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How to use both the NSM and CL approaches to meaning – Portuguese lexeme *paixão* ‘passion’

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that the NSM approach to meaning (Wierzbicka 1996) can be used together with some methodological tools elaborated within the Cognitive Linguistics (Langacker 1988, Lakoff 1987). By combining NSM explications, based on reductive paraphrase, with prototype semantics, stating that meaning of a lexeme has a centric structure (with some senses more salient than others) we are able to refer more accurately to the peripheral senses of a given word. Thanks to the radial network diagram it is possible to excerpt precisely the lexical unit we are interested in and describe it in terms of semantic primes.

Key words: radial network, prototypical category, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM), lexical meaning, lexical unit, emotion.

1. Introduction

I assume that word meanings in different languages mirror the ways of living and thinking specific for a given language community and are essential in understanding its culture. In other words, our categorisation of the world depends on the language we use. In this paper I would like to show that combining the NSM paradigm with the cognitivists’ proposal concerning the inner structure of a polysemic category is a valuable contribution to the research on the lexical meaning. Although working well in defining the central meaning of the lexeme (Kleiber 2003), the NSM method has certain limitations as far as peripheral meanings are concerned. I would like to demonstrate that the two approaches are complementary, referring to the example of the Portuguese word *paixão* ‘love,’ ‘passion.’

2. Methodology

I believe that the meaning of a lexeme is revealed best on the sentence level. Otherwise we have several different meanings hidden in one lexical form. I believe (cf. Apresjan 2000, Bartmiński 1999, Wierzbicka 1996) that the definition of a given concept should reveal everyday, not scientific, knowledge. But the problem persists, how should we allocate the meaning we are interested in? The NSM method does not entirely account for the polysemic nature of most natural categories. That is why I consider it useful to combine the NSM paradigm with the cognitivists' proposal concerning the inner structure of the lexeme. Before analyzing the Portuguese *paixão*, let us take a look at the above mentioned approaches; see what they have in common and what the main differences between them are.

2.1. Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

The NSM (i.e. natural semantic metalanguage) is a decompositional approach based on a fixed set of symbols (semantic primes) and combinatorial rules (metagrammar). The meaning of a given word is explicated by ascribing to it a composed semantic representation (metalinguistic explication). It is assumed that the entire meaning can be explicated through reductive paraphrase, that is to say an equivalent expression composed of semantic primes and molecules¹.

The repertoire of semantic primes, which consists of 63 lexical units (see Table 1.), is based on conceptual universals; not on universals of experience, environment or culture. The semantic primes are regarded not only as universal, but also as innate – hence indefinable, known to us a priori – and that liberates us from the stereotypes and prejudices we are accustomed to by the usage of our native languages (Wierzbicka 1996).

Table 1. NSM – a list of semantic primitives (Wierzbicka 2009:5)

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING / THING, PEOPLE, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, MUCH/MANY, SOME, ALL
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR

¹ Semantic molecules are bigger “chunks” of knowledge. They are usually words that have proven to be useful in the explication of many other words, e.g., *woman*, *eat*, *animal*, *home* (see also: Goddard/Wierzbicka 2002).

Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement, contact:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH
Location, existence, possession, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifier, augments:	VERY, MORE
Similarity:	LIKE

The explication by means of NSM is, by assumption, the simplest possible and intuitively clear to everyone, no matter what language they speak. It must be noted here that semantic primes exist as meanings of lexical units (not lexemes) (Wierzbicka 2009). A lexical unit is defined as a pairing of a single specifiable meaning with a lexical form (Goddard 2001:2).

In my previous work I used the NSM methodology to explain the meaning of some cultural key words in Portuguese (Buřat Silva 2006, 2008). The results I obtained assured me that constructing a metalinguistic explication clarifies various aspects of the word meaning. Once the principles of the metagrammar are known, a simple verification of the definition is possible. It is easy to compare synonymous lexemes like e.g. *amargura*, *mágoa*, *dor*, *tristeza* (all of them referring to a kind of SADNESS).

2.2. Cognitive Linguistics (CL)

Cognitivists (e.g. Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1988) claim that language must be studied with reference to its cognitive, experiential and social contexts, as Geeraerts (1995:111) says, “cognitive linguistics sees language embedded in the overall cognitive capacities of man.” That is why cognitive linguistics is mainly interested in natural language categorisation and its characteristics: prototypicality, polysemy, metaphor and cognitive models.

