

What Do Learners Need to Know about the Figurative Extensions of Target Language Words? A Contrastive, Corpus-Based Analysis of *Thread*, *Hilar*, *Wing* and *Aletear*

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a detailed analysis based on corpus evidence of the multiple senses of the English verbs *thread* and *wing* and the Spanish verbs *hilar* and *aletear*. Although these verbs derive from nouns with similar or identical referential content, the figurative extensions of their basic meanings are quite different and can be seen to constitute more than one single continuum of senses. Rather, different branches or strands of figuratively related senses can be discerned, with major shifts in meaning often being associated with particular phraseological or grammatical patterns. The findings of this contrastive analysis are discussed in relation to the learning of the semantic potential of target language words in foreign language learning.

Keywords: polysemy, figurative extension, contrastive analysis, FLL.

RESUMEN: En este artículo, presentamos un análisis detallado de los varios sentidos traslaticios de los verbos ingleses *thread* y *wing* y los verbos *hilar* y *aletear* en español. Aunque estos verbos surgen de unos sustantivos que comparten un mismo significado, o un significado parecido, sus extensiones semánticas son muy distintas y guardan una relación muy distinta entre ellas. En el caso de cada verbo, es posible identificar más de una rama de sentidos que se relacionan entre sí, y su uso en el corpus permite discernir que los cambios de significado suelen ir acompañados de otros cambios gramaticales. Los resultados de este análisis contrastivo permiten señalar algunas de las dificultades que supone para el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera la flexibilidad semántica de las palabras.

Palabras clave: polisemia, extensión figurativa, análisis contrastivo, aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.

1. Introduction

It has long been recognised that for foreign language learners the mastery of a limited number of words is often sufficient to meet most of their communicative needs. Because the high-frequency words in any language also tend to be highly polysemous, the same word can be used to refer to very different things, which means that a grasp of the extended meaning potential of the words s/he knows, along with an awareness of their different phraseological patterns, will enable the learner to expand the range of topics s/he can talk about (Littlemore; Low, 2006).

Among the most regular principles motivating meaning extension are metaphor and metonymy (Taylor, 2003). In all languages, words can figuratively extend their meanings, although the figurative extensions of a term in one language may not be possible for the equivalent word in another. For example, the English noun *thread* and the Spanish noun *hilo* share a basic sense (length of spun material for use in sewing or weaving), as well as some figurative extensions: both can be used to denote a long thin line of liquid, light or colour or the linking element or common idea in a story, argument or situation (for example, ‘nunca pierde el hilo de la conversación’ or ‘the thread running through many of these proposals was the theme of individual power and opportunity’). However, in English the word can also be used to describe the raised spiral line on a screw or lid which allows it to be fixed in place by twisting, a sense that is not possible for Spanish *hilo*, which can, in contrast, refer to wires (*hilo telefónico*), the quality of a voice (*un hilo de voz*) or influence (*mover los hilos*), among other things.

This may present a problem for language learners as they will not necessarily know which figurative extensions are permitted in the target language. They may transfer inappropriate extensions from their own language, or they may be over-cautious and not transfer any extensions to the L2. A further problem for the language learner is that these figurative extensions are likely to be associated with particular phraseological patterns (Deignan, 2005), as would be the case of *hilo conductor/argumental* or *hilo de voz*, for instance. Thus, the foreign language learner will need not only to recognise the sense of different uses of *hilo* or *thread*, but also become familiar with the phraseology associated with them, and be aware of the fact that the phraseology contributes in an important way to the overall meaning.

Native speakers of Spanish and English presumably build up knowledge of the semantic extension potential of the words in their language through encountering them used in multiple discourse situations. Frequent, meaningful and varied types of communicative interaction throughout life provide rich input that foreign language learners usually do not have, and which may prevent them from developing full appreciation of the referential flexibility as well as the fixedness of the target language words and expressions that they know. In the absence of such rich and varied input, teachers and material designers must seek ways to help learners develop sensitivity to – if not mastery of – these two aspects of language use.

In earlier work (MacArthur; Littlemore, 2008), we investigated whether direct contact with the data contained in language corpora might be useful in helping learners cope with these two types of difficulty (i.e. referential flexibility and fixedness of expression), working with the hypothesis that corpora can provide the learner with useful

