LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF FRENCH WORDS

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Abstract

In language games, many rely on the mental qualities of the player (memory, cultural knowledge, quick wit, etc.) without the intervention of chance. It is therefore not only a shared language but also a shared culture that underpins successful communication. For this reason, in this article, we aim to provide a categorized distinction of the characteristic features of word games.

Linguistic ambiguity arising from a single word can lead to two types of ambiguity: one produced unintentionally and the other resulting from the sender's deliberate wordplay. The latter relies on certain techniques, which, in our view, are responsible for this ambivalence. In this context, we shall analyses the semantic features employed by those accustomed to playing with words, in order to achieve their objectives by putting their recipients in a difficult position. These word games constitute the focus of our study, which we consider particularly suitable for such an analysis. This article primarily addresses the linguistic and logical features of definitions.

Introduction

In language games, many activities appeal to the interlocutor's mental abilities (memory, cultural knowledge, quick-wittedness, etc.) without involving chance. The same applies to crossword writing, which belongs to a category encompassing a large proportion of word games. The success of such games is therefore based on a shared language as well as a shared culture. For this reason, this article seeks to propose a categorical distinction of the characteristic features of crossword definitions, after analyzing several examples by Georges Perec, an author renowned for producing grids that are, to say the least, extremely difficult to solve.

In this study, we attempt to analyses a number of definitions and to highlight, on the one hand, the richness and diversity of the techniques used by crossword setters to create

ingenious definitions in which polysemy and homonymy frequently occur; and, on the other hand, the possible analytical strategies employed by solvers to uncover the denominations hidden behind these definitions.

Based on these strategies, it seemed necessary to propose a categorization of definitions, which is the aim of this research. This categorization is established on the basis of linguistic features, logical features, and features related to cultural capital and rhetoric.

1. LINGUISTIC FEATURES

In linguistics, a feature is a specific characteristic of a given element or a minimal relevant property distinguishing two units. In our case, however, features refer to any clue or sign that leads to meaning within a definition. It is therefore a generic term encompassing a wide range of more specialized technical notions, such as explicit, implicit, grammatical and semantic features.

1.1 Explicit features through the presence of deictics

Deictics are linguistic units that indicate place, time and the subject referred to (example. il, y, jadis). These personal and spatio-temporal markers are also known as shifters. Their referential value varies from one definition to another. They include spatial-temporal markers, personal markers and demonstrative markers.

Spatial-temporal markers

These are words within the definition that indicate either time or space in order to facilitate the solver's task. However, solvers cannot know what they refer to without identifying the correct denomination. For example:

Le maintien de l'ordre devait y poser de sérieux problèmes.

The solution is a ten-letter word: CAPHARNAUM.

In this definition, the linguistic element y refers to a place. However, it may also function as a personal pronoun meaning to him, to her, or as a pronoun meaning to that or to that thing. This shows that even grammatical words are polysemous, as their meaning varies according to context.

Personal markers

First person (nous, notre, nos), second person (vous, votre, vos), and third person (il, elle, l'). Their referents cannot be identified without first finding the correct denomination. For example:

S'il est nourri, c'est de pruneaux.

The solution is a three-letter word: TIR.

In identifying personal markers, one should not be misled by on, which can take several values (indefinite, first person singular, first person plural, etc.). In this definition, the

pronoun il may refer to an object, a person, an animal, and so on.

Demonstrative markers

Demonstrative markers are grammatical words used to draw attention to a specific content, idea or meaning, such as ce, cet, cette, ces, voici, celui-ci. For example:

Celui-là devrait aller vers l'anode.

The solution is a three-letter word: NOI (ion spelled backwards).

Here, the author uses the demonstrative deictic celui-là to substitute the expected word.

1.2 Implicit features

A denomination is implicit when it is allusive or suggested rather than explicitly stated. The reader must rely on reasoning and deduction to extract it from the information provided in the definition. The solution is not linguistically represented, nor indicated by a deictic. For example:

Fait un courant d'air…

The solution is EOLIENNE (eight letters).

