

Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Comprehension of Some Senses of the Word 'Sight'

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البحث في استيعاب الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين اللغة الانكليزية لغة أجنبية للمعاني المختلفة لكلمة "نظر"

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المخلص

في ضوء علم الدلالة الادراكي يعتبر اتساع المعنى في لغة ما انعكاس لانماط تفكير الناطقين بتلك اللغة. حيث ان انماط التفكير المختلفة تعين ارتباطات مختلفة بين المشار اليه بمفردة ما والعالم الداخلي والخارجي للناطقين بتلك اللغة مما يؤدي الى انتاج دلالات مختلفة للمفردة الواحدة. لذلك بات اكتساب متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية لانماط تفكير الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية امرا جوهريا يمكنهم من ادراك مجموعة المعاني المرتبطة بمفردة ما في اللغة الهدف. بعد عرض العمليات الادراكية التي تسهم في بناء المعنى حاول الباحث تحري استيعاب متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية لبعض دلالات مفردة "بصر" في مجموعه من الجمل. وقد اظهر تحليل استجابات المشاركين في الدراسة الى ان نمط التفكير المختلف عن نمط تفكير الناطقين باللغة والمتمثل باختلاف عملية التفسير الادراكي، وتحول المجالات، والارتباطات الخاطئة كان سببا رئيسا في ضعف استيعاب الطلبة المشاركين في الدراسة للدلالات المختلفة لمفردة "بصر".

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الدلالة الادراكي، اتساع المعنى، تصور، بصر، استعارة، مجاز مرسل، انماط تفكير، ارتباطات، استيعاب

Abstract

In light of cognitive semantics, meaning extension in a language is actually a reflection of its natives' modes of thinking. The different ways of thinking set different correlations between the word's referent and both the interlocutors' inner world and the outside world and hence produce distinct senses for that word. It is then essential for the EFL learners to acquire the natives' modes of thinking in order to be able of getting the list of meanings related to each lexical item in the target language. After reviewing the conceptual process involved in meaning construction, the researcher tries to investigate EFL learners' comprehension of some senses of the word 'sight' in a set of sentences. The qualitative analysis of the subjects' responses shows that the non-native like thinking which involves un-natural conceptual decoding, shift in domains, and miscorrelation are the main causes of the subjects' poor comprehension.

Cognitive semantics, meaning extension, conceptualization, sight, metaphor, metonymy, mode of thinking, correlations, comprehension.

1. Introduction

The meaning of a word is not canned in the referent indicated by that word; rather it is encyclopedic in nature. An item representing a particular referent opens the way to a series of senses beyond the one which stands for that referent (Evans, 2007:132). The referent is only one domain; its internal structure, and the details of that structure are related to other external domains in human lives whether philosophical, scientific, biological, economical ones, etc. through particular mental procedure (Malmkjær, 2010: 64).

That procedure involves the principle of cognitive semantics which reads that "meaning-construction is conceptualization" (Evans and Green, 2006:157). The details relative to a word referent are stored mentally, in a form of distinct elements of information, and they occupy abstract areas "mental spaces" in our mind. Knowledge of our inner world, and knowledge of the different aspects in

the external world also take their positions in our mind in other “mental spaces” (again as elements of information). A linguistic item such as a word induces entry to some elements of information in the different mental spaces through fetching the connections between the elements in these spaces and the ones found in the mental space of the word’s referent itself. Thus, the idea which exist in one ‘mental space’ is made tangible by the word through highlighting the connections between the idea in question and the word’s referent (Evans, 2007:135-36).

Let’s elaborate these notions through discussing the senses of the word ‘eye’ in the examples below:

1-“There were tears in her eyes.”(Hornby, 2003:445)

2-“It fastens with a hook and eye.”(ibid.)