The concept of radial network, which I use here, comes from the works of Lakoff (1987 – radial category) and Langacker (1988 – network model). Investigating into the meaning of a lexeme I base my considerations on the prototype semantics assumption, that a lexical category has a centric structure, and different meanings are linked to one another in a systematic way. That is to say, it is possible to allocate a central meaning of a lexeme and see how other meanings are related to it thanks to the processes of metonymy, metaphor, extension and

instantiation of meaning. Perceiving the polysemic lexeme as a radial network allows us to see the relationships between different meanings within the lexeme in a clear and precise way. The key issue in constructing a radial network is to allocate a central meaning, which is not simple at all. In my work I use a functional, not etymological criterion to find the category centre (cf. Taylor 2001). I look for the element which would allow me to extract peripheral meanings in the most economical way.

It must be stressed that seeing a polysemic category as a radial network does not necessarily imply that there exists only one prototypical centre. On the contrary, we may have two (or more) prototypical centres of a category (Soares 1999).

2.3. NSM and CL – similarities and differences

The main assumptions shared by Wierzbicka and the cognitivists are:

- a) meaning is central to a language and thus, it is a primary focus of linguistic studies,
- b) linguistic knowledge cannot be separated from the general knowledge,
- c) concepts may be fuzzy, there are better and worse representatives of a category,
- d) grammatical analysis and semantic analysis are inseparable,
- e) speakers' knowledge about the language is often tacit,
- f) language does not mirror objective reality; it imposes a structure on the world, a structure that reflects the needs, interests and experiences of people from different cultures (cf. Soares 1999).

Table 2. Differences between NSM and CL

NSM	Cognitive Linguistics
a) the definitions of fuzzy concepts need not to be fuzzy; on the contrary, they should be precise and discrete in presenting the concept's vagueness,	a) meaning of a word cannot be defined precisely,
b) mental notions are clearer to us than physical notions; it is easier to define <i>love</i> than <i>mug</i> ,	b) physical notions are more basic, hence the postulate of metaphorical definitions of mental states,
c) basic concepts are indecomposable primes,	c) basic concepts are complex conceptual structures,
d) idealistic approach – the problem of meaning analysis is solved once the alphabetum cogitationum humanorum is established,	d) empirical attitude – seeking the experiential basis for linguistic expressions,
e) meaning analysis based mainly on introspection ² .	e) use of corpora.

² Actually, new papers on NSM show the growing importance of linguistic corpora in the NSM research (see: Goddard 2009, Wierzbicka 2006, Bułat Silva 2008).

Both approaches make use of the prototype theory in their explanation of meaning. Moreover, semantic primes meet a very important CL postulate: they are *embedded*, or rooted in human mind-and-body (cf. Brala 2003).

To see the differences between NSM and CL, let us look at the Table 2.

3. Portuguese lexeme *paixão*³

To see how the method I proposed here works, let us examine the Portuguese emotion term, *paixão* ‘love,’ ‘passion.’ Defining an emotion is much like defining a colour; we have to resort to prototypes. Emotion terms are very interesting conceptual categories, because they may have influence on how people actually feel (Wierzbicka 2009). On the other hand, they are quite simple to explicate, because they come from our inner, subjective reality that is directly accessible to us.

The word *paixão* has been chosen on statistical grounds from the corpus of more than 250 fado songs. I describe it here beginning with dictionary definitions and collocations. Having built the radial network of the lexeme, I look for the meaning which appeared the most number of times in the songs. I examine that particular meaning (or rather, lexical unit) more carefully, looking at its relations with surrounding words and the domains of its metaphorical conceptualisation. Then, on the basis of the former investigation I build a NSM explication expressed in semantic primes.

3.1. Dictionary definitions of *paixão*

In the Great Dictionary of Portuguese Language we can read that the basic meaning of the lexeme *paixão* is “all the tortures suffered by Jesus Christ since the moment of being imprisoned in the Olive Garden until His death on the cross” (Machado 1981 VIII:295-296). Most expressions with *paixão* come from that meaning: e.g. *Domingo da Paixão* ‘Palm Sunday,’ *semana da Paixão* ‘Holy Week,’ *veu de Paixão* ‘a purple cloth used to cover the cross and the pictures in churches during the Lent’ (DIC 2001:2717). The emotional meaning that is of interest to us appears only on the 5th (‘exaggerated or deep feeling, like love or hatred,’ Machado 1981 VIII:295-296) or 7th place (‘a very strong feeling that is expressed as an obsession towards the object of that feeling and that is imposed in an absolute manner,’ DIC 2001:2717). The verb *apaixonar-se (por alguém)* ‘fell in love with someone’ comes from that meaning.

³ This part is based on Chapter 3.1.2. from my book “Fado – podejsćie semantyczne” (Bulat Silva 2008). The NSM definition of *paixão* has been changed according to my extended knowledge of the NSM. I would like to thank Anna Wierzbicka for discussing this definition with me.

