

“Meaning indicators” in Spanish-English/English-Spanish dictionaries

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This paper studies the information often included in entries for polysemous words in bilingual dictionaries to help users to differentiate among senses and to aid them in their choice of a translation equivalent.

It is well-known that words displaying a significant degree of polysemy pose challenges for bilingual dictionaries (Zgusta 1987). Many bilingual dictionaries provide lists of equivalents, but in the absence of clear indications to the user, the result is often an inappropriate choice for the translation context. As lexicographic description has increasingly included contextual and collocational information, bilingual dictionaries have employed several strategies, such as “meaning indicators” in the source language, senses marked with subject labels, and further explanations of translations, to help lead users to the sense that motivated the search. As we show in our analysis of several large-scale Spanish-English/English-Spanish bilingual dictionaries, however, dictionaries have not been systematic in applying these strategies to sense differentiation. It is surprising that these strategies are so varied, in that consistency—both in terms of the nature of the “meaning indicator” and its application to entries—is highly valued in lexicography. We propose a more systematic approach to “meaning indicators” that increases the use of synonymic phrasing while reducing the role of subject labels. Finally, we also consider the role of examples in bilingual entries. Most entries for polysemous words contain examples with translations that complement the equivalents given, although there are examples which do not correspond to any of the senses for which an equivalent has been provided (e.g., the on-line version of *Merriam-Webster’s Spanish-English Dictionary* contains the example *tener alguien buena planta* ([someone] be good-looking) under the entry for *planta*, but this expression, while quite common, is not covered by any of the five senses listed for *planta*). We suggest how this sort of inconsistency could be avoided.