

Antithetical words

Abstract

The existence of antithetical words in many languages appears to undermine communication. Theories about this curious phenomenon are reviewed and illustrated.

Keywords: *addad; ambiguity; language.*

Empson described his seventh type of ambiguity (1930, p. 192) as "the most ambiguous that can be conceived": This is the case in which a word has two opposite meanings. Indeed, at best this is puzzling. For why would language, capable of lavishly making the finest distinctions among a multitude of concepts, economize in such a dangerous manner? At worst, the existence of homonymous antinomy must shake our belief in the capability of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication and thus provide a crucial example of the language problem (Moore, 1993/94). Unlike his predecessors, Empson was of the opinion that the use of words which cover their own opposite was to be expected only from a rather sophisticated state of language and of feeling:

It seems likely, indeed, that words uniting two opposites are seldom or never actually formed in a language to express the conflict between them; such words come to exist for more sensible reasons, and may then be used to express conflict (1930, p. 195).

Theodor Moritz Redslob's (1873) analysis of Arabic provides an early description of such antithetical words. Though others had mentioned the supposedly widespread existence of *addad*, or words with two opposing meanings, Redslob's is the earliest extensive Western account.¹ In his work Redslob quoted over twenty Arab sources, with special attention being

1. Flügel (1862), for example, mentioned this phenomenon only in passing, and regarded it as a stylistic peculiarity of ancient Arabic). For a modern treatment see Schub (1977).

given to al Anbari, a 10th century grammarian from Baghdad, from whose *Kitab al-addad*, or Book of Opposites, he reproduced lengthy passages. Redslob was critical of the Arab sources, rejecting many of their examples (especially those suspected of irony or euphemism, and the ones that were context dependent). The 353 "admissible" addad listed by him (pp. 26-33) include such pairs as "to write and to erase"; "to stay and to leave"; "to keep quiet and to speak out"; "new and used"; "slave and king", each of these being expressed by a single word. Redslob was not unduly disturbed by the confusion that may be created by words having two contrary meanings. In his opinion, in most cases only one of the two meanings is in everyday use, while the other is unusual, often totally unknown by many native speakers of Arabic. He also rejected the idea that the addad is a peculiarity of Arabic, for other languages also have a few such cases, and he quoted some examples from Hebrew, Ethiopian, Greek and Latin. It appears, therefore, that later attempts to characterize the Arab culture as basically ambivalent, largely on the basis of the addad's existence (e. g. Charnay, Berque, & Alexandre, 1967), are based on a false inference.

Further light was thrown on this subject by Carl Abel, another linguist of the same period. Abel's work of 1884 pointed out, and extensively documented, an addad-like phenomenon in ancient Egyptian: Several words had two antithetical meanings, while other ones were composed of two contradictory roots. Similarly to Redslob (1873), Abel (as well as many others after him, e.g. Bolinger, 1975; Palmer, 1976; Sarfatti, 1978, 1997) found that antithetical words existed in other languages, as well. Abel's explanation for this linguistic curiosity was based on relativity:

It is clear that everything on this planet is relative and has independent existence only in so far as it is distinguished in its relations to and from other things... Since every conception is thus the twin of its opposite, how could it be thought of first, how could it be communicated to others who tried to think it, except by being measured against its opposite? (1884, p. 9).

Abel felt that this tendency was a primitive one, and that man has "gradually learnt to separate the two sides of the antithesis and think of the one without conscious comparison with the other" (p. 15). It was taken for granted by Abel that a language in which a word could have two totally opposite meanings, could not serve for efficient discourse among its speakers, and that, therefore, special symbols and gestures had been used to distinguish the two meanings in writing and in oral communication, respectively. Since the majority of these antithetical words have disappeared from modern languages, so has the habit to indicate opposite meanings. If any of them survive in modern usage, they will have to be interpreted through context alone, or be a source of constant confusion.

In another work Abel (1905) extended his search for antithetical words from Egyptian to many Indo-European languages. He reiterated his position that such inversions of meaning

were a basic characteristic of language, and that every concept can be understood in relation to its opposite:

Since one cannot conceive of strength except as opposed to weakness, the word indicating 'strong' contains a simultaneous reminder of 'weak', through which it came into existence (1905, p. 1).