Looking at the adjectival and verbal collocations with *paixão* in its emotional meaning, one can say that it is conceptualised as a “destructive” feeling: *paixão leva a morte* ‘passion leads to death,’ *paixão arruína* ‘passion ruins,’ *paixão* can be *infeliz* ‘unhappy,’ ‘unsatisfied,’ but we cannot talk about **paixão feliz*. One can become *vítima de paixões* ‘victim of a passion.’

It seems reasonable to group different senses of the word *paixão* around two prototypical centres: 1. ‘the sufferings of Christ’ (Fig. 1) and 2. ‘a very strong feeling,’ ‘passion’ (Fig. 2). The reasons for it are: a) a big number of peripheral meanings ascribed to each centre, b) orthographical distinctiveness (upper vs. lower case), c) semantic distinctiveness. It must be noted, that *paixão2* can be derived from *paixão1* via the processes of metaphorical extension of meaning and metonymy: real ‘sufferings of Christ’ began to mean ‘spiritual sufferings of any human being,’ caused by ‘strong emotions.’

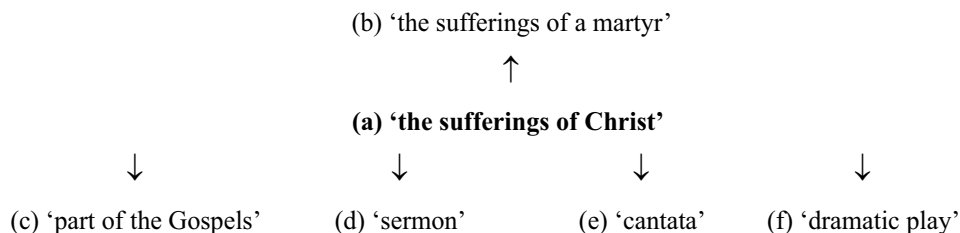
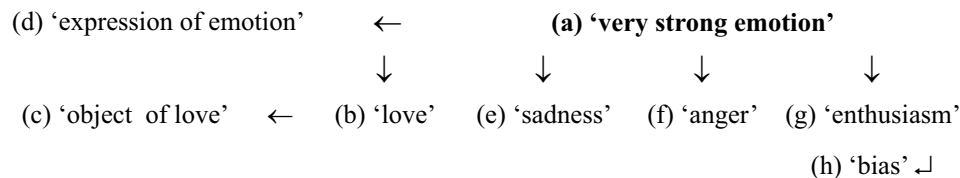


Fig. 1. The radial network of *paixão1*

The meaning (b) is an extension of a central meaning: ‘the sufferings of Christ’ began to mean ‘the sufferings of any follower of Christ.’ All the other meanings are linked to the centre via (metonymical) instantiation: the name for ‘the sufferings of Christ’ was used as a name for the written (c), oral (d), sung (e) and dramatic (f) ‘narrative on the Christ’s sufferings.’



← (↙) metonymical relation
 ↑ extension of meaning
 → metaphorical relation
 ↓ instantiation of meaning

Fig. 2. The radial network of *paixão2*

The meaning (d) ‘expression of an emotion present in the work of art’ is related to the central meaning through metonymy. The senses (b), (e), (f) and (g) are

instantiations of the centre, specifying the central ‘passion’ (*I feel something like someone can feel when this someone wants something very much*) into various kinds of feelings: (b) ‘love’ (*I feel something very good towards this someone*), (g) ‘enthusiasm’ (*I feel something very good, I want to do something*), (e) ‘sadness’ (*I feel something very bad, I can’t do anything*) and (f) ‘anger’ (*I feel something very bad, I want to do something*). The meaning (c) ‘object of love’ is related metonymically to the meaning (b) ‘love.’ There is also a metonymical relation between the senses (g) and (h): ‘bias,’ in other words ‘lack of impartiality,’ is an inherent feature of ‘enthusiasm,’ ‘commitment.’

3.2. *Paixão* in fado

The word form *paixão* appeared 25 times in the corpus (consisting of 31 231 tokens), that is with a frequency of 0,08%. It appeared mainly (22 examples) in its 2(b) meaning, ‘love.’ It is not a great number, but comparing with its frequency in the standard corpus of the Portuguese language (0,0055%), we see that its frequency in fado is ~14,5 times greater, which allows us to consider *paixão* as one of the fado key words.

There are three source domains of the metaphorical conceptualisation of *paixão* in fado. *Paixão* is conceptualised as fire, death and executioner.

Paixão is fire: *paixão queima o coração* ‘passion burns the heart’ and has to be ‘extinguished,’ *apagada*; one can also *acender* ‘light up’ *paixão* and then *ateá-la*, ‘kindle it.’

1. *Hei-de apagar a paixão*

Que me queima o coração

Na boca d’outra mulher

‘I have to extinguish the **passion**

That burns in my heart

In the lips of another woman’

(„Amor é água que corre,” line 45).