information not only about usage but also about phraseological patterning. A large electronic language corpus can be used to isolate a large number of usage events involving polysemous words, providing learners with the kind of information gained by native speakers over a long period of time in their daily contact with the language. We were particularly interested in how learners made use of the senses they would come across, which we related to Dirven's (2002) notion of a 'figurative continuum'. According to Dirven, word senses may be usefully regarded as being located on a continuum stretching from purely literal senses, through metonymic senses, to metaphorical ones. So, for example, when looking at uses of the denominal verb *shoulder* in the BNC, the Spanish learners of English who participated in the study encountered the verb used to mean 'carry', as in 'sometimes Andrew had been so drunk that Iain had **shouldered** him all the way home' as well as metaphorical uses like 'she **shouldered** the blame for what the media gleefully called: 'Malice at the Palace''. Although this second use of *shoulder* might prove somewhat opaque to the non-native speaker in another context, when encountered alongside other related senses of the verb in the corpus lines, learners in our study had little difficulty in understanding it, and also appreciated its figurative entailments. That is, they appeared to be using the continuum of senses as they worked with the data, using one sense they understood to help them work out the meaning of another. How they did this, however, or the 'core' or 'enabling' sense that they identified was not predictable from our analysis of their behaviour in class. Nor was it predictable from basic frequency measures in the corpus or our intuitions that one sense would be more transparent than another. Moreover, it was impossible to map the senses of the words we explored along a single continuum, and they seemed to fit more naturally into a type of 'tree' diagram with different 'branches' emanating from the same basic sense(s) (See Figures 1-4 for an illustration). For example, *shoulder* was also found in the corpus with the metonymic meaning of 'use the shoulder to move something out of the way', as in 'Erlich **shouldered** his way through the crowd and went after her', as well as a more metaphorical usage in sentences such as 'I mean, I'd really like to, but I've already been **shouldered** out of the nativity play', the latter two senses being related to each other but somewhat different from the 'carry' senses. Where such major breaks in senses occurred, learners in our study had considerable difficulty in assigning a meaning to the new sense(s) encountered. One pedagogical implication that can be derived from this is that if learners are likely to overlook or misunderstand some of the senses encountered in a corpus, a purely data-driven or discovery approach to figurative language is unlikely to be fully effective in foreign language learning. Rather, some manipulation of the data by teachers or material designers might be desirable. And our preliminary findings on the corpus data suggested that this could be done by manipulating the forms of the words and phrases used as search items, because major shifts in meaning seemed to be accompanied by major shifts in grammatical patterns.

The findings from our study raised four interesting further research questions: is it more appropriate to think of the relationships between the figurative extensions of word meaning in terms of a continuum, or of a tree diagram? To what extent do figurative extension patterns in Spanish match those in English? Are major shifts in sense accompanied by marked changes in phraseology in either or both languages? And do any

frequent patterns occur that would be worth pointing out to language learners? In order to address these research questions, we conducted an in-depth, comparative corpus study of two items in English (*to thread* and *to wing*) and their Spanish equivalents (*hilar* and *aletear*). We chose to focus on denominal verbs as these are most often characterised by metaphorical and metonymic meaning extension processes. In this paper, we present our analysis of these denominal verbs, and describe the senses we identified, setting these out schematically as tree diagrams. The major sense shifts are recorded as different branches on the tree; the increasingly figurative senses of each branch visualised as points on the branch increasingly distant from the basic sense of each verb. In our description, we pay particular attention to frequency of senses as well as correlations between form and meaning. Our findings support those of Hunston; Francis (2000), indicating that grammar can convey at least as much information as lexis in figurative language use, and that it is inappropriate to separate the two. We discuss the possible pedagogical implications of this type of corpus analysis for the teaching/learning of figurative language.

2. Word Searches in Two Different Corpora

Figurative uses of words can vary quite considerably in English and Spanish, depending on where the language is spoken. In order to accurately identify the senses most commonly associated with the words in a particular language-speaking community, we decided to restrict our study to data taken from European sources (British English and Peninsular Spanish respectively).

In order to investigate the figurative extensions of *thread* and *wing* in English, the UK sub-corpora of the Bank of English were used. Together, these constitute a corpus of 321 million words (the entire Bank of English contains 450 million words) of literature, journalism, radio recordings, naturally occurring spoken English, and ephemera. The Bank of English is a tagged corpus, which makes it possible to search for specific word types. Searches were conducted for *thread* (as a verb); *threading*; *threaded*; *wing* (as a verb); *winging*; and *winged*. The following sections contain an analysis of the findings for these.

The CREA (*Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual*) was used to explore figurative extensions of all forms of *hilar* and *aletear*. This corpus contains over 150 million words, half of which are taken from Latin American sources, the other half Spanish. When searching for these words as used in Spain, then, the total number of words in this sub-corpus (about 75 million) is considerably smaller than that available in the Bank of English. The description of these two Spanish verbs is therefore not as accurate, detailed or revealing as that of *thread* and *wing*, given that generalisations about their use is based on much more meagre data than those available for the English words. This made it difficult, for example, to make any remarks on correlations between forms and senses in the case of *aletear*, as the number of tokens of the verb was too small to allow any accurate description of this kind. Thus, the analysis of these two verbs in Spanish is only tentative and serves more as a background to the analysis of the English verbs in order to provide some idea of the differences and similarities between their semantic extensions.

3.1. Thread

The diagram shown in Figure 1 shows the distribution of senses of *thread* used as a verb in the Bank of English. For the sake of brevity, all forms of the verb are included (i.e. *thread*; *threading*; *threaded*). Any particularly interesting variations according to verb form are noted. The most productive sense of *thread* in its basic form is the transitive sense of threading cotton, or a similar substance, through a needle:

BRANCH 1

SENSE 1

THREAD + noun phrase (NP) + *through* (Example: *Easy to **thread** the detonator cord through*)

Figurative extensions of sense 1 also carry some sort of transitivity (e.g. *thread the ball across to*). The first category of uses involves a metaphoric transfer from cotton and thread to objects that one might not at first sight associated with threading:

SENSE 2

THREAD + NP + preposition (Example: *and went on to **thread** a super ball through to Coyle*)

Presumably the threading here relates to the type of movement the ball is making; i.e. winding along a trajectory, presumably through a group of opponent players. Many of the examples in the corpus resemble this one in that they come from football commentaries, which could reflect the fact that the Bank of English is heavily weighted towards sports journalism.

