

Proper Names and Linguistic Dynamics

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Abstract

Pragmatics is the study of how people exchange meanings through the use of language. In this paper we describe our experience with regard to texts belonging to a large contemporary corpus of written language, in order to verify the uses, changes and flexibility of the meaning of Proper Names (PN). As a matter of fact, while building the lexical semantic database ItalWordNet (IWN), a considerable set of PN (up to now, about 4,000) has been inserted and studied. We give prominence to the polysemy of PN and their shifting or moving from one class to another as an example of the extensibility of language and the possibility of change considering meaning as a dynamic process.

Many examples of the sense shifting phenomenon can be evidenced by textual corpora. By comparing the percentages regarding the texts belonging to two different periods of time, an increasing use of the PN with sense extension has been verified. This evidence could confirm the tendency to consider the derived or extended senses as more salient and prevailing on the base senses, confirming a “gradual fixation” of meaning during the time.

The object of our study (in progress) is to observe the uses of sense extensions also examining in detail “freshly coined” examples and taking into account their relationship with metarepresentational capacity and human creativity and the ways in which linguistic dynamics can activate the meaning potential of the words.

1. Lexicographic Experience

According to Wittgenstein every sign seems dead when it appears by itself: only in use is it alive. Lexical pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that investigates the processes by which linguistically-specified (“literal”) word meanings are modified in use (Wilson, 2004). The goal of lexical pragmatics is to account for the fact that the concept communicated by use of a word often differs from the concept encoded. We wish to describe our experience relative to the texts belonging to a large contemporary corpus of written language, in order to verify the changes and flexibility of the meaning of Proper Names (PN). While building the lexical semantic database ItalWordNet (IWN), a considerable set of PN (up to now, about 4,000) has been inserted and studied. Each PN is considered as an “instance” of a class it belongs to, e.g.: “Firenze (Florence) *belongs to class* città (town)”. About 200 classes of PN were defined. While codifying PN, linking each proper name to its belonging class, it was evidenced that, in many cases, there is a shift from one belonging class to another, with an extension of meaning. In particular, we examine the particular uses of PN, highlighting polysemic productions that occur by means of a metaphoric use of PN, e.g.: “He is a poor Don Quixote”, or by means of metonymy, e.g.: “the Yamaha won out again with Valentino Rossi”, or on the basis of a kind of analogy, e.g.: “You have a beautiful silhouette”.

We give prominence to the polysemy of PN and their shifting or moving from one class to another as an example of the extensibility of language and of the possibility of change that are at the basis of a functional approach considering meaning as a dynamic process.

Some deviations from the literal reference are present regularly when considering some particular belonging classes; therefore a semantic relation has been created to codify this phenomenon in IWN (Marinelli, 2004). When

there is a regular shifting from one belonging class to another, (in the case either of metonym or of metaphor), also for PN we indicate the regular shifting using the code: “*has extension*” and its reversed “*is extension of*” e.g.:

Quirinale1 *belongs to class* palazzo (palace)
Quirinale2 *belongs to class* carica (office)
Quirinale1 *has extension* Quirinale2
Quirinale2 *is extension of* Quirinale1

2. The Research on the Corpus

Our research has been carried out by studying - among others - a set of representative samples of PN, also present in the semantic database WordNet 2.1, that show a kind of polysemy, e.g.:

- (n) Peter Pan (a boyish or immature man; after the boy in Barrie's play who never grows up)
- (n) Peter Pan (the main character in a play by J. M. Barrie; a boy who won't grow up)
- (n) colossus, behemoth, giant, heavyweight, titan (a person of exceptional importance and reputation)
- (n) Titan ((Greek mythology) any of the primordial giant gods who ruled the Earth until overthrown by Zeus; the Titans were offspring of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth)).

Two equivalent subsets of CLIC corpus (Corpus di Lingua Italiana Contemporanea) have been examined as reference corpora for verifying our assumptions. The Italian PAROLE Corpus (Marinelli *et als.*, 2003) consists of 20 million word tokens, including texts collected until 1996. One of the main goals of the LE PAROLE project was to ensure the creation of a comparable set of large Written Language Resources (WLRs) for all the European languages. After the end of the PAROLE Project, the Corpus

has been enlarged adding data from various types of newspapers, (encoded following the general standard rules recommended by the “old” Project), covering, up to now, the years until 2003. The new corpus, now named CLIC, consists of almost 100 million words.

