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MEANING, CONTEXT AND TRANSLATION OF THE VERB *TO DO*

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Rezumat: *Prezentul articol studiază etimologia și unele schimbări semantice ale verbului englez „to do”. Scopul acestei cercetări a fost de a urmări câte semnificații a dobândit acest verb de-a lungul timpului. În plus, am selectat aproximativ 44 de exemple din cărți scrise de Oprah Winfrey, Mel Robbins și Michele Obama care conțin verbul „to do” și am examinat semnificațiile verbului în structuri și expresii idiomatice în diverse contexte, precum și modalități de traducere.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *verb, sens, context, comunicare, traducere.*

Introduction

Mastering verbs is a cornerstone of a strong English vocabulary because it allows us to describe actions and states of being. Verbs are powerful vocabulary words because they can be conjugated to discuss the past or the future, hypothetical situations or possibilities.

The verb ‘to do’ is among the fifty most frequently used verbs in English and according to Thesaurus dictionary online (<https://www.thesaurus.com/e/writing/common-words/>), it is the first in the list of most common used action verbs. ‘Do’ is used as an action verb and as an auxiliary; it is used to form a great number of collocations and idiomatic expressions. The purpose of this research was to trace how many meanings this verb acquired over time. In addition we selected about 44 examples containing the verb ‘do’ from Oprah Winfrey’s book, Mel Robbins and Michele Obama’s book and examined their meanings in various contexts as well as possible ways of providing an appropriate translation.

Etymology of the verb ‘to do’

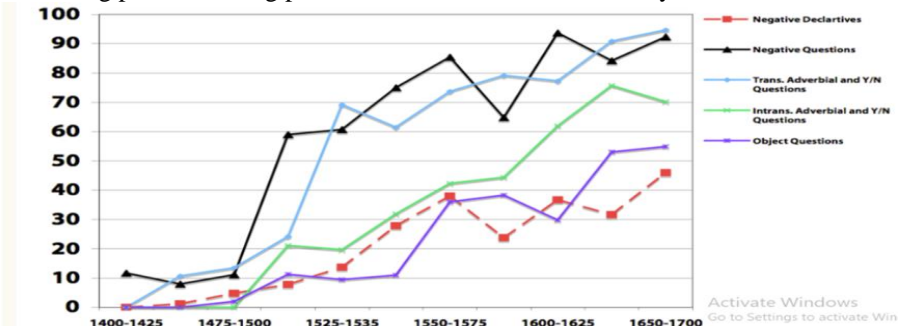
According to Jean Aitchison (2001), everything changes over time and language is no exception. There can never be a fixed time when language stands still. It is something common for it to be in a continuous process of development. We shall try to follow the evolution of the verb ‘to do’ and prove the statements regarding the continuous development of language.

According to OALD online, *do* evolved from Old English *dōn*, of Germanic origin; it is also related to Dutch *doen* and German *tun*, from an Indo-European root shared by Greek *tithēmi* ‘I place’ and Latin *facere* ‘make, do’ [21].

Douglas Harper’s Online Etymology Dictionary (2000) states that In Old English, *don* (first person singular) had the following connotations "to make, to act, to put, to perform, to cause, to place". In West Germanic **doanan* (source also of Old Saxon *duan*, Old Frisian *dwa*, Dutch *doen*, Old High German *tuon*, German *tun*), from PIE root **dhe-* the verb “to do” was defined as "to set, put, place” [7].

“Do” was first used as an auxiliary verb in Middle English, when periphrastic form in negative sentences replaced the *Old English* negative particles. For example: Hie ne wendon. (OE) They did not think. (ME)

The following chart attached bellow, adapted from Ellegård (1953), proves that essential changes of the verb ‘do’ took place namely in the Middle English period, when the verb acquired its use of an auxiliary form. It can be noticed that it was a long process, taking place over the course of about 300 years.



Ellegård, Alvar. 1953. *The Auxiliary do: The Establishment and Regulation of Its Use in English*. Edited by Frank Behre. Gothenburg Studies in English. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.

According to the same dictionary, in the *Middle English* *do* meant, “to perform, to execute, to achieve, to carry out, bring to pass by procedure of any kind.” Beginning with *the Early Modern English* the meaning of the word was drastically narrowed, used mainly as an auxiliary verb, which soon was required in almost all questions and negations. Nevertheless, over the course of more than 100 years, the meaning of the word ‘to do’ has changed enormously until finally stopping at the meaning that is closest to us nowadays. It is distinguished as an “act of doing something” [7]. By 1824, the meaning of the verb “to do” was similar with “something done in a set or formal manner”.