In order to get to the next sense, another figurative transformation takes place where the notion of ball is metonymically transferred to the shot that caused the ball to be ‘threaded’:

SENSE 3

THREAD + NP + preposition (Example: *Kanu’s 51st-minute pass to **thread** a low shot under Matthias Asper*)

Similarly, sense 2 can also be metonymically transferred to the sense 4, which refers to the path that is left by the thing or the person doing the threading:

SENSE 4

THREAD + NP (Example: *200 yards away and Woods had to **thread** a path through several large trees*)

Sense 4 has a sub-cluster of senses, which take on a reflexive feel. This is a very productive cluster, particularly in the v-ing verb form. The cluster also exhibits significantly more fixedness than the other senses. One reason for this may be to do with the fact that reflexive uses of thread are non-existent in the basic sense (cotton rarely, if ever, threads itself through a needle!). The fixedness of the expressions may thus be serving as a signal to the reader or hearer that a figurative sense is intended and pre-empting surprise at the incongruity of the idea in a more literal sense (Deignan, 2005). The following illustrate some of these reflexive uses.

The first reflexive use was in fact one of the most common in the corpus, and also the one with the most fixed phraseology:

SENSE 5

THREAD + POSSESSIVE + *way through* (Example: *John Carroll had to **thread** his way through a field*)

There were many expressions of this type, which is interesting as it corresponds to Sinclair *et al.* (1996: 353) verb pattern ‘... its way through’. According to Sinclair *et al.*, there are twelve verbs that form this pattern: *dodge; ease; edge; feel; grope; inch; manoeuvre; navigate; nose; pick; prize; sidestep; squeeze; steer; thread; twist; and weave*. All of these verbs are apparently ‘concerned with moving carefully or avoiding obstacles, either physically or metaphorically’ (Sinclair *et al.*, 1996: 353). They go on to say that, of this group, *feel, pick* and *thread* exhibit this pattern most frequently. The high frequency of this pattern suggests that it would be well worth pointing out to learners of English.

This sense was also metaphorically extended to fictive motion (see Talmy, 2000), where the agent is not actually doing any moving, but a more ‘literal’ interpretation of the language would suggest it was:

SENSE 6

NP + THREAD + POSSESSIVE + *way through* (Example: *The river **threaded** its way through the hills*)

In order to understand ‘fictive’ motion we have to see the agent both as moving and as stationery. Again, the relative fixedness of the phraseology may be due in part the fact that the meaning here is somewhat removed from anything that is possible in the literal context. Finally, there was one example of abstract fictive motion:

SENSE 7

NP + THREAD + POSSESSIVE + *way through* (Abstract, fictive motion) (Example: *Slavery **threaded** its way as an issue, a concern, and eventually a threatening problem through the fabric of American democracy.*)

It is interesting to note that when we have these highly creative, abstract extensions of the basic sense, there are rarely more than one or two examples. Sense 2 can also be metaphorically transformed into sense 8, where the motion is curvy, but not necessarily curvy in the same way as thread going through a needle is curvy:

SENSE 8

THREAD + NP + preposition (Example: *But in the end,” she says, **threading** her fingers round Shaylor’s*)

Finally, in sense 9, the most ‘figurative’ of all the senses in this first branch, the threading is entirely abstract and refers to intangible phenomena. Here we have examples of things being threaded together, which is somewhat removed from the basic sense of *thread*:

SENSE 9

THREAD + NP + together (Examples: *He **manages to thread** his ideas together/Threading two words together*)

In the middle of the diagram, we have inserted a dummy sense of ‘*thread through*’, where the cotton acquires agency. Although no evidence was found for this basic sense in the corpus, a number of figurative derivations of it were found. This is interesting as it suggests that figurative continua may be complex phenomena, containing ‘missing values’.

BRANCH 2

DUMMY SENSE

The cotton threads through the needle (no instances found)

The first figurative extension of this dummy sense is where a person threads through something:

SENSE 10

THREAD + preposition + NP (Example: *He felt as if he were **threading** through a minefield*)

This can be applied to fictive motion:

SENSE 11

THREAD + preposition + NP (fictive motion) (Example: *the St Agnes coast path, **threading** through an expanse of heath to*)

It can also be applied to abstract contexts:

SENSE 12

THREAD + preposition + NP (Example: *accounts interweave, and **threading** through both is the painful tale*)

The other basic sense of *thread* (*thread the needle*) is sense 13:

BRANCH 3

SENSE 13

THREAD + NP (Example: *it looked like someone trying to **thread** a needle at 300mph*)

This sense produces very few figurative uses. Only ten were found in the entire corpus, and were evenly spread across *thread*, *threading* and *threaded*. Of these, nine were relatively tangible:

SENSE 14

THREAD + NP (Example: *His pilgrimage to **thread** the Milky Way*)

There was only one abstract extension of this use of *thread*:

SENSE 15

THREAD + NP + preposition (Example: *Threading the nostalgia with reflections on...*)

But there were a number of passive constructions of *thread* with this meaning, such as: *The novel is **threaded** with the effects of slavery* or ***threaded** into the book is the sense that...*

These are interesting as they show a certain parallelism between abstract senses and passive forms.

