

Intralingual and crosslinguistic enantiosemy as a communicative problem

There is an amazing phenomenon in languages: a combination of antonymy and homonymy, i.e. the expression of opposite meanings by one word. One of the best-known examples is Latin *altus*, meaning both 'high' (e.g. *altus mons* 'high mountain') and 'deep' (e.g. *altus lacus* 'deep lake'). However, remarkable as this fact may seem, it does not impede communication.

A phenomenon similar to this can also be observed between different languages, e.g. Polish *czerstwy chleb* 'stale bread' vs. Czech *čerstvý chléb* 'fresh bread', or English *absolutely* (as a reply) 'yes, absolutely' vs. Polish *absolutnie* 'no, absolutely not'. Cases like these, however, can indeed produce severe misunderstandings.

The difference between these two phenomena clearly lies in the different communicative situations. So how does "normal" communication among native speakers work, and what is communication in a second language lacking? An important role seems to be played by context and co-text, cultural background knowledge, redundancy, and strategies employed by the sender to prevent the receiver from misunderstanding the message.

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There is a remarkable phenomenon in languages—a combination of homonymy¹ and antonymy, i.e. the expression of opposite meanings by the same word. Some of the most famous examples include Latin *altus* 'high; deep', Russian *ob'ëxat'* 'to visit everywhere; to pass by', German *abdecken* 'to cover; to uncover',² and Polish *pożyczać* 'to lend; to borrow'.³

This phenomenon has been known for a long time. Cicero declared *tollendum esse Octavium*, meaning either 'Octavius should be elevated' or 'Octavius should be

¹ I would now argue that enantiosemy is more commonly a case of polysemy than of homonymy (D. B. 2026).

² The first meaning refers to translations such as 'remove (a roof), clear (the table), skin (an animal)', while the second refers to 'block (a light source), cover (an opposing team player)'.
³ Unless otherwise indicated, the examples of enantiosemy in this article are taken either from my own collection or from Markovski (1986: 63ff.), Müller (1963: 51), Novikov (1973: 181–192), and Šercl' (1973 [1883]).

removed' (cf. Novikov 1973: 182; Hegel [1831] 1964: 120ff.). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel used the double meaning of the word *aufheben* in his philosophy:

“Aufheben hat in der Sprache den gedoppelten Sinn, daß es so viel als aufbewahren, erhalten bedeutet, und zugleich so viel als aufhören lassen, ein Ende machen. Das Aufbewahren selbst schließt schon das Negative in sich, daß etwas seiner Unmittelbarkeit und damit einem den äußerlichen Einwirkungen offenen Daseyn entnommen wird, um es zu erhalten. – So ist das Aufgehobene ein zugleich Aufbewahrtes, das nur seine Unmittelbarkeit verloren hat, aber darum nicht vernichtet ist.” (Hegel [1831] 1964: 120)

“*Aufheben* has a double meaning in language, signifying as much as ‘to preserve, to maintain’ and at the same time as much as ‘to cause to cease, to make an end’. The act of preserving itself already includes the negative aspect that something, in order to be preserved, is removed from its immediacy and thus from an existence open to external influences.—Thus, what is removed (*aufgehoben*) is at the same time preserved, having only lost its immediacy, but not destroyed.”

▮208 This “intra-word antonymy” (“vnutrislovnaja antonimija”, Novikov 1973: 182) has received the name *enantiosemy* [and also been called *contronymy*, *autoantonymy*, *antilogy*, *antagonymy* as well as *Janus words*—D. B. 2026], but it is still considered to be some kind of surprising flaw in language that should die out in modern literary languages, or, as Šercl’ (1973 [1884]: 259) wrote: “the more ancient the language and the more primitive the people, the more often this phenomenon occurs” (“чем язык древнее и чем народ примитивнее, тем чаще встречается это явление”). Against the backdrop of a more modern worldview, this idea sounds like this: “This phenomenon is unproductive in modern language and serves mainly as a kind of relic of the semantics of ancient roots” (“Это явление непродуктивно в современном языке и служит в основном своеобразным реликтом семантики древних корней”, Novikov 1973: 192). This opinion is based, on the one hand, on the fact that there are very few examples of enantiosemy. For example, Andrzej Markowski (1986: 63) did not find a single example of enantiosemy among Polish adjectives.⁴ On the other hand, it is usually assumed that enantiosemy hinders communication even more than ordinary homonymy, so that the language organism tries to suppress these phenomena.