Paixão is death: *paixão leva a morte* ‘leads to death’ and is like a ‘grave.’

4. *Com que voz chorarei meu triste fado,*

que em tão dura paixão me sepultou

que mor não seja a dor que me deixou

o tempo, de meu bem desenganado

‘In what voice will I cry over my sad fate

That buried me in such a cruel **passion**.

Don’t let the pain grow

The pain left behind by my deceived love’

(„Com que voz,” line 2244).

Paixão is an executioner: it breaks one's soul, *ferir* 'wounds,' *tortura* 'tortures'; *paixão* is *dura* 'cruel,' 'tough,' *cega* 'blind' and *teimosa* 'obstinate.'

19. *Meu amor não me pergunte o motivo,
Da paixão que me tortura,
A verdadeira paixão,
Não tem razão, nem se procura,
'My dear, don't ask the reason
Of that love that tortures me
Because the real love
Comes without cause nor query'
(„Sem razão,” line 8788).*

There is also one more feature of *paixão* worth mentioning, its vagueness. *Paixão não tem razão* 'there is no reason for it,' *paixão voa* 'passion flies,' 'flutters' and *anda pelo ar* 'it walks on air,' *não ha ninguém quem a pudera definir* 'there is no one to define it.'

12. *Definir, ai quem pudera!
A paixão de uma fadista
Ninguém, nem tu, compreendes,
o que dentro em mim eu sinto:
'Ah, is there anybody to define it?
What is the passion of a fadista
Nobody, even you, understands
What I feel at the bottom of my heart'
(„Fado da estúrdia,” line 4277).*

3.3. NSM definition of *paixão*

Let us now summarize all that we have learnt about the word *paixão* and express it using the natural semantic metalanguage. The basic meaning of *paixão* in fado is 'love,' I wrote it down as *I feel something very good towards this someone / I want to be with this someone at all times*. Seeing passion as fire correlates to its sexual aspect, hence *I want my body to touch this someone's body for a long time* and the prototypical situation of *a man and a woman doing some things with their bodies and feeling something good because of this*. The strength of the feeling is formulated as *I can't feel something like someone can feel when this someone wants something very much*. 'Excitement,' 'willingness to act' is paraphrased as *I want to do something*. 'Being lost' inherent to feeling *paixão* is expressed as *I don't know what I can do*. The 'destructive' aspect of *paixão*, confirmed both by the dictionaries and by the domains of metaphorical conceptualisation of *paixão*

in fado I wrote down as *I know that something very bad can happen to me because I feel something like this*. Lines (b) and (n) reflect the element of thinking involved in the feeling of *paixão*.

X tem paixão por Y

lit. ‘X has a passion for Y’

- (a) *X feels something very good towards Y,*
- (b) *when X thinks about Y, X often thinks like this:*
- (c) *I want to be with this someone at all times,*
- (d) *I want my body to touch this someone’s body for a long time,*
- (e) *I want to do some things to this someone like two people can do when it is like this:*
- (f) *one of these two people is a man, the other is a woman,*
- (g) *these two people are doing some things with their bodies at that time,*
- (h) *because of this these two people feel something good,*
- (i) *at the same time, when X thinks about Y, X thinks like this:*
- (j) *I can’t not feel something like someone can feel when this someone wants something very much,*
- (k) *I want to do something because of this,*
- (l) *I don’t know what I can do,*
- (m) *I know that something very bad can happen to me because I feel something like this,*
- (n) *when X thinks like this, X feels something like someone can feel when this someone thinks like this.*

4. Concluding remarks

The above definition of the lexical unit *paixão* is based on a prototypical cognitive scenario (*X feels something like someone can feel when this someone thinks like this*). Such a prototypical approach, despite being an alternative to the model based on necessary and sufficient attributes, as described in the section above, can be combined with the analysis based on fixed semantic elements.

Cognitivists maintain that the lexical meaning is grounded in shared human experience of bodily existence. How is it possible that they do not notice that the NSM repertoire is a reflection of their thesis? I agree with Brala (2003) that NSM can become a useful tool for overcoming the methodological confusion within Cognitive Linguistics. Although Wierzbicka critically opposes cognitivists (namely Rosch, Lakoff and Johnson), her method seems more a contribution to Cognitive Linguistics than an alternative (cf. Soares 1999). As I demonstrated, by combining the NSM method with the prototype semantics and the theory of metaphor, a new, valuable insight into the word meaning can be gained.

I think that further studies concerning lexical meaning should prove the complementarity of NSM and cognitivists' approaches. Much remains to be done in the field of polysemy and semantic similarity. How many shared components do we need to consider two concepts as meanings of one lexeme? How to decide whether we deal with one meaning or with two different ones? Further studies on polysemy are necessary to answer the above questions.

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