‘Eye’ refers to an organ on our face with which we see (ibid.). It has a curved round shape which is similar to that of “a metal piece into which we fit a small hook to fasten our clothes” (ibid.). The word ‘eye’ evokes the associations between the shape of the eye (mental space of the word’s referent) and the shape of a thing in the external world (another mental space of another referent); and hence the word ‘eye’ has a new content (meaning) activated by the relation between information in these two different mental spaces. That new meaning will have its own mental space which is related to another mental space to construct a new meaning in light of the connection between them, and so on. Thus meaning is conceptual and encyclopedic in nature.

Detecting the connections between the mental spaces which is an inevitable process that happens all the time involves the projection of a domain that we know on another domain which is a new one; i.e. “a mapping from a source domain of a familiar semantic content onto a target domain of unfamiliar and new information” (Trask, 2007:501) This involves a number of conceptual processes such as metaphor, metonymy, and metaphonymy.

2-Conceptual Process Involved in Meaning Extension.

To understand the conceptual process involved in meaning extension, it is essential to comprehend the cognitive devices employed in this process:

2.1. Metaphor

It is a conceptual process that enables us to express the new referent by a word whose referent seems to be comparable, in certain aspects, to the new one. This process is an unavoidable as whenever we face new referents in the world we try to focus on points of similarity between them and the “familiar” ones to provide the best way of description and expression (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009: 654).

The core of metaphorical extension of words is to foreground the points of similarity between two separated domains through comparison, and then to project the shared feature from the source domain, which is tangible for our understanding, to the target domain which was intangible before that comparison. For instance, when we say the “eye of a needle” we project the domain of a human being to the domain of an inanimate object (two different and distinct areas) due to the similarity in shape between the two referents. (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006:115-18).

2.2. Metonymy

Metonymy is the replacement of an item by another one related to it. That replacement may involve the use of the work to indicate the author “to read Jane’s Austen”, the material to mean product “to wear leather”, the container to denote content “to have a cuppa”; the place to mean the resident “the White House, etc. (Bussmann, 1996: 746). It is clear that metonymy allows semantic extension through including the meaning of a word in another one that belongs to the same context (Campbell and Mixco, 2007:122-23). For instance, in a sentence like:

3-The White House comments on the results of the presidential election.

We remain within the domain of the dwelling of the president of the United States but we refer to the place rather than the resident. It is logical then to look at the notions of “similarity versus contiguity as the basis of metaphor and metonymy” (Greeraerts, 2010: 215)

2.3. Metaphtonymy

Metaphtonymy is the conceptual process where metaphor and metonymy interact to give a new meaning (Evans, 2007: 140). The following sentence presents a good example of metaphtonymy:

4- "Go on- I'm all ears" (Hornby, 2003: 395)

"I'm all ears" is used to mean (I am paying attention). The ears are only parts of a person's body and they are used metonymically to stand for the person as a whole. Ear is a tool that helps us get the sounds, while attention is the tool that helps us get the ideas. Hence, ear is used metaphorically to mean 'attention' due to the similarity between the two domains (ear and attention) in that both of them are devices that help us get certain entities. Consequently, 'I'm all ears' is an example of metaphtonymy as metaphor is present within a metonymical expression.

3. Meaning Extension of the Word 'Sight'

3.1. Introduction

Sight is one of the five senses that enable the human beings and animals to see things in the world through the two eyes which are the path that allows the visible details of the world outside to enter our brain. Hence, this sense is one of information suppliers for our inner world. The range or distance within which a human being can see is limited to a particular number of meters, and the situation is similar in the case of animals. In the discussion below we will trace the cognitive processes which underlie some senses of the word 'sight':

a. **'The act of seeing'** (Gralnik, 1984:1324)

5- "Marcel will faint at the sight of blood". (Quirk, 2003,1533)

The function of the eyes is to see through focusing on a particular object in the world. This is only one function among the many ones that contributes to the sense of sight. In this instance, the sense name (sight) is specialized to encode the function of a sense organ (eye). 'Sight' is employed metonymically as the whole sense is used to indicate part of it; i.e. a function of its organs which is 'the act of seeing'.

b. **'How far you can see (the distance within which you see)'. (Hornby, 2004: 1195)**

