

Cognitive and Communicative Sources of Enantiosemy

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Abstract

Enantiosemy arises from semantic shifts when the meaning of a sign takes two different paths with the resulting formation of two opposite meanings. My claim is that enantiosemy is a regular phenomenon depending on general principles of cognition and communication; the sources of enantiosemy being of a great variety. The most common sources of enantiosemy (the most of examples are from the Russian language). 1. Polarization of actants. Example: *odolzhit'* (i) 'to lend'; (ii) 'to borrow'; cf. English to lease, French *hôte*, etc. 2. Conventionalization of pragmatic inferences. Example: *bukval'no* — (i) 'not figuratively or metaphorically' (e. g. *Ne ponimaj ego bukvallyno* 'Don't take his words literally'); (ii) 'to be taken figuratively or metaphorically' (e. g. *Ona bukvallyno vyletela iz komnaty* 'She literally flew from the room'). 3. Conventionalization of irony. Example: *ochen' nuzhno* — (i) *Mne ochen' nuzhno tuda poiti* (perfective infinitive) 'I need to go there'; (ii) *Ochen' nuzhno tuda xodit'* (imperfective infinitive) 'There is no need to go there.' 4. Conventionalization of evaluation (provided that evaluation may be different). Example: Church Slavonic *vonja* 'aroma' vs. Russian *von'* 'stink'. 5. Revaluation of a term of abuse. Example: the words *shel'ma* and *shel'mec* 'rogue, rascal, scoundrel' often express approval or admiration. 6. «Mixed feelings». Example: Polish *litosc* 'compassion' and Russian *ljutost'* 'ferocity, fierceness' have the same origin. 7. Opposite results of similar actions. Examples: (1) *zadut'*: *On zadul svechu* 'He blew the candle out' vs. *zadut' domnu* 'to blow in a blast furnace'; (2) Belorussian *luchyc'*, Polish *laczyc* ('to join'), on the one hand, and Bulgarian *lucha*, Serbian *luchiti*, Czech *louciti* ('to separate'), on the other hand, have the same origin: they go back to Common Slavonic **laciti* (probably 'to bend'). 8. Opposite ways to achieve similar results. Example: Serbian *spor* 'slow' and Russian *sporyj* 'fast' go back to the same adjective with the original meaning 'abundant, plentiful'. To make the output abundant, one has to work either longer (hence connotation of slowness) or more efficiently (hence connotation of quickness). 9. Temporal metaphors (passing time vs. passing through time). Example: *vpered: Zasedanie pereneseno na dva chasa vpered* — (i) 'The session will take place two hours earlier than originally scheduled'; (ii) 'The session will take place two hours later than originally scheduled.' 10. Temporal metonymy. Example: *nedelja* 'Sunday' (e. g. *nedelja torzhestva Pravoslavija* 'Orthodoxy Sunday') vs. 'working week' (e. g. *Na nedele menja doma ne byvaet* 'I am not at home during the week'); cf. Italian *ferie* 'holidays' vs. *giorno feriale* 'weekday'. The above list does not exhaust the sources of enantiosemy. In addition, enantiosemy may arise from various combinations of different mechanisms. In the paper, I will explicate the mechanisms involved and relate the data to a coherent theoretical analysis.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Here I will speak about cases when a single sign can signify two opposite things – a phenomenon that is called «enantiosemy». My thesis is that, far from being a simple curiosity that can be illustrated by a few isolated cases that are not part of a larger system, enantiosemy is a regular phenomenon that is based on certain general principles of cognition and human communication.

It should be said that the concept of enantiosemy, which is sometimes used by scholars to denote a sign with two opposite meanings within a single semiotic system, can be misleading. «Opposite» meanings are usually understood as meanings that appear within the same context yet signify «opposite» things. However, if such a rigid definition is used, it becomes highly unlikely that a single sign can express «opposite» meanings. Indeed, if we were to suppose that a single sign regularly signifies different and moreover «opposite» meanings in the same contexts, it would be totally unclear how native speakers could understand which of the «opposite» meanings applies at any given moment.

Usually, enantiosemy is understood a lot more broadly. It refers to any case in which a single sign acquires «opposite» meanings in different contexts or even semiotic systems as a result of semantic shifts. Let us give some examples of linguistic enantiosemy, which show that enantiosemy normally does not lead to misunderstanding.

(1) The Czech *čerstvý* <*chleb*> signifies ‘fresh (bread)’, while the etymologically identical Russian adjective *черствый* means ‘stale.’

