

Polysemy in Finite Verbs according to their Linguistic Structure and its Consequent Impact on Spanish<>English Translation

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Abstract

This paper analyses the relationship between the syntactic structure of finite verbs and their meaning. In order to do so, it provides an overview of the notion of polysemy, the linguistic categories of finites and non-finites, verbs of complete and incomplete predication, transitive and intransitive verbs, as well as the concepts of quasi-passive and empty carriers. What is more, it explores the way in which these categories affect the translation of finite verbs into Spanish and highlights the importance of recognizing syntactic structures when translating.

Key words: polysemy, finite verbs, categories of the verb, Spanish<>English translation, semantic and syntactic approaches, linguistic structures.

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza la relación entre la estructura sintáctica de los verbos finitos y su significado. Para ello, refiere brevemente a la noción de polisemia, los verbos finitos y no finitos, los verbos de predicación completa e incompleta, los verbos transitivos e intransitivos, la cuasi pasiva y los *empty carriers*. A su vez, examina la forma en que dichas categorías afectan la traducción de los verbos finitos al español y resalta la importancia de reconocer las estructuras sintácticas al traducir.

Palabras clave: polisemia, verbos finitos, categorías de los verbos, traducción Español<>Inglés, enfoques semánticos y sintácticos, estructuras lingüísticas.

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Introduction

Polysemy is an inherent feature of the language, which evidences the extreme complexity, creativity, flexibility and intricacy thereof. For the purposes of this research work, the term “polysemy” shall refer to “the coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase” (Oxford University Press, 2020). It is worth noting that some authors question the notion of “meaning of an expression,” suggesting that, in fact, words do not have concrete meanings but rather “meaning potentials,” which may be defined as the “essentially unlimited number of ways in which an expression can prompt dynamic cognitive processes, which include conceptual connections, mappings, blends and simulations” (Fauconnier, & Turner, 2003, p. 79). Therefore, such meaning potentials will be realized in concrete contexts.

It is the job of translators to identify out of the multiplicity of potential meanings of a word or phrase, the meaning that such expression bears in the particular context of the source text in order to be able to produce an equivalent meaning, to the extent possible, in the target language. Consequently, polysemy is in the very essence of the profession of translators and, in the absence of the former, the latter would become replaceable by machines.

Objectives

The aim of this research work is to analyse some of the ways in which the structure of finites can be helpful to recognize their meaning in order to translate them. To such end, it will briefly refer to the notions of finites and non-finites, verbs of complete and incomplete predication, transitive and intransitive verbs, quasi-passive constructions and empty carriers, and it will provide some examples to illustrate such potential meanings and the relationship between meaning and the linguistic structure, together with its corresponding Spanish structure. Such examples are merely of an illustrative nature and they do not cover all the potential meanings of the corresponding finites.

The Impact of Linguistic Structures on the Meaning of Finites

Throughout the history of linguistics, great efforts have been devoted to analysing and categorizing verbs. One of the main classifications of verbs is that which divides them into finites and non-finites. Finites are conjugated verbs, i.e., the form of the verb shows the categories of person, number, tense, mood, aspect and voice, whereas non-finites are non-conjugated verbs that only show the categories of aspect and voice, and encompass infinitives, past participles, gerunds and present participles. Within the broader category of finites are the subcategories of verbs of complete and incomplete predication, also referred to as predicating and linking verbs respectively. Verbs of complete predication are those that express a complete meaning, or, in other words, that wholly or chiefly accomplish the predication (Paul Roberts, 1954), whereas verbs of incomplete predication do not. As pointed by Paul Roberts, many verbs of incomplete predication were originally verbs of complete predication and the change from one category to the other took place in historic times.