Each subset is composed by texts covering the years 1992-1994 and 1999-2001, both containing about 20 million words and the same type of texts i.e. daily newspapers: La Stampa, Repubblica, Il Sole 24 Ore.

Many examples of sense extension can be evidenced by textual corpora. Newspaper articles are particularly rich in metaphorical uses, to give the discourse great enrichment, “essentially consumer oriented”. In general, written language has more ideational metaphors, called also metaphors of transitivity, than spoken discourse. This is attributed to a more general difference in types of complexity: spoken language is “grammatically intricate”, whereas written language is said to be “lexically dense” (Taverniers, 2003).

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Name	Frequency	Proper use	=C/B %	Extended	=E/B %	Other	=G/B %
Caos	410	13	3,17%	397	96,83%	0	0,00%
Sirena	70	14	20,00%	21	30,00%	35	50,00%
Bordeaux	49	23	46,94%	26	53,06%	0	0,00%
Giuda	28	12	42,86%	10	35,71%	6	21,43%
Rasputin	3	1	33,33%	2	66,67%	0	0,00%
Tarzan	26	7	26,92%	9	34,62%	10	38,46%
McDonald's	43	12	27,91%	22	51,16%	9	20,93%
Nutella	48	13	27,08%	33	68,75%	2	4,17%
Yalta	12	6	50,00%	6	50,00%	0	0,00%
Amleto	44	20	45,45%	16	36,36%	18	40,91%
Chihuahua	4	1	25,00%	3	75,00%	0	0,00%
Chianti	50	16	32,00%	33	66,00%	1	2,00%
Vaticano	635	142	22,36%	394	62,05%	99	15,59%
Farnesina	153	11	7,19%	127	83,01%	15	9,80%
Musalemme	2	1	50,00%	1	50,00%	0	0,00%
Chimera	29	6	20,69%	19	65,52%	4	13,79%
Waterloo	21	7	33,33%	12	57,14%	2	9,52%
Champagne	141	1	0,71%	137	97,16%	3	2,13%
Amazzone	8	4	50,00%	4	50,00%	0	0,00%
Sfinge	14	4	28,57%	9	64,29%	1	7,14%
Peter Pan	15	9	60,00%	3	20,00%	3	20,00%
Titano	27	2	7,41%	6	22,22%	19	70,37%
Cenerentola	73	9	12,33%	56	76,71%	8	10,96%
Cassandra	19	6	31,58%	9	47,37%	4	21,05%
Babele	75	5	6,67%	35	46,67%	30	40,00%
Total	1999	345	17,26%	1390	69,53%	269	13,46%

Table I – Statistics from CLIC corpus years 1992-1994

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Name	Frequency	Proper use	=C/B %	Extended	=E/B %	Other	=G/B %
Caos	514	3	0,58%	511	99,42%	0	0,00%
Sirena	71	9	12,68%	14	19,72%	38	53,52%
Bordeaux	122	38	31,15%	82	67,21%	2	1,64%
Giuda	42	14	33,33%	22	52,38%	8	19,05%
Rasputin	17	6	35,29%	11	64,71%	0	0,00%
Tarzan	42	7	16,67%	30	71,43%	5	11,90%
McDonald's	186	4	2,15%	124	66,67%	21	11,29%
Nutella	61	6	9,84%	55	90,16%	0	0,00%
Yalta	16	3	18,75%	13	81,25%	0	0,00%
Amleto	88	23	26,14%	63	71,59%	2	2,27%
Chihuahua	6	1	16,67%	5	83,33%	0	0,00%
Chianti	93	33	35,48%	59	63,44%	1	1,08%
Vaticano	885	137	15,48%	519	58,64%	129	14,58%
Farnesina	242	5	2,07%	212	87,60%	19	7,85%
Musalemme	5	2	40,00%	3	60,00%	0	0,00%
Chimera	32	0	0,00%	28	87,50%	4	12,50%
Waterloo	31	6	19,35%	19	61,29%	6	19,35%
Champagne	185	1	0,54%	179	96,76%	5	2,70%
Amazzone	5	2	40,00%	3	60,00%	0	0,00%
Sfinge	8	1	12,50%	7	87,50%	0	0,00%
Peter Pan	35	11	31,43%	17	48,57%	7	20,00%
Titano	14	1	7,14%	5	35,71%	8	57,14%
Cenerentola	74	9	12,16%	72	97,30%	3	4,05%
Cassandra	18	5	27,78%	9	50,00%	4	22,22%
Babele	71	7	9,86%	57	80,28%	7	9,86%
Total	2863	334	11,67%	2119	74,01%	269	9,40%