Human sight functions within a limited range. For instance, we can see things that are at a distance of only a number of meters beyond which we cannot see. There is a range within which, or out of which we can see, or cannot see. This factual experience prompts the following senses of 'sight':

C. Visible/ invisible Sense: People tend to conceive the relation between our sight and the limit within which we can see in terms of visibility and invisibility; hence 'sight' in these examples is used metaphorically to mean visible, and invisible:

6. "At last we come at sight of a few houses." (ibid.) (visible sense)

7. "Keep out of sight." (ibid.) (Stay where you cannot be seen- invisible sense)

d. Close/ Far sense: As the range of seeing is expressed in terms of distance, things can be either close to or far from our sight. Thus, 'sight' metaphorically encodes the (close sense) and (far sense) in the following instances:

8. "The end is in sight." (ibid.) (*Will happen soon, close sense*)

9. "The boat disappeared from sight." (ibid.) (far)

e. **'Something seen.'** (Dalgish: 2001, 685.)

10. The museum attempts to recreate the sights and sounds of war time Britain. (ibid.)

'Sight' here means the images of the war. The sense of 'sight' involves a number of elements like the eyes, the range within which to see, the act of seeing, and the image of things to be seen. Again conceptual metonymy underlies the use of 'sight' to mean 'image' where one of the elements (part) related to the sense is encoded in the word which represents the whole sense.

f. **'A thing worth seeing (the sights of the city).'** (Gralnik, 1984:1324.)

11. "We are going to Paris for the weekend to see the sight". (Hornby, 2004: 1195)

Metaphtonymy is the conceptual device which underlies the meaning of 'sight' in this example. The act of seeing involves directing our eyes and attention to things we want to see. The tourists used

to direct their attention to the interesting places in a city. The association between directing one’s attention towards visiting the interesting places is conceptualized in terms of directing one’s eyes towards objects to be seen. Metaphor is the motivator for this meaning due to the similarity between the two experiences in terms of focusing attention upon the goal.

The effect of metonymy is also present. ‘Sight’ which is the name of the whole sense is used to refer to a place to be seen ‘i.e. image’ which is related to the sense of sight, and is an element of the act of seeing. The whole ‘sight’ stands for the part ‘interesting places’. Hence, the use of ‘sight’ in this instance is to mean “interesting place: in a town or a city”; therefore it is an example of metaphonymy.

g. “Any of various devices used to aid the eyes in lining up a gun, optical instrument, etc. on its objective” (Gralnik, 1984:1324)

12. He has the deer in his sight now. (Hornby, 2004: 1195.)

The instrument through which one sees things is correlated with the sight organ (i.e. eyes) through which we can see the world around us. Conceptual metaphor is activated due to similarity of function of the eyes and that of the instrument (gun in the example above). While metonymy is also present here as the whole ‘sight’ replaces the ‘eye’ which is the first element in the ‘sight sense’ that picks up the goal image. Accordingly, metaphonymy underlies the extension of meaning of ‘sight’ to be a gun or a device to see through.

h. “A goal or aim” (ibid.)

13. “Rogers had victory firmly in his sight. “ (Quirk, 2003, 1533)

Things within our range of sight are all like goals that is reached by our eyes (conceptual metaphor). Things to be seen (goals) are one of the elements involved in the domain of ‘sight’ sense. Due to metonymy, ‘sight’ stands for things to be seen. Again, metaphonymy extends the meaning of the word ‘sight’ to be ‘goal’ in this example.

