Abstract. Treatment of meaning in NLP is greatly facilitated if semantic analysis and generation systems rely on a language-neutral, independently motivated world model, or ontology. However, the benefits of the ontology are somewhat offset in practice by the difficulty of its acquisition. This is why a number of computational linguists make a conscious choice to bypass ontology in their semantic deliberations. This decision is often justified by questioning the principles underlying ontologies and by challenging the ontology-based semantic enterprise on the grounds of its ostensible irreproducibility. In this paper we illustrate, on the example of the lexicon entry for the Spanish verb *dejar*, the expressive power of lexical-semantic descriptions based on the ontology used in the Mikrokosmos machine translation project. This expressive power is compared with that of some of the non-ontological approaches to lexical semantics. We argue that these approaches in reality rely on ontologies in everything but name. We offer a view of ontologies as theories of lexical-semantic descriptions. We posit that no underlying principles for ontologies are possible and explain why the charge of irreproducibility is not valid.

The central tenet of ontology-based semantics is “grounding” the meanings of lexical units in an independently motivated and interpreted system of symbols, an ontology. An ontology-based lexicon is an important component of the Mikrokosmos multilingual MT project (see, e.g., Onyshkevych and Nirenburg, 1994; earlier versions of the same paradigm were described in Nirenburg et al., 1992 as well as Carlson and Nirenburg, 1990 and Meyer, Carlson and Onyshkevych, 1990). Advantages of lexicons supported by ontologies include support for treatment of synonymy (and near-synonymy), control over uniformity of the grain size of lexical descriptions, enabling the treatment of lexical gaps in translation as well as support for a variety of inferencing mechanisms necessary for lexical and other kinds of disambiguation. It has been widely accepted since Bar Hillel (1960) that without such mechanisms a large number of textual phenomena cannot be fully treated. It might, therefore, seem strange that lexicographers and MT researchers are not flocking to this method (cf. a similar lament in Bateman, 1993, p.83). But, of course, there are important reasons for that, some connected with linguistic tradition, and some others with purely engineering considerations. Very briefly, the major objections can be summarized as follows:

- **The Redundancy Objection**: it is often possible to resolve semantic ambiguities using non-semantic (syntactic, morphological, etc.) clues. This observation has led to a variety of claims that semantics is redundant. As a practical consequence, rec-

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ognition supplanted interpretation in system designs, as attempts were made at disambiguation but not at representation of the meaning of text.

- **The Language Dependence Objection:** It is widely assumed that a given ontology will reflect the linguistic bias of its builders and will, thus not be really language-neutral. At a different level, this objection is formulated in terms of “upper case semantics” (McDermott, 1978), that is, the claim that ontological concepts are, in reality, camouflaged English words.

- **The Scientific Method Objection:** the apparent irreproducibility of ontological systems and the related unavailability of reliable and easily teachable heuristics or methodology for either ontological or ontology-based lexical acquisition.

- **The Engineering Objection:** the difficulty and cost of developing, maintaining and updating ontologies and the seemingly easy availability of simple and straightforward English-language frameworks for a minimum feature characterization of lexicon entries lead people to opt for the latter.

The core of the paper is a detailed example of lexical specification in ontology-based semantics, namely, the entry for the verb *dejar* in the Spanish lexicon for Mikrokosmos. We find this example very appropriate because, at times, it might seem an ideal example for refuting and not corroborating the ontology-based approach. In fact, though, this example serves our purpose of addressing and deflecting, if not formally refuting, the above four objections by demonstrating

- what exactly our ontologies deliver for the task of lexical description;
- how they help us operate in cases which would create problems for the alternative approaches;
- that we understand and build our ontologies as theories of lexical semantics;
- and why the charge of irreproducibility is not well founded.