Freud (1910/1959) seized upon this idea, finding strong support in Abel's works for his belief that dream-work includes a "tendency to reduce two opposites to a unity." In his short paper on "The antithetical sense of primal words" Freud quoted extensively from Carl Abel's book, published in 1884 under the same title.²

To the list of languages in which addad-like words have been shown to exist we may add both Hebrew and English. As for the former, though Zarfati (1978; see also Morag, 1981) listed scores of such words, the situation is similar to Arabic: in most cases the second meaning, though well documented, is unusual, infrequent, and largely unknown to most Hebrew speakers.³ Euphemisms found in Hebrew sources have only a tangential relationship with the topic at hand. Thus the use of "bless" for "curse" in the *Book of Job* does not indicate that this word has antithetical meanings; instead, along with many Talmudic examples, it is the result of authors' and redactors' reluctance to use offending words (see "lashon nekiya" and "sagi nahor").⁴

The same cannot be said of English, where numerous words have two contrary (in some cases even contradictory) meanings, currently coexisting in the language. A few examples will illustrate this:

sanction -- permit or punish; temper -- soften or harden; oversight -- supervision or failure to note something; let -- allow or hinder; host -- stranger, enemy or one who receives guests; cleave -- split or adhere to; enjoin -- require or prohibit; ravish -- seize and carry away by

-
2. Compare Freud's view with Meerloo (1910/1952, p. 170), in a passage entitled The Ambivalence of Words: "...we know that every word has an ambiguous, equivocal meaning. Or, to phrase it differently, there are several meanings rooted behind each word. Psychologists use the term 'ambivalence' to designate the paradoxical nature of the word, for behind every expression lies both the wish to express and the wish not to express. Discord is inherent to man and to the word, which is the property of man. Man wants to live and he wants to die. He wants to express and he wants to conceal".
 3. Of the several Hebrew roots, often cited in this context (e.g. השל, הלש, שכה) only a few are antithetical. Thus the post-Biblical use of קלם to indicate praise, rather than derision, resulted from the influence of similar sounding Greek κάλος (beautiful), while the seeming contradiction between פנים (face, therefore outside) and פנימה (inside) is explained by Brown, Driver & Briggs (1906, p. 819) as the latter meaning "faceward from point of view of one entering by opposite door". Though the two opposite meanings of Hebrew סכל are derived from Arabic سَكَلَ = form, likeness (according to Adalbert Merx, *Chrestomathia Targumica*, 1888, in Brown et al., 1906, p. 698), others think that the positive connotation bears the influence of שכל. Still others (e.g. חסד, עוב) though probably antithetical, create no communication problem, because only one meaning is in current use.
 4. Compare with Gordis (1936 and 1938), who related this phenomenon to verbal taboo, and Nöldeke (1910), who classified 177 addad into ten categories, but found no common explanation that would fit all of them.

force or transport with delight or joy.⁵

In other cases the coexistence of contrary meanings in one word becomes apparent only when a word's etymology is examined. Thus speed is related to Gothic *spediza* (late comer) and to German *spät* (late); both cold and caldron can be traced back to the same root, and so can blank and black; altitude's roots may be found in its Latin origin, *altus*, indicating both high and deep.

Antithetical meanings are not limited to words but may also reside in expressions. Thus "in charge of" may mean both being the slave and the master. To set the clock ahead one hour is ambiguous, according to Urdang (1984, pp. 260-1): If the clock reads 12:00, is one to change it to 1:00 or to 11:00? The same holds for advance or gain and for lose, when these verbs refer to time: In an answer to a reader's query the editors of *American Speech* (Thomas, 1983, p. 90) explain that to move an appointment up may mean both later in time and earlier in time.