4. Test Analysis

A questionnaire of ten sentences is presented to 50 students from the fourth stage in the department of English/college of Basic Education/ university of Babylon (2015-2016) to investigate their comprehension of some senses of the word ‘sight’. Ten distinct senses of that word are presented in ten sentences and the subjects are asked to tick the meaning of “sight” in each sentence from a list of options. Then the responses are collected and analyzed. The analysis indicates that the subjects develop their own cognitive strategies which do not conform to the ones employed by the natives; consequently their responses manifest one of the following compensation alternatives:

i. Non-native like cognitive thinking: The concepts overlap in the subjects’ cognition specially those whose contents show a higher level of convergence in the surface structure of the sentence. Hence, the subjects’ responses seem to be a sort of personal judgement as they have no information about the natives’ conventions in utilizing these distinctive concepts in a context. The table below clarifies this point:

Table (1) Subjects’ Responses Which Show Un-natural Conceptual Decoding

No	The sentences	Correct response	Subjects ’incorrect responses		Analysis
1	After ten days at sea, we had our first sight of land.	act of seeing	visible		The act of seeing involves making things visible. The subjects narrow the sense of ‘sight’ from ‘act of seeing’ to ‘visible’. They use metaphoric decoding of metonymically encoded expression)
2	At last we come at sight of a few houses.	visible	ability to see	close	Things are visible only when we have the ability to see them, and when they are within a close distance. Some subjects confuse ‘close’ sense for ‘visible’ sense. While other subjects broaden ‘visible’ sense of ‘sight’ to the ‘ability to see’ sense; i.e. they employ metonymic interpretation to comprehend a metaphoric extension of the word.

3	Keep out of sight.	invisible	ability to see	We are unable to see things that are out of the natural distance within which we can see. However, some subjects broaden the sense of 'sight' from 'invisible' sense to the sense of 'ability to see'. They adopt metonymic thinking to communicate with the natives' metaphoric thinking that underlies the meaning of 'sight' in this sentence.
9	The end is in sight.	close	ability to see	Close things are possible to be seen. In this sentence, 'close' sense is broadened to 'ability to see' sense. Again, the subjects employ metonymy to comprehend the metaphoric extension of the word 'sight'.
10	She always had Hollywood firmly in her sight.	goal	ability to see	'Goal' sense is broadened to 'ability to see' sense. Metonymic thinking is employed to interpret metaphtonymic extension of the word.

- ii. Context conceptualization: It is well known that conceptualization as a process of meaning building, and of meaning extension involves the correlation between the source domain represented by the referent, in all its details, in the real world and the target domain which is an entity that shows a sort of similarity or connection to the source domain . Yet, the subjects, in their responses, conceptualize their understanding of the whole sentence regardless of the cognitive correlation that underlies the process of meaning extension of the word 'sight'. The subjects develop a strategy of linguistic correlation where the source domain is either the total meaning of the sentence or the meaning of some lexical items that attract their attention in the sentence. This can be touched through the subjects' responses to the items presented in the table below:

Table (2): Subjects' Responses Which Reflect Context Conceptualization

N	Sentence	Ideal Response	Subjects' Incorrect Responses		Analysis
1	After ten days at sea, we had our first sight of land.	act of seeing	Far	interesting place	The occurrence of 'sea' at the end of the first phrase, and the occurrence of 'land' at the end of the clause may foreground the distance interpretation on the subjects' part; and the semantic contribution of the phrase 'After ten days at sea' in addition to the appearance of 'first' in the main clause may further enhance the 'far' sense interpretation. The phrase 'After ten days at sea' may also be understood by the subjects as a connotation of a routine activity which finally ends by the arrival to the interesting places. Hence, the subjects paraphrase the sentence as (After ten days at sea, we had reached the interesting places in the land)
2	At last we come at sight of a few houses.	visible	interesting places	goal	'At last' invokes the sense of being longing for some aim to be fulfilled. Hence, some of the subjects choose the 'goal' sense, while others assume that this goal is the arrival at 'interesting places'. The sentence is understood as 'At last we come at interesting places of a few houses', or 'At last we get our goal of arriving at interesting places'

