

Henry Niedzielski

SEMANTIC CONSIDERATIONS OF 'SET' AND SOME OF ITS FRENCH EQUIVALENTS

The Problem

Bilingual English-French dictionaries usually do not show clearly the basic meanings of set. Instead of providing some general semantic features, they list various synonymous words or expressions in an apparent mixture of meanings, based on a structural analysis of English. While paraphrasing rather than translating, monolingual dictionaries and even specialized descriptions of English idiomatic expressions also fail to classify systematically each basic meaning with its sub-senses. All types of lexicons generally set apart the so-called two-word or phrasal verbs - which contain one or more prepositions or adverbial particles like in, out, up, down, on or off - because they are 'idiomatic' and because their meaning seems to be clearly shown in the relevant preposition. In fact, the meaning of some of these compound verbal expressions depends on whether they are in the active or the passive voice. For instance, to set up with and to be set up with show the same relation of 'to cause to have' and 'to come to have' as exists between to give and to get.

Previous research

Makkai's ranking of polysemous verbs (1972:205) reveals that, with the exception of make, set is the most idiomatic of all English verbs. This idiomaticity presents difficulties both to students of English as a foreign or second language and to translators or interpreters. Unfortunately, neither grammarians nor lexicographers are very helpful in the explication of said idiomaticity.

For instance, in A Grammar of Contemporary English, set is simply classified under irregular verb Class 3 (after cut) with the following characteristics: "all three parts V, V-ed1 and V-ed2 are identical with no suffix or change of the base vowel" (Quirk et al. 1973:114). Makkai analyzes get in detail, but for set lists only set about, set back, set in, set off1 ('emphasize, contrast'), set off2 ('cause, set into motion'), set out (for/on), set up (1972:289).

Unabridged dictionaries tend to be more exhaustive, but overlapping meaning areas in their unduly long listings generally cause confusion. The RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY lists over eighty entries. Although the WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY (W3) gives only thirty-three lexical entries for the verb set, the reader is still at a loss because semantic differences are not clearly presented. For example, what is the difference between "to put to stay in place" (entry 5a) and "to cause to assume a specified position" (entry 8)? The same lack of clear semantic differentiation appears in the OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH (ALD). Under the first sub-entry, the ALD groups 'put', 'lay', and 'stand'; however, in the third sub-entry

it defines set as "station, place ready, place or turn in right or specified position or direction[...]" . Do the verbs put, lay and stand not mean "place in position"?

The one dictionary which attempts best to establish a semantic sub-categorization of the numerous senses of set is the SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, which groups all of them into ten classes only.

The solution

Interested by a similar problem caused by another polysemous verb, get, I had already established a system accounting for all the basic meanings of the verb (cf. Niedzielski 1976). Each of the nine different basic semantic categories represented in Table 1 contains two primary semantic features, one selected vertically out of [+stative], [+dynamic/+causative], [+dynamic/-causative] and one horizontally out of [+essive], [+possessive], [+performing].

Table 1 (To Get)

	ESSIVE	POSSESSIVE	PERFORMING
S T A T I V E	BE	HAVE	BEHAVE?
D Y N A M I C	COME TO BE	COME TO HAVE	DO
	CAUSE TO BE	CAUSE TO HAVE	CAUSE TO DO

The same classification as for get has been used by some of my students at the University of Burundi (Bacamurwanko and Matuturu 1981). They paraphrased all the English structures which they could find in the unabridged monolingual dictionaries mentioned above by replacing set, for each structure, by the group of primary features found in one of the semantic categories described in Table 1. Then they translated each English paraphrase into an underlying Kirundi structure exhibiting the same group of primary features. Finally, they refined these general Kirundi structures into idiomatic surface structures. These paraphrases and translations confirmed that the table established for get is also usable for the various meanings of set and its basic lexical equivalents in Kirundi. Later, other students verified the validity and reliability of the same classification table, using French equivalents (Goldenberg and Szymanski 1982) and German (Gehlen 1982).

Therefore, the nine semantic categories contained in Table 1 will serve as a basis for describing the various meanings and usages of set. They are: 'cause to be', 'cause to do', 'cause to have' (these three categories normally involve two or three animate NPs, one or two of them performing various functions), 'come to be', 'come to have', 'do', 'be', 'have' and 'behave' (only the last three are stative, all the others being dynamic).

As the purpose of this paper is not to give an exhaustive classification of all the possible meanings of set, but rather to show a method of establishing such a classification, each category will be illustrated by as few examples as necessary; however, more English 'synonyms' and their French lexical equivalents will be provided in Table 2. In this table, the main features listed horizontally have been replaced by simpler terms: "being", 'having' and 'doing'. Each box, from 1 to 9, will be examined in turn.

