

SEMANTIC MEANINGS OF WORDS

Always remember:

There is no single permanent equivalent for any given word.

Polysemy

Definition: *The case of a single word having two or more related senses. Thus the noun screen is polysemous, since it is used variously of a fire screen, a cinema screen, a television screen, and so on.*

Words cannot be separated from their context. Words are not separate entities, they are given a particular meaning or twist depending on the context in which they are used.

Variations in meaning of words offer a wide range of variations, which depend on the context. For instance: concrete vs. abstract meaning.

One problem for the translator is that words with particular meanings associated to them will not translate as the exact counterpart in the target language. Words in French and in English do not have semantic ranges which exactly coincide. Variations of meaning of a word in the source language will require the use of totally different counterparts in the target language.

Example: looking up the French equivalent for the word *eye* in a bilingual dictionary

eye:

1. First meaning ⇒ *oeil* as in anatomy or in “the eye of the master” *l’œil du maître*.
2. Second meaning ⇒ *châs* “the eye of a needle” *le châs d’une aiguille*.
3. Third meaning ⇒ *en vue* “to be in the public eye” *être en vue*.

Only one meaning of the word coincides in both languages. The other meanings are extensions of the first, and they don’t correspond to the same word in the other language. These have to be rendered by the equivalent required by the context.

Literal vs. figurative meaning

Literal: *taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory (free from distortion).*

Figurative: *departing from a literal use of words; metaphorical.*

Different meanings associated to words literally and figuratively may correspond in both languages. For example, one can talk about *a hole in sweater* and *a hole in the budget*: *un trou dans un pull* et *un trou dans le budget*. However, these cases are rare.

Compare:

se mordre la langue ~ to bite one's tongue
une mauvaise langue ~ a gossipmonger / scandalmonger
être ivre ~ to be drunk
être ivre de joie ~ to be ecstatic

Language levels

Words are chosen in function of the public they are destined for. One can be writing using slang, very formal language, etc. The translator must be aware of these particularities and translate the original text accordingly. These different types of language levels also introduce differences in meaning.

Technical language may also be used and may introduce such differences. For example, *une carotte* is no longer a vegetable for geologists but a core sample. In standard French, *la peau* may refer to the skin, but in slang *faire la peau à quelqu'un* means to kill someone.

Gender problems

French being a language that assigns genders to all nouns, some specific problems in translation may arise from overlooking the gender of words identical in everything but gender:

le chèvre (goat cheese)	↔	la chèvre (goat)
le critique (the critic)	↔	la critique (criticism)
le livre (book)	↔	la livre (pound)
le manche (handle)	↔	la manche (sleeve)
le mode (mode)	↔	la mode (fashion)
le parti (party)	↔	la partie (part/ game)
le poste (position set)	↔	la poste (post office)
le tour (tour)	↔	la tour (tower)
le voile (veil)	↔	la voile (sail)

Words in context: other examples

Faire:

Il **fait** beau aujourd'hui.
Pour rester en forme, il faut **faire** du sport.
Tu as **fait** quelque chose d'intéressant hier ?
Ma sœur sait **faire** la cuisine.
Il est assez grand, il **fait** un mètre quatre-vingt.
Un kilo de saucisse... Ça **fait** combien ?
Elle ne dormait pas. Elle **faisait** semblant.
Tu devrais te **faire** couper les cheveux.

Lever:

Levez la main lorsque vous aurez la réponse.
Il est tard, **lève**-toi !
Levez-vous lorsque je vous le dirai.
La séance est **levée**.
Un corps d'armée de 1 000 hommes a été **levé**.

Mettre:

Mets la table !
On ignore qui a **mis** le feu au bâtiment.
Son patron vient de le **mettre** au courant de la situation.
Il a **mis** une chemise rouge.

Chez :

Il l'a invité à passer le week-end **chez** lui.
On retrouve souvent les mêmes personnages **chez** Balzac.
On peut difficilement estimer ce qui se passe **chez** un animal qui a peur.

Coup :

Passe-moi un **coup** de fil demain !
Il donna un **coup** de pied dans la poubelle.
Elle fut réveillée par de grands **coups** à la porte.
Tu a besoin d'un **coup** de main pour faire la vaisselle ?