(2) In the sentence *They had only just moved in; their boxes lay on the kitchen floor, still unpacked*, the final words mean ‘not yet unpacked.’ Moreover, a Google search shows that there are examples in which *unpacked* signifies both ‘not yet unpacked’ and ‘not yet packed’ within a single sentence, although the context always shows which meaning is correct. Consider:

- Are you the kind of person who puts *unpacked* boxes in the basement of your new home to be *unpacked* at a later date (5 years later!)?
- I finally got fed up that our office is a labyrinth of *unpacked* boxes from when we moved like five months ago, so to make a point, I hid the computer chair and stacked a bunch of boxes in front of the computer, so that we can’t do anything on the computer until the boxes are *unpacked*.

(3) The Russian word *неприкасаемый* can refer to a very low social status with an allusion to the Indian caste (‘untouchable, Harijan’) or, in contrast, to a high status that makes an individual immune to court proceedings (‘inviolable’).

(4) In the following joke, a single sentence can have two opposite meanings depending on the intonation with which it is pronounced: *What is monotony?* ‘*Yesterday was like this, today is like this, and tomorrow will be like this* (the clauses are pronounced with an enumerative intonation, and the words *yesterday*, *today*, and *tomorrow* are stressed). *And what is variety?* ‘*Yesterday was like this, today is like this, and tomorrow will be like this* (the clauses are pronounced with

a contrastive stress on the word *this* and on the words *yesterday*, *today*, and *tomorrow*; a supplementary gesticulation may accompany the word *this* in order to emphasize the difference).

The factors that regularly engender enantiosemy are quite diverse. Here I will discuss only the most common sources of enantiosemy, mostly giving examples from Slavic languages and, most often, from Russian (nevertheless, most of these examples have numerous typological parallels).

2. TEMPORAL METAPHORS

Two opposite space-motion metaphors of time occur in languages. The first and more archaic metaphor is based on the notion that the world is stable and immobile and that time «passes by»: in this case, the past is perceived as going ahead and the future as lagging behind. The second metaphor is based on the notion that time is invariable and immobile and that the «observer» moves through time from the past to the future. In this conception, the future is perceived as lying ahead and the past as lying behind. As a result, a linguistic expression that initially had a spatial meaning can mean the exact opposite when it is used with regard to time. Both the past and the future can be considered to lie ahead. This leads to the enantiosemy of the Russian prefix *пред-* used in a temporal sense (it refers to an earlier moment of time in the adjective *предыдущий* ‘preceding’ and to a later moment of time in the adjective *предстоящий* ‘upcoming’). The Russian adverb *вперед* can mean both ‘before, first’ (*вперед подумай, потом сделай* ‘first think and then act’) and ‘later, again’ (*вперед не сердь меня* ‘don’t anger me again’). The same enantiosemy occurs with the English *fore*, which refers to the past in the words *before*, *forego*, and *forerunner* and to the future in the word *forward* (in such sentences as *I am looking forward to seeing you*).

3. TEMPORAL METONYMIES

A second major source of enantiosemy in this domain stems from the fact that time is often indicated with the help of metonymy, i.e., substitution by association. It turns out that associated intervals of time are often those that are conceptualized as being «opposite.» For example, certain language units can signify both holidays and workdays: the Italian word *feria* (from the obsolete verb *feriare* ‘not to work, to rest’) has the meaning ‘holiday, day off’ (in the plural, *ferie* can signify vacation or leave), as well as the meaning ‘workdays’ in informal speech. For the derivative adjective *feriale*, the meaning ‘weekday’ is dominant, while the etymologically identical French expression *jour férié* means ‘holiday.’ A similar paradox occurs in Slavic languages that often denote Sunday by a word deriving from the words *не делать* ‘not to work’ (e.g., Ukrainian *неділя*, Byelorussian *нядзеля*, Bulgarian *неделя*, Polish *niedziela*, etc.). At the same time, the Russian word *неделя* was metonymically transposed to the seven-day week, including Sunday, and predominantly refers to workdays in contemporary Russian. In other words, its meaning is opposite to that of the original word.

4. POLARIZATION OF AGENTS

The polarization of agents occurs when, in the description of a situation, one views two of its participants as being «opposites» and the description of the situation from the standpoint of one of these participants as being opposite to its description from the standpoint of the other participant. As the situation is the same, the same language unit may be used for its description by both agents. This language unit may be viewed as being enantiosemic in itself. For example, the Russian verb *одолжить* signifies both ‘to lend’ and ‘to borrow.’ Consider also the well-known example of the French verb *louer* that signifies both ‘to rent out’ and ‘to hire’ (e.g., *louer un appartement* ‘rent out/hire an apartment’, *louer une voiture* ‘to rent out/hire a car,’ etc.).