Semantic change of the verb “to do”

“Vocabulary is the area where we most often notice the way language changes (...)” [5, p.132]. Words can acquire new understandings and meanings in a certain period of time. Linguists have called this phenomenon “the semantic change”. As Begoña Crespo points out that “The semantic change [also] known as deterioration involves applying a social perspective in the analysis of the language” [2, p. 106]. From the perspective of language growth, this is seen positively, in order to communicate more effectively and to get a better understanding. Culture, other languages, the development of science and technology are just some of the factors that influenced the semantic change.

In her book *Language Change: Progress or Decay*, linguist Jean Aitchison (2001) claims that “Words are by nature incurably fuzzy”. Therefore, a good dictionary should be consulted all the time. As Crystal (2010) believes, “It’s very important to pay attention to every part of a dictionary definition [and meaning], if we want to

use a word correctly. If we don't, it's easy to confuse people by saying something we don't mean" [3, p. 159]. Therefore, in order to understand and analyze how its meanings have evolved over time, "there should be consulted dictionaries from different periods. Namely, the dictionary is the one that tells us about the history of each word."

In contrast to other parts of the speech, the English verb has undergone a greater number of modifications in the twentieth century. The reason might be, according to Iulia Ignatiuc, that the verb has a more developed morphological system. To point out the semantic changes of the verb *to do*, it should be studied how more meanings to the verb were added over time. Many dictionaries should be consulted in order to identify the semantic changes throughout time.

Do is a multifunctional verb, used as a main verb and as an auxiliary verb (Săndulescu 2011). There are two types of changes in the meaning of the verb *to do* and the dictionaries below confirm this:

1. When in a certain period of time, it changes enriching a more general meaning;
2. When the meaning of the verb *to do* is less general, in other words, the meaning is narrowed.

As Crespo claims, "the process of language change (...) moves towards the specialisation or narrowing of meanings" [2, p.117]. There are cases when the new meanings of the verb *to do* make us see it differently. However, up until now the meaning of the verb continue to change.

According to *Chambers's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (1874)*, *to do* [transitive] means to perform any action; to bring about or effect; to accomplish or finish; to prepare; to put or bring into any form or state; [intransitive], to act or behave: to fare or get on as to health; to succeed: to suit or answer an end [17].

Universal-Webster Dictionary (1958), defines the word *to do* /*du:*/ - to perform; to carry out; to complete; to deal with in the manner required; bring about; to cover distance; to be enough; to act; to get along; to serve purpose: my suit will d. for another year; put an end to [18].

The Oxford Dictionary of Current English, (1993), defines it in the following manner: 1. perform, carry out, achieve; 2. produce, make, provide (doing a painting); 3. grant; impart (do me a favour); 4. act, behave, 5 work at (do chemistry); 6. be suitable or acceptable; satisfy; 7. deal with; attend to (do one's hair); 8. fare; get on (did badly in the test); 9. solve; work out; 10. a) traverse (a certain distance), b) travel at a specified speed; 11. act or behave like; 12. produce (a play); 13. a) finish (I've done in the garden), b) be finished (day is done); 14. cook, esp. completely (do it in the oven; potatoes aren't done). 15 be in progress (what's doing?) [19].

According to *Oxford Dictionary (2009)*, the following meanings are added for the verb *to do* - to succeed/be in progress; to do a task; job, what do you do (what is your job?); to study; to cook; to perform; to be suitable; to work at; to steal/ rob; to solve; to copy somebody; to speed; to travel; to visit.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) added some new more meanings for the verb *to do* - to have an effect, to spend time, to cook, to provide a service, to decorate, to copy behavior, to deceive, to be enough, to solve, to travel, to do a task; to perform [22].

Over a period of five years, in *Cambridge Dictionary (2014)*, are added the following meanings to the auxiliary verb *to do*: to take part in, to achieve something; to be responsible for something; to create, produce; to clean something; to arrange something; to complete a journey; to be acceptable; to steal; to cheat someone; to spend time in prison; to punish someone; to take an illegal drug [20].

Collins English Dictionary (2018), brings new meanings to the verb *to do*, namely: to serve the needs of; to fix or to arrange; to serve, to provide; to make tidy, elegant, ready, as by arranging or adorning (to do one's hair), to conduct oneself, to fare or manage (how are you doing these days?), to translate or adapt the form or language of, to wear out [23].