Not all word forms followed the same pattern as that followed by the basic sense. *Thread* as a verb produced 251 hits;¹ *threading* produced 189 hits, *to thread* produced 41

1. The grammatical tagging in the Bank of English is only 90% accurate so this figure needs to be treated with caution.

hits, and *threaded* produced 512 hits. The different forms of the words exhibited different collocation patterns. As Hunston and Francis (2000) predict, it was the collocations to the right that told us the most about the different senses of the words. *Threading* and *threaded* produced the most fixed expression and transitive uses. For *thread/VERB*, *thread a/its /their way through* constituted the most frequent pattern. The higher proportion of collocations such as these suggests that figurative uses of this verb may be more common than uses in its basic sense, strengthening the above assertion that the pattern is worth teaching to learners of English, and that it is worth informing them of the fact that it indicates figurative usage.

Collocations to the right of *threaded* were somewhat similar to those of *thread* (VERB). Again, we identified a *threaded a way through* pattern, but we also had a larger number of prepositions besides *through* (*between, down, past*).

Interestingly, *threading* followed a slightly different pattern from both *thread* (VERB) and *threaded*. It appeared to trigger the fixed phrase *threading his/her/their etc, way through* far more frequently than the other forms of *thread*. This could be because it is describing current action. It also predicted the pattern: *threading through X is...*, which is often associated with literary and/or abstract contexts.

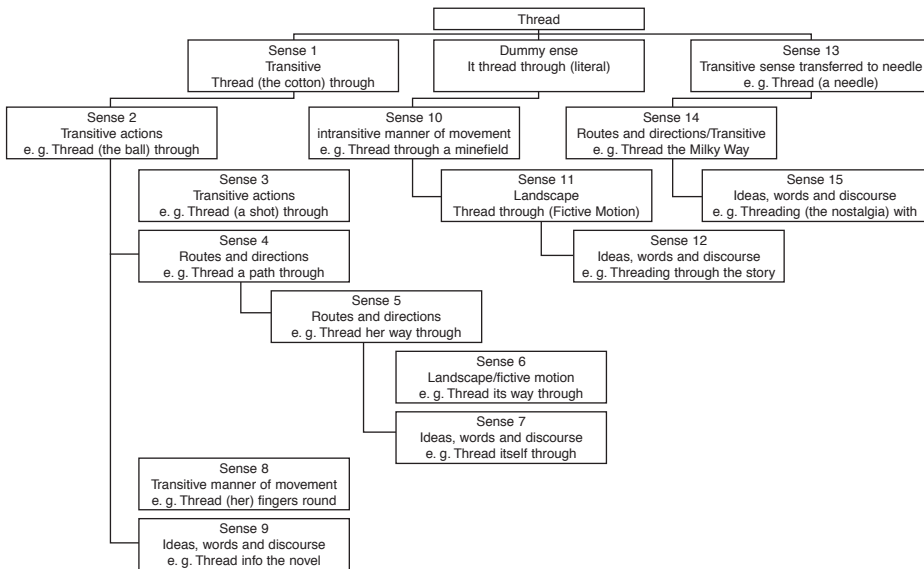


Figure 1: Senses of **THREAD**

3.2. Hilar

The nouns *thread* and *hilo* share a basic sense, but the verbs *thread* and *hilar* do not. Nevertheless, there exists some overlap in their figurative senses (which may facilitate comprehension of these for Spanish learners of English and English-speaking learners of

Spanish), although the way these particular figurative extensions can be related to other uses of the verbs in each language is quite different, as a quick glance at Figures 1 and 2 shows. The extension patterns of *hilar* appear much more straightforward than those of *thread*, particularly in the case of the most ‘productive’ branch (branch 3).

Figure 2 offers a schematic representation of the different senses of *hilar* identified in the 179 tokens of the verb found in a word search of the CREA for all forms. As can be seen from the diagram, three ‘branches’ or extensions of meaning have been identified as arising from the basic sense of the verb.

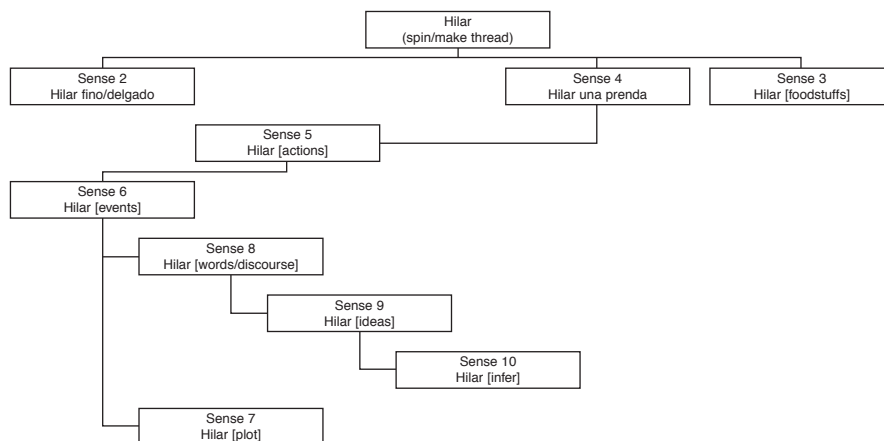


Figure 2: Senses of HILAR

BASIC SENSE

SENSE 1

The basic sense of *hilar* is glossed by the *DRAE* as ‘*reducir a hilo el lino, cáñamo, lana, seda, algodón, etc.*’, a definition very similar to that of Seco *et al.* (1999): ‘*transformar en hilo [una fibra textil]*’. That is, the verb means to spin or make thread, a centuries-old activity which may be carried out with or without the help of artefacts or machines. 28% of the CREA entries for HILAR illustrate this first sense:

la lana se llevaba a lavar al río y luego se hilaba en la rueca para hacer calcetines y otras prendas

68% of tokens of the verb used in the sense of ‘spin’ in the CREA denote on-going activity through the imperfect tense (*hilaba/n*) as in 1, but the sense is also found realised by non-finite forms (infinitive and participles):

allí, en fin, se sentaba la esposa, **hilando** la lana en medio de sus mujeres.

