



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATING POLYSEMIOUS LEXICAL ITEMS AND THE STRATEGIES ADOPTED: A CASE STUDY OF EFL LEARNERS AT SABER FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND EDUCATION – DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH - UNIVERSITY OF LAHIJ

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the knowledge of the undergraduate students in translating three Arabic polysemous lexical items into English in different contexts. The research aimed to assess the student's proficiency in giving the meaning of polysemous words and measure their ability to select appropriate equivalents as well as the strategies adopted. The study involved thirty students from the Department of English, Saber Faculty of Science and Education. The participants carried out a translation test that contextualized three Arabic lexical polysemous lexical items (ضرب - حصر - تخفيف) within fifteen sentences. Statistical analysis of the data revealed a lack of knowledge among undergraduate students as they faced difficulties in constructing proper sentence patterns and a lack of competence in finding the exact English equivalents, resulting in challenges in selecting words that formed coherent English sentences and violating the sentence structure. Consequently, their production of correct English sentences was compromised. Furthermore, the study identified that the students relied on various language strategies, including L1 transfer, synonymy, avoidance, and paraphrasing, to facilitate their translation process. However, these strategies led to unsatisfactory English translations.

Keywords: Polysemy, Lexical items, Translation, Strategies, Competence.

General Introduction

Translation plays an important role in communication between different communities. Sometimes, finding equivalent words in the target language (TL) to convey a coherent message was not an easy task. Therefore, students encountered difficulties in identifying appropriate target language equivalents for source language terms due to limited vocabulary knowledge. This led to inaccurate or insufficient translation choices. These problems could be attributed to lexical or grammatical aspects (Salem, 2014). One of the issues that required investigation to find suitable solutions was lexical problems.

Baker (2018) provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by translators, including lexical issues. The translation of English words with multiple meanings, whether as homonyms or polysemous terms, posed a significant lexical challenge for translation students. Linguists have shown considerable interest in the theoretical differentiation between homonymy and polysemy in semantic analysis. Homonymy typically has separate dictionary entries, often marked with superscripts 1, 2, and so forth (Fromkin et al., 2003, p. 180). Thornbury (2002, p. 9) explained that polysemy refers to words that have multiple meanings, but these meanings are related to each other. Both polysemy and homonymy can confuse communication, especially during conversations, leading learners to struggle with expressing and understanding precise meanings. The problem of distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy can be resolved by recognizing that the different

senses of the word are historically related, indicating a common origin. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to validate this difficulty by examining students' knowledge in identifying the exact Arabic counterpart.

Statement of the Problem

The act of translating polysemous words is viewed as one of the challenges to the students since they might experience different strategies to have the intended translation. Therefore, translation problems arise at the word level, especially in the translation process from English to Arabic. So, students sometimes find difficulty in translating polysemous lexical items in different texts. Finding out the exact Arabic counterpart may be considered an essential problem that students encounter while translating from Arabic into English. Ghazala (1995, p. 98) regarded polysemy as one of the major distinguishing characteristics of both English and Arabic, and it may be English more than Arabic. Thornbury (2002) also stated that polysemy creates a challenge to lexicographers and confusion for learners because there is ambiguity about which is the basic meaning and which are the shades of meanings. Such difficulty poses a remarkable problem, which means, students are not able to produce correct Arabic sentence patterns. Therefore, this study is an attempt to validate this phenomenon by investigating the student's knowledge and the strategies used in their translation.

Significance of the Study

The reason behind investigating this topic is that students face difficulty when translating polysemous lexical items in different texts properly. So, this topic is of great value because it points out variations between two different languages and cultures. Undergraduate students at Saber Faculty of Science and Education might have a relatively large stock of target language vocabulary yet they still have some problems because they are not enough competent. Thus, this study is an attempt to avail them of the opportunity to come across such translation and know how to deal with this difficulty. In this case, they will gain competence in using the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) which will be of some help in language acquisition.

Research Objectives

1. To measure the students' proficiency while translating polysemous lexical items in different texts properly.
2. To examine the strategies practiced in the translation to come up with the proper sentence patterns.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the correct and incorrect polysemous lexical items identified in the written work of undergraduate students when translating different Arabic polysemous lexical items into English?
2. What are the strategies used to translate these polysemous lexical items?