Dictionary	Chambers's Etymological Dictionary (1874)	Oxford Dictionary of Current English (2009)	Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2021)
Meaning	(+ examples)	(+ examples)	(+ examples)
To perform any action /activity or task	We will do what we can to help	What have you done to your hair?	What are you doing this evening?
to perform the activity or task mentioned		I'm doing some research on the subject	You could help me by doing the dishes.
To do something (job)		What's Tom doing these days?	What does she do for a living?
To do something to learn or study		Have you done any (studied anything by) Keats?	I'm doing physics and biology.
To bring about or effect	Her lessons are doing good results.		
To accomplish or finish	I've done talking - let's get started.		Wait till I'm done.
To put or bring into any form or state	+		
To act or behave	They are free to do as they please	They are free to do as they please.	Do as you are told!
To fare or to get on as to health	How did you fare in your exams?		
To succeed	The box will do fine as a table.	He's doing very well at school (= his work is good).	How is the business doing?
To suit or answer an end/ be suitable	The box will do fine as a table.	Will do me nicely.	These shoes won't do for the party
To solve		Are you good at doing crosswords?	I can't do this sum
To perform or produce a play		He will do "Othello" on this stage next year.	The local dramatic society is doing "Hamlet" next month.

To copy somebody			He does a great Elvis Presley.
To travel		We did the round trip in two hours.	How many miles did you do during your tour?
To spend time			She did a year at college, but then dropped out.
To cook		Do it in the oven.	How would you like your steak done?
To cheat somebody			How would you like your steak done?
To steal/rob		Did a big bank	The gang did a warehouse and a supermarket.
To reach a particular speed		My car is doing maximum 100 miles per hour.	The car was doing 90 miles an hour.
To punish			They did him for tax evasion.
To take drugs			He doesn't smoke, drink or do drugs.
To deal with somebody/something			The hairdresser said she could do me (= cut my hair) at three.
To copy somebody		He does a great Elvis Presley.	Can you do a Welsh accent?
To finish	Sit there and wait till I'm done.		Did you get your article done in time?
To be in progress		What's doing?	
To work at		Do chemistry.	

As it can be seen from the chart, the 1874 Chambers's Etymological Dictionary provides 9 entries related to the meanings of the verb "do". Universal-Webster Dictionary (1958) provides about 11 entries, a small increase in the meanings of the verb can be already noticed. The 1993 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of Current English already has 15 entries. Oxford Dictionary and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2009 offers about 15 entries for the verb *do* as well. No major change is observed in Cambridge Dictionary (2014) or in Collins English Dictionary (2018) either, which comes with the same meanings for the verb to do. By contrast, The OALD online, 9th edition provides 25 entries to the verb "to do". Namely, it is proof that over time new meanings of the verb have been added.

Meaning and Context

According to Cambridge Dictionary context is defined as being "the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it" [20]. There are three types of context: lexical, grammatical and situational.

According to the same dictionary, the meaning of word is what it expresses or represents, it is the significance of a word. There are three different approaches to the meaning: referential approach (philosophical, logical level), functional approach (is related to the function of the word in a sentence) and pragmatic approach (it depends on the situation, speaker and listener).

Meaning cannot be expressed without context, and context cannot be settled without meaning. The meaning of word depends on its context and at the same time influences the context. According to semantic contextualism, there is no sentence that fully expresses its meaning without context. Consequently, as Smith [14, p.406] claims that “The “meaning” [of a sign] (...) should be considered with reference to context, since, (...) context is unavoidable.

Words can change their meanings from context to context. When we refer to meaning, “A single word form can vary greatly from one context to another” [6, p.96]. According to Travis (1985), every single word has a literal meaning only when it goes together with a defined context. The language in general is considered to be embedded with the context. Even verbs are affected by the context. There are three types of context: social, cultural, and cognitive and two types of meanings: cognitive and communicative.

It is not an easy subject at all, even linguists were reluctant to talk about meaning and context a while. The meaning of the language is much more difficult to express than its formal side, context (Hörmann, 1986). Especially in the process of communication, the context is the one who helps us to determine the meanings of the words properly. In addition, in order to be able to understand the meaning in a context, reading skills are required. The importance of the context is proved by the multitude of meanings for each word in the dictionary. Context separated from the meaning cannot make us understand the whole situation.

From a translational point of view, it is very important to make sure that both context and meaning are correctly understood, are related to one another. Besides the meaning, a translator should be aware of changes in grammar, pronunciation, spelling or punctuation, because there is no part of the language that does not change over time. (Crystal, 2010). There are two important processes in translation:

1. Interpreting the meaning of a text (or sentence, word) from one language to another.
2. Understanding the context, deepening in the context.