3	Keep out of sight.	invisible	far	close	The adverb “out” connotes the sense of being away, and some of the subjects tend to substitute that sense of “out” by its equivalent word ‘far’. Whereas other subjects paraphrase the meaning of ‘far’ as ‘out of closeness’, so they choose ‘close’ sense.
4	The boat disappeared from sight.	far	act of seeing	visibility	The semantic content of the verb ‘disappear’ is logically related to act of seeing, ability to see, and visibility. The subjects are attracted to these options under the influence of ‘disappear’ logical and contextual associations.
5	The museum attempts to recreate the sights and sounds of war time Britain.	image	visible	close	Recreating something may involve making it either visible to our eyes or close to our understanding. Again, the semantic content of the verb ‘recreate’ in this context invokes the subjects’ choices.
7	She recently underwent operation to restore her sight.	ability to see	goal		One may undergo difficult experiences to restore one’s goal. The words ‘underwent’ and ‘restore’ prompt the idea of struggle which in turn directs the subjects to the choice of ‘goal’ sense.
8	He has the deer <u>in</u> his sight now.	device	far	visible	The containment sense (some entity inside another one; i.e. container) encoded by the preposition ‘in’ seems to control the subjects’ choices in the last three items of the test. Some of the subjects’ responses indicate metaphorical interpretation of the text especially those who choose the senses of ‘far’, and ‘invisible’. On the one hand, some sorts of containers may hide things inside them that they cannot be seen as they are far from others’ eyes. Whereas other subjects follow a simpler cognitive thinking as they assume that when things are described as being in one’s eyes, this means that they are so close to be seen ‘visible’.
9	The end is <u>in</u> sight.	close	far	invisible	
10	She always had Hollywood firmly <u>in</u> her sight.	goal	far	invisible	close

- iii. Structural fitness: This strategy is opposite to the one mentioned above. The subjects tend to conceptualize the senses clarified in certain expressions in the given list of options in terms of fitness of these expressions to some structural positions in the sentences. Hence, they replace the word ‘sight’ by the option item that best fits “sight’s” position rather than its sense in the sentence. More clarification is presented in the following table:

Table (3): Subjects' Responses Which Mirror Their Focus on Structural fitness

Sentence	Correct response	The Subjects' Incorrect Responses		Interpretation
3. Keep out of sight.	invisible	device		The subjects have chosen from the list of options the words which structurally fit the positions of the word 'sight' in these sentences regardless of their contextual and semantic fitness.
4. The boat disappeared from sight.	far	goal		
5. The museum attempts to recreate the sights and sounds of war time Britain.	image	device		
6. We are going to Paris for the weekend to see the sight.	interesting places	image	device	
8. He has the deer in his sight now.	device	goal		
9. The end is in sight.	close	goal		

4. Overall Discussion of the Results:

The results of the test analysis highlight the inadequacy of presenting a language to the learners as a math- like topic. The rules focused system of teaching language frequently proves its deficiency as it denies the live side of language where every moment interaction between the users of a language and the world around them sends in a new spirit in the individual words generating various senses for every single word in an amazing medium of endless correlations between language, thinking, culture, and the different domains that touch the human life in this world.

The subjects' responses mirror that most of the subjects fail to realize the cognitive distinction between the interrelated concepts; for instance, they have been unable to distinguish between 'visible' sense and 'close' sense; and between 'far' sense and 'invisible' sense of the word. The situation is not better with the senses like 'goal' and 'ability to see' whose concepts are more distinct than the ones mentioned above. The subjects' insufficient cognitive competence leads them to develop a non-native like conceptual thinking; and hence we find them employ metaphorical thinking to interpret metonymic extension of the word, or they develop metonymic thinking to comprehend a metaphorically extended sense of the word, or they utilize one cognitive process: either metaphor, or metonymy to get the meaning of metaphonymic expression. All these alternatives lead to one result: the subjects' inability to get the intended meaning.

Some choices of the subjects, particularly those which reflect context conceptualization, signal that the subjects approach the target language cognitively. They try to find some understandable domain through which they access the target domain represented by the word 'sight'. Yet, the absence of the natives' knowledge of how the particular concept is encoded in a particular linguistic item prompts the learners to synonymize rather than conceptualize. They tend to use the sentence meaning as a source domain and they correlate it to the sense option that they assume to be the best representative of that meaning. To clarify this notion let's examine their responses to item (3). We find them assume that the meaning of the sentence 'At last we come at sight of a few houses' as **'At last we come at interesting places of a few houses', or 'At last we get our goal of arriving at interesting places'**. Then, they use that hypothesized meaning of the sentence as the source domain. After searching the set of senses of the word 'sight' within the list of options presented in the test, they match between the assumed meaning of the sentence and the options that best fit that meaning; i.e. 'interesting places' and 'goal' senses. Absolutely, cognitive thinking is apparent here, though in the wrong direction, as the subjects look for a sort of connection between something known for them (the sentence hypothesized meaning) and something unknown represented by the intended sense of the target word 'sight'.