Moreover, a language unit that denotes a certain situation may be used for designating «opposite» participants in this situation, often with the help of the same morphological means. For example, the French *hôte* describes «opposite» participants of a situation in which one person visits another: it can be translated both as ‘host’ (*remercier ses hôtes de leur hospitalité* ‘thank one’s hosts for their hospitality’) and ‘guest’ (*bienvenu, vous êtes notre hôte* ‘welcome, be our guest’).

5. CONVENTIONALIZATION OF SPEECH IMPLICATURES

The Russian word *буквально*, just as its English counterpart *literally*, often serves as an indicator of hyperbole (e.g., *Ты буквально оглушил меня этой новостью* ‘You literally stunned me with this news’) and thus give a signal of sorts to the addressee: «Don’t take me literally!» (implying the opposite of its original meaning). The conventionalization of implicatures is also at the root of the enantiosemy of such Russian verbs as *переизбрать* <X-a>, which can signify both ‘reelect X’ and ‘elect another person instead of X,’ and *пройти* ‘to pass by’ or ‘to pass through.’ In particular, verbs with the prefix *непе-* signifying repetitive action may mean ‘to do the same again’ or ‘to do it differently.’ For example, *переписать* may mean ‘to copy or reproduce a text’ or ‘to rewrite a text anew.’

Opposite implicatures may also arise for expressions that refer to something obvious: they may implicate that something is evident and beyond doubt or, on the contrary, that it only appears to be so and that things are totally different in reality. This is the origin of the enantiosemy of the English word *apparent* that can mean ‘clear, evident’ (*apparent error*) or, on the contrary, ‘seeming’ (*apparent cause*, i.e., not the real cause).

6. IRONIC NEGATION

The expressive usage of a linguistic expression in the opposite sense is, to all intents and purposes, an occasional enantiosemy. When such usage becomes conventionalized for some lexical unit (in a certain type of usage) and is perceived as an idiosyncratic feature that should be recorded in a dictionary entry, one can speak about enantiosemy in the proper sense of the word.

For example, Russian dictionaries give the following meaning, among others, of the adjective *хороший* ‘good’: ‘Used to express an ironic attitude or a disparaging and disapproving valuation (it is specified that this meaning is usually implemented in a brief form).’ An example is *Ты-то сам хороиш. Сам убежал, а меня оставил* ‘You’re just great. You ran away, leaving me by myself.’ Dictionaries interpret the expression *очень нужно* (lit. ‘very necessary’) as ‘there is no need,’ which may also be evidence of the conventionalization of ironic usage: depending on whether the verb is used in its perfective or imperfective aspect, this expression can have opposite meanings (*Мне очень нужно туда пойти* ‘I need to go there a lot’ vs. *Очень нужно туда ходить* ‘There’s no need for me to go there’).

7. CONVENTIONALIZATION OF EVALUATIVE CONNOTATIONS

Another situation in which enantiosemy can arise is when a word is regularly used with evaluative components and when the evaluation differs in different types of usages. For example, the Russian word *погода* means ‘good, sunny, and dry weather’ in certain dialects and ‘bad, rainy, snowy, or stormy weather’ in others. Evaluative connotations regularly appear in words that refer to ‘smells’: when such connotations become conventionalized, they acquire the meaning ‘pleasant smell, aroma, fragrance’ or, in contrast, ‘bad smell.’ This leads to the opposite meanings (inter-language enantiosemy) of the Russian *вонь* ‘bad smell’ and the etymologically identical Church Slavonic *воня* ‘aroma, fragrance’ and the enantiosemy of the English *odor* that has the somewhat obsolete meaning of ‘aroma, fragrance’ and its widespread meaning of ‘bad smell’ in contemporary speech (e.g., deodorant commercials).

8. IRONIC REEVALUATION

Lofty and literary words are sometimes used ironically in everyday speech, and, when such usage becomes conventionalized, enantiosemy arises. For example, the adjective *пресловутый* has two meanings in Russian: the obsolete literary ‘famous, glorious’ and the more contemporary ‘much-talked-about, sensational’ (with an undertone of disapproval). The word *перл* (lit. ‘pearl’), which has the metaphoric meaning ‘outstanding example, something with exceptional merits’ (usually applies to speech – e.g., *перлы остроумия, красноречия* ‘pearls of wit, pearls of eloquence’), can be used ironically (almost exclusively with regard to speech) with the meaning of ‘something that is exceptionally bad.’ Note that this usage of *перл* is more frequent in contemporary speech than its laudatory usage.