Table II – Statistics from CLIC corpus years 1999-2001

In the lexical semantic database IWN a very high percentage of PN shows a regular sense extension: 59 classes out of 200 and 2070 names out of 4000, as examined in detail in Marinelli 2004. For the diachronic analysis almost two hundred PN were chosen; we decided to show here in the tables the most representative PN and present in the semantic database WordNet 2.1. They were examined evaluating and tagging manually the cases of sense extension. We decided to verify the data coming from our analysis, examining the use of PN in a “living context”, considering the texts belonging to the corpus as “the most suitable natural environment” for studying the behaviour of a considerable set of PN in different topical contexts. In the corpus we analyse concretely a group of PN showing many types of derivatives and sense extensions, generated in many sentences of common sense. Our main purpose is to offer an account of how PN behave in relation to their context of use and in different periods of time.

3. About the Results

The tables only show some results regarding subject matters each of which would certainly deserve to be studied in further detail.

3.1 Meaning Fixation

Taking into account the data coming from our analysis and comparing the percentages regarding the data/texts belonging to the two different periods of time, a decreasing use of the literal sense has been verified, while the use of the PN with sense extension is increasing. This evidence could confirm the tendency to consider the variations in meaning as more salient and prevailing on the base senses/meanings, confirming a “gradual fixation” of the meaning as time passes (Nutella, Yalta, Tarzan, etc.). In particular, even if the sample considered is too small to evince statistically consistent results, it is evidenced that with regard to some PN (Caos, Champagne, Rasputin, Vaticano, Waterloo), the percentage of sense extension compared with total frequency remains almost constant in the time. On the other hand, as regards other PN (Amleto, Babele, Nutella, Peter Pan, Sfinge, Tarzan, Yalta), we notice a great variation during time: the use of sense extension is much more frequent in more recent periods of time. As far as the first PN is concerned, we can say that the extended sense has been “fixed”; as to the second ones, the fixation process still seems to be in progress with an increasing use of sense extension. In the set considered there is also a proper name “Sirena” (Siren) that can be looked at as an example of a decreased use of sense extension, as if the language evolution could with the passing of time cause the dimming of some utterances, probably substituted by other more up-to-date idioms. Moreover the proper name “Chimera” (Chimaera) recently results only with the extended sense. There are PN that are present with high frequency in both of the two subsets considered, but in more recent periods of time show different types of sense extensions, some even out of scale, e.g.: Playstation, Islam.

3.2 The text-context connection

The text-context connection is fully confirmed. Language takes place in context. The meanings we construct in

using language are strictly linked to both the cultural and situational context in which the language is used: the lexical-pragmatic processes apply “on line”, in flexible, creative and context-dependent ways (Wilson 2003).

By understanding the semiotic situational properties, language users can predict the meanings that are likely to be exchanged and the language likely to be used. There is an inextricable, systematic association between context and text, i.e. the extra linguistic situation and the linguistic/verbal realizations, while, at the same time, the context activates the meanings.

The importance of context is confirmed in particular when highlighting the use of different types of metaphorical and/or metonymic meaning extension; in fact, more transpositions than expected were found, e.g.: the name of a place becomes the name of a battle and then of the defeat (Waterloo); the name of the hill becomes the name of a vineyard and then the name of the wine (Bordeaux, Champagne, Chianti), the athlete’s name gets on to the brand and then to the garment (Lacoste); or a physicist’s name becomes the name of the engine (Diesel) or the name of the biomedical analysis (Doppler); or the name of a valley becomes the name of a cow and then of the luncheon meat, of the brand, of the basket-ball team (Simmenthal).

Another consideration could be made about the “verse” of the sense shifting. While in the case of metaphoric use, sense shifting has only one direction and, like similitude, it is not reversible, e.g.: “My husband is a true Othello”, in the case of metonym the extension of meaning is verified and continues passing from one class to another and vice versa (Lacoste, Ferrari, Vatican, Iraq, etc.), spontaneously recognized by our mind even dynamically adjusted each time to meaning grasping and comprehension.

3.3 Consolidated and Novel Sense Extensions

Another point which should be highlighted concerns the relation between the consolidated meaning extensions and the “freshly coined” ones.