(1a) set = "cause to be in a certain location or position"

According to W3, set evolved from Middle English setten developed from Old English settan, akin to Old High Germanic sezzen. Chaucer was among the first writers to use it in his Canterbury Tales. The original meaning was the causative of sit. The basic componential features were then [+causative, (+essive), +locative]. Therefore, Table 2 shows in its central area lexical equivalents with these features.

Thus, in sentences like

He set (placed) the hen onto the eggs.
Il a assis (placé) la poule sur les œufs.

set (1a) is [+causative, (+essive), +locative] with the meaning of:

"He caused (made) the hen to sit on the eggs"
"Il a fait en sorte que la poule est assise sur les œufs"

It may be that in those days people believed that the most stable and the most secure position was the sitting one because, according to the ALD, the semantic element present in other meanings of set is "to put securely in position". Today, the position may be standing, lying or somehow defined in relation to another position of reference.

E.g.
I set (leaned) the bicycle against the wall.
J'ai appuyé la bicyclette contre le mur.

I set (launched) the raft afloat.
J'ai lancé le radeau à l'eau.

He sets (puts, places) money aside.
Il met de l'argent de côté.

The woman sets out (displays) the chickens at the market-place.
La femme expose les poulets au marché.

		HAVING	BEING				DOING
S T A T I V E	8		[+ attributive]		[+ locative]		9
		HAVE avoir to be supplied with être muni de	7b	BE être	7a	BEHAVE se comporter	
			continue constitute	continuer constituer	to be located to be inserted to be opposed	être situé être serti être opposé	
D Y N A M I C	3	CAUSE TO HAVE faire avoir	1b CAUSE TO BE		1a		2 CAUSE TO DO faire faire
		buy acheter supply fournir release libérer provide approvisionner assign allouer	rendre		mettre		order ordonner urge presser instigate inciter emulate imiter prescribe prescrire enjoin enjoindre " interdire inflamm inflammer
			sharpen {aiguiser affuter harden tremper curdle faire cailler adjust régler ajuster arrange arranger dispose disposer decorate décorer institute instituer appoint nommer ordain ordonner publish publier transpose transposer		put mettre stand dresser lay coucher place placer lean appuyer launch lancer display exposer apply appliquer turn faire tourner join remplacer attach joindre affix apposer emphasize mettre l'emphase reject rejeter		
	5	COME TO HAVE obtenir	4b COME TO BE		4a		6 DO faire
		receive recevoir find trouver	devenir				start doing {se mettre à commencer assail assaillir concentrate se concentrer
			become devenir be transformed se transf. change changer develop s'accroître solidify se solidifier		rest se reposer lean s'appuyer begin commencer start moving {se mettre en route stop moving se fixer fall behind s'attarder decline se coucher depart partir		

Table 2

(1b) set = "cause to be in a certain condition"

We note that in the French equivalent of "He caused the hen to sit on the eggs" the notion of 'resultative' is clearly expressed in the verb est assise ('is seated'). It seems that this notion prevailed in English and that the meaning of set was quickly extended to the entire basic area of 'cause to be' including "cause to be in a certain condition, state, shape ...". Thus,

He set (freed) the prisoner free.
Il libéra le prisonnier.

where set (1b) is [+causative, (+essive) +attributive] with the meaning of:

"He caused the prisoner to be free"
"Il a fait en sorte que le prisonnier est libre"

The worker sets (hardens) the metal (cf. lets the metal set).
L'ouvrier fait durcir le métal.

The housewife sets (curdles) the pudding (lets it set).
La ménagère fait cailler le lait.

The composer sets (transposes) thoughts into music.
Le Compositeur met (transpose) des pensées en musique.

(2) set = "cause to do"

From the central "cause to be" area, the usage of set seems to have spread to the adjacent "cause to do" area. Thus,

That fellow set (ordered) his dog on me.
Ce type m'a fait attaquer par son chien.

meaning: "That fellow caused his dog to attack me".

The resultative feature is very clear in the French translation, which illustrates the emphasis placed by the French language on the result of a performance, as opposed to the emphasis placed in English on the action itself. The same resultative feature appears in the following examples, which show that some animate being performs on the instigation of another animate being.

Paul's answer set them thinking.
La réponse de Paul les fit réfléchir.

meaning: "With his answer, Paul made them think"
"Paul les fit réfléchir avec sa réponse"

This and examples found in other categories, show that surface structures may sometimes conceal semantic elements of an expression because of some idiomatic transformation such as the nominalization of an instrumental.

