

Polysemy in Traditional vs. Cognitive Linguistics

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1 Introduction

Polysemy, the phenomenon whereby a linguistic unit exhibits multiple distinct yet related meanings is a very common feature of any language. In fact, almost all the words in language are polysemous to a greater or lesser extent. Consider such words in English as *get*, *face* and *nice*, etc. Polysemy is justly considered to be a necessary means of language economy. As Ullmann (1959:118) puts it, “polysemy is an indispensable resource of language economy. It would be altogether impracticable to have separate terms for every referent”.

No wonder polysemy is such a topic of interest in the study and description of natural languages, and poses special problems both in semantic theory and semantic applications, such as lexicography or translation. Nevertheless, except as a source of humour and puns, polysemy is rarely a problem for communication among people. In fact, language users select the appropriate senses of polysemous words “effortlessly and unconsciously” (Ravin & Leacock 2000:1).

A look at the entries for polysemous words in different dictionaries shows that polysemy presents a challenge to lexicographers. The traditional lexicographic practice is to list multiple dictionary senses for polysemous words and to group related ones as sub-senses. However, dictionaries differ in the number of senses they define for each word, the grouping into subsenses and the content of definitions. It seems that there is little agreement among lexicographers as to the degree of polysemy and the way in which the different senses are organised (Hollósy 2008:209).

The lexicographers’ disunity is mirrored in linguistically naive speaker’s judgement about polysemous words. Jorgenson (1990:187) asked speakers to distinguish senses of highly polysemous words, among others: *head* (21 dictionary senses), *life* (18), *world* (14), *way* (12), *side* (12) and *hand* (11). The author found that the subjects in the test consistently refused to recognise more than about three senses, even after being shown the dictionary entries for polysemous words that differentiated a dozen or more senses. In Jorgenson’s view (1990: 168), dictionary entries for some words “do inflate the number of sense categories beyond those normally distinguished by speakers”. One difficulty people will have in using the dictionary is in distinguishing major and

minor senses, since most dictionaries treat all senses as equally important, which is clearly misleading.

Being very complex, the concept of polysemy poses a challenge for lexical semanticists as well. As pointed out by Jackson and Amwela (2007:69), it involves a certain number of problems, such as the number of meanings, transference of meanings and difficulty in recognizing polysemy as opposed to homonymy.

Since one meaning cannot always be delimited and distinguished from another, we cannot determine exactly how many meanings a polysemous word has. Consider the verb *eat*, which has the following main meanings (Mayor 2009:535):

1. to put food in your mouth and chew and swallow it (She *was eating* an ice cream.)
2. to have a meal (Let's *eat* first and then go to the movie.)
3. to use a very large amount of something (This car *eats* petrol.)

However, besides its literal meaning, it is also used in idioms having a transferred meaning, such as *eat your words* (admit that what you said was wrong); *eat somebody alive* (be very angry with someone); *I'll eat my hat*; *I could eat a horse*; *have somebody eating out of your hand*; *eat somebody out of house and home*; and *you are what you eat*, etc. What is more, in the literal sense, we can also distinguish between eating nuts and eating soup, the former with fingers and the latter with spoons. If we push this analysis too far, we may end up deciding that the verb *eat* has a different meaning for every type of food we eat (Jackson & Amwela 2007:69). Even this example shows that a word may have both a 'literal' meaning and one or more 'transferred' meanings, although we cannot determine with precision how many different meanings a given word may have altogether.

Nevertheless, the most puzzling question both lexicographers and lexical semanticists are faced with is how to distinguish polysemy from homonymy. As generally defined in semantics (Leech 1981:227–229, Lyons 1981:43–47, Lyons 1995:54–60), homonymy refers to etymologically unrelated words that happen to have the same pronunciation and/or spelling (e.g. *bank* as a financial institution and the edge of a river). Conversely, polysemes are etymologically and therefore semantically related, and typically originate from metaphoric/metonymic usage (e.g. *bank* as a building and a financial institution). The distinction is, however, not always straightforward, especially since words that are etymologically related can, over time, drift so far apart that the original semantic relation is no longer recognizable, *pupil* (in a school) and *pupil* (of the eye).

Homonymy and polysemy often give rise to ambiguity, and context is highly relevant to disambiguate the meaning of utterances. Consider the oft-mentioned example from Lyons, in which the two phenomena appear together (Lyons 1977:397):

(1) *They passed the port at midnight.*

This utterance is lexically ambiguous. However, it would normally be clear in a given context which of the two homonyms, *port*¹ ('harbour') or *port*² ('kind of fortified wine'), is being used and also which sense of the polysemous verb 'pass' ('go past' or 'give') is intended.

Lexical ambiguity resulting from polysemy and homonymy has also attracted the attention of translators for a long time. It is generally assumed in translation theory that the disambiguation of contrastive polysemy often depends on information pertaining to the context of situation only (Catford 1965, Newmark 1988 and Nida 2001, etc.). Lyons (1977:235) also notes that context plays a central role in solving problems of translation which arise as a result of homonymy or polysemy. If the ambiguity is resolved by the context in which the sentence is uttered, it can be correctly interpreted by the hearer, and, in principle, correctly translated into another language.

Furthermore, it has also been demonstrated by some of the linguists mentioned above (e.g. Lyons 1977:551–552 and Lipka 1992:136, etc.) that there is subjective association involved in making a distinction between polysemy and homonymy as well. In other words, there is a good deal of agreement among native speakers as to what counts as the one and what counts as the other in particular instances. However, there are also very many instances about which native speakers will hesitate or be in disagreement.