A problem of comparable magnitude, based on totally different mechanisms, is created by what Thomas (1983) called "interchangeable pairs" in English. Unlike the *addad*, in which one word has two opposing meanings, here two, apparently contradictory words, are identical in meaning. All of these have pre- or suffixes; many of them are due to the confusion of the negative *in-*, with the propositional prefix *in-* (as in *inflammable*, *inhabitable*, *inheritable*, etc.), or to nonstandard English, such as *irregardless*. (The potential for disaster in mistaking *inflammable* for *uninflammable* has created two new words in English: *flammable* and *non-flammable*). Yet even when these are ruled out, enough are left to be added to the language problem: *ravel/unravel*, and *thaw/unthaw* are only two examples. The clearly negative prefixes *dis-* and *mis-* have a similar history. When they are added to words already having a negative sense, they serve, quite anomalously, as intensive rather than negative prefixes (as in *disannul* or *in misdoubt*). Neither is the following phenomenon, involving apparently contradictory word pairs, especially helpful for clarity of expression: The adjectives *ingenious* (marked by cleverness, artful) and *ingenuous* (marked by lack of subtle analysis, simple) are near antonyms, yet each is an obsolete form of the other. Similarly, the antonymous adjectives *temerous* (rash, bold; cf. *temerity*) and *timorous* (full of or affected by fear) are often confused with one another, the former again being an obsolete form of the latter.

All of the foregoing, whether involving one word with two opposing meanings, or two apparently contradictory words which are interpreted as identical, well illustrate the language problem. It does not matter that any given user of such words may be unaware of the other meaning, or that an intentional double entendre may be lost on some of its recipients: indeed,

5. See also the confusion that arises from "unpacked suitcase" (empty or full?) and from "to dust" (remove dust or spread it?).

such miss-matches between the participants in a dialogue render any verbal exchange even more dangerous. One can easily sympathize with Francis Bacon's (1620/1854) observation: "Words still manifestly force the understanding, throw everything into confusion, and lead mankind into vain and innumerable controversies and fallacies" (p. 347).

References

- Abel, C. (1884). *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte*. Leipzig: Friedrich.
- Abel, C. (1905). *Über Gegensinn und Gegenlaut in den klassischen, germanischen und slavischen Sprachen*. Frankfurt: Diesterweg.
- Bacon, F. (1854). *Novum organum* (B. Montague, Ed. & Trans.). Philadelphia, PA: Parry & MacMillan. (Original work published 1620)
- Bolinger, D. (1975). *Aspects of language* (2nd ed). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1906). *A Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament with an appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic* (based on the Hebrew lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius as translated by Edward Robinson). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Charnay, J. P., Berque, J., & Alexandre, P. (1967). *L'ambivalence dans la culture arabe*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Empson, W. (1930). *Seven types of ambiguity*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Flügel, G. (1862). *Die grammatischen Schulen der Araber* (Abhandlungen der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft II 4). Leipzig: Brockhaus.
- Freud, S. (1959). *Collected papers* (Vol. 4). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1910)
- Gordis, R. (1936). Studies in Hebrew roots of contrasted meanings. *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series*, 27(1), 33-58.
- Gordis, R. (1938). Some effects of primitive thought on language. *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 55(3), 270-284.
- Meerlo, J. A. M. (1952). *Conversation and communication*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Moore, M. (1993-1994). The language problem. *Et Cetera: A Review of General Semantics*, 50, 461-468.
- Morag, S. (1981). Layers of ancientness. *Tarbitz*, 50, 1-24 (in Hebrew).
- Nöldeke, T. (1910). *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*. Strasbourg: K.J. Trübner.
- Palmer, F. R. (1976). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Redslob, T. M. (1873). *Die arabischen Wörter mit entgegengesetzten Bedeutungen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Sarfatti, G. B. (1978). *Semantika 'ivrit* [Hebrew semantics]. Jerusalem: Rubinstein.
- Sarfatti, G. B. (1997). *Kileshon 'ami: 'iyunim balashon ha'ivrit* [In the language of my people: Studies in the Hebrew language]. Jerusalem: Hebrew Language Academy.
- Schub, M. B. (1977). The 'addâd. *Al-'Arabiyya*, 10(1-2), 42-45.
- Thomas, M. (1983) Interchangeable pairs in un-, in-, en-, etc. *American Speech*, 58(1), 78-80.
- Urdang, L. (1984). 'Earlier' and 'later' words. *American Speech*, 59, 260-261.