity stated by Geeraerts (2013), since, when identifying and processing lexically ambiguous senses, studies establish that (1) there is a first moment in which subjects notice the ambiguity, and meanings are represented as sets of necessary conditions that fully capture the conceptual content conveyed by words; (2) there are as many particular meanings for a word as there are differences in contextual conditions; which is why subjects need to use resources (cognitive, lexicological, terminological, etc.) to decode the word; and (3) meanings is conferred to the ambiguous word based on both the use of resources and the context in which it occurs.

As translation is a bilingual activity, it is necessary to explore the strand of second-language vocabulary acquisition in the study of lexical-semantic ambiguity. The following section presents an overview of how lexical-semantic ambiguity has been approached from a SLA perspective. The focus will be on the influence of false friends.

#### *The SLA perspective: vocabulary acquisition*

Since words are one of the major constructs with which learners reproduce and produce a foreign language, lexical-semantic is one of the learning problems to be tackled. The meaning of a word in a foreign language does not often make sense to learners in a given linguistic context, or learners may produce a text/discourse in the Second Language (SL), in which some words could be interpreted in more than one way. This is called between-language or cross-language ambiguity (Pavlenko, 2009).

Cross-language lexical-semantic ambiguity is found mostly in studies on vocabulary acquisition. They posit that the way learners acquire foreign words may both ease and affect later reception, interpretation and production in the SL. Studies conducted on cross-language lexical-semantic have sought to answer the following questions:

How are L1 and L2 words represented in the mind? What are the variables that condition the selection of the appropriate meaning of a word for a given context? What is the role of context in this process?

Nehm & Rector (2012), summarize current cognitive psychological knowledge concerning vocabulary acquisition and discusses implications for the development of effective computer assisted vocabulary acquisition methods, also useful for the reduction of ambiguity in SL production. He demonstrates that acquisition of word meanings requires explicit (conscious) learning processes. Based on the definition of lexical ambiguity in L1, they conducts a study on lexical-semantic ambiguity between languages; that is, in bilingual contexts (German-English). It was found that German learners transferred the German vocabulary and linguistic notions when processing English ambiguities.

Houdková (2012), analyzes the role of lexical-semantic ambiguity in advertisements written in German, in view of whether these cases are the result of polysemy or of vagueness. She found that polysemy, and the different ambiguity types (lexical, syntactic, homonymy) are enclosed within vagueness in foreign-language production. Noor (2016), provides examples of lexical-semantic ambiguity with quantifiers in English. By means of data analysis of Dutch SL learners, she demonstrates that ESL learners are often influenced by their native language, and so does happen with quantifier ambiguity. These studies are relevant to demonstrate that lexical-semantic ambiguity can also be present in between-language cases. Nevertheless, they do not clarify the aspects that condition the selection of appropriate meanings for a foreign word.

Likewise, many studies have been conducted on the role of lexical-semantic ambiguity in second language vocabulary acquisition within reading comprehension. The most recent ones are those of Kambe, Rayner & Duffy (2001); and Kaplan, Fisher & Rogness (2010).

The study conducted by Kambe, et al. (2001), examine the effects of pictorial (videos, images) and verbal (Spanish definitions, English translations) glosses/annotations on vocabulary learning and comprehension of an authentic literary text. The experimental groups performed significantly better on the vocabulary tests, and their choices showed less degree of ambiguity, which conveys the idea that visual aids are effective in vocabulary acquisition. Kaplan, et al. (2010), focus on vocabulary knowledge and experience in L1. Their study was undertaken to explore the role of vocabulary-acquisition experience in reading comprehension. Results suggest that students' vocabulary knowledge at the 2,000-word and the 3,000-word

levels correlated with their reading comprehension strategies acquired in the L1. They also examine L2 reading comprehension in relation to vocabulary knowledge, ambiguous vocabulary and strategic reading behavior. She concludes that learners' limited lexical coverage might go back to the linguistic difficulty of the text, and overrule the influence of other text- and learner- based determiners of reading comprehension. Like Kambe, et al. (2001), they investigate the relationships between L2 vocabulary, prior knowledge, and reading comprehension. She found that reading comprehension enhances the cognitive process of accessing (Geeraerts, 2013) in vocabulary acquisition.

These 5 studies investigated vocabulary size or depth as a direct causal variable of reading comprehension, which proves that context is an important aid in the acquisition of foreign vocabulary. The influence of the mother tongue can play a role in the way learners perceive the meaning of new words, though, which has not been dealt with in depth in the studies mentioned. This is believed to be the case with false friends. Their graphic and phonetic resemblances make learners transfer the meaning resemblances automatically, which is a hazard in vocabulary acquisition.

The analysis of the approaches to lexical-semantic ambiguity is summarized in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Approaches to lexical ambiguity: Strengths and gaps.

Approach	Outcomes	Gaps
Second Language Acquisition	Strategies of L2 learners for ambiguity recognition and vocabulary acquisition Identification of lexical units that trigger ambiguity in L2	Insufficiently approached in translation
Translation	View of ambiguity as text- affecting Reference to the relation between sense and meaning	Categorization of lexical-semantic ambiguity (several types) The causes of lexical-semantic ambiguity specifically are not revealed Analysis of ambiguity based on translation stages: identifying, decoding and re-expressing Little cognitive approach: how/ why translators access the ambiguity/decode the sense of the word/integrate it during the three stages of the translation process: interpretation or comprehension, decoding and re-expression.

The primary need of further research lies then on integrating the three cognitive steps identified by Geeraerts (2013), for the processing of LA: accessing, decoding, and the three stages of the translation process: interpretation, decoding, and re-expression (Venuti, 1998), in the analysis of lexical ambiguity in Translation. This will in turn contribute to enhance translation training.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present paper has presented a literature overview of the approach to lexical-semantic ambiguity both in Translation and in SLA. This overview has revealed three main aspects:

In research about lexical-semantic ambiguity in translation, the missing link is its approach through cognition in second-language learning (processes that occur in the mind of the learners and translators in the recognition of lexical ambiguity in the source text, and in its resolution in the target text and view of lexical units that can cause interlingua lexical-semantic ambiguity (L1 to L2).

This linking approach can be relevant to explain causes and consequences of translation errors derived from lexical ambiguity, and to design pathways for the treatment of such errors.

Future research pathways can therefore use, in the first place, the means and this (cognition in language learning) to explain lexical-semantic ambiguity, based on the three major steps of the Translation process: identifying, decoding and re-expressing.

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