If a translator follows these steps then it will lead to a good contextualized translation. A successful translation is when the message of a text is transmitted as a whole, not when we take certain ideas out of context. In the process of translation, the context is seen as a “cognitive environment”. In its relation with the language, context has a dynamic feature (House, 2005). Therefore, a translator should systematically study semantic changes in a language.

The verb “to do” in context and its meanings

In order to get a better understanding how the verb *do* is used in all the variety of its meanings, I have selected about 44 examples from some books I read recently: *What I know for sure* by Oprah Winfrey (2014), *Five second Rule* by Mel

Robbins (2017), and *Becoming* by Michelle Obama (2018). I grouped the identified examples according to the meaning of the verb *do* as it is explained in OALD.

1. To perform any action /activity or task:

- He finally had a chance to do what those generations never had. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 106) *În sfârșit a avut șansa de a face ceea ce alte generații nu au avut niciodată.*
- I do nothing for at least ten minutes. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 95) *Nu fac nimic timp de cel puțin zece minute.*
- The best time to do it, is right now. (Mel Robbins, p. 81) *Momentul potrivit pentru a face acest lucru, este chiar acum.*
- She's been spending a lot of time figuring out what she needs to do. (Michelle Obama, p. 56) *A petrecut o grămadă de timp pentru a-și da seama ce trebuie să facă.*
- I would do the same. (Michelle Obama, p. 42) *Aș face a fel.*
- It was hard for me to know what to do. (Michelle Obama, p. 56) *Mi-a fost greu să decid ce să fac.*
- The power of what we were doing. (Michelle Obama, p. 171) *Puterea lucrurilor pe care le făceam.*
- You really gotta do that? (Michelle Obama, p. 92) *Chiar ai de gând să faci asta?*
- What would the publicity do to our girls? (Michelle Obama, p. 226) *Ce efecte ar avea publicitatea asupra fetelor noastre?*

2. To perform the activity or task mentioned

- To do good things for other people. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 10) *A face lucruri bune pentru alți oameni.*
- I knew what I needed to do to start my day right. (Mel Robbins, p. 34) *Știam ce trebuie să fac pentru a-mi începe ziua corect.*
- I found a job that still left me enough time to do volunteer work. (Michelle Obama, p. 141) *Am găsit un job care încă mi-a lăsat suficient timp pentru a face voluntariat.*
- All he had to do was speak. (Michelle Obama, p. 218) *Tot ce trebuia să facă era să vorbească.*

3. To do something (job)

- I find satisfaction in so much of what I do. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 9) *Găsesc atâta plăcere în ceea ce fac.*
- No matter how we look or what we do for a living. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 56) *Nu contează cum arătăm sau ce facem pentru a ne câștiga existența.*
- I have been hired to do everything from babysitting his kids and giving them piano lessons. (Michelle Obama, p. 69) *Am fost angajat să fac totul, începând de la îngrijirea copiilor săi până să la ofer lecții de pian.*
- I promised I'd do all the work. (Michelle Obama, p. 193) *Am promis că voi face toată munca.*

4. To act or behave

- As children do when they arrive on this planet. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 19) *Așa cum fac copiii atunci când ajung pe această planetă.*