Equivalence and Translation

The concept of equivalence is central to translation theory, as stated by Baker (2005, p. 77). Equivalence refers to the relationship between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) that allows the (TT) to be considered a translation of the (ST). It is believed that equivalence can exist at the word, sentence, or text level. However, achieving equivalence between Arabic and English, for example, is often challenging. Jakobson (1959, p. 233) argued that full equivalence in translation is usually not possible, even when apparent synonymy exists. He emphasized the impossibility of achieving exact translation. Baker (2018) stated that translation problems can occur at the word level when there is no equivalent word in the target language (TL) that carries the same meaning as the source language (SL) word. Baker discusses different types of word meanings, such as prepositional, expressive, presupposed, and evoked meanings. At a higher level, translators face challenges

in combining words to form meaningful language stretches. Differences in lexical patterns like collocations and idioms pose difficulties. Grammatical equivalence deals with variations in grammatical categories between the (SL) and (TL) which may require adding or omitting information in the target translation (TT). Textual equivalence focuses on information and cohesion in the (SL) and (TL) texts. Understanding the structure of the source text (ST) helps the translator create a cohesive and coherent (TT) for the target cultural audience. Pragmatic equivalence involves dealing with implicatures and strategies of avoidance in translation. The translator must decode implied meanings to convey the message of the (ST). Their role is to recreate the author's intention in another culture, ensuring clear comprehension for the target culture reader (pp`10 -235).

Translation Problems

Translation problems often present considerable challenges for students. They commonly encounter difficulties in areas such as lexicon (vocabulary), grammar, style, and phonology (Ghazala, 2008, p. 28). One significant challenge is finding equivalent words or expressions that accurately convey the intended meaning from the source language to the target language can be a complex task. The researcher realized that there is no doubt that students of course will face difficulties when translating polysemous words since it has multiple meaning and this can be challenging because the intended meaning of a word in one language may not have an exact equivalent in another language and when encountering polysemous words, students need to employ strategies to ensure the accurate translation.

Lexical Problems

When students do not understand a word or an expression or do not know it at all, they will encounter problems in finding the appropriate equivalent, (p. 98). Ghazala (2008) also said that students may confront different lexical problems while translating. (p. 19). These lexical problems include:

- a) Literal translation and its appropriate moment of use.
- b) Synonymy.
- c) Polysemy and monosemy .
- d) Collocations and idioms .

Grammatical Problems

The grammatical differences between languages, such as English and Arabic, can pose significant challenges for translators. Differences in word order, tenses, and verb structures can make it difficult to achieve a direct correspondence between the source and target languages (p. 28). For example, English tenses may not have exact equivalents in Arabic grammar, leading to difficulties in conveying the same meaning. The literal translation of certain verbs, like "to be," may result in poor translation (p. 18).

Stylistic Problems

Style plays a crucial role in conveying meaning and must be considered during translation (p. 222). Translators may encounter various stylistic problems, including

- a) Formality: Each language has its own degrees of formality, and translators may struggle to accurately convey the appropriate level of formality in the target language.
- b) Ambiguity: Ambiguity in the source text can pose challenges in determining the intended meaning, potentially leading to a distortion of the original message in the translation (p. 21).

The problems may strongly affect the meaning. The degree of formality or informality is a problem that concerns words and grammar. (Joos, 1962 as cited in Ghazala, 2008, p. 225) suggested that a formality scale

of the English language consists of five degrees as follows: frozen formal, formal, informal, and vulgar or slang.