1. **How the Ontology-Based Lexicon Works.**

The Mikrokosmos lexical entry consists of 12 zones. Each zone is included for an overt purpose, to support a particular stage in text analysis or generation or to help developers navigate the lexical knowledge base. With respect to basic lexical meaning determination, three kinds of lexicon information are central — subcategorization information (encoded in SYN-STRUC), information on linking syntactic and semantic dependency (encoded using a system of connected variables occupying argument positions in SYN-STRUC and SEM) and basic semantic information (in SEM). In this paper we concentrate on the basic semantic description, and will thus show only one zone, SEM, and two subzones, ANNO.DEF and ANNO.EX, of each sample entry. The latter supplies an informal description of the meaning of the lexical unit, for human consumption. The former defines the semantic content of the lexical unit. The complete top-level structure of an

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3. Cf. the many suggestions for syntactic treatment of prepositional phrase attachment, a problem whose solution is universally accepted to require semantics.
entry in the Mikrokosmos lexicon is shown below (for a detailed description, see Onyshkevych and Nirenburg, 1994).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{<superentry> :} & = \\
& ((\text{syn-cat}): \text{<lexeme> } \ast ) \ast \\
\text{<lexeme> :} & = \\
& \text{CATEGORY: } (\text{syn-cat}) \\
& \text{ORTHOGRAPHY:} \\
& \quad \text{VARIANTS: } "\text{variants}" \\
& \quad \text{ABBREVIATIONS: } "\text{abbs}" \\
& \text{PHONOLOGY: } "\text{phonology}" \\
& \text{MORPHOLOGY:} \\
& \quad \text{IRREGULAR-FORMS: } ("\text{form}\" \text{form-name}) \ast \\
& \quad \text{PARADIGM: } "\text{paradigm-name}" \\
& \quad \text{STEM-VARIANTS: } ("\text{form}\" \text{form-name}) \\
& \text{ANNOTATIONS:} \\
& \quad \text{DEFINITION: } "\text{definition in NL}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{EXAMPLES: } "\text{example}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{COMMENTS: } "\text{lexicographer comment}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{TIME-STAMP: } \text{date-of-entry lexicog-id} \\
& \quad \text{DATE-LAST-MODIFIED: } \text{date lexicog-id} \\
& \text{APPLICABILITY:} \\
& \quad \text{LOCALITY: } "\text{locale}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{FIELD: } "\text{field}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{LANGUAGE: } "\text{language}" \ast \\
& \quad \text{CURRENCY: } "\text{era}" \ast \\
& \text{SYNTACTIC-FEATURES:} \\
& \quad \text{SYNTACTIC-CLASS: } \text{class} \\
& \quad \text{IDIOSYNCRATIC-FEATURES: } (\text{feature value}) \ast \\
& \text{SYNTACTIC-STRUCTURE:} \\
& \quad \text{SYNTACTIC-STRUCTURE-CLASS: } \text{class} \\
& \quad \text{SYNTACTIC-STRUCTURE-LOCAL: } \text{fs-pattern} \\
& \text{SEMANTICS:} \\
& \quad \text{SEMANTIC-CLASS: } \text{class} \\
& \quad \text{LEXICAL-MAPPING: } \text{lex-sem-specification} \\
& \quad \text{MEANING-PROCEDURE: } \text{meaning specialist} \\
& \text{LEXICAL-RELATIONS:} \\
& \quad \text{PARADIGMATIC-RELS: } ((\text{type}) \text{f-struct}) \ast \\
& \quad \text{SYNTAGMATIC-RELS: } ((\text{type}) \text{f-struct}) \ast \\
& \text{LEXICAL-RULES:} \\
& \quad \text{LR-CLASS: } \text{class} \ast \\
& \quad \text{LR-LOCAL: } (\text{LR}\# (\text{lexeme} \mid \text{no}) \ast \\
& \text{PRAGMATICS:} \\
& \quad \text{STYLISTICS: } ((\text{FORMALITY, SIMPLICITY, COLOR, FORCE, DIRECTNESS, RESPECT}) \text{ value}) \ast \\
& \quad \text{ANALYSIS-TRIGGERS: } \text{trigger} \ast \\
& \quad \text{GENERATION-TRIGGERS: } \text{trigger} \ast 
\end{align*}
\]

The two relevant zones for the seven entries of *dejar* are shown below.
[dejar-v1]
[anno]
[def "var1 stops doing var2"]
[ex "dejó de escribir"]
[sem]
[lex-map]
  ^var2
    instance-of *event
    agent ^var1
    aspect
    phaseend
    telic no]]

[dejar-v2]
[anno]
[def "var1 fails to do var2 to/with var3"]
[ex "dejó de despedirse"]
[sem]
[lex-map]
  ^var2
    instance-of *event
    agent ^var1
    theme ^var3
    attitude
    type epistemic
    value 0
    scope ^var0
    attributed-to *speaker*]]