The consolidated meaning extensions are durable and almost universally recognized, like “Waterloo”, indicating a final crushing defeat (why a defeat and not a victory, why is the French point of view prevailing?), “Kleenex” a piece of soft absorbent paper, mascara the makeup to darken the eye lashes, “Jacuzzi” a large whirlpool bathtub with underwater jets (quoting the definitions found in WN 2.1), etc., and, namely, every time there is a polysemic production of a proper name with a regular sense extension. Through the history of language, “demetaphorization” occurs: metaphors gradually lose their metaphorical nature, and in this way become “domesticated” (Halliday, 1994) and their character changes becoming retrievable nearly as a literal expression, and it is not easy to recreate the metaphorical path of its derivation. “What starts as spontaneous, one-off affair may become regular and frequent enough to stabilize in a community” (Wilson, 2003).

While conventionalized sense extensions have irrecoverably lost at least some of their original properties, fresh metaphors are easily comprehended and are available in the daily press, on TV, in popular literature, etc.

We consider as belonging to this set those sense extensions that originate from a current event and become

cutting-edge and even swish, with high frequency in everyday language. The lexico-grammatical choices speakers/writers make, become completely meaningful depending on the one hand on the relationship between interlocutors: the formulation of utterances is dependent on what is often called the interlocutors' "common ground", i.e. on the shared knowledge, belief and attitude; on the other hand, on the purpose or intention of what is said: "the principal source of difference in semantic potential ... arises from difference in associated purport" (Croft and Cruse, 2004) and, in this case, the primary purpose is to use impressive linguistic expressions, giving a semantic surplus, capturing the "vividness" of experience, conveying "chunks" of information, painting a richer picture of experience than might be expressed by literal language (Ortony, 1987).

"Freshly coined" meaning extensions will become consolidated or fixed, through a process of lexicalization e.g.: "pane e nutella" (bread and nutella), and of grammaticalization e.g.: "Papa boys". New words are coined starting from the most cutting-edge proper names: from "Nutella", "nutellofili", "nutella-dipendenti, etc.; from "Berlusconi", "Berluscloni", "berluscones", "berlusconeide", etc.; from "Flintstone", "flintstoneggiare"; from "McDonald", "McDonaldizzato", etc. Even a part ("Euro") of a proper name ("Europa") can be used as prefix creating new words to make a vivid impression: e.g.: "Eurosauro", "Euroislam", "Eurotorino". Sometimes our basic intuition of implication and inferential schemas is exploited (modus ponens/modus tollens): "no Martini no party!". We often resort an antonomasia, e.g.: "Il signore degli anelli"(the lord of rings) to indicate Yuri Chechi, the gymnast athlete, or "il Dottore" (the Doctor), referred to Valentino Rossi, the world champion motor-racer.

4. Final Remarks

Novel usages of words can be derived through the extensibility of language: "The description of language is a description of choice" (Chapelle, 1998), or even of

creativity that shapes, for each proper name considered, more transpositions, derivatives and neologisms than expected. The meaning is created in language. Our proposal is to go in depth studying the "history" of the meaning extensions that many PN present, analyzing the "chain of metaphorical interpretations" (Halliday, 1994/1985) as steps in between the metaphorical form and the base-expression, also examining in detail the origin, the evolution, and, sometimes, the dimming of this phenomenon always considering the different contexts of its "history". Many more connections will be created that may teach us about mechanisms of metaphor production and comprehension (Fellbaum, 2004),

The dynamic construal of meaning is not connected with the appearance of specific structural properties in the lexicon, nor with the apparently infinite flexibility of meaning in context: an alternative approach must be explored, whereby neither meanings nor structural relations are specified in the lexicon, but are construed "on-line" in actual situations of use (Croft and Cruse, 2004) facing partial temporary "representational structures, constructed at the point of utterance", partially responsive to contextual factors. We believe that the context gives the drift to develop a kind of creativity capable of formulating even novel metaphors. "Verbal communication typically conveys much more than is linguistically encoded" (Sperber and Wilson, 1997). Either considering sense extensions as the outcome of a metarepresentational capacity (Papafragou, 1995), or as the possibility of satisfying an expectation of relevance, the only way to interpret it is to employ one's innate metaphorical interpretive strategy (Croft and Cruse, 2004).

Our research in this field will be fostered by the analysis and comparison with our linguistic resources, taking into account the way in which linguistic dynamics can activate the meaning potential of the words i.e. "the meanings through which we live our lives" (Martin, 2003)

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