This ancient shift in structure can be observed, for example, in the verb “become”. In Old English, this verb meant “happen”. For instance, “Him ðæs grim leán becom: this grim retribution *happened* to them, Cd. 2; Th. 3, 36” (Bosworth, J., 1898, emphasis added). This meaning is preserved, for example, in the expression “what has become of it?” (Harper, n.d.). This verb was also used in Old English to mean “come” or “arrive”. For example, “Hannibal to ðam lande becom: Hannibal *came* to that land, Ors. 4, 8; Bos. 90, 14” (Bosworth, J., 1898, emphasis added). The most frequent use of the verb “become” nowadays - as a verb of incomplete predication meaning “to turn, develop into, start to be, grow to be”: *volverse, tornarse, convertirse* - may derive from this later sense, since it conveys the idea of *coming* to a certain condition or state (Quirk, 2014). In Middle English, the verb was used in the sense of “befit”, “be suitable”: *quedar bien, sentar bien, verse bien*, as a verb of complete predication. This is seen, for example, in the following sentence “They should doe such things as becommed their shape” from a Treatise of Moral Philosophy from 1563 (Oxford University Press, 1971). This sense is still used nowadays in phrases such as “This suit becomes him”.

Likewise, among inchoative verbs, the verb “grow” is another clear example of how the meaning of the verb may change depending on whether it has complete or incomplete predication:

Grow (complete predication)	E. g. He grew a lot.	Crecer
Grow (incomplete predication)	Grow old	Envejecer
	Grow pale	Palidecer
	Grow bored	Aburrirse
	Grow suspicious	Comenzar a sospechar/sospechar
	Grow tired	Cansarse

It should be noted that, whereas in some cases ‘grow’ may be translated into Spanish either as a verb of complete predication or as a verb of incomplete predication (for example, grow pale: *palidecer/ponerse pálido*), in other cases, a verb of incomplete predication would not constitute an appropriate translation. For example, grow bored cannot be translated as “*volverse aburrido*” (turn boring).

Apart from this difference in meaning between complete and incomplete predication, a further difference appears depending on whether the verb is transitive (VT), i.e. it takes a direct object, or intransitive (VI), i.e. it does not take a direct object. For example:

- a. (i) The herbs in my uncle’s garden grow very fast. (VI) [*Las hiervas del jardín de mi tío crecen muy rápido.*]
(ii) My uncle grows herbs in his garden. (VT) [*Mi tío cultiva hiervas en su jardín.*]
- b. (i) Her hair grew a lot. (VI) [*Le creció mucho el pelo.*]
(ii) She grew her hair long. (VT) [*Se dejó crecer el pelo.*]
- c. (i) The bacteria grew in the Petri dish. (VI) [*Las bacterias proliferaron/se multiplicaron en la placa de Petri.*]
(ii) We grew bacteria in the Petri dish. (VT) [*Cultivamos bacterias en la placa de Petri.*]

Other examples include:

- a. (i) The cake tasted delicious. (VI) [*La torta estaba/sabía deliciosa.*]
(ii) He tasted the delicious cake. (VT) [*Probó la deliciosa torta.*]
- b. (i) I felt tired. (VI) [*Me sentía cansado.*]

(ii) I realized he had fever when I felt his forehead. (VT) [*Me di cuenta de que tenía fiebre cuando le toqué la frente.*]

c. (i) He ran last week. (VI) [*Corrió la semana pasada.*]

(ii) He ran a fundraising campaign last week. (VT) [*Organizó una campaña de recaudación de fondos la semana pasada.*]

d. (i) The butler walked to the door. (VI) [*El mayordomo se dirigió a/caminó hacia la puerta.*]

(ii) The butler walked her to the door. (VT) [*El mayordomo la acompañó a la puerta.*]

e. (i) Tom left after Mary. (VI) [*Tom se fue/se marchó después que Mary*]

(ii) Tom left Mary. (VT) [*Tom dejó a Mary.*]

In some cases, however, the potential transitive or intransitive nature of the verb, as well as its potential complete or incomplete predication, creates ambiguity. Oaks (2010) mentions, among others, the following examples:

- “Did you hear about the writer who *dropped eleven stories* into a waste-basket and lived?” (Rosenbloom, 1978: 110, emphasis added). Here, “dropped” can be intransitive (*se cayó once pisos*) or transitive (*tiró once historias*).

- “When is a hat not a hat? – When it *becomes a woman*.” (Withers & Benet, 1954: 68, emphasis added). In this case, “become” may be a transitive verb of complete predication (*le queda bien a una mujer*) or an intransitive verb of incomplete predication (*se convierte en una mujer*).