BRANCH 1

SENSE 2

HILAR + *fino/delgado*

Salient in the semantics of the idioms *hilar fino/delgado* is the notion of an action carried out by a human subject with great care and subtlety, no doubt motivated by the skill and care taken by the craftsman in spinning thread. For contemporary speakers, however, the meaning relatedness of these two senses of *hilar* might constitute a major associative leap, more accustomed to machine-aided processes of making thread where the skill of the person is not a central component. Interestingly, 55.8% of the instances of *hilar fino/delgado* found in the corpus are realised by the infinitive, and none by the imperfect, as in these examples:

*una excelente ocasión para intentar **hilar algo más fino** sobre el Big Ensemble TM.
por esta corriente ideológica van a tener que **hilar muy fino** para decidir a qué aguas
quedarse*

As can be appreciated in these citations, *fino* is subject to modification, being realised by *más fino*, *del todo fino*, *muy fino*, *finísimo*, *tan fino*, *algo más fino*, *por lo fino* and *muy finamente*, a trend also present with *hilar delgado*. The realisation with *delgado* appears to be relatively infrequent in contemporary Spanish, only accounting for 14% of the instantiations of the sense of ‘do something with great care’:

*eso obliga a los periodistas que trabajan en él a **hilar más delgado todavía** a la hora de
evaluar cómo*

A not inconsiderable number of uses of *hilar fino/delgado* (34.8%) are realised by present simple (*hila/n*):

*Octavio Paz, que en estas cuestiones **hila muy delgado**, ha visto que la consecuencia de*

For the learner of Spanish as a foreign language, however, it might be useful to encounter the idiom in contexts where the node is realised by the infinitive, because the preceding linguistic context can provide important clues to the positive assessment of the expression. Of the 43 infinitive realisations of *hilar fino/delgado*, 12 are preceded by verbs expressing obligation (*tener que/hay que/obligar a*), while other cases similarly show that it is desirable for speakers that they should know how to be subtle or careful in their doings:

*Un teatro público tiene que **hilar más fino***

*Los pilotos tuvieron que aprender a **hilar finísimo** con el combustible*

*En ocasiones cae en simplificaciones. Pero sabe **hilar más fino** en este azoriniano tapiz de ingenios*

Given that an important aspect of figurative language use is its axiology, the corpus can provide learners with relevant information about this aspect of usage. If, in a

case such as this, a particular meaning appears to correlate with a particular form, examination of corpora can help language teachers and material designers locate and isolate those instances which might prove most helpful to learners in understanding not only what such figurative uses mean but also what evaluation is implied in their use. This is of particular importance if learners have consulted a bilingual dictionary such as the *Oxford Bilingual Dictionary* (1994) which translates *hilar fino/delgado* as ‘split hairs’. Apart from the fact that this expression does not accurately translate the sense of the Spanish expression, the English idiom implies unnecessary and unwanted attention to detail, a negative evaluation absent in *hilar fino/delgado*.

BRANCH 2

SENSE 3

A sense closely related to the ‘making thread’ sense is the use of the past participle to describe the ‘thread-like’ appearance of substances which cannot properly be said to have been spun. This use is particularly associated with foodstuffs or confectionary (*huevo/azúcar/higo hilado*) but also with other substances such as wax or glass.

BRANCH 3

SENSE 4

The third ‘strand’ of figurative extensions of *hilar* appears to stem not from the ‘spinning’ semantics of the verb, but rather from the sense of ‘weave’. Although cited as rare by dictionaries, and found to be rare in the CREA, the verb can also be used to refer metonymically to the product of spinning, namely the thread. An example such as the following shows how the process of spinning and weaving are expressed as separate processes:

Primero hilaba esta lana, después tejía esta tela

However, the two steps may be fused, as in the following examples:

donde se hilaban y tejían las ropas de los habitantes or vestía pardo de estameña, hilado, según se dijo, por sus propias manos

That is, transitive uses of *hilar* may be followed by direct objects like *lana* or *lino* or by NPs realising the product of the thread once woven into cloth.

SENSE 5

Focus on the product (the thread) and its linking or joining function motivates figurative uses of the verb with quite different targets; common to all, however, is the notion of joining together. Altogether, this linking sense accounts for 41% of uses of *hilar* found in the corpus, although, as will be seen, it is used to talk about particular topics more frequently than others.