- It is good to have a master that tells you what to do. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 101) *Este bine să ai un stăpân/superior care să-ți spună ce să faci.*
- 5. To finish something (a finite action)**
- I begin repairing the damage done to my spirit. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 23) *Încep să repar daunele aduse spiritului meu.*
 - Everything you try to do to me is already done to you. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 115) *Tot ceea ce încerci să-mi faci îți este deja făcut.*
 - I did what needed to be done. (Mel Robbins, p. 38) *Am făcut ce trebuia făcut*
 - He knows in his heart what must be done. (Mel Robbins, p.) *Știe în inima lui ce trebuie făcut.*
 - When I was done talking, he run home. (Michelle Obama, p. 94) *Când am terminat de vorbit, el a fugit acasă*
 - I was done with that. (Michelle Obama, p. 206) *Am terminat cu asta.*
 - He was done with work and finally headed home. (Michelle Obama, p. 208) *A terminat lucrul și în sfârșit a ajuns acasă.*
- 6. To solve something**
- I've found that the best thing to do is ask myself a simple question: What is this here to teach me? (Oprah Winfrey, p. 26) *Am constatat că cel mai bun lucru de făcut este să îmi pun o simplă întrebare: Ce pot să învăț de aici?*
 - Help me figure out “what to do with my life. (Mel Robbins, p. 31) *Ajută-mă să înțeleg “Ce să fac cu viața mea”.*
 - Was there a way to do this seriously? (Michelle Obama, p. 117) *A existat o modalitate de a face acest lucru serios?*
- 7. To produce, make or provide something**
- It may feel like the whole world is rising up to tell you what you cannot do. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 46) *Se pare că lumea întreagă se ridică pentru a-ți arăta lucrurile pe care nu le poți face.*
- 8. To be suitable or be enough for somebody/something**
- Your dream may have nothing to do with this! (Oprah Winfrey, p. 69) *Este posibil ca visul tău să nu aibă nimic în comun cu aceasta!*
- 9. To spend a period of time doing something**
- Wake up in the morning and decide what to do with the day. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 101) *Trezește-te dimineața și i-a o decizie ce să faci cu ziua care-ți stă în față.*
- 10. To talk about tasks such as cleaning**
- It is our job to do daily cleanups. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 113) *Este lucrul nostru să facem curățenie zilnică.*
- 11. To learn or study something**
- You don't have to do philosophy for that. (Mel Robbins, p.43) *Nu trebuie să faci filozofie pentru asta.*
- 12. To copy somebody**
- You should do like NASA does when it launches a spaceship. (Mel Robbins, p. 57) *Ar trebui să faci așa cum face NASA atunci când lansează o navă spațială.*

- She was calling us back, as only our mom could do. (Michelle Obama, p. 152) *Ne chema înapoi, așa cum numa mama noastră putea face.*

13. To succeed/To progress

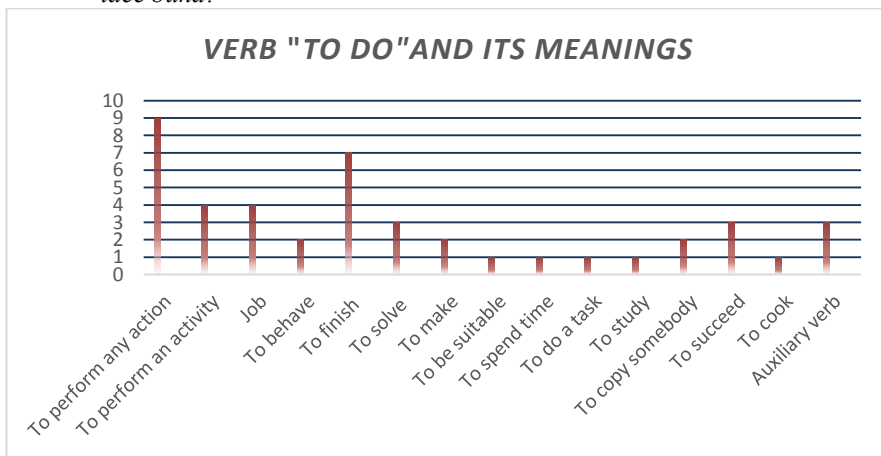
- Always do your best. (Oprah Winfrey, p. 104) *Fă mereu tot ceea ce îți stă în puteri.*
- He managed, as he'd always done, to be both easygoing and deeply focused. (Michelle Obama, Ch. 5 p. 67) *Ca de fiecare dată el a reușit să fie atât de relaxat și de concentrat în același timp.*
- The truth was, I intended to do everything. (Michelle Obama, p. 372) *Adevărul era că intenționam să fac totul.*

14. To cook something

- I was doing muffins for my family. (Michelle Obama) *Făceam brioză pentru familia mea.*

15. Used as an auxiliary verb

- Do you know the game Angry Birds? (Mel Robbins, p. 94) *Știi jocul Angry Birds?*
- Why do you need a job? (Michelle Obama, p. 41) *De ce ai nevoie de un job?*
- Do you think that's a good idea? (Michelle Obama, p. 304) *Crezi că este o idee bună?*



So, we can see that the verb “to do” is used most frequently in the following meanings: *to perform any action and to finish something (showing the result)*. According to the diagram, it can be seen that *to perform an activity and to do something (job)* are quite frequent as well.

Conclusions

The research helped to reveal that the varied meanings of the verb ‘to do’ make it a widely used verb. The latest edition of Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary provides as many as 25 entries that exemplify the various meanings of the verb ‘to do’. However, the first meaning “to perform an action / to do an activity” remains the most used. All these analyzed examples may serve as evidence that the

semantics of the verb ‘to do’ is quite large, therefore, it is very important that translators rely on dictionaries in order to avoid errors. Also, understanding the context is another important condition to do appropriate translations.

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