- *Get Rich Quick* (Advertisement for HERBA RICH, a haircare product) (Revlon Consumer Products, 1955, emphasis added). Here the verb “get” can be intransitive of incomplete predication (*vuélvase rico*) or transitive of complete predication (*compre/consiga Rich*).

In such cases, it is essential that the translator be aware of the different structures that the verb may adopt in order to be able to convey the meaning of the source text in the target language and, depending on the intention of the writer or speaker, to maintain the ambiguity of the source text, if possible.

As previously mentioned, an intransitive verb differs from a transitive verb in that the former does not take a direct object. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that, in some

cases, a finite may be analysed as an intransitive verb since no direct object is present and the structure is active in form, but the meaning of the structure may be consistent with that of a passive structure and, therefore, the verb would convey an idea of transitivity. This is the case of quasi-passive structures, also known as notional passives. For example, in the sentence “This book reads easily”, the structure is in the active voice, but the meaning of the sentence is passive (the book is read by someone). Therefore, the grammatical subject “This book”, which is an inanimate object, is not the performer of the action and it, thus, differs from the logical subject “*someone* reads the book”. This is shown in Spanish by means of the passive voice with “se”, which is more frequent than the passive formed by *ser* + past participle: “*Este libro se lee con facilidad*”. Other examples include:

a) (i) The tickets to the show sold very quickly. [*Las entradas para el espectáculo se vendieron muy rápido.*]

(ii) They sold the tickets to the show very quickly. [*Vendieron las entradas para el espectáculo muy rápido.*]

b) (i) As the chicken cooks, prepare the potatoes. [*Mientras se cocina el pollo, prepare las papas.*]

(ii) Her husband cooks chicken very well. [*Su marido cocina pollo muy bien.*]

c) (i) The new edition of his book on criminal law will publish next year. [*La nueva edición de su libro sobre derecho penal se publicará el año que viene.*]

(ii) He will publish a new edition of his book on criminal law next year. [*Publicará una nueva edición de su libro sobre derecho penal el año que viene.*]

Once again, knowing these structures can be very helpful to properly understand the meaning of apparently similar phrases or sentences. For example:

(a) This contract is binding. [*Este contrato es vinculante.*]

(b) This book on contract law is binding. [*Este libro sobre derecho contractual se está encuadernando.*]

Whereas in sentence (a), the finite “is” functions as an intransitive verb of incomplete predication and “binding” is an adjective that means “obligatory”, sentence (b) shows a quasi-passive structure in which the finite is “is binding”. In the example (b), the sentence

is active in form (neither an auxiliary for the passive nor a past participle is used), but the meaning is passive (the book is bound by somebody), since the book is an inanimate object that cannot perform the action of “binding”.

Another example is provided below:

- (a) His biography is moving. It even made me cry! [*Su biografía es conmovedora. ¡Hasta me hizo llorar!*]
- (b) Although it is quite expensive, his biography is moving and it will soon sell out. [*A pesar de ser bastante cara, su biografía se está vendiendo y se agotará pronto*]
- (c) Although the biography is quite expensive, the publisher is moving it and it will be soon sold out. [*A pesar de que la biografía es bastante cara, el editor la está vendiendo y se agotará pronto.*]

In the first sentence in (a), the finite is “is”, which is an intransitive verb of incomplete predication, and “moving” is an adjective functioning as a subjective complement. However, in (b), the finites of the main clause are “is moving”, which is used in the sense of selling goods or merchandise (Oxford University Press, 2020), and “will sell out”. Here, the quasi-passive is applied using, first, the progressive tense, and then, the simple future. The same meaning is expressed in (c), but an active construction (the publisher is moving it: subject + VTCP + DO) and a passive construction (it will be sold out: subject + modal + auxiliary for the passive + past participle) are used instead of the quasi-passive. In addition to this, the structure of a finite may not only lead to different potential meanings, but may also result in the verb being sometimes devoid of lexical meaning. The verb “do” constitutes a clear example of this. To begin with, “do” may function as an empty carrier or as a main verb. When “do” functions as a main verb, it can be transitive or intransitive. As an intransitive verb, it can convey different meanings. For example:

- a) Do as I say, not as I do. [*Haz lo que yo digo, pero no lo que yo hago.*]
- b) That will do. [*Con eso bastará.*]
- c) How are you doing? [*¿Cómo estás?*]

Moreover, as mentioned before, the verb “do” can be transitive. As such, it is considered to be delexical. A delexical verb, also known as a light verb, thin verb or semantically

weak verb, can be defined as that which “has very little meaning in itself and is used with an object that carries the main meaning of the structure” (*Cobuild English Grammar*, 2017, p. xix). For instance, the phrase “do the ironing” can be replaced by “iron”, and, therefore, in the sentence “She is doing the ironing”, the direct object “the ironing” would bear the main meaning of the predicate and the sentence could be translated as “*Ella está planchando*”. Other examples include:

Do the washing up	Lavar los platos.
Do the cooking	Cocinar
Do drugs	Drogarse
Do research	Investigar
Do an operation	Operar

As noted by Live (1973), throughout the history of English, there has been a tendency to split the verb into two parts. The first part would carry the grammatical information and the second part would bear the lexical meaning. This tendency is also observed in the use of auxiliary verbs and empty carriers. In this respect, Live argues that said tendency “has, since the sixteenth century, crystalized in the use of periphrastic verb forms for interrogative and negative expressions and in the establishment of the progressive tenses, with do in the former cases, and in the latter case, be (...) (p. 31)”.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1971), the use of “do” as an empty carrier dates back to Old English, though it became more frequently used in Middle English and especially after the 16th Century. At that time, it was used not only in the negative form - the periphrastic form in negative sentences such as “They did not know” replaced the negative particles used in Old English “Hie ne wendon” (Harper, n.d.) - but also in the affirmative form - for example, “He dū zim”, instead of “He seems”. Later on, this use of “do” in affirmative sentences was dropped, but it was preserved in interrogative and negative sentences. For example:

- a) Did they know how to get there? – No, they didn’t (know how to get there).
[¿Sabían cómo llegar? –No, no sabían (cómo llegar)].
- b) Does he do his homework alone? [¿Hace la tarea solo?].
- c) Does she do drugs? [¿Se droga?]

As previously mentioned, the empty carrier would only contribute grammatical meaning to the sentence and would, thus, impact the inflection used in Spanish (*sabían* instead of *saben*, *sabrán*, etc.). Moreover, nowadays, “do” is also used in affirmative sentences to show emphasis and contrast, and for the purpose of inversion:

- a) They thought he didn’t know anything about the party, but he did know. [*Pensaron que no sabía nada sobre la fiesta, pero sí sabía.*]
- b) I don’t recall if he was with Susan, but I do remember he came to the party. [*No recuerdo si estaba con Susan, pero sí recuerdo que vino a la fiesta.*]
- c) That dress does look beautiful on you! [*¡Qué bien que te queda ese vestido!*]
- d) Not even once did he tell me the truth! [*¡Ni siquiera una vez me dijo la verdad!*]
- e) Only then did I understand what was going on. [*No fue sino hasta ese momento que entendí lo que sucedía.*]

As illustrated in the examples above, “do” has multiple possible translations depending on its structure and the particular context in which it appears.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research work has referred to the interplay between linguistic structures and meaning, in particular with respect to finite verbs, showing how semantics and syntax are inextricably intertwined, and exploring their impact on translation. To such end, this work has briefly pointed out the differences between finites and non-finites, verbs of complete and incomplete predication, and transitive and intransitive verbs. What is more, examples of such verbs as well as their respective translations into Spanish have been provided in order to illustrate such differences in meaning. In addition to this, the notion of the quasi-passive has been briefly explained and examples of said structure with their corresponding translation have been included. Last but not least, this research has alluded to the concept of empty carriers and compared the use of “do” as a main verb and as an empty carrier.

Overall, this work has illustrated some of the ways in which different structures can contribute to polysemy, which in turn contributes to the richness of the language. It is of

crucial importance that the translator be able to recognize the different linguistic structures that make up the language since the lack of knowledge of such structures could lead to a misrepresentation of the intended meaning in the source text. Further research should be conducted to explore other ways in which linguistic structures impact the meaning of finites as well as non-finites and the difficulties that this may entail for translators.

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