Although there is indeed a tendency to eliminate ambiguity in language, the elimination of homonymy is much less common than is usually suggested (cf.

⁴ Some works on more “exotic” (or “primitive”) languages provide numerous examples of enantiosemy, many of which, however, are highly controversial: For example, Beznosikova (1984: 9) gives an example from the Komi language: *mešöky’s’ kis’tny* ‘to pour out of a bag’ and *mešökö kis’tny* ‘to pour into a bag’, where the verb *kis’tny* obviously means simply ‘to pour’, and the case endings of the noun ‘bag’ in this agglutinative language perform the functions of prepositions in inflected languages.

Budagov 1963: 243). In fact, enantiosemY in European standard languages is not dying out at all; on the contrary, new examples of this phenomenon are constantly being formed, cf. *abzac* in Russian youth slang ‘something that causes sharp disapproval; something very good that causes approval’ (Nikitina 1998: 9); from German youth slang, we can cite a whole series of adjectives with the same meanings: *ätzend, fett, fetzig, geil, höllisch, gut, irre, krass*. Evaluative enantiosemY is also present in the Russian slang verb *prikolot’sja*, cf. the following examples (taken from Nikitina 1998: 353ff.):

- (1) *Vot svoloč’, malo togo, čto dva stavit, eščë i prikoletsja nad toboj.*
‘Here’s a bastard, as if giving you an F weren’t enough, he also **pokes fun** at you.’
- (2) *Ja k ètoj gerlé prikololsja.*
‘I have **fallen in love** with this girl.’

Of course, one could argue against such examples from slang, saying that they actually confirm the theory of the “primitiveness” of enantiosemY. 209 However, similar cases can be found in more scientific areas of vocabulary: for example, an important sphere of modern society, the field of economy, includes the Polish word *kupiec* ‘trader, merchant, vendor; buyer, client’ and the Polish example *pożyczać* ‘to lend; to borrow’ given above, as well as its German and Russian equivalents *leihen* and *odolžit’* (although the use of the latter in the sense of ‘to borrow’ is considered incorrect; cf. Novikov 1973: 182).⁵

All this indicates that enantiosemes (like other homonyms) do not pose a serious problem for communication, “since they are almost always neutralized either by the speech situation or by the context” (“так как почти всегда нейтрализуются или речевой ситуацией, или контекстом”, Šanskij 1964: 43). One might even suggest that enantiosemY, like homonymy in general, is “a useful phenomenon” (“явление полезное”, Malachovskij 1990: 24). Hegel (1964 [1831]: 21ff.), discussing the ideal properties of language for science, even noted:

“[D]ie deutsche Sprache hat [...] viele Vorzüge vor den anderen modernen Sprachen; sogar sind manche ihrer Wörter von der weiteren Eigenheit, verschiedene Bedeutungen nicht nur, sondern entgegengesetzte zu haben [...]; es kann dem Denken eine Freude gewähren, auf solche Wörter zu stoßen [...].”

“The German language has [...] many advantages over the other modern languages; some of its words even have the further peculiarity of having not only different meanings, but opposite ones [...]; it can be a joy for the mind to encounter such words [...].”

⁵ In non-rhotic varieties of English (i.e., variants with vocalized /r/), the prefixes *hyper-* ‘above’ and *hypo-* ‘below’, which are often used in scientific terminology (including for the formation of new terms), are pronounced identically. Thus, there are potentially many such homophones as *hypertension* ‘high blood pressure’ and *hypotension* ‘low blood pressure’.