Hilar is used to refer to the connection between actions or events occurring one after another, and in the CREA is particularly associated with descriptions of football matches. It is thus used in the same discourse contexts as senses 2 and 3 of English *thread* :

su incapacidad de hilar jugadas que llevasen algún peligro sobre la meta

SENSE 6

Used transitively, *hilar* is also found with words denoting destiny or fate as Subject:

una singular fata que hila el sino lastrado

SENSE 7

Closely related to sense 2 above is *hilar* followed by words such as *argumento* or *trama*. That is, the verb denotes the linking of events, but in this case fictional ones, and thus overlaps with sense 12 of English *thread*. This sense is also associated with Latin *filare*, from which the Spanish verb developed, and accounts for a total of 25 tokens (or 20%) of figurative uses of *hilar* in the CREA:

se encuentra con una narración tan bien hilada y tan bien narrada

SENSE 8

Hilar is used figuratively to describe the linking of words or larger units of discourse, as in the following example:

Gabry decía tacos para hilar frases que nada decían

SENSE 9

14.5% of the tokens of *hilar* were used to denote the linking of thoughts and ideas, realised by nouns such as *teoría* or *ideas*.

razonaban con torpeza, incapaces de hilar correctamente un pensamiento

This example is again illustrative of the positive connotations of *hilar*: coherence, whether of speech, ideas or elements of plot are highlighted in these uses of the verb.

SENSE 10

Closely related to sense 6 is the use of *hilar* to signify ‘infer’, but in this case the verb can be used transitively or intransitively:

La gente está hilando la separación con un romance con Melanie Griffith nada es lo que parece.

Y sólo hilando en el filo de lo sutil puede uno ir descubriendo

3.3. Wing

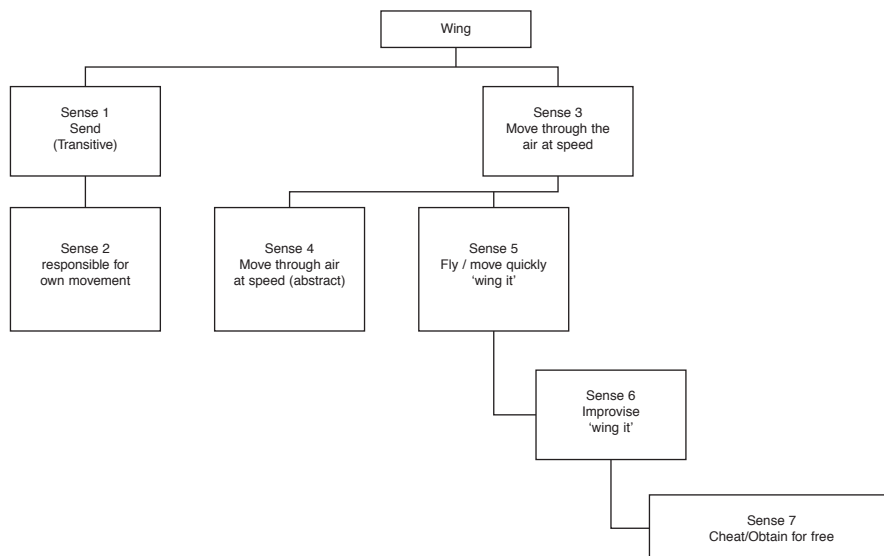


Figure 3: Senses of WING

There were far fewer instances of *wing* than there were of *thread*, and the pattern of figurative extensions was much more straightforward. Like *thread*, figurative extensions of *wing* also divide into transitive and reflexive/intransitive senses. Unlike *thread*, transitive uses are relatively rare. This is likely to be because of the lack of parallelism with the basic sense. Although things can be threaded, things are very rarely ‘winged’ in the real world, and when they are, *winged* is usually operating as an adjective (*a winged creature*). In the first sense, *wing* + noun, *wing* is metonymically extended to refer to flying, or being transported quickly:

SENSE 1

WING + NP + preposition (Example: *imagine the smoke and flames **winging** the message to him*)

This can be metaphorically extended to form the fairly fixed, reflexive phrase *wing its way*:

SENSE 2

WING + POSSESSIVE + way + preposition (Example: *a heartfelt good luck message **winging** its way from New Zealand*)

This is similar to *thread*, but the other stages that *thread* passes through in order to get here were apparently absent.

The other main sense was *wing* with a preposition:

SENSE 3

WING + preposition (Example: *send their tickets **winging** back to Britain*)

Sense 3 can be extended to abstract contexts:

SENSE 4

WING + preposition (Examples: *The trumpet comes **winging** through; Each word **winging** across the stage*)

Interestingly, this sense occurred more often with *winging* than with *wing* or *winged*. It was thus more common in the present continuous.

The other figurative extension was to ‘*wing it*’, which was a fairly fixed grammatical pattern. Again, this could be being used to mark figurative use and avoid confusion.

SENSE 5

WING + it + preposition (Example: ***Wing** it over the trenches*)

It strikes us that this might be a particularly difficult construction for language learners. It is not clear what the ‘it’ stands for, if anything, and to the best of our knowledge, this dummy pronoun is not present in other languages. It would be worth drawing attention to in the language classroom.

This sense is then figuratively extended to mean ‘to improvise/do one’s best with inadequate training or experience’:

SENSE 6

WING + it (Example: ***Winging** it is more realistic*)

Finally, there was another sense, which does not appear to be metaphorically or metonymically related to any of the other senses:

SENSE 7

WING + NP (Example: ***Wing** a year’s subscription*)

When *wing* is used in this sense, it acquires a sense of freeloading or cheating. There was, however, only one example of this in the entire corpus.