Definitions of Polysemy

In the linguistic literature, polysemy is defined similarly by the scholars. From the huge number of polysemy definitions, a few of them are mentioned in this paper. Polysemy (or polysemia) is a compound noun for basic features. The name comes from the Greek poly (many) and semy (to do with meaning as in semantics). According to Kovács (2011), the term polysemy was first introduced by the French semanticist Michel Bréal in his *Essai de Sémantique* in 1897. Polysemy is also called radiation or multiplication. This happens when a word acquires a wider range of meanings (Quiroga–Clare, 2003). (Riemer, 2010) defined polysemy as "the possession by a single phonological form of several conceptually related meanings" (p. 161). The Dictionary of Linguistics (2008, p. 373) also defined polysemy as "A term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item that has a range of different meanings, e.g., plain = clear, unadorned, obvious". Polysemy (or imperfect ambiguity) means that "the meaning of one lexeme is metaphorically extended based on some similarity, leg (of a man) vs. leg (of a table." (Varga, 2017, p. 49). Dickins, Hervey, and Higgins (2017) provided a similar definition for polysemy "a situation in which a lexical item has a range of different and distinct meanings, or senses (e.g., plain = (i) 'clear', (ii) 'unadorned', (iii) 'tract of the flat country'." (p. 295). Almann (2016) defined polysemy as "a lexeme that has two or more related meanings." (p. 107). Generally, polysemy is distinguished from simple homonyms (where words sound alike but have different meanings) by etymology. Polysemous words almost always share the same origin or root. For example, run (person does, water does, color does) another example is the word get it can mean reach, become, and understand .

Types of Polysemy

Cruse (2000, pp. 111-113) categorizes polysemy into two types: linear and non-linear. Linear polysemy refers to the specialization-generalization relationship between senses and is divided into four types: autohyponymy, automeronymy, autosuperordination, and autoholonymy. In contrast, metaphorical and metonymous polysemy fall under the non-linear category. To gain a deeper understanding, let's explore each of these terms in detail:

Autohyponymy: This occurs when a word has a general sense that encompasses a more specific sense. For example, "fruit" is a general term that includes specific types like "apple" and "banana".

Automeronymy: In this type of linear polysemy, a word has a sense that represents a part or component of a larger entity. For instance, "arm" can refer to the limb itself or specifically to the limb without mentioning the hand.

Autosuperordination: involves a word that has a sense representing a higher-level category or a broader concept. For example, "vehicle" is a superordinate term that includes specific types like "car" and "bus".

Autoholonymy: This type of linear polysemy occurs when a word represents a whole that includes its parts. An example is the word "tree," which can refer to the entire plant as well as its individual branches, leaves, and roots.

Non-linear polysemy: includes metaphorical and metonymous senses, which involve more creative and unpredictable shifts in meaning. Metaphorical polysemy involves the use of words in a figurative sense, where the meaning is extended beyond its literal interpretation. Metonymic polysemy, on the other hand, involves the association of a word with something closely related to it or a part representing the whole.

The Importance of Context in Understanding Meaning

Newmark (1988, p. 9) highlighted the importance of context in translation, stating that it takes precedence over rules, theories, and primary meanings. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, pp. 32-35) defined context as co-text, context of situation, and context of culture. The context of the situation, analyzed through the register's components, plays a significant role in translation. Hu (2010) emphasized the identification of the register in the source language and the re-establishment of the corresponding context in the target language.

Difficulties Facing ESL/ EFL Learners in translating polysemous words

Polysemes and homonyms are common in English, with identical spelling and pronunciation but distinct meanings. ESL and EFL learners often assume familiarity but lack a comprehensive understanding of these words. According to Finegan (2008, p.187), "a word is polysemous (or polysemic) when it has two or more related meanings". For instance, in the sentence "They do not have any family," the word "family" denotes "children." Nonetheless, many ESL/EFL learners struggle to discern its intended meaning in context. This challenge extends even to non-native English teachers, let alone ESL/EFL learners. Armstrong (2005) points out that since the meanings of polysemous words are determined by the linguistic contexts in which they occur, this makes them 'trouble-makers' more than other words (p.90).

EFL learners encounter challenges with polysemous words, especially in ambiguous contexts. They often rely on dictionaries, but these references may not cover all possible meanings or demonstrate usage adequately. This can result in difficulties in determining the appropriate meaning without comprehensive contextual understanding, particularly when learners are unfamiliar with at least one word in the context (Parent, 2009). The researcher considered this one of the most challenging reasons. Furthermore, in reading, learners who are familiar with one meaning of a polysemous word are reluctant to abandon it even when its meaning is different in a particular context; they tend to stick to the meaning they know (Laufer, 1997, p. 153). This can lead to confusion, misunderstanding of a text, or even to the misuse of the polysemous word which, in turn, can lead to miscommunication. This difficulty can be attributed to the fact that in the classroom, students are not alerted to the phenomenon of polysemy; they are taught only the word form and its primary meaning and are tested only on them, whereas the extended meanings are left to chance encounters (Parent, 2009).