(3) set = "cause to have"

Although a preliminary analysis of the frequency of other meanings of set suggests that the usage of set spread from boxes 1 and/or 2 to boxes 4 and 6, we shall first consider in this synchronic semantic study all the expressions which share the causative feature. In the following sentences, set has the meaning of "cause to have":

It is very costly nowadays to set a child up with clothes.
Habiller un enfant aujourd'hui ça coûte cher.

where to set up means 'to buy'.

Structures belonging to this category are not too numerous but include those like:

Paul's father set him up as a bookseller.
Le père de Paul l'a installé comme libraire.

that is, "Paul's father caused him to have a bookstore"
"Le père de Paul lui a fait avoir une librairie"

because to be a bookseller Paul must have a bookstore; and the function of selling, or the status of seller, is dependent on the possession of the store and of the books.

(4a) set = "come to be in a certain position or location"

Although it is understandable that, in many situations, someone or something comes to be in a certain position or location as a result of some other action or process, expressions in this category emphasize this resultative feature rather than the causative. In fact, it is remarkable that French equivalents of set (4a) are generally pseudo-reflexives; i.e. reflexive in form but not in meaning. I have shown in another article that these structural reflexives indicate that the true agent is not expressed.

E.g.
As his eyes set, everybody knew he had lived.
Quand ses yeux se fixèrent, tout le monde comprit qu'il avait vécu.

where set means "came to be in a fixed position", and the agent death is unexpressed but still understood in this figure of speech. There are other situations where the agent is not understood.

E.g.
Winter sets in (begins) early here.
L'hiver commence tôt ici.

or "Winter comes to be early here"

Atheists would never accept the notion of the creator as an agent who regulates seasons.

In other situations, the agent is also the subject of set.

E.g.

After breakfast, we set out (departed) for the next town.
Après le déjeuner, nous nous sommes mis en route vers
le village voisin.

where set out (for) means "came to change our location from... to..."

(4b) set = "come to be in a certain condition or state"

This category, like 5 and to a limited extent 4a, includes some expressions found in 1b, 3 or 1a, respectively.

E.g.

The dry undergrowth was set alight (by the sun).
Le sous-bois fut illuminé (par le soleil).

corresponding to:

The sun set alight the dry undergrowth.

The agent sun need not be expressed and, in fact, it could be argued that such sentences should be treated as belonging to category 1b with the meaning of "cause to be in a certain condition", but with the emphasis on the resultative rather than the agentive. However, other languages use the instrumental for the agent and a reflexive structure for the verb (e.g. zapaliło się in Polish). Thus, the relation between 4b and 1b seems to be again that which exists between get and give: a sort of mirror image. This change in condition may also be expressed through an intransitive verb.

E.g.

Poverty sets in (spreads) with unemployment.
La pauvreté se répand avec le chômage.

meaning: "Poverty comes to be greater"

(5) set = "come to have"

This category is made up mostly of passive structures which, as mentioned above, correspond to active structures found in category 3 ("cause to have").

E.g.

He was set up with (received) a huge inheritance.
Il a reçu un gros héritage.

This passive idea of "come to have" may also be expressed through a past participle alone:

Set up with (finding) the right address, he resumed his
research.
Ayant trouvé la bonne adresse, il recommença à chercher.

It appears that set expresses a coming into possession without any effort - contrary to get, which may be used for all kinds of ways of acquiring a possession.

(6) set = "do" [+dynamic, -causative, +performing]

Unlike categories 4 ("come to be") and 5 ("come to have"), which stress the resultative aspect of an action or process, this category emphasizes the activity itself. In fact, the beginning of an action is often expressed here, with an inchoative aspect.

E.g.

The rioters set about (started) smashing the shop-windows.
Les émeutiers se sont mis à briser les vitrines.

He did not know how to set about that job.
Il ne savait pas comment commencer cet ouvrage.

Because the feature of sudden activity is prevalent in this category, set has also come to mean a violent activity.

E.g.

The robbers set about (attacked) the tourist.
Les larrons ont attaqué le touriste.

The original semantic element of 'firmly' or 'securely' which was a part of set ("cause to sit") probably explains the following sentence:

The inspector set his heart (concentrated) on that case.
L'inspecteur se concentra sur le cas (de tout son coeur).
i.e. "The inspector studied that case wholeheartedly"

(7a) set = "to be in a certain location or position"

Categories 7 and 8 ("to have") seem to go beyond the resultative aspect observed in categories 4 ("come to be") and 5 ("come to have"). They describe a stative situation which, of course, must have been brought about by some previous process or action completely disregarded here.

