



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### USING CONTEXT IN TRANSLATING POLYSEMY

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#### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the obstacles that face students in translating English polysemic words into Arabic. To achieve this objective, the descriptive quantitative method was followed. A translation test consisting of 10 sentences included 5 polysemic words, each one used in two different contexts was administered to a sample of 23 participants who were randomly selected from the third level of the department of English, Faculty of Education- Saber, University of Aden. The findings revealed that some of the participants succeeded in using the context in translating these words while the others failed in finding the appropriate meanings and faced difficulties in translating these words. The difficulties may lie in the fact that student lack basic knowledge and understanding of the multiplicity of words. Not to mention that they did not use the given context. This might be due to the students' unfamiliarity of the nature of the polysemic words and they used the core meanings of the lexemes. The findings also revealed that the more reading and understanding the context, the more accurate translations are produced by the student. The findings emphasized to a great extent the importance of studying polysemous words, having into consideration the other meanings of the polysemic as it is not enough to use the common meanings of such words.

**Keywords:** Polysemous Words, Context, Translation.

#### 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).

Translation problems in some cases may arise at the word level, especially 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.

## 2. Research Questions

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?

## 3. Research Objectives

1. This study tries to discover the solutions for the problem of translating polysemous words.
2. This study also aims to help students deal with the best way of translating polysemous words from English into Arabic.

## 4. Literature Review

### 4.1. 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.

### 4.2. 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 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). (يُنمي)

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.

#### 4.3. 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.

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 (حطّم / 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. (Ghazala, 2008, p.99)

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 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 (صلب) 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:
  - a. You cannot break with your family. The meaning of the word 'break' in this sentence is 'يخاصم', as: (لا يمكنك أن تخاصم عائلتك).
  - b. The thief broke away from the police. The meaning of the word 'broke' in this sentences is 'فَزَّ', as: (فَزَّ 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].

#### 4.4. 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.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Population and Sample

The sample of this study consisted of 23 students selected randomly from the third undergraduate students who study at the Department of English, Faculty of Education-Saber, University of Aden. They were asked to translate ten English sentences into Arabic. Those sentences contain English polysemous words in different contexts in order to know the problems that the students face in translating English polysemous words into Arabic.

## 5.2. The Research Instruments

This study aims to investigate the role of context in translating polysemous words from English into Arabic. To achieve this objective, 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 BA 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**.

The test was handed to a jury of four experts to ascertain its content validity. The standard translation of the sentences into English was also validated by the juries. Data were collected and the scripts were given to three raters for evaluation. The total score of the test was 10 marks based on a rating scale prepared by the researchers which was divided into three categories: one 'full mark' was given for a 'correct' answer; 'half a mark' was given for an 'acceptable' answer and 'zero mark' was given for a 'wrong' answer. Table (1) includes the rating scale and scores of the test.

## 6. Discussion

Five polysemous words that most of the students know and use have been carefully chosen from different sources. Each word has been used in two sentences with two different contexts of the study. The subjects have been asked to translate the 10 sentences from English into Arabic. The participants have not been informed that the words are polysemous to deal with them just as ambiguous words. Finally, the students have been strictly asked not to use dictionaries. Each word is analyzed in both sentences; the following table show the results of analysis.

Polysemous Word	Sentence No.	Accurate Answer 1 Mark		Inaccurate Answer Zero	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Break	1	15	65.22	8	34.78
Break	2	16	69.57	7	30.43
Made	3	7	30.43	16	69.57
Make	4	15	65.22	8	34.78
Park	5	23	100	0	0
Park	6	0	0	23	100
Raw	7	10	43.48	13	56.52
Raw	8	4	17.39	19	82.61
Mouth	9	13	56.52	10	43.48
Mouth	10	23	100	0	0

Table (1): The results of the Test

A vast number of English words are polysemous, the multiplicity of meaning of words, which have several meanings. Students are required to bear this in mind while translating a word which seems strange if translated into its common meaning. For example, all of the subjects of this study failed to handle the meaning of the polysemic lexeme "**park**" of sentence no 6. They used the common meaning 'حديقة/ منتزه' and they did not try to connect the context with the meaning of this word. In the following lines, the translation of the participants will be discussed.

### Break

- a. A fierce war may break out between the two countries.
- b. If you break the rules, you will be punished.

The above two sentences present the polysemic word break into two senses and different contexts. It is important to note that 'break' in the first sense refers to something that may happen, the meaning can be guessed from the clue word 'war' and the second sense refers to disobey the rule or law and this meaning is clear from the clue word 'rules'.