[dejar-v3]
[anno]
[def "var1 leaves, abandons var2"]
[ex "dejó su paraguas" "dejó su trabajo" "dejó la capital"]
[sem]
[lex-map]
  ^var2
    instance-of OR *own *control
      OR *be-at-same-location
        agent ^var1
        theme ^var3
        aspect
        phaseend
        telic yes]]

[dejar-v4]
[anno]
[def "var1 permits var3 to do var2 with/to var4"]
[ex "dejó a su hijo de conducir"]
[sem]
[lex-map]
  *permit
    agent ^var1
    beneficiary ^var3
    theme ^var2
    ^var2
    instance-of *event
    theme ^var4]]

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The seven entries are the result of amalgamating many of the 54 meanings listed for this verb in The Collins Spanish-English dictionary by combining essentially identical meanings and eliminating those which are too specific or completely derivable from a basic meaning of the verb and the meaning(s) of its argument(s). Thus, in dejar-v5 the SEM zone represents in the representation language of our choice what is explained informally in DEF. The actual meaning represented by dejar-v5 is, of course, equivalent to one of the meanings of the English verb lend. The meaning is presented in DEF as “permit to

1. Our ontology does not contain a concept corresponding to the English verb lend because we “do not add a concept if there is already one “close” to it or slightly more general than the one being considered” (Mahesh, 1995).
use" in order to show explicitly each of the syntax-semantics linking variables. The information about the elidability of var2 (which would lead to an English realization such as "var1 lends var4 to var3") as well as the temporal relations are omitted for the sake of simplicity.

For details of the Mikrokosmos formalism, see, for instance, Onyshkevych and Nirenburg, 1994. Here let us mention only that the operator "^" maps a syntactically defined variable into its meaning. The meaning of dejar-v5 can be glossed as "^var1 permits ^var3 to do ^var2" (for example, "The banks permit the companies to use excess office space") and "var2 is the event in which ^var3 uses ^var4" (for example, "The companies use the excess office space"). The meaning also contains a postcondition "^var1 cannot use ^var4 for the duration of ^var2" (for example, "The banks cannot use the office space while the companies use it").

The ontological concept *permit has the following definition:

*permit
  is-a *directive-act
  agent *human
  beneficiary *human
  theme *event

  agent *permit.beneficiary
  precond *have-authority

  agent *permit.agent
  theme OR *permit.beneficiary
  *permit.theme

During text processing, after an occurrence of dejar is identified as dejar-v5, the semantic constraints in the concept *permit will be used for checking whether the actual fillers of the case role slots (i.e., agent, beneficiary, theme, etc.) conform to the constraints imposed on the values of the latter in the ontology and the lexicon. This is the mechanism for using selectional restriction information in constructing text meaning representations in Mikrokosmos.

2. Alternatives to Ontology

A number of more or less detailed proposals have been advanced in computational lexical semantics over the past seven to ten years. A significant portion of the efforts in this field is devoted to developing formalisms in which to record lexical information. There have also been substantive proposals about the content of the semantic parts of the lexicon entry, including the LCS theory of Jackendoff and his followers (e.g., Jackendoff, 1983, Hale and Keyser, 1986, Atkins et al., 1986, Kegl, 1989, Dorr, 1993), the generative lexicon approach of Pustejovsky and his coauthors (e.g., Pustejovsky, 1991, Pustejovsky et al., 1993) and the work of group most recently associated with the ACQUILEX project in Europe (e.g., Boguraev and Briscoe, 1989, Briscoe et al., 1990, Copestake et al., 1992 and selected chapters from Briscoe et al., eds., 1993).

A most interesting feature of all these, otherwise distinct, approaches is that they all
avoid the concept of language-neutral ontology in their theoretical framework, while, in reality introducing elements of metalinguistic apparatus which play the same role as the ontology. The catch is that these elements typically remain of indeterminate theoretical status and carry insufficient information for many processing decisions.