E.g.

His house is set (located) in the heart of the woods.
Sa maison est située en plein cœur de la forêt.

This rare gem is set (inserted) in a solid-gold ring.
Ce joyau rare est serti dans une bague d'or massif.

Obviously, someone must have built the house and placed the gem into the ring.

(7b) set = "to be in a certain condition or state"

In the following sentence, the idea of a state which endures unchanged is understood in the English version and very clear in the French idiomatic version. This stability derives again from the semantic element of 'firmly' or 'securely' found originally in set.

The weather is setting fair.
Le temps est au beau fixe.

meaning: "The weather continues to be nice"

(8) set = "to have"

Although quite rare with this meaning, set is used here in some sentences which resemble others classified under category 5 ("come to have"). As mentioned above (7a), the situation is described without any consideration of the process or action which created it.

E.g.

I don't need to buy warm clothes because I am well set up (supplied with) for winter.

Je n'ai pas besoin d'acheter de vêtements chauds parce que j'en suis bien muni pour l'hiver.

This sentence could be contrasted with that listed under "come to have":

"Set up with the right answer, he resumed his search"

where set 5 indicates a change, a new development.

(9) set = "to behave"

Behave means "to appear as, to act as, to conduct oneself in a particular way". In other words, as indicated in its roots, 'to behave' could be at the same time 'to be' and 'to have' or, in its present usage, 'to be' and 'to do'. In the first interpretation, behave bears features which classify it as a stative verb. In the second interpretation, the additional feature of 'doing' qualifies it as a performing verb. In fact, unlike the case for verbs found in categories 2 and 6 ("cause to do" and 'do', respectively), the action of behaving neither produces anything, nor creates anything except perhaps, at times, an illusion. Of course, verbs in this [+stative, +performing] category are quite rare, seeming a priori to exhibit mutually exclusive features. For set, the following sentence may serve as an example:

That man sets (himself) up as a doctor.
Cet homme prétend être docteur.

meaning: "That man behaves like (pretends to be) a doctor"

Conclusion

In conclusion, semantic analysis by componential features has led us to establish twelve sub-categories to account for all the possible meanings of set. Since the original meaning of set was the causative of sit and included the feature of location, it is not surprising that half of the sub-categories contain the basic meaning of 'being' and that the greatest number of lexical equivalents of set are still causative.

The twelve semantic sub-categories of set show all the basic denotations of this verb. Any additional connotations must be deduced from various situational or linguistic contexts. For

instance, some figurative or abstract meanings may be found for some categories. Thus,

His parents are very much set against his marriage.
Ses parents s'opposent vraiment à son mariage.

Here the locative configuration of two camps opposed to each other is recognizable. Therefore, set is [+stative, (+essive) +locative +abstract]. The following sentence, however, is [+causative, (+essive) +locative +abstract]:

The Pope set off (emphasized) solidarity as the most essential quality.
Le pape a souligné que la solidarité est la qualité fondamentale.

Note that solidarity, an abstract notion, is placed in the first rank like a concrete entity.

Whether or not additional semantic features are contained in a structure with set, the procedure to determine the precise meaning of the expression is the same:

- (1) Establish the nature and the function of the agent and the recipient of the action, or those of the experiencer of the process or state.
- (2) Determine whether the agent is acting on his own initiative or because of an outside instigator or cause.
- (3) Define the outcome of the action or process - is it a change in location, a change in condition or a new possession? If the outcome is not definable, what is the action being performed?
- (4) Paraphrase then the idiomatic expression containing set by utilizing the semantic features discovered through the above questions. This paraphrase can be translated into any language, substituting lexical items of the target language for those in the English paraphrase.

The paraphrasing of idiomatic expressions, based on a semantic classification of set determined by its componential features in various situations, may find practical application in at least two fields: in automatic or computer-aided translation and in lexicography. The procedure followed in translation would be to substitute lexical items of the target language for those found in the English paraphrase and then to refine the TL structure by substituting for the periphrastic, semantically explicit items others more concise and more idiomatic with similar meanings or componential features. In lexicography, the various semantic areas could be indicated and the equivalents of each basic meaning of set listed exhaustively at the end of the series of definitions already provided, in lieu of the incomplete set of synonyms appearing in that very place. Ideally, all polysemous verbs would be redefined according to these semantic categories, for this would allow much shorter and more systematic listings.

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