As it is obvious from Table 1, the first polysemous word 'break' in sentence 1 reveals that 65.22% of the students successfully rendered the correct equivalent meaning of this word, they translated it into "تتدلع", this means that they understood the meaning of the word 'break' in this context and have translated it accurately. While 34.78% of participants failed in rendering this word into its correct equivalent meaning. These mistakes lie in the fact that "break" has a known core meaning and most of the participants use it in translating this word. That is, some of them used the core meaning "كسر" which is out of this context and the other used the two Arabic words 'تحدث' and 'تقع' which are equivalent to the English word 'happen'. Nonetheless in the second sentence, the meaning of 'break' refers to a different meaning of its core meaning. 69.57% of the participants are successfully rendering this word into its appropriate meaning which is 'خالف، خرق' while 30.43% failed in rendering this word into its appropriate meaning. They may know only the common meaning of the polysemic lexeme and usually use it in their translation into Arabic without giving attention to any of its other possible meanings in different contexts.

### Make/ Made

1. Can you imagine? He made his will just a day before he died.
2. Cristiano Ronaldo makes thirteen million Euros a year.

The first sentence is one of the problematic sentences because it contains two polysemous words: 'make' and 'will'. The concern here is the verb **make**, but it is related to 'will'. In this context, it refers to write something. Alternatively, "reach, achieve, or realize" are another meanings of this word. These two meanings are realised if 'will' respectively means: "legal document saying what is to happen to somebody's property and money after they die". (Oxford Dictionary, 2008, p.1747), or "what somebody wants to do, 'a wish'". (Oxford Dictionary, 2008, p. 1746).

As can be seen clearly from table (1), only 30.43% of the participants succeed in rendering the polysemic lexeme 'made' in sentence (3) accurately. This indicates that they knew the meaning of this word from the context, so they translated it into 'كتب'. However 69.57% of the participants used another meaning which is 'يعمل'. In fact, the translator should not stick to the core meaning of the word without taking into account the type of the text or even the context.

'Make' in the second sentence is used with money, i.e. **make money**. Therefore, it refers to "earn/ gain". This is one of the common senses of 'make'. The sum of money written after this verb is to illustrate its meaning.

The results in table (1) showed that 65.22% of the participants have understood the intended meaning. They successfully translating this polysemic lexeme accurately and some of them used different Arabic words which are considered synonyms. They translated 'make' as (يربح، يكسب، يتقاضى، يجني، دخل). Apparently, 34.78% of the participants failed in rendering the meaning accurately, they translated it into 'يصنع'. Such rendering is obviously unrelated to such context and appears to be irrational.

### Park

- a. They decided to take a walk around the park.
- b. The athletes were indescribably hyperactive that day at the park.

In the two sentences above, 'park' has two different meanings. The first is the general and public area for recreation, and the second is a stadium or enclosed area used for sports [16]. In the first sentence, the word "walk" was the clue to meaning of this polysemic word, as one takes a walk for recreation or leisure. In the second sentence, the clue was the word "athletes" to denote that it is peculiar to them.

The polysemic word "park" in sentence no.1 has been translated by all the participants into Arabic as 'حديقة/منتزه'. This means, all the students were able to understand the meaning of this word because it comes in its common meaning, so they did not find difficulties to find the meaning of this word.

In the second sentence, all the students failed to render the polysemic word 'park' accurately, although the clue was the word "athletes" to denote to its meaning. In this case, the students did not use the given context to translate this word into 'ملعب' and used the common meaning, which is 'حديقة، منتزه'.

### Raw

- a. Sushi can be eaten raw in salads or cooked.
- b. There were a number of errors in the raw data.

The word "Raw" appears in interestingly two different levels of semantic signification. The first one is simply in reference to something that is not cooked, and the second denotes information that is not analyzed, evaluated, or processed. However, the clues are quite easy to guess, the first one included "sushi" which is a name of a Japanese dish, and the latter included the word "data" being a form of information.

Based on the previous results, 43.48% of the participants were able to produce the correct translation for the first sense 'نيء', and the other failed to render accurately and used the common meaning 'صف'. On the other hand, only 17.39 % of the participants succeeded in rendering the accurate meaning 'بيانات أولية' of the polysemic word 'raw data'. This indicates that they used the context and the clue words that were given in this context. While 82.61% of the participants did not make it when they referred to it as 'بيانات أصلية، صف البيانات'.

### Mouth

- a. The honey had a good mouth.
- b. He told him that he had a pimple in his mouth.

The last case of lexical ambiguity was the word "Mouth". This word in the first sense refers to the quality of honey as judged by its flavor in the mouth, while the other sense, which is more common, refers to the opening of the lower part of the face, surrounded by the lips (Oxford, 2009). The clue to the first sense was the word honey, and the clue to the second one was the hard-inflamed spot "pimple", which can only appear on a physical surface, in this case, the mouth.