9. RETHINKING A NEGATIVE EVALUATION

Words expressing a strong emotional evaluation often develop opposite meanings. Words that initially involved a negative evaluation of the object come to express admiration. When such usage is conventionalized, enantiosemy arises, and it is often set down in dictionaries. For

example, the Russian word *шельма* ('rogue') has a special shade of meaning that is characterized as follows: «... used as an expression of approval or admiration.» A similar phenomenon occurs with certain English swear words that can be used to express a friendly attitude towards the addressee. For example, *You're a right little bastard* (said tenderly by a girl to a young man) or *Come here, you little bollocks* (said lovingly by a mother to her three-year-old son). Another example is the English word *terrific* that, according to dictionaries, can signify both 'terrible' (*terrific spectacle*) and 'stunning, amazing' (this meaning is quite widespread in contemporary informal language).

However, the opposite phenomenon sometimes occurs: a word that initially involves a positive evaluation comes to express a highly negative emotional evaluation. For example, the French *sacré* 'sacred' is often used with the meaning 'damned' (*sacré menteur* 'damned liar').

10. EVALUATIONS ON A SCALE OF INTENSITY

Opposite evaluations may lie not on the axis «good-bad» but on a scale of intensity: something may be characterized as more or less important. The Russian *так* may serve as a marker of something unimportant that can be disregarded (*так, пустяки* 'it's nothing but trifles'). In the same way, the word *так* can be intentionally used to belittle the importance of something: *Он не жених, а так, просто знакомый* 'He's not a suitor but a mere friend.' At the same time, *так* can be used as an intensifier (i.e., for emphasizing importance): *Я так устал* 'I'm very tired.'

Pronominal expressions are not the only words that can convey opposite evaluations on a scale of intensity. Take the Russian word *бесценный* that has an obsolete meaning commonly defined as 'of no or little value' and the contemporary «opposite» meaning of 'invaluable, precious.' The Russian expression *сумасшедшие цены* normally refers to very high prices, while its counterparts in certain Western European languages (French *les prix fous*, English *crazy prices*) can refer both to very high and very low prices (it is no coincidence that ads about big sales frequently use such expressions).

11. «MIXED FEELINGS»

Designations of emotional states can easily pass over to associated emotions, giving rise to semantic chains whose links may correspond to emotional states that are perceived to be «opposite.» This can engender an enantiosemy of «emotional terms.» For example, *жалость* 'pity' can be associated with love (in some Russian dialects *жалеть* means 'to love') and contempt (the Russian adjective *жалкий* incorporates this valuation in its very meaning). It is no accident that the Polish *litość* 'compassion, charity, pity' is etymologically identical to the Russian *лютость* 'ferocity.' The «intermediate link» between these meanings is the Czech *lítost* that signifies a special emotion that was described in detail by M. Kundera in his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and that consists of a feeling of great pity for oneself arising as a reaction to humiliation and evoking reciprocal aggression.

12. OPPOSITE RESULTS OF SIMILAR ACTIONS

Similar actions may lead to opposite results. For example, a strong current of air can either kindle or extinguish a flame. This gives rise to the enantiosemy of the Russian verb *задуть* that can be seen from the collocations *задуть домну* ‘to kindle a furnace with bellows’ and *задуть свечу* ‘to blow out a candle.’ An interesting example of inter-language enantiosemy in Slavic languages is verbs that arose from the development of the proto-Slavic **lǫčiti* (most likely, ‘to bend’): the Byelorussian *лучыць* and the Polish *łączyć* ‘to connect’, on the one hand, and the Bulgarian *лъча*, the Serbian *лучити*, and the Czech *loučiti* ‘to divide, separate off,’ on the other. Other examples of such enantiosemy are the Russian words *рубить* <*избѣ, мебель*>, which can mean both ‘to make’ and ‘to destroy with a sharp tool’ (e.g., a log house or furniture), and *вывести* <*кроликов, тараканов*>, which can signify both ‘to give birth to, raise’ and ‘to kill, annihilate’ (e.g., rabbits or cockroaches).

13. DIFFERENT MEANS OF ATTAINING SIMILAR RESULTS

The opposite meanings of the Serbian *спор* ‘slow’ (see also such expressions as *спорити* ‘to slow down’ and *спорозни* ‘to send at a slow speed’) and the etymologically identical Russian *спорый* ‘fast’ stem from the existence of two opposite means of increasing the results of work: one can work either longer or more productively. This led to two different paths of development of the adjective that clearly meant ‘copious’ initially: on the one hand, ‘long’ and therefore ‘slow’ and, on the other, ‘intensive, effective’ and thus ‘fast.’

14. CONCLUDING REMARK

This is not an exhaustive list of the regular sources of enantiosemy. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it suffices to show that enantiosemy usually has regular sources and is even predictable in some cases.