Strategies Used by EFL Learners in Dealing with Polysemous Words

When English learners lack sufficient knowledge of a particular lexical item's meaning, they may employ specific strategies to generate appropriate combinations of words. However, this can also lead to the occurrence of particular errors.

Transfer

Language transfer occurs in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Haugen 1950 as cited in Tarone, Cohen, and Dumas, 1976, p. 79) explains that learners engage in loan shift, using native language meanings for existing words in the target language. Farghal and Obiedat (1995, p. 323) note positive transfer when target collocations match the native language and negative transfer when no corresponding patterns exist. Little-Wood (1984, p. 26). Supporting this notion, learners often rely on their mother tongue experience to organize and comprehend the new language, allowing them to avoid starting from scratch.

Avoidance

Avoidance is when language learners try to avoid using unfamiliar or challenging language constructions, which can lead to errors. As learners progress, there should be a decrease in avoidance (Corder, 1967, as cited in Vazquez & Cristina, 2005, p. 71). Farghal and Obiedat (1995, p. 322) note that second-language learners may avoid using target lexical items because they struggle to recall the appropriate words they know passively,

resulting in unintended changes in collocations. Tarone, Cohen, and Dumas (1976, p. 82) explain that this avoidance strategy helps learners bypass target-language rules or forms that are not yet fully established in their competence.

Paraphrasing and Synonymy

The third strategy often used by learners is paraphrasing, or using synonyms. Learners may substitute the target item with a synonymous alternative and use paraphrasing to express the target collocations with which they are not familiar. Farghal and Obiedat (1995, p. 324) found that Arabic EFL learners heavily relied on synonyms, leading to deviant and incorrect collocations. However, as learners acquired more collocations, their use of paraphrases decreased, and paraphrasing served as a means to facilitate communication.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to achieve convincing and solid results. It is important to note that certain qualitative research methods can incorporate numerical data, such as content analysis. For instance, content analysis involves systematically and objectively analyzing textual data using numerical measures like frequencies and percentages (Neuendorf, 2016). This approach offers valuable insights into the prevalence of specific themes or patterns in the data, allowing researchers to identify relationships and connections among different data aspects (Krippendorff, 2013). However, it is crucial to recognize that the use of numerical data in qualitative research is not a defining characteristic. Instead, such data is typically employed to support the analysis and interpretation of non-numerical data, rather than serving as the primary focus of the research. Qualitative research primarily aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, often relying on non-numerical data sources.

Data collection instruments and procedures

This study employed one main tool for collecting the required data for the research topic. A written test was administered to (30) candidates from the third-year – department of English at Saber Faculty of Science and Education - University of Lahij, to know their abilities in translating three different polysemous lexical items in different contexts correctly. Richard et al (2010, p. 591) define a test briefly, as "Any procedures for measuring ability, knowledge, or performance". However, Seliger and Shohamy, (1989, p. 176) define a test in a more elaborative way; "A test is a procedure used to collect data on subjects' ability or knowledge of certain disciplines. In second language acquisition research. Tests are generally used to collect data about the subjects' ability in and knowledge of the second language in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, metalinguistic awareness, and general proficiency". The primary objective of this test was to identify and examine the challenges encountered by students.

By employing this data collection instrument, this study sought to gather comprehensive insights into the specific challenges associated with translating polysemous, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the translation process. The data selected are two Arabic verbs and one verbal noun, each contextualized in five different sentences. The three lexical items are, 'ضرب' /drb/ 'hit', 'حصر' /hsr/ 'enclose', and 'تخفيف' /tkhfyf/ 'diluting', they are chosen from three different dictionaries, Wehr (1960), Baalbaki (1995), and Hafiz (2004), and because they are polysemous, i.e., display multiple senses.