If we accept the definition of so-called “false friends” (or “pseudo-analogonyms”, cf. Hengst 1977: 252 and Bunčić 2000: 15) as “crosslinguistic homonyms”, then we can also speak of crosslinguistic enantiosemy. This phenomenon can be observed in many “false friends”, cf. Russian *zapomnit’* ‘to memorize’ and Polish *zapomnieć* ‘to forget’, Russian *von’* ‘stench’ and Polish *woń* ‘smell, aroma’, Russian *kriminalist* ‘criminalist’ and Polish *kryminalista* ‘criminal’, Polish *no* ‘well, yes’ and Italian *no* ‘no’ or Polish *absolutnie* ‘no, under no circumstances’ and English *absolutely* ‘yes, in any case’.⁶ There are many more enantiosemes at this crosslinguistic level than within a single language. Firstly, this is due to the fact that there are no mechanisms that eliminate homonyms as there are within a language. D210 Secondly, the reasons for the emergence of crosslinguistic enantiosemy are more diverse. For example, one of the most famous pairs of enantiosemes, Russian *urodlivyj* ‘very ugly’ and Polish *urodziny* ‘beautiful’, arose purely by chance, namely, by the merger of two prefixes with the meaning ‘not-’ and ‘up, rise-’ in **u-*.

It is obvious that enantiosemy between two languages, compared to that within one language, can interfere with mutual understanding much more. To establish the reasons for the different status of this phenomenon in the two communicative situations, let us try to identify the differences between intralingual and interlingual communication.

As noted above, the meaning of intralingual enantiosemes is determined by context. This is done in two ways: First, different meanings of a word are used only in certain situations, so that the listener (or reader) can exclude those meanings that are not applicable in a given situation. Second, due to redundancy in language, almost everything is expressed several times, so that the addressee can usually reconstruct even completely indistinguishable words.

In contrast to this, a person speaking a foreign language cannot (or does not have time to) perceive all the details of the text, so redundancy for them is reduced to zero.⁷ Of course, they do not know in which situations which meanings of a word are used. Often they do not know the word at all and are therefore forced to guess its meaning. The context does not help, because due to a common element in their meanings, antonyms can be used in the same contexts, e.g. Polish *czerstwy*

⁶ Additional examples are given by Plotnikov (1979: 33ff.). Among gestures, we can cite nodding the head as a sign of agreement in most European countries, and in Bulgaria as a sign of negation.

⁷ Therefore (as probably everyone who has ever studied a foreign language has experienced), a foreign language needs to be heard louder and under better circumstances than one’s native language. This observation fits very well with Lewis’s (2000: 21–24) approach to the problem of “false friends”: He describes them as a special kind of noise in the interlingual channel of information transmission. It can be added that this type of noise is special in that it does not interfere with the message but, on the contrary, removes part of the information.

‘stale’ and Czech *čerstvý* ‘fresh’ in relation to bread: *czerstwy chleb* vs. *čerstvý chléb*. In addition to this, foreigners perceive the whole situation based on their native cultural and linguistic worldview. For all these reasons, feeling uncertain, they base their guesses on formal similarities with words in their native language (especially when the languages are closely related). This is the trickery of “false friends”.

▣211 Moreover, when the sender and receiver both know the code they are using, then the speaker (and even more so the writer) almost instinctively avoids utterances that might be misunderstood. In interlingual communication, of course, the native speaker does not know which words might cause a misunderstanding by the non-native interlocutor.

Enantiosemey, this extreme case of semantics, has merely prompted these thoughts about the differences between communication in a non-native language and “normal” communication. The processes that ensure mutual understanding in communication in a language common to both interlocutors, but inaccessible to a non-native speaker, are always present, and the problems associated with this should be kept in mind when speaking to a non-native speaker.

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