The noun phrase un courant d'air is polysemous: it may refer to a physical airflow or, in informal and humorous language, to a person who is frequently absent. The solution may therefore be a verb related to faire courant d'air (isomorphic relation) or a noun (heteromorphic relation), leading to several possible interpretations.

1.3 Grammatically isomorphic features

A definition and its denomination are grammatically isomorphic when both belong to the same syntactic category. For example:

Tout bien considérée.

The solution is REPUTEE (seven letters).

This definition involves the defreezing of the fixed adverbial expression tout bien considéré ("all things considered"). The author adds the feminine -e to alter the expression entirely, particularly the word considérée, which is polysemous and may mean "esteemed" or "well-known". Hence the isomorphic denomination REPUTEE.

1.4 Grammatically heteromorphic features

In contrast, grammatical heteromorphism occurs when there is a difference in syntactic category between the definition and its solution. For example:

Nous le prisons fort…

The solution is PIRANESE (eight letters).

Here, the solution refers to Piranesi, the Italian engraver and architect, whose work is associated with eaux-fortes (etchings). The definition exploits the polysemy of prison (noun or verb priser), creating a syntactic mismatch between definition and solution.

2. LOGICAL FEATURES

2.1 Synonymy

In this study, two words are considered synonymous when they are substitutable for one another, sharing one or more elements of meaning. In crossword puzzles, words often appear without context, which increases ambiguity. Absolute synonymy is rare, as noted by Niklas-Salminen (1997). For example:

Nouveau-nés acéphales.

The solution is EBES (four letters).

Here, the solver must find a synonym of nouveau-nés (bébés), then remove the initial letter (acéphales = "headless"), producing EBES.

2.2 Inclusion

Inclusion refers to a semantic relationship in which one term is contained within another, such as hyperonymy/hyponymy and meronymy/holonymy.

2.2.1 Hyperonymy vs hyponymy

These relations organise meanings according to a genus–species hierarchy. For example:

Combattants, et jusqu'au dernier râle.

The solution is ECHASSIERS (ten letters).

The words combattants and râle share a common hyperonym (ECHASSIERS), illustrating a hierarchical semantic relationship.

2.2.2 Meronymy vs holonymy

Meronymy and holonymy express part–whole relations. For example:

Ne met jamais les voiles, même quand il est barré.

The solution is AVIRON (six letters).

Here, voiles and barres are parts of the whole (AVIRON), making them meronyms, while AVIRON is their holonym.

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEFINITION AND DENOMINATION

This relationship involves a logical connection between the meanings of the definition and the solution. For example:

Voudrait effacer une mauvaise impression.

The solution is ERRATUM (seven letters).

The phrase voudrait effacer links mauvaise impression to ERRATUM, which denotes a printing error noted for correction.

3.1 Relation of specificity

Specificity refers to essential and exclusive characteristics linking the definition to the solution. For example:

Est toujours lourd, malgré son nom…

The solution is LEST (four letters).

Despite multiple possible interpretations of lourd, the property of heaviness is specifically associated with LEST.

3.2 Deductive denomination

A deductive denomination is based on logical reasoning from cause to effect. For example:

C'est à cause de lui que tous les Français connaissent le mouvement dada…

The solution is TIERCE (six letters).

The clue exploits the polysemy of dada, leading the solver to the context of horse racing (tiercé), a popular French betting practice.

3.3 Relation of resemblance

This involves identifying shared characteristics between objects or persons. For example:

Ne sont pas seulement favoris chez le boucher.

The solution is COTELETTES (ten letters).

The definition relies on a resemblance in shape between favoris (sideburns) and côtelettes.

4. CULTURAL AND RHETORICAL CODING FEATURES

The crossword setter, like any writer, employs rhetorical strategies and cultural references. Rhetoric here involves wordplay, logical construction and coded messages requiring cultural knowledge.

4.1 Asemantic denominations

Asemantic denominations, known as fillers, are meaningless letter sequences used to complete a grid. For example:

Donne un petit caractère penché.

The solution is ITAL (four letters), a truncated form of italique.

4.2 Probabilistic denominations

Some definitions allow multiple interpretations due to semantic flexibility. For example:

Ont quelque chose de saumâtre.