Discussing the Students' Test

Concerning the first item, "ضرب" (/drb/), the students' correct responses accounted for forty-seven (47) instances, representing (31%) of the total. Conversely, there were one hundred three (103) incorrect responses, constituting (69%) of the total. Similarly, the second item, "حصر" (/hsr/), yielded notable percentages in the students' translations. Only nine (9) responses (6%) were correct and good translations for this item. In contrast, one hundred forty-one (141) responses (94%) were incorrect. The third lexical item, "تخفيف" (/tkhfyf/), also

resulted in a high percentage of incorrect translations among the students. One hundred forty-three (143) responses (95%) were uncorrect verb and noun equivalents, while only seven (7) responses (5%) were accurate and correct. For more clarification, the correct and incorrect responses were also explained by the researcher in the following figure.

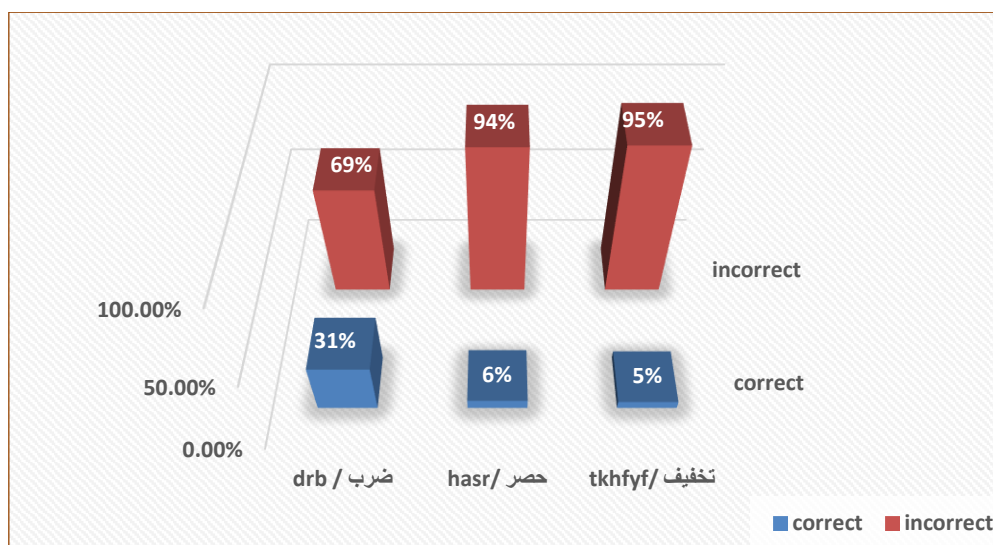


Fig. 1: The students' translation production

Generally, the high frequency of incorrect responses suggests that third-year EFL undergraduate students at the Department of English, Saber Faculty of Science and Education, encounter challenges when translating polysemous words in different contexts. This highlights their incompetence, leading them to employ inappropriate sense correspondents. Despite having a large vocabulary in their second language (L2), learners do not possess the same natural ability as native speakers to effectively combine words.

Discussing Strategies Adapted by the Students in the Test

In the translation test, the students predominantly relied on (L1) transfer as their main strategy. Approximately (165) incorrect responses, accounting for around (43%), occurred because they used their first language (L1) to generate lexical items in the target language (L2). Another strategy observed in the translation test was avoidance, which involved simplifying the vocabulary. About (55) incorrect responses, representing approximately (14%), resulted from the students intentionally avoiding the correct response and opting for an alternative. Blum and Levenston (1978) suggest that avoidance occurs when learners possess passive knowledge of alternative vocabulary options but fail to utilize them effectively, leading to the avoidance of specific distinctions in their speech and writing. Approximately (14) responses, about (37%), utilized synonymy as a strategy in their translations, replacing the target lexical items with synonymous terms. Regarding paraphrasing, only (22) responses, representing approximately (6%), chose to rephrase their answers during the translation test. This strategy was primarily employed due to the student's inability to produce synonyms for the target lexical items.

To provide further clarification, the researcher elaborated on the correct and incorrect responses in the accompanying figure.