The participants faced some troubles while trying translating this word in the first sentence. As 56.52% of the students translated it correctly into 'طعم، مذاق', while 43.48% of them did not able to translate it correctly. The second sense was easy to be translated, accordingly, all the participants were able to translate it correctly into 'فم'.

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

## 7. Conclusion

The present study revealed that most of the students are unable to translate polysemous word from English into Arabic. Besides, one can conclude that the variety in choosing the meaning of polysemous words by students is a reflection of the variance in students' knowledge, as well as the degree of their familiarity with these polysemous words and their other meanings. Moreover, it seemed that the students had have a difficulty

in determining the suitable equivalent in Arabic, which was vivid as they failed in using the correct or acceptable equivalent when translating some polysemous words in the two different contexts. This may be attributed to several factors. For instance, the students who are learner of English as a foreign language are not exposed to the culture of the target language, and they are unfamiliar with the other meanings of those words. Not to mention the gap that exist between the two cultures.

The results obtained from this study have answered the first research question, i.e., 'What are the obstacles of translating polysemous words from English language into Arabic encountered by BA students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education-Saber, University of Aden?' Hence, some obstacles when translating polysemous words from English into Arabic had been examined and identified, which are due to the absence of knowledge among the students, vocabulary lack; that is the students use only the core and the common meanings of words. They do not try to find other meanings when the common meanings are strange. They do not take the context into consideration. The present study has also answered the second research question, i.e., 'How can the students deal with translating polysemous words from English into Arabic?' Concerning this point, it is worth emphasizing that most English words are polysemy and have common meanings that known by most of the students, and second meanings, which are hidden in the linguistic contexts. In addition, the difficulty of the translation process that involves polysemic words cannot be avoided because the text and the context are embedded a connotative meaning. Based on the findings of this study, it is strongly recommended that students should give attention to the polysemic words during translation as well as, the teacher of translation should focus on this type of words and help their students to translate such words. Thus, a translator may be able to grasp the real meanings of the words, in that they may only understand some linguistic elements of certain words. Hence, in order to meet the objectives of the present study; the researcher has highlighted several challenges and obstacles encountered by these students when translating polysemous words from English into Arabic. Finally, this study found that polysemic words can make the translation process difficult when the two senses are very closely related. As a result, it was clarified that the proper use of the linguistics context helps the students decide the accurate meaning relying on the clues that are provided in surrounding words. The findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. Some of the students did not give attention to the context in their attempting to translate the polysemic words from English into Arabic since polysemous words are context dependent.
2. Some of the students resorted to the "central or core" meanings of the polysemous words regardless of the other associated meanings or "meaning variants".
3. Most of the students treated the polysemous words as monosemic ones, consequently, they committed serious mistakes in their translations.
4. Although collocational relations are of a great assistance in guessing the meanings of polysemous words, most of the subjects did not depend on them in their renderings.

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## مقالة بحثية

### استخدام السياق في ترجمة الاشتراك اللفظي

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## الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلاب في ترجمة الاشتراك اللفظي من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية، ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم اتباع الطريقة الكمية الوصفية حيث خضع المشاركون لاختبار ترجمة تكون من 10 جمل محتوية على 5 كلمات عديدة المعاني، وقد وضعت كل كلمة في سياقين مختلفين لعينة عشوائية مكونة من 23 طالباً وطالبة من طلاب المستوى الثالث قسم اللغة الانجليزية، كلية التربية صبر، جامعة عدن. وقد كشفت النتائج أن بعض المشاركين نجحوا في استخدام السياق في ترجمة هذه الكلمات بينما فشل الآخرون في ايجاد المعاني المناسبة لهذه الكلمات. إن هذه الصعوبات في حقيقة الأمر بسبب افتقار الطلاب إلى المعرفة الأساسية بالاشتراك اللفظي (تعدد المعاني). ويتضح ذلك من خلال ترجمتهم للكلمات المعطاة فإنهم لم يستخدموا السياق المحدد بل استخدموا المعاني الأساسية للمفردة دون النظر إلى معانيها الأخرى. إضافة إلى ذلك فقد كشفت النتائج أيضاً أنه كلما استطاع الطالب فهم السياق، استطاع أن يخرج بترجمات أكثر دقة. إلى ذلك، أكدت النتائج إلى أهمية دراسة الاشتراك اللفظي، وفهم المعاني الأخرى للمفردات وعدم الاكتفاء بالمعاني الشائعة لهذه الكلمات.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الاشتراك اللفظي، السياق، الترجمة.