

Pedro J. CHAMIZO DOMINGUEZ & Brigitte NERLICH

**LAS RELACIONES LÉXICAS. BEIHEFTE ZUR ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR
ROMANISCHE PHILOLOGIE. BAND 299 by Miguel CASAS-GÓMEZ,
MAX NIEMEYER VERLAG, TÜBINGEN, 1999. VIII + 241 PP.
ISBN: 3-484-52299-3 ISSN: 0084-5396**

It is generally accepted that philosophers of language should not develop their theories in a philosophical vacuum but should be aware of the work done by linguists. Prof. Casas-Gómez's work is one of these books that philosophers should bear in mind when they try to speak about polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, hyponymy, cohyponymy, hyperonymy, antonymy and other related questions.

Las relaciones léxicas (Lexical relationships) is the result of extensive research financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, and the Andalusian Government. The book has the following aims (which are mostly achieved): 1, to analyse how the topic of 'lexical relations' has been treated throughout the history of linguistics; 2, to compare and contrast different researchers' positions and opinions about this topic; 3, to outline the specific problems created by each of these approaches; 4, to synthesise the ideas of different authors inside a stable theoretical framework; and 5, to arrive at general and critical conclusion (p. 4). Prof. Casas-Gómez's work is therefore firmly rooted in the past but also lays the foundations for future research (p. 5). His approach could, for example, be applied to a collected corpus of literary works (novels, poetry, essays, etc.), oral material, speakers' opinions about language (collected directly via interviews, etc., or, for example, as expressed in 'letters to the editor' in newspapers), and texts reflecting different uses of Spanish, especially Hispano-American ones (p. 6). In this project, one misses an attempt at analysing "technical" texts using scientific, technical, legal, medical or philosophical vocabulary (but, see 172). What is missing perhaps is a study of the use of technical terms in different disciplines (consider, for instance, the cases of *anthropology*, *speculation* or *idealism*) or the difference between

words used in these disciplines as compared to their use in ordinary language. This could give rise to very interesting questions related to synonymy and polysemy. It would, for example, be interesting to see how the meaning of various technical terms has changed over a period of 50 years, which is the time-span covered by Prof. Casas-Gómez in his study of novels.¹

Prof. Casas-Gómez's research was carried out under the influence of German academic writing and this can be felt throughout this book: the bibliography (no less than 27 pages of bibliographical references) is very exhaustive and covers most European languages; furthermore, this bibliography is continually referred to in the text and in lengthy and abundant footnotes (on pp. 42 and 72, for example, footnotes make up the main part of the text). This allows the reader to constantly check the author's theses against those of other researchers. However, one slight shortcoming of writing more *germanico* is perhaps the lack of ironic or humorous asides which would make the text more enjoyable and would have given the reader some breathing space.

Polysemy and homonymy are the main topics treated in this book, with all other topics centring around them. The author questions the traditional concept of polysemy (p. 57) as a genuine lexical relationship and also rejects the basic distinction between polysemy and homonymy. Although Prof. Casas-Gómez does not quote D. Davidson², his position can be compared to Davidson's. However, the rejection of polysemy and homonymy as descriptive tools can create serious problems when studying corpora.

It should be stressed that under certain circumstances speakers/hearers and writers/readers can very well be aware of or become conscious of polysemy (and etymology) when using or interpreting words, especially when trying to achieve certain communicative effects.³ This can be observed, for example, when we encounter terms which have one meaning in ordinary language and another (sometimes very different one) in some technical jargon. For example, the term *idealism* (and its cognates) as used in ordinary language means something quite different from the philosophers' technical use. While, in ordinary language, *idealism* can be a quasi-synonym for *disinterestedness*, *altruism* or *unselfishness*, in technical, philosophical jargon it normally means something similar to "philosophical doctrine which maintains the thesis that the cognoscent subject

¹ For the technical terms relating to economy, see Chamizo Domínguez, P. J. y García Lizana, A., "Lenguaje y cambio de paradigma en economía", [in:] Martín Vide, C. (ed.), *Actas del IX Congreso de Lenguajes Naturales y Lenguajes Formales*. Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1993, pp. 185–195.

² *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

³ See, Nerlich, B. & Chamizo Domínguez, P. J., 1999: "Cómo hacer cosas con palabras polisémicas: El uso de la ambigüedad en el lenguaje ordinario", [in:] *Contrastes*, IV, pp. 77–96; and Nerlich, B. & Clarke, D. D., 2001: "Ambiguities we live by: Towards a pragmatics of polysemy", [in:] *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33, pp. 1–20.

constitutes the known object”. Obviously, it would be very difficult to find a synonym in this case. To illustrate this point, let us imagine hearing a statement such as *Kant was an idealistic but rather mean philosopher*. This would be interpreted very differently by an ordinary speaker and by a philosopher. The first would probably believe that this statement was a contradiction in terms because it is well known that Kant was a mean guy, while the second would probably be conscious of the ambiguity exploited in this statement.