The solution is ETIERS (six letters), linked to the meaning of saumâtre as a mixture of fresh and salt water.

4.3 Semantic frequency

Frequency is an objective measure that estimates the number of times a crossword solver has encountered a given word, based on an approximate calculation of how often a word appears across numerous grids. The semantic frequency effect therefore consists in more easily recognising a word that is encountered more frequently in crossword puzzles than another word encountered less often; this frequency effect is observed both for words belonging to the open class (content or lexical words) and for those belonging to the closed class (function or grammatical words).

4.4 Cultural capital : paradigmatic dimension

Paradigmatic relations can shed light on the connotations of the word to be found. Indeed, these relations are those that exist between lexical units *in absentia* within a definition, but which are likely to appear in the grid, that is, in the answer itself denomination. Paradigmatic relations thus provide an answer to the question "What can I put in place of this word?"; the most common or obvious ones in crossword puzzles belong to what we have termed the "logical features of definitions": synonymy, hyperonymy vs. hyponymy, and meronymy vs. holonymy. Thus, language bears witness to a form of cultural capital, and all language users, through the language they employ, carry within them elements of a given culture, whether these elements are easily or only with difficulty observable.

4.5 Cultural capital: syntagmatic dimension

Syntagmatic relations are complementary to paradigmatic relations; they account for the links that exist between the different segments present in a sentence, insofar as words are arranged and connected in a linear manner. Through the study of syntagmatic relations, we aim to disambiguate vague definitions, especially those containing fixed expressions as well as proverbial or idiomatic expressions, by analysing the lexical units that compose them. Indeed, fixed expressions are sometimes subjected to a process of defixation by crossword constructors in order to lead solvers away from the appropriate solution. It is therefore neither words in their morphology nor syntactic rules that carry cultural meaning, but rather the particular ways in which individuals speak or write: the ways they use words, their modes of reasoning and narration, and their use of linguistic techniques to joke, to explain, or to play on words. For example:

Son train monte ou descend en même temps que son niveau.

The solution is VIE (three letters), derived from the expressions train de vie and niveau de vie.

4.6 Rhetoric: metaphorical dimension

Essono J.-M defines rhetoric. as "a set of precepts relating to the art of speaking well, to eloquence. It is the science of expression, discourse analysis, and figures or tropes." (ESSONO 1986 p16) It reveals processes to which crossword solvers are confronted in almost all grids, and which contain errors of reasoning or ruses that hinder the proper interpretation of a definition. Among these processes, we have metaphor. In the context of crossword puzzles, this involves going beyond the apparent meaning suggested by an initial reading of the definition and uncovering the hidden meaning, since most metaphorical uses are not recorded in dictionaries. For example :

S'il lève plusieurs chevaux d'un coup, c'est vraiment qu'il a du cran !

The solution is CRIC (four letters), where chevaux refers metaphorically to horsepower.

4.7 Rhetoric: metonymic dimension

Metonymy is a rhetorical figure based on substitution; it consists in replacing the expected term with another term that logic or empirical experience allows one to associate with the former. It often occurs in ordinary communicative situations, where it depends, more precisely, on requirements of economy and relevance. This process nevertheless always gives rise to a gap, whether that gap becomes apparent only through the analysis of a definition or when the sought-after solution is found. For example:

Son bœuf a fait un effet bœuf.

The solution is SOUTINE (seven letters), referring to the painter's work Bœuf écorché.

Conclusion

Following our classification of definitions, we observe that polysemy persists across all categories. The internal co-text of definitions, particularly phrasal ones, plays a crucial role in meaning construction. The distinction between primary and secondary meanings is central: the primary meaning guides the solver towards the correct solution, while secondary meanings act as misleading paths.

In conclusion, crossword definitions display remarkable richness and complexity, relying on diverse linguistic and logical mechanisms. Successful solving depends on linguistic mastery, cultural knowledge and the ability to decode wordplay. The categorisation proposed in this article offers useful tools for understanding the underlying principles governing the creation and resolution of crossword definitions.

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