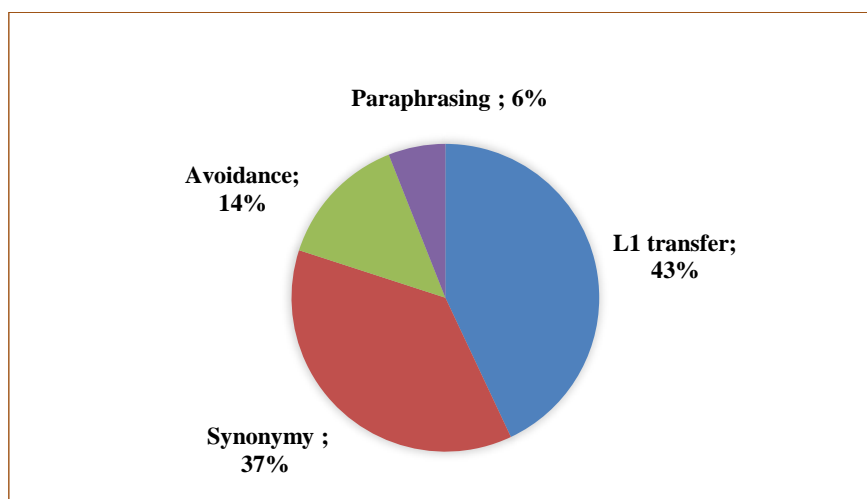


Fig. 2: The strategies employed by students in the translation test

Conclusion

In discussing the study results, it was concluded that the main problem students face is finding the close polysemous lexical equivalent. They were not enough competent in translating these polysemous lexical items into English. As a result, they find difficulty in selecting and finding the exact meaning. Therefore, they violate sentence patterns. As a result, they are not able to produce good English. To facilitate their translation, they used and experienced different strategies such as L1 transfer, avoidance, synonymy, and paraphrasing. Similar studies such as Translation Difficulties of Polysemous Words from English into Arabic: A Case Study of Yemeni EFL University Students by Abdulsafi, A. & Abdulsafi, A, (2017) and The Role of Context in Solving the Problems of Translating Polysemous English Words into Arabic by Salem, A. (2014) provided insights into the specific challenges and factors affecting EFL learners' ability to translate polysemous words accurately. They highlighted the importance of cultural-linguistic and contextual factors in the translation process and offer suggestions to overcome these difficulties.

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مقالة بحثية

صعوبات ترجمة المفردات المعجمية متعددة المعاني والاستراتيجيات المتبعة: متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة
أجنبية في كلية صبر للعلوم والتربية- قسم اللغة الإنجليزية- جامعة لحج أنموذجاً

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المُلخَص

تناولت هذه الدراسة ترجمة ثلاث أفعال متعددة المعاني من العربية إلى الإنجليزية في سياقات مختلفة. وتهدف هذه الدراسة أيضاً إلى التعرف على مستوى طلاب المستوى الثالث في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية صبر للعلوم والتربية في تعيين معاني الكلمات متعددة المعاني وقدرتهم على اختيار مكافئات مناسبة. شملت الدراسة ثلاثين طالباً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية صبر للعلوم والتربية. قام المشاركون بإجراء اختبار في الترجمة يتكون من فعلان واسم متعددي المعاني (ضرب - حصر - تخفيف) تم ادراجها في خمسة عشر جملة. أظهرت النتائج ان الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات في بناء أنماط جمل صحيحة واخفاقات في بيان معاني المفردات في تلك الجمل في سياقاتها المختلفة وبالتالي عدم قدرتهم على إيجاد الالفاظ المكافئة والمناسبة لها. وعلاوة على ذلك، حددت الدراسة أن الطلاب اعتمدوا على استراتيجيات لغوية مختلفة، بما في ذلك نقل اللغة الأولى، والمرادفات، والتحاش، وإعادة الصياغة وذلك لتسهيل عملية الترجمة. ومع ذلك، أدت هذه الاستراتيجيات إلى ترجمات غير مرضية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كلمات متعددة المعاني، كلمات معجمية، ترجمة، استراتيجيات، كفاءة.

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