As an example, it might be useful for us to create a treatment for this sense of *dejar* in the generative lexicon framework of Pustejovsky (1991), Pustejovsky et al. (1993). Based on the formalizations available in the above papers as well as the entry for build in Pustejovsky (1994), we can conclude that *dejar*-v5 would be characterized as a process with an event structure (probably, a transition followed by a state), an argument structure identifying though not naming the case roles, with some reference to their semantic characteristics in qualia form, plus the qualia structure for the verb itself. The entry would contain semantic information, including some selectional restrictions. Pustejovsky’s own examples are also very instructive. Here is the generative lexicon entry for the English noun *tape* (Pustejovsky et al., 1993, p. 335):

\[
\begin{array}{|l|}
\hline
\text{tape} (x, y) \\
\text{CONST} & \text{information}(y) \\
\text{FORMAL} & \text{physobj}(x), 2\text{-dimen}(x) \\
\text{TELIC} & \text{contain}(S, x, y) \\
\text{AGENTIVE} & \text{write}(T, x, y) \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Leaving aside the question of the composition and cardinality of the set of the qualia structures (CONST, FORMAL, TELIC, AGENTIVE), the status of values for these properties remains unclear. These cannot be words of English (because two of them are certainly not). Therefore they must be a part of some other symbol system which is not explicitly introduced. Isn’t it natural to conclude that they are all part of an implicit and undeclared ontology? Moreover, an ontology which seems to be a set of unconnected semantic features? By contrast, all the properties and their value sets in our approach are defined in an overtly specified ontology of multiply interconnected complex, structured elements. In other words, we know why we use the concepts we use, where they come from, with which other concepts they connect and how, what to do when we need a new concept, and how to keep the characterizations consistent.

There is a price to pay for the privilege of having all properties, objects, events and value sets used in specifying lexical meaning based on an explicit ontology. The price is the need for a considerable, complex, and costly acquisition and maintenance effort. Interesting attempts have been made in practical NLP applications, especially in machine translation, to try to avoid paying this price. Traditionally, in machine translation this position has led to the so-called transfer approach, where the ultimate goal has been not to understand the meaning of the source text but rather to find word-sense to word-sense correspondences between a given pair of languages. It has been argued that in many cases devices simpler than a full semantic analysis would be sufficient for such a goal. Indeed, the seven entries of *dejar* seem to offer a near ideal example of such a semantics-free approach\(^1\) to disambiguation: it turns out that an analyzer will be able to
determine which of the meanings is used in the text by using syntactic, morphological and other non-semantic clues from the various lexicon entry zones which we, due to space constraints, did not show in the example.

In some other projects, the legitimate desire to avoid acquisition difficulties has led to a redefinition of the notion of ontology as an hierarchically organized set of word senses within one language (see Knight, 1993; and, to some extent, Farwell et al, 1993), which are connected directly to corresponding word senses in other languages. There is no essential difference between this approach (which claims to be interlingual) and the transfer approach because, in the former, the hierarchical structures of the language-dependent ontologies of word senses (whose nodes contain little information other than subsumption and translation equivalents) end up being essentially unused.

One example of the benefits of ontology-based description is in resolution of referential ambiguities, a notoriously difficult problem which does not lend itself to a syntax-based or statistics-based solution. Consider the sentence:

*The banks lent the companies excess office space which they didn’t need for three months.*

In order to select the appropriate Spanish pronoun for *they*, it is necessary to determine its reference, because *banco* is masculine and *compania* is feminine in Spanish. (Of course, if both candidate referents were of the same gender, the strategy advocated in non-semantic approaches would suffice.) The entry for *dejar-v5* contains information that the lender relinquishes the use of the object lent. It is this knowledge element which allows for the resolution of this particular ambiguity.

In the end, all approaches to machine translation that avoid semantics face difficulties when it is impossible to establish a one-to-one word sense correspondence across any two language-oriented ontologies. The latter are of little use when supralexical context must be taken into account, as in resolution of reference ambiguities. They can also lead to false positive solutions when lexical units are not decomposable to the level of separate words or whenever figurative language is used. Last but not least, in the cases of residual ambiguity (one-to-many word sense correspondences), it will be necessary to write special disambiguation rules which often will not be possible in the absence of elements of world knowledge not usually provided. By contrast, the ontology-based approach insists on a rich and proactive semantic characterization of lexical meaning, to support the automatic derivation of text meaning representations.

