

## Figurative senses in Spanish lexicography

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### ABSTRACT

The label *fig.* [figurative] has traditionally been used in Spanish lexicography. Although it is firmly rooted in the dictionaries of the Real Academia Española, many current dictionaries of Spanish have eliminated it because some lexicographers contend that information deriving from the diachronic development of senses has no place in a synchronic usage dictionary. This paper discusses the use of this label in several different Spanish dictionaries. Examination of entries from the Real Academia dictionary indicates that (1) the label has been applied erratically, and, in the case of polysemous words, (2) it has often been impossible to determine which sense the figurative usage is based on. Such unsystematic application and the increased importance of frequency-related information has led to its demise. We argue that deletion of the label alone, with no additional strategy to indicate figurative usage, is not advisable in general monolingual dictionaries because information concerning possible usage environments of metaphorical extensions depends on the contexts in which the literal sense of the word is used.

### 1 Introduction

The question of how to represent figurative senses in a synchronic dictionary has been discussed by G. van der Meer in several papers, especially in the context of learner's dictionaries of English [van der Meer 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000]. One of van der Meer's main contentions is that monolingual dictionaries, especially learner's dictionaries, should organize material or otherwise mark figurative senses to show their relationship to the historically original sense when the metaphor is still active. In this paper we discuss this issue with reference to Spanish monolingual lexicography. Although Spanish lexicography has a long tradition of using labels to indicate derived senses, several recent monolingual dictionaries have abandoned use of the *fig.* label. We are not convinced, however, that abandoning the label *fig.* is in itself a positive outcome, precisely because information about sense relationships can be important both for decoding and encoding. We first analyze the present situation with reference to figurative senses in Spanish lexicography and point out the main problems with all the current approaches. We then go on to suggest how the representation of figurative senses could be improved by narrowing the field of application of the label *fig.*, which should lead to more consistent lexicographic practice.

### 2 The label *fig.* in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* [DRAE]

The starting point for any study on Spanish monolingual dictionaries is the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* [DRAE], not only because of its privileged position as the dictionary of the standard language but also because of the influence it has exercised over other dictionary projects in Spanish.<sup>1</sup> The DRAE has a long tradition of extensive use of labels; the label *met.*, for *metáfora* or *metafóricamente*, is found in the first edition of 1780 and subsequently was changed to the label *fig.*, for *figurado*, in the edition of 1884 (the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the dictionary) [de Hoyos 2000]. The DRAE (1992, 21<sup>st</sup> edition) provides no information in the

front matter as to the application of labels, although many are employed; for example, *ant.* (*anticuado*), *coloq.* (*coloquial*), *despect.* (*despectivo*), *fam.* (*familiar*), *inus.* (*inusitado*), *irón.* (*irónico*), *Lit.* (*Literalmente*), *poét.* (*poético*), *pop.* (*popular*), *Por excel.* (*Por excelencia*), *Por ext.* (*Por extensión*), *p. us.* (*poco usado*), *rur.* (*rural*), *vulg.* (*vulgar*) are labels included in the list of abbreviations.<sup>ii</sup> As de Hoyos [2000: 80] notes, the only information about the application of the label *fig.* is provided in the definition of the word *figurado* in the body of the dictionary, from which it can be deduced that *figurado* contrasts with historically original and literal.<sup>iii</sup> The fact that the label should have this meaning in the context of the *DRAE* is not surprising, given that the historical development of senses plays a very important role in this dictionary.

Despite the many revisions of the *DRAE*, analysis shows that the label *fig.* has not been applied systematically. The label is found in 17,161 senses in the *DRAE* [1992]. We see several problems with the way the *Real Academia* has applied the label. It is not always possible for the user to determine which sense of a polysemous word is the basis for the derived, figurative sense, and application of the label itself has been erratic. Examples of these two problems are given in (1a) and (1b) below:

1.a. (Partial) Entry for *plancha* ‘flat piece of metal’ [*DRAE* 1992]

Del fr. *planche*.

1. f. Lámina o pedazo de metal llano y delgado respecto de su tamaño.
2. Utensilio de hierro, ordinariamente triangular y muy liso y acerado por su cara inferior, y que en la superior tiene un asa por donde se coge para planchar. En la actualidad, el calor de la plancha procede generalmente de la energía eléctrica.
3. Acción y efecto de planchar la ropa. Mañana es día de PLANCHA.
4. Conjunto de ropa planchada.
5. Trozo de hierro que, sujeto por una cadena al juego trasero de las diligencias, se colocaba delante de una de las ruedas posteriores, la cual quedaba inmóvil al encajarse en él y servía de freno en las bajadas muy pendientes.
6. Placa de hierro, cobre, etc., que se usa para asar o tostar alimentos.
7. Postura horizontal del cuerpo en el aire, sin más apoyo que el de las manos asidas a un barrote; o bien la misma posición del cuerpo flotando de espaldas.
- 8. fig. y fam. Desacierto o error por el cual la persona que lo comete queda en situación desairada o ridícula. Ú. m. en la frase hacer, o tirarse, una plancha.**  
[...]