Miscorrelation is also apparent when the subjects fail to differentiate between the concept which is a mental picture of some content and the linguistic expression used to label that concept. They correlate between the linguistic label of the concept (list of sense options presented in the questionnaire) and the sense of the word 'sight' depending on the grammatical position which the two

can share in a particular sentence rather than on the shared properties between the word's referent (in all its details) as a source domain and the target domain represented by the extended sense of that word. For example, in their response to item (4), some of the subjects tend to replace the word 'sight' by the word which labels the sense option that grammatically fits the position of the word 'sight' in the sentence. Hence, (The boat disappeared from sight) which means (the boat is far) is rephrased as (The boat disappeared from goal). A word which is used to label a sense is not necessarily the best cognitive equivalent of this sense in the sentence because cognitive equivalence involves a range of categories which go beyond the literal and the linguistic range of the word. Accordingly, 'goal' as a word which best identifies one concept encoded by 'sight' is different from 'goal' as a concept in itself. Thus replacing the latter by the earlier communicates a completely different message.

5. Conclusions

Finally, the following conclusions have been pointed out:

- 1- Language is a matter of a routine linguistic behavior which is highly shaped by the interlocutors' mutual knowledge of their world which in its turn cultivated by their culture. Metaphor, metonymy and metaphonymy are modes of thinking, communication, and shared understanding that are mutually and routinely used by the natives of a language within a frame of common knowledge between the interlocutors.
- 2-The subjects' responses reveal a sort of cognitive deviation which can be summarized in the following points:
 - a. Un-natural conceptual decoding: Un-natural decoding is the non- native like mental processing of the words in question. The cognitive devices employed by the subjects to decode the intended senses of 'sight' do not coincide with the ones utilized by the natives to encode these senses. The subjects think metaphorically to comprehend the metonymic extension of the word and vice-versa, or they utilize one conceptual device (i.e. either metaphor or metonymy) to comprehend a sense whose conceptual content involves both metaphor and metonymy (metaphonymy).
 - b. Shift in domains: Meaning extension involves correlation between a source domain (i.e. the word's referent in all its details) and the latter's relation to the various domains in the world (see the introduction) and a target domain (i.e. the entity we try to understand in light of the source domain). Due to their cognitive competence deficiency, the subjects shift the domains by making the sentence meaning the source domain through which they access the intended sense of the word 'sight'.
 - c. Miscorrelation: various senses of a word is the outcome of correlation between the mental space of a word and the other mental spaces which involve the encyclopedic information of both our inner world, and the outside world. With the absence of ability to call such connections between these mental spaces, the subjects focus on the concrete levels available to them represented by similarity in grammatical position between the target word 'sight' and the sense option presented in the test.

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Appendix (1): The Test Sample

Q: Tick the different meanings of the word “sight” in the list below:

- a. act of seeing, b. far, c.
 image
 d. interesting place , e. A device you look through f. Goal or aim
 g. ability to see h. visible i.
 invisible
 j. close.
1. After ten days at sea, we had our first **sight** of land.
 2. At last we come at **sight** of a few houses.
 3. Keep out of **sight**.
 4. The boat disappeared from **sight**.
 5. The museum attempt to recreate the **sights** and sounds of war time Britain.
 6. We are going to Paris for the weekend to see the **sight**.
 7. She recently underwent operation to restore her **sight**.
 8. He has the deer in his **sight** now.
 9. The end is in **sight**.
 10. She always had Hollywood firmly in her **sight**.