1. In reality, the situation is more complex, as there is an entire spectrum of semantic involvement in text analysis. See Nirenburg and Levin, 1992 for a discussion. Also note that semantic knowledge can be introduced partially by positing an uninterpreted set of semantic features (e.g., animate or phsobj) and including their values directly in lexicon entries. This seems to be the approach taken in the ULTRA MT system (Farwell et al., 1993) and Pustejovsky (1991).
3. Ontology as Theory

As stated above, every property and value in the SEM zone of an entry in our lexicon comes from the ontology. Therefore, the ontology defines the form and content of lexical-semantic descriptions as well as text meaning representations. It has been a metatheoretical truism in linguistic theory since Chomsky’s “Aspects” that an abstract system underlying a set of descriptions is a theory. Our ontology is an abstract system underlying our lexical-semantic descriptions. Thus, it is our theory of lexical semantics. Our position is exactly parallel to Chomsky’s classical statement that “a grammar can be regarded as a theory of a language” (1965, p.24): Chomsky’s grammar underlies the syntactic descriptions exactly the way our ontology underlies lexical descriptions.

Can and should it be questioned, then, what underlies ontology itself? That is, what defines ontology itself? What determines the choice of its atoms? If we allow this question and answer it satisfactorily by pointing out at another system which defines the theory of ontology, the next immediate question will be “What is the theory of that theory?” And we will find ourselves in the groove of infinite regression.

The question of the theory of ontology is, however, not entirely superfluous because, if indeed such a theory could be formulated, it would provide formal principles for ontology discovery, licensing an algorithmic procedure for its acquisition. Algorithmic procedures can be overtly described so that anybody could learn and use them in ontology acquisition, thus rendering ontologies reproducible.

4. Reproducibility of Ontology

Note that the question about reproducibility of ontologies touches upon the provenance of the ontology itself and leaves unchallenged our claim that ontologies are theories of lexical semantics. And our ontologies are arrived at in the same empirical way as generative grammars. As Chomsky put it, “it is unfortunately the case that no adequate formalizable techniques are available for obtaining reliable information concerning the facts of linguistic structure” (ibid, p. 19), thus declaring theory formally undiscoverable. Similarly, no algorithmic procedure for acquiring ontologies is available either. And therefore the question of the theory of ontology loses its only claim to relevance.

Our approach has been criticized (e.g., by Briscoe, 1994) for not stipulating overt principles on which our ontology is based. There are two possible responses to this criticism. First, we have just shown that no such principles are available. Secondly, exactly the same line of criticism applies to all extant metalinguistic frameworks, including those of our critics. This means that if the enterprise of ontology acquisition is considered

1. Additional abstract systems will be used to describe the process of using our lexicons in computational-semantic processing. These systems will form the theory of our procedural lexical semantics, or the theory underlying the process of constructing text meaning representations.

2. This question is often posed in the form of a query about the principles underlying ontology construction.
unsound because it is theoretically undetermined, all the non-ontological and pseudo-
non-ontological approaches we have mentioned above, are unsound also for exactly the
same reason. And we do not think they are.

While there is no algorithmic procedure for discovering ontology, this is not to say that
nothing is known about the methodology of ontology acquisition. Chomsky could afford
to make his pessimistic statement quoted above and stop at that because both Chom-
skian and post-Chomskian traditions sanction the use of descriptions of language frag-
ments for arguing theoretical issues rather than the goal of comprehensive language
description. Facing the latter task and mindful of Chomsky's admonition, we adhere to
the "combination of weak methods" paradigm formulated by Wilks (Wilks et al., 1992, p.
38) for knowledge acquisition in NLP. It does not follow that our ontologies are built in a
haphazard and ad hoc fashion. They are formalized using a specially defined representa-
tion language and are organized around property inheritance hierarchies which facilitate
(though, of course, do not guarantee) data consistency.

