
Figurative verb polysemy is driven differentially by grammar and conceptual content: Evidence from cross-linguistic data

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Figurative polysemy, in which a word's original meaning is extended into domains for which it did not originally apply, is a pervasive property of the creativity of human language. We argue, using cross-linguistic (English/Spanish) data, that we can explain similarities and differences in patterns of figurative verb polysemy in the two languages by distinguishing whether the polysemy is anchored in grammar (e.g. the event-structure of the verb) or in conceptual (or "root") content. We begin with the case study of English *sweep* and Spanish *barrer*. Though listed as equivalents in the IDS database (Key & Comrie 2015), *sweep* is an activity verb (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1991), while *barrer* describes a complex telic event (Auza & Maldonado 2005). As conceptual counterparts, they share various patterns of figurative extension (e.g., describing overwhelming victory or severe weather); we show that the differences in event structure also correlate with subtle differences in figurative senses.

A contrasting case study is provided by *tear* and *rasgar*, which share event structure but differ in fine details of conceptual content. Both verbs denote comparable changes of state resulting in some loss of integrity via separation; however, they diverge significantly in their semantic restrictions on the affected object. *Rasgar* is restricted to destruction of unsubstantial materials, excluding, e.g. thick substances (??*rasgar pan* 'tear bread'). *Tear* is not so restricted, and (perhaps relatedly) further implies that the separation involves force in opposing directions. These differences are clearly traceable in figurative meanings: While both verbs can describe figurative separation or destruction, only *tear* allows figurative uses exploiting force in opposing directions, e.g. to describe contrary feelings.

A full understanding of cross-linguistic variation in creative language use, such as figurative verbal polysemy, entails understanding how grammatically-encoded content interacts with content not specifically linked to grammar. The success of our account in shedding new light on figurative polysemy thus highlights the importance of treating the two types of semantic content as distinct, if related.

References: • Auza, A. & R. Maldonado (2005). Determinantes aspectuales en la adquisición verbal, el caso de los nombres de oficio. M. Lubbers Quesada & R. Maldonado (eds.), *Dimensiones del aspecto en español*. Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 245–274. • Key, M.R., & B. Comrie (eds.) (2015). *The Intercontinental Dictionary Series*. <https://ids.clld.org/>. • Levin, B. & M. Rappaport Hovav (1991). Wiping the slate clean: A lexical semantic exploration. *Cognition* 41, 123–151.