1.b. (1) (Partial) entry for *oro* ‘gold’ [*DRAE* 1992]

Del lat. *aurum*.

1. m. Metal amarillo, el más dúctil y maleable de todos y uno de los más pesados, solo atacable por el cloro, el bromo y el agua regia; se encuentra siempre nativo en la naturaleza. Es uno de los metales preciosos. Núm. atómico 79. Símb.: Au.
2. Color amarillo como el de este metal. Ú. t. c. adj.
- 3. Moneda o monedas de oro. No tengo más que ORO; pagar en ORO.**  
[...]

(2) Compare with (partial) entry for *plata* ‘silver’ [DRAE 1992]

Del lat. \*plattus, \*platus, plano, del gr. πλατος.

1. f. Metal blanco, brillante, sonoro, dúctil y maleable, más pesado que el cobre y menos que el plomo. Es uno de los metales preciosos. Núm. atómico 47. Símb.: Ag.

2. fig. Moneda o monedas de plata. No tengo PLATA; pagar en PLATA.

3. Dinero en general; riqueza.

[...]

(3) Entry for *estela* ‘wake, trail’ [DRAE 1992]

Del lat. aestuaria, pl. n. de stuarium, agitación del agua.

1. f. Señal o rastro de espuma y agua removida que deja tras sí una embarcación u otro cuerpo en movimiento.

2. Rastro que deja en el aire un cuerpo en movimiento.

3. Por ext., rastro o huella que deja algo que pasa.

### 3 Use of the label *fig.* in other dictionaries

This observed lack of systematicity has led many Spanish lexicographers to significantly reduce or entirely forego use of the label in their dictionaries; for example, in the *Diccionario del español actual* [DEA] the label is only found at the end of a sense, to indicate that the word is also used in figurative contexts. If no additional information is provided, however, this solution is not particularly helpful for encoding purposes in that the user has no clue as to the sorts of domains that often accept a figurative use of the word. Let us look at the entry for *cáncer* from DEA:

**cáncer**<sup>1</sup> m 1 Tumor maligno que destruye los tejidos orgánicos animales. *Tb fig.* | Alcalde *Salud* 319: El tratamiento radical de los cánceres gástricos solo puede hacerse quirúrgicamente. Cela *Pirineo* 101: El viajero .. se duele una vez más de la incuria española, ese cáncer que, al alimón con la envidia, nos va dejando en los amargos y más huérfanos cueros.  
[...]<sup>iv</sup>

Although the example illustrates the use of *cáncer* in a context similar to that of English “a cancer in society”, the entry does not tell us whether this is the only possible type of context or whether *cáncer* is used figuratively in other contexts as well.

Since the main thrust behind marking figurative senses has been to establish an historical relationship between senses, one may claim, as de Hoyos [2000: 102] does in his study of metaphorical uses of animal names, that synchronically oriented dictionaries of Spanish need not provide explicit information about historical sense development. This is currently the most generalized practice in Spanish dictionaries, such as *CLAVE. Diccionario de uso del español actual* or *Diccionario Salamanca de la lengua española*. Nevertheless, we would submit that not all figurative uses of nouns are as highly lexicalized, and consequently as semantically stable, as the examples de Hoyos discusses. In the particular case of animal names, a certain characteristic of the animal is perceived as salient and is the basis for the

metaphorical use which becomes set in usage. In the case of many other nouns, however, the range of contexts in which a figurative reading occurs is much wider:

2. a. Sample uses of *estela*

Siguió la estela de su maestro y triunfó en el teatro francés.

'He/she followed in the steps of his/her mentor and triumphed in French theatre.'

La estela que dejó aquella revista todavía se percibe en ciertas publicaciones locales.

'The trail left by that journal can still be seen today in several local publications.'

#### 4 Discussion

Spanish lexicography has witnessed in recent years a change away from the more historical and literary orientation of dictionaries towards a completely descriptive view of the language as currently spoken, so that today's "usage" dictionaries are much less like the *DRAE* than was María Moliner's *Diccionario de uso del español* [*DUE*] almost forty years ago (the *DUE* is basically a reorganization of material present in the *Real Academia* dictionaries). The emphasis on a synchronic description of the lexicon has led to organizing information in entries so as to facilitate looking up meanings, which in practice has meant listing what lexicographers believe to be the most common sense first (there is no entirely corpus-based dictionary of Spanish to date), without much regard to sense relationships. We agree with van der Meer that such an approach misses an important function of monolingual dictionaries, particularly those that are used in a learner's context, namely to help to shape the user's knowledge of the language's vocabulary. In the above examples with *estela*, for example, it is clear that *estela* is something that is left as the result of its passing, which accounts for why it can be used in conjunction with the verb *dejar* 'leave'. The historical fact that *estela* originally referred to 'wake' (= 'trail in water') is not important for synchronic use, but the fact that it the result of an action is, because that is why it co-occurs with specific verbs. Consequently, we would argue that indicating that senses are figurative is not only a matter for historical dictionaries but rather provide useful information in synchronic dictionaries. In order to take on that informative role, the idea behind the figurative marking must not be limited to an historical view of the sense development but rather also be understood as a part of the current lexical structure.