In total, *wing*/VERB produced 56 hits, and *winged*/VERB produced 70 hits; and *winging*/VERB produced 171 hits. The collocation patterns for *wing* and *winged* resembled each other, but those for *winging* were somewhat different. The collocations of *wing*/VERB in the Bank of English show that *wing it* is the most frequent expression. As with *thread*, it was the collocations to the right that told us the most interesting things. They showed that *wing it* and *wing* + preposition were the most frequent forms and senses. After this, there was the series of *wing its/their* etc. *way*.

The collocations for *winged*/VERB were fairly similar to those of *wing*/VERB. Again, the most frequent expression was *wing it*, but unlike with *wing*, this was immediately followed by *wing its way*.

Interestingly, *winging* had a slightly different collocation pattern from both *wing* and *winged*. *Winging its way* was much more significant than other collocations. This is interesting as with *thread*, it was also the v-ing form that exhibited the most unique pattern of senses. It would be worth investigating the generalisability of this phenomenon, as it is likely to have important language teaching implications.

3.4. Aletear

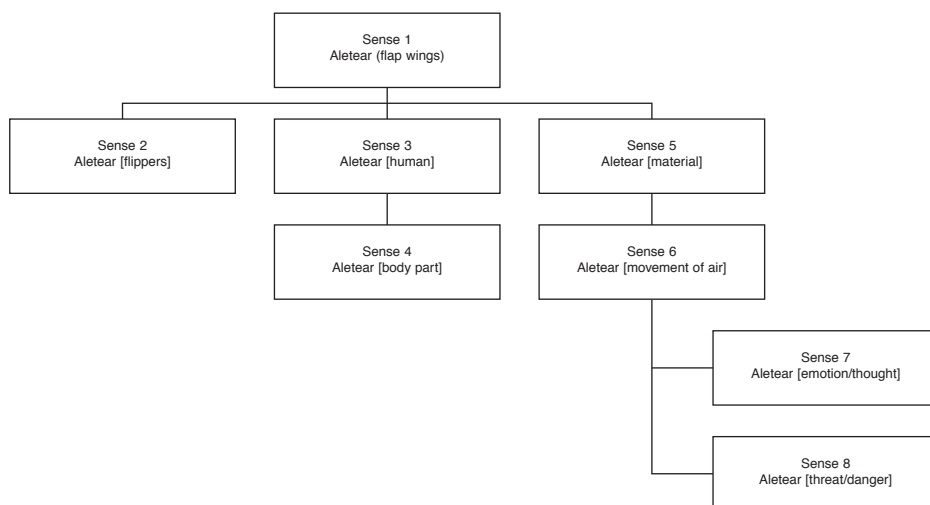


Figure 4: Senses of ALETEAR

Aletear derives from *aleta* (‘fin’) and thus at first sight appears to bear little relation semantically to English *to wing*. However, the nouns from which both verbs derive denote those limbs on animals that enable locomotion; the medium in which this movement takes place may be different (water and air, respectively) but, as will be seen, movement in or of the air is prominent in the semantics of a number of figurative extensions of *alatear*. That is, although the verb can be used to refer to the movement of fins or flippers, it is most commonly employed to refer to the movement of the wings (whether of a bird or other winged animal). Indeed, this is the core (or first) sense identified both by the DRAE (2001) and Seco *et al.* (1999). Of the 113 tokens of ALETEAR found in the CREA, 41 (or 36%) are used in this sense:

*Le despertó, tres horas más tarde, el **alatear** de los primeros buitres.*

The DRAE (2001) notes in its gloss of this sense that the movement of the wings does not necessarily imply that the bird (or other animal) is actually in the air: ‘mover frecuentemente las alas sin echar a volar’. However, this lack of movement in the air is not associated with all the corpus uses of the verb:

*estábamos mirando una paloma que **alateaba** inmóvil sobre la fuente de la plaza*

If *alatear* did not imply some kind of airborne movement, the use of ‘*inmóvil*’ would be redundant in this case. Indeed, as will be seen below, frequent collocates to the right of the verb are locational adverbial expressions which situate the bird, butterfly or other winged creature in the air. However, the verb appears to belong to the group that Morimoto (2001: 43-60) classifies as VMMS-1 (verbs that denote an ‘internal’ manner of

movement) or verbs whose semantics highlight a type of movement that does not lend itself to uses in which there is displacement of the Subject to a particular location.

The corpus citations of ALETEAR reveal that this is a verb that readily lends itself to figurative use. It is often found used in similes and metaphors:

tenso, pálido, demacrado, como si en su corazón aleteara el ave negra del temor
Las instancias aleteaban en el cuchitril como palomas mensajeras

In the description that follows, the semantic extensions of *aletear* have been divided, not uncontroversially, into three groups or branches.

BRANCH 1

SENSE 2

This branch consists of the verb used to describe the movement of flippers or fins in the water. This could be seen as the core sense, but in the CREA no uses were found to describe the movement of fish; rather, it is used to describe the movement of a diver's flippers, as in the example below:

una acción nociva muy común en los buceadores inexpertos o insensibles es el levantamiento de sedimentos del fondo cuando aletean

BRANCH 2

SENSE 3

This branch of *aletear* focuses on the movement of humans. The first sense describes the movement of the whole body with no mention of a particular body part:

una criatura inteligente que aleteaba y que latía y que parecía comprender su situación

This sense does not appear to be particularly frequent, as only three uses were found in the corpus (all used to describe a woman).