Moreover, one should not forget in this context the classical distinction between the speakers’ passive and active competence. Many speakers may use only a small number of terms *motu proprio* in everyday conversations, but they may well be able to understand many more when they are used by other speakers. I think that this is especially relevant when dealing with terms that are used in technical jargon as well as in ordinary language.

One could say the same with reference to synonymy. In how far we consider two signs to be synonyms depends on the degree of our linguistic competence and the ways in which we have learnt how to use words. An example would be the use of the words *ajonjolí* and *sésamo* (both ‘sesame’) in Spanish. Looking at the entry in the *DRAE* (*Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language*), (**ajonjolí**. “Planta herbácea anual, de la familia de las pedaliáceas, de un metro de altura, tallo resto, hojas pecioladas, serradas y casi triangulares; flores de corola acampanada, blanca o rósea, y fruto elipsoidal con cuatro cápsulas y muchas semillas amarillentas, muy menudas, oleaginosas y comestibles. Llámase también alegría y sésamo.”), one could say that this is an almost paradigmatic case of perfect synonymy. If a speaker learned the meanings of both words from the *DRAE* he or she would certainly believe that these words were perfect synonyms and would assume that they could be used interchangeably without changing the meaning of the utterances in which they are used. However – according to my students – *sésamo* has been used (especially in TV advertisements) for years with relation to hamburgers, while *ajonjolí* has been mainly used with relation to typical Spanish Christmas sweetmeats. For this reason, many speakers think that the object we are referring to with the word *ajonjolí* is quite different from the object referred to when using the word *sésamo*. In fact, if we asked ordinary speakers for a definition of *ajonjolí*, they would probably say something like “small seeds used in Spanish Christmas sweetmeats and other cakes”; whereas when asked for a definition of *sésamo* they would say something like “small seeds used to sprinkle on hamburgers”. Using G. Frege’s terminology, we can say that *ajonjolí* and *sésamo* no longer have the same sense or the same reference and that, despite the reference staying the same, they are gradually acquiring different meanings because they are used in different contexts. As a result, they may well soon cease to be synonyms.

Prof. Casas-Gómez's reflections on the problems of polysemy and synonymy also open up very interesting questions for the field of translation. Translating is mainly based on trying to find synonyms in the target language for the words used in the source language. However, if we accept the thesis that perfect synonymy is impossible to achieve, a successful translation should be a rather illusory undertaking. Similar problems arise with regard to polysemy and false friends. Many problems in translations derive from the fact that most words in a natural language are polysemous and that the polysemy of word in one language is not necessarily mirrored by a similar network of polysemous senses in the other language – far from it! This is especially important when speakers or writers use a polysemous word knowing that it is polysemous and deliberately try to achieve a specific cognitive, stylistic, or other effect. In these cases the search for a synonym in another language may be impossible. As a result, the cognitive or stylistic effects that the speaker wants to achieve in the original language may be irretrievably lost in the target language.⁴

False friends (a translator's true enemies), especially partial semantic false friends (e.g.: English *actual*, Spanish *actual* or French *table*, Spanish *tabla*), pose similar problems. Here the synonymy between two languages is only partial. Such cases could be profitably analysed using Prof. Casas-Gómez's insights. Partial semantic false friends (as well as total ones) are the equivalent in two given natural languages to polysemous words in a single language. It is generally assumed that polysemy is the result of a word acquiring new meanings through the figurative uses of that word (e.g. *mouth* [facial orifice] – *mouth* [river]). The same holds true for false friends which are the result of the fact that such changes have not uniformly occurred in two given languages.⁵ This means that in these and other cases diachronic considerations must be taken into account. Studying difficulties in translation such as these would be easier if we were to maintain the synchronic and diachronic distinction between polysemy and homonymy, at least for analytical purposes. One of the results of the study of corpora promised by Prof. Casas-Gómez which would be most appreciated by translators would certainly be a list of possible equivalencies in several languages.

To sum up, *Las relaciones léxicas* is a book that should be read not only by linguists, for whom this book has mainly been written, but also by anybody interested in language, particularly philosophers of language and translators. The interest of this book lies not only in the notable results achieved, but also in the promises it holds for future studies.

⁴ For a further development of this topic, see Chamizo Domínguez, P. J., "Dealing with ambiguity when translating polysemic words", [in:] *Turjumàn. Revue de Traduction et d'Interprétation/Journal of Translation Studies*. 8 (2), (1999), pp. 27–43.

⁵ See Chamizo Domínguez, P. J. and Nerlich, B., "Spanish lecturers do not teach fastidious topics: Metaphor, metonymy and false friends". Submitted to *Journal of Pragmatics*.