The decision to include information regarding figurative senses in the dictionary forces us to consider a number of points. There are at least two main approaches to representing the idea [figurative sense]: (a) using one or more labels, and (b) organization of senses and subsenses so as to clearly indicate that one sense is related to another. Obviously the two approaches are not incompatible with one another; the approach taken in *DEA* is to use both. But in this respect, *DEA* is the exception among recent Spanish dictionaries, which have tended to order senses according to frequency. A separate but no less important issue in our opinion is to first determine what [figurative] refers to and what degree of sense relations should be represented in the dictionary; specifically, should all degrees of lexicalization be treated in the same fashion, i.e. should highly lexicalized figurative senses be afforded the same treatment as metaphorical senses that are best described as an extension of the context? In our view, the answer is no. Metaphorical extensions that are highly lexicalized and entirely stable need not be identified with a label; in this context, the label can only refer to historical

development and as such can be deleted in a synchronic usage dictionary. The relationship between the original, literal sense and the derived, metaphorical sense can be represented by ordering of subsenses. The use of *fig.* with multi-word expressions is another question; should they be treated in the same way as single words? In practice, Spanish dictionaries have in the past marked all cases (single words and phrases) with the label *fig.*, but using a single label for all cases of metaphorical senses has led, as shown by the examples in (1) above, to uneven application of the label. We would suggest that the *fig.* label is unnecessary for multiword expressions for which a literal compositional semantics is not possible, because the very inclusion of the expression in the dictionary should alert users to the unpredictable meaning.

Much current work in lexical structure is based on lexical hierarchies (e.g. WordNet). In terms of accounting for metaphorical extension, however, it is not clear to us that hierarchical relationships are particularly explanatory. Sense transfer does not seem to operate based on superordinates or hyponymy; hierarchical organization of the lexicon would have little to say about the extensions of *plancha* and *estela* mentioned above.

In our opinion it is at least worthwhile to consider use of a set of well-defined domain labels in conjunction with *fig.* to indicate the most frequent contexts for metaphorical extension for the large number of cases in which the metaphorical sense is not highly lexicalized. Work in semantics and cognitive linguistics has shown that sense relationships can be characterized in a number of specific ways. Some senses are more specific (particularization) whereas others are better described as extensions to other fields [Warren 1992]. It then becomes important to be able to indicate which domains the sense has spread to. If these domains can be successfully identified and categorized, presumably by careful analysis of corpus data, it should be possible to represent these domains in the dictionary. At this point in our research program, we are looking at corpus data to see if we can develop a list of contexts that would prove informative. Such labels would be similar to subject domain labels, which do not involve diachronic relationships.

## 5 Conclusion

The main objections to use of the label *fig.* is that it increases inconsistency in the dictionary and represents a diachronic view of sense relations that is unnecessary in a synchronic dictionary. Its elimination from general monolingual dictionaries, which have identified frequency of use as a priority in the ordering of senses, is in our view not an improvement, in that information associated with the derived meaning depends on the nonderived meaning [e.g. the use of *dejar* with *estela*]. A more precise notion of contextualization, which can be gleaned from corpus data, appears to be a viable starting point for improved description of usage. More exact indications of usage domains should aid in reflecting how meanings 'hang together', to use van der Meer's term.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The most recent edition of the *DRAE* (2001, 22<sup>nd</sup> ed.) was released in mid-October, 2001 and was not consulted in the preparation of paper. The only edition of the *DRAE* available on CD-ROM to date is the 1992 edition, which was the one we consulted for this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> The list of abbreviations totals 473 (as points of comparison, the number of abbreviations in two prominent English dictionaries, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 10<sup>th</sup> edition* and the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* is 309 and 0, respectively); most are geographic references, references to grammatical information (such as *adv. neg. adverbio de negación*), etymological references (such as *ing. med. inglés medio*), or subject fields.

<sup>iii</sup> The definition for *figurado* reads as follows:

### **figurado, da**

(Del part. de *figurar*).

1. adj. Que usa figuras retóricas. *Lenguaje, estilo figurado*.

2. adj. Se dice del sentido en que se toman las palabras para que denoten idea diversa de la que recta y literalmente significan.

3. adj. Dicho de una voz o de una frase: *De sentido figurado*.

<sup>iv</sup> *Tb fig.* means "También figurado" 'also figurative.'

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