

A Cross-Linguistic Study of Near Synonymy of Visual Verbs in Persian, English, German and French Based on Frame Semantics¹

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Abstract

Linguistic typology tries to investigate the linguistic universals and linguistic variation simultaneously. Lexical typology is significant since it shows how lexical varieties are shaped. Accordingly, the present paper aims at showing how Persian, English, French and German languages categorize words within the perception-visual subframe and uncover what similarities and differences exist between equivalent words in each of the mentioned languages. In order to find perception-visual lexical units, monolingual dictionaries are used, while for comparing words cross-linguistically, bilingual dictionaries and corpora are used. It is concluded that frame semantics is a suitable approach for explaining cross-linguistic variation and similarity since it simultaneously considers differences and similarities. Results indicate that “see” and its equivalents in German and French as well as Persian are the most unmarked words because it is almost used to express verities of visual concepts. The more marked the words are, the more variant the words are for a special feature. For the feature “looking stupidly” or “viewing secretly” as more marked domains compared to passive seeing, lexical variation is more considerable.

1. Introduction

Linguistic typology tries to consider linguistic similarities and differences simultaneously. Lexical typology tries to compare lexical variety within languages (Croft, 2003). Although linguistic typology compares a large number of languages from different language families, the present paper used its critical tools for comparing languages from the same language family, i.e. Persian, English, French and German. This paper aims at uncovering how similar and different these languages are regarding the verbs related to the visual sense. For this purpose, frame semantics is used since it focuses on both language similarities (via frames) and linguistic differences (via Lexical Units). Based on frame semantics and lexical typology, the following questions are posed:

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- (i) For each of these languages, how are near synonymous lexemes classified?
- (ii) Within the perception frame, are languages' tendency towards the universals or differences?
- (iii) What is the most unmarked word within the Perception Frame? How is linguistic variety connected to markedness?

2. Frame Semantics

Frame semantics is a cognitive approach that searches for speakers' background knowledge and experiences to define lexemes. In fact, this theory shows that linguistic elements invoke a frame (schema) in speakers' mind based on their experiences and background knowledge. Within frame semantics, each word is defined within a particular frame. For instance, the radius is not comprehensible without referring back to the concept, circle (Fillmore, 1977a, b, c; 1986a, b; 1969; 2007; Fillmore & Atkins, 1992; 1994).

Fillmore borrowed the concept frame from Minsky (1975). He (Fillmore, 1986a) mentions that frame semantics controls word and phrasal rules. Therefore, senses depend on frames (Fillmore, 1977c) and frames are the abstract perception, memory, experience and action (Fillmore, 1977a). This paper focuses on the perception frame that is borrowed from the *English FrameNet*.

3. Methodology

For comparing purposes, firstly, the perception, perception-passive and perception-active frames are defined. Secondly, different words within the perception frame are extracted from the following monolingual dictionaries:

- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby et al., 2000)
- Oxford Duden German Dictionary (Duden et al. 1980)
- Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle (Larousse, 1867)
- Sokhan Comprehensive Dictionary (Anvari, 2002)

Thirdly, for a more accurate comparison, some simple words are selected from the English language. Then, their equivalents are searched within both the following bilingual dictionaries and thesaurus:

Bilingual dictionaries:

- Millenium English Persian Dictionary (Haghshenas et al., 2005)
- The Concise Oxford-Duden German Dictionary (Clark & Thyen, 1998)
- The Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary (Corréard et al., 2001).

Thesaurus:

- Oxford Concise Thesaurus (Haweker & Waite, 2007)
- The Cambridge French-English Thesaurus (Lamy, 1998)
- Swann's way (Webster's German Thesaurus Edition) (Proust, 2006)
- Persian Thesaurus (Fararuy, 2008)

Fourthly, examples of different words are extracted from corpora to indicate what a word carries but is not mentioned in dictionaries. For this aim, the following corpora are used:

- British National Corpus (2007)
- Huge German Corpus (HGC) (Schmid, 1994)
- Français Lexique (2001)
- Bijan Khan Corpus (2011)

Lastly, the words are compared for markedness to obtain a typological position of the mentioned languages, i.e. Persian, French and German. Note that the English language is omitted from our typological views since it is considered as constant.

4. Conclusion

This paper concluded that, firstly, frame semantics is appropriate for cross-linguistic comparisons since it considers both similarities and differences. Secondly, via frame semantics, it is possible to redefine typological concepts such as markedness and economy which are simpler than the available definitions. Languages are not only internally and cross-linguistically different, but they are sometimes extra-linguistically different. Fourthly, languages have not defined language concepts based on other languages, but some concepts are culturally various from others. Lastly, from grammatical point of view, Persian tends to make more complex verbs than French and German.

Keywords: Frame Semantics, Perception Frame, Markedness Principle, Near Synonymy