Reproducibility may indeed be a legitimate "goal of scientific experiments" (ibid). We
believe, however, that our paradigm is not that of a scientific experiment thus defined.
Just as it is possible to write any number of different but equally adequate grammars for
the same set of linguistic data, there must be multiple but equally acceptable ontological
models of a given world (cf. Hobbs, 1989, pp. 16-17). Thus, there is no single "true" or
"correct" ontology waiting to be discovered, and our experiments are not similar to
those in the natural sciences, which attempt to describe existing entities and phenomena.
We deal with artificial constructs. We do not even have to claim the psychological reality
of an ontology along the lines of "natural kinds" (in Kripke 1972), or its correspondence
to mental structures in the human mind (e.g., Lakoff 1988). We can, however, offer an
empirical verification of the ontologies we acquire. What we are after is a working tool,
something that enables us to develop a lexicon that makes a quality translation possible.
Our ontologies can be refuted if they fail to support NLP applications. For instance,
when an MT system based on one of our ontologies systematically provides substandard
translations, the quality of the ontology may be one of the culprits.

Opinions about the irreproducibility of ontology have been based largely on the claim
that no two people would be able to agree on what any particular node or path in the
ontology should look like. Our experience in practical medium- to large-scale ontology
acquisition tends to refute this claim. The cited difficulties are usually connected with the
learning curve of the team, during the initial stages of the task. As the learning curve
flattens, a general consensus develops among the team members, which makes it possi-
ble to maintain and expand the ontology in a fairly uniform way. The Mikrokosmos
project and its predecessors have employed over 30 people over the period of about 8
years in the ontological effort, and, in spite of the considerable normal staff turnover, the
approach has remained fairly uniform. Obviously, we have developed a number of pre-
misses and methodologies, some of which have found its way into our acquisition tools.
One of our most challenging tasks is to explicate these premises and methodologies and
automate or semi-automate certain steps in ontology acquisition. In Mikrokosmos this
process is well under way, but its description will form the subject for other papers.
5. Conclusions.

By way of summarizing, we now refer back to the four objections and the four promissory notes issued at the beginning of the paper. We have shown that the semantics-based approach to translation is not redundant in that it provides the detail of knowledge necessary for resolving the problems posing problems for non-semantic approaches. Furthermore, by organizing our semantic primitives into an ontology, not only do we assure a consistent terminology, but also explain the meaning of these semantic primitives by establishing systematic paradigmatic relations among ontology elements. Finally, the ontology provides a rich search space for complex inferencing processes routinely needed to disambiguate figurative language as well as notoriously difficult phenomena such as nominal compounds in English and reference resolution in all languages.

As argued at length in Nirenburg and Goodman (1990), the charge concerning the inevitable language dependency of any ontology is based on a logically simple but unrealistic maximalist view of interlingua. We stress that the interlingua, as the ontology, is not a phenomenon waiting to be discovered but rather an artifact incrementally constructed with the goal of asymptotically approaching the ideal of a completely language-neutral ontology. The richer the set of ontological properties and primitives, the more expressive the text meaning representation, and the higher the chances of this mechanism being adequate for the description of a variety of lexical meanings across languages. The ultimate assessment of the language neutrality of ontology is empirical: if an ontology supports a very successful multilingual machine translation system, then it is ipso facto sufficiently neutral. The same argumentation, in fact, renders the claims of "upper case semantics" spurious. In any case, the Mikrokosmos ontology relies on neither English syntax nor lexical semantics for any of its reasoning.

We have amply addressed the issue of reproducibility of ontologies and concluded that, in all those cases when such an enterprise was necessary in any of our projects, we were able successfully to carry out this task. We have also shown that the issue, central to the irreproducibility argument, of principles underlying ontology or, for that matter, any metatheoretical framework, falls by the wayside as undecidable.

Finally, the engineering objection to ontology-based approaches is, indeed, pertinent. We believe that the benefits of incorporating even an incomplete ontology in an application system far outweigh the risks and costs. The alternative, to abandon the capability for complex reasoning that ontologies support, a priori admits failure to resolve some of the

1. It is on the basis of one such methodology that we can systematically reduce dozens of word senses in the dictionaries to a manageable number of basic senses. Thus, by taking into account the ontological concepts to which the entries are related as well as the combination of constraints, we shrank the 54 word senses of dejar in the Collins Spanish - English Dictionary to the seven entries presented in the paper.

2. We have made some successful initial steps toward this goal (Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1994; Mahesh, 1995).
common disambiguation tasks inherent in machine translation. To ameliorate the engineering risks and costs, MT projects such as Mikrokosmos develop and deploy a plethora of increasingly automated tools to facilitate and validate the knowledge acquisition process.

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