SENSE 4

More frequently, *aletear* figuratively extends its meaning from describing the movement of a bird's wings to describing the movement of the arms, which may resemble the wings when flapped:

los codos aleteando como si fuéramos cluecas a punto de poner

However, it is also used to describe finer motor movement of different parts of the body, such as lips, hands or eye lids:

sobre la que aletean asustadas las larguísimas pestañas de oro en cuanto su nariz respingó aleteante, mostrando los pelos de sus fosas

BRANCH 3

SENSE 5

Here, *aletear* denotes the fluttering movement of some material, such as the leaves of a book, curtains or leaves. Although movement is still highlighted with this sense, the Subject is not agent of the movement.

*contemplaba el bosque de mástiles y banderines **aleteando** en la dársena del puerto*

SENSE 6

A number of tokens of *aletear* were found to denote the movement of air:

*El aliento de la calle **aleteaba** en las cortinas*
*Ese soplo que **aletea** entre los labios*

As can be appreciated in this last example, the movement of air may be literally or metaphorically breath expelled through the mouth. This use has Biblical echoes, for in Genesis I, 2, this is the verb used to describe God moving the waters. Rewordings of the famous lines are found in the CREA:

*Cuando el viento de Dios vuelva a **aletear** sobre la superficie de las aguas*

SENSE 7

The Subject of the verb *aletear* may be a thought or emotion. In these cases, the verb refers to an unspecified subject's vague apprehension of this.

*En Albacete **aletea** un acusado sentimiento de frustración*
*Cuando **aleteaba** todavía la esperanza en su corazón*

SENSE 8

Closely related to sense 3 is the use of *aletear* to denote the apprehension of danger or threat.

*Calculaba el peligro de descomposición que **aleteaba** sobre la monarquía tras la alianza de 1699*
*Las crisis de subsistencia **aleteando** de nuevo*

The collocation of *aletear* with nouns with negative connotations is curious, given that sense 2 is associated with the benign intervention of the deity. The close relationship of awe or admiration and fear may explain why the semantic prosody of this verb may change so radically in different contexts.

Certain patterns were discernible to the right of the verb. Given that motion is salient in the semantics of the verb (whether used literally or figuratively), it was not surprising to find that *aletear* is often followed by a preposition. These were most frequently the prepositions *en*, *sobre* and *por*, none of which describe the path of the

trajector to a landmark, thus placing this verb among the group of Spanish verbs that Morimoto (2001) calls VMMS-IS.

4. Implications for Teaching

As has been seen, although there is some overlap between them, the figurative extensions of these verbs are very different in English and Spanish, although the nouns from which they derive denote a similar entity (*wing/aleta*) or the same one (*thread/hilo*). In the case of all four verbs, we have noted that figurative senses cannot be located along one single continuum, but that major shifts in meaning can be discerned, and that these separate meaning branches may or may not be associated with a range of figurative senses. Where such a figurative continuum exists, learners may benefit from exploring corpus examples which reflect these related senses and the patterns associated with them. For example, manner of movement is a salient aspect of figurative uses of *thread*, while *hilar* is associated with linking or joining.

Furthermore, as we developed the classification technique, it became apparent that the different senses of these verbs were often associated with particular grammatical patterns (transitive/intransitive, finite/non-finite verb forms, and so on), which seems to indicate that the learning of figurative uses of words cannot be separated from the learning of their grammatical behaviour. As Hunston; Francis (2000) point out, words acquire meaning through their grammar patterns. Perhaps the clearest example of this, in the case of the verbs explored here, is *thread* as it occurs in the *way* construction. Although verbs like this followed by possessive + *way* have received a great deal of attention (for example, Goldberg [1996] or Jackendoff [1990]), from a pedagogical point of view its occurrence in modern English as one realisation of *thread* expressing a manner of motion may be greatly facilitate learning of the various uses of this verb to refer both to fictive and factive motion. As Israel points out (1996: 221), from a historical point of view, the occurrence of a verb such as this in the *way* construction marks its shift of meaning to denote a manner of movement denoting path creation; but, as has been seen, it can also be used to refer to careful movement without *way*, and is found in the corpus followed also by *path*. Focussing on the use of this particular construction might facilitate learners' understanding of *thread* in other patterns to refer to a particular type of movement. This will be important for learners whose mother tongue is typologically different from English (as is the case of Spanish learners of English) in this regard, and may complement other pedagogical proposals for teaching/learning manner of movement verbs in English (for example, the use of Total Physical Response activities to trigger motor imagery [Lindstromberg; Boers, 2005]).

Likewise, for learners of Spanish whose mother tongue is English, it may be helpful in exploring the corpus to focus on the prepositions that follow the Spanish verb *aletear*, which expresses manner of movement but occurs in very different patterns from similar verbs in English. In terms of pedagogy, it is unrealistic to suggest that learners conduct this kind of detailed study for themselves for every word they encounter, but it may be useful for them to be exposed to one or diagrams of the type shown in this article, for a couple of words in their own and the target language. This would alert them to the types

of similarities and differences that exist between languages and to the importance of phraseology in determining meaning. With advanced language learners who are majoring in the foreign language, or who are planning to teach languages themselves at some point, it may be a valuable exercise to have them make comparative corpus studies of their own as this would sensitise them to the figurative nature of polysemy, as well as making them aware of the potential and limitations of transfer as a communication strategy, and of corpora as a materials development tool.

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