Finally, as is referred to above, homonymy and polysemy are often the basis of a lot of word play, usually for humorous effects. In the nursery rhyme *Mary had a little lamb*, we think of a small animal, but in the comic version, *Mary had a little lamb, some rice and vegetables*, we think of a small amount of meat. The polysemy of *lamb* allows two interpretations. However, we make sense of the riddle *Why are trees often mistaken for dogs?* by recognising the homonymy in the answer: *Because of their bark* (Yule 2006:107–108).

In the light of all these problems related to polysemy it is understandable why it has been so widely discussed in the literature. In fact, we can make a distinction between two different approaches in their treatment. While traditional grammarians such as Lyons (1977, 1981, 1995), Leech (1981), Cowie (1982), Lipka (1992) and Jackson & Amwela (2007), etc. assume that polysemy is a characteristic of only word meaning, cognitive linguists (Lakoff 1987, Tyler & Evans 2003, Croft & Cruse 2004, Evans & Green 2006 and Evans 2007, etc.) challenged this view by regarding polysemy as a category of other areas of language, such as morphology, phonology and syntax. This paper sets out to compare these two opposing approaches. Thus the primary aim of this study is twofold. First, I will look at how polysemy is treated in traditional approaches showing primarily what attempts were made to differentiate polysemy from homonymy and what the drawbacks of the criteria suggested for this were. Second, I will highlight the new approach to polysemy in cognitive linguistics.

2 Polysemy in traditional approaches

The term *polysemy* is derived from the Greek *poly-* meaning ‘many’ and *sem-* meaning ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’. Thus the roots of the study of the complex relations between words and meanings lie in Greek philosophy. However, as was pointed out by Siblot (1995:24), Aristotle was highly critical of polysemy. “Words of ambiguous meanings”, he claimed, “are chiefly useful to enable the sophist to mislead his learners”. Later, the majority of philosophers denounced polysemy and considered it “a defect of language and a handicap to communication, understanding and even clear thinking” (Ullmann 1959:167).

Concrete research into the multiplicity of meaning only began in the 18th century and was continued into the 19th century by linguists interested in meaning from the point of view of etymology, historical lexicography or historical semantics (Nerlich & Clarke 1997:351). In fact, the origin of the term *polysemy* used in linguistics dates back to 1897 when Michel Bréal (1897:145) introduced it in his *Essai de Sémantique* as follows:

Le sens nouveau, quel qu’il soit ne met pas fin à l’ancien. Ils existent tous les deux l’un à côté de l’autre. Le même terme peut s’employer tour à tour au sens propre ou au sens métaphorique, au sens restreint ou au sens étendu, au sens abstrait ou au sens concret ... à mesure qu’une signification nouvelle est donnée au mot, il a l’air de se multiplier et de produire des exemplaires nouveaux, semblables de forme, différents de valeur. Nous appelons ce phénomène de multiplication la polysémie.

In this passage, Bréal argues that polysemy occurs when a word denotes a new sense together with the old one. The word usage will vary between a basic sense and a metaphoric sense, a restricted sense and an extended sense and between an abstract sense and a concrete sense. He adds that any new signification assigned to a particular word is more likely to produce, in turn, other new signification to be assigned to the same word. It is worth noting that in his description of polysemy, Bréal considers that polysemy is an open-ended and quite productive phenomenon in language.

In the course of the 20th century, the focus of linguistic studies, in general, changed from a diachronic perspective to a synchronic perspective. However, polysemy played only a minor role in the structuralist tradition. In the theory of semantics developed by Katz & Fodor (1963) and Katz (1972), the issue of polysemy did not receive much attention. For one thing, Katz (1972) did not distinguish polysemy from homonymy, more importantly, he took “the one form–one meaning approach” (Cuyckens & Zawada 2001:xii). Accordingly, polysemy was maximally restricted and bringing as many different senses under one semantic definition was given preference. In fact, polysemy was largely regarded as the unusual case, with monosemy and homonymy being regarded as the norm. Still several linguists (Leech 1981, Lyons 1977, 1981, 1995 and Lipka

1992, etc.) did explore polysemy focussing primarily on the differences between polysemy and homonymy. They recognised that the various senses of a polysemous word could be derived from a basic sense but did not go further than that. Besides, in these traditional approaches, polysemy is restricted to the study of word–meaning. The lexical semanticists mentioned above use it to describe words like *body*, which has a range of distinct meanings. Consider some of its different meanings (Mayor 2009:172):

- (2) a My fingers were numb and my whole *body* ached.
- b The dog found the *body* of a girl in the woods.
- c Nick had bruises on his face and *body*. The bird has a small *body* and long wings.
- d Workers at the factory are making steel *bodies* for cars.
- e The arguments are explained in the *body* of the text.
- f The British Medical Association is the doctors' professional *body*.

The word *body* is a typical example of polysemy as its different senses are related both semantically and historically. *Body* in the following examples can refer to the physical structure of a person or animal (a), a corpse (b), the central part of a person or animal's body not including the head, arms, legs, wings (c), the main structure of a vehicle not including the engine, wheels, etc. (d), the main or central part of something (e) or a group of people working together to do a particular job (f). Historically, it goes back to OE *bodig* (Onions 1966:104).

As is mentioned above, traditional linguists (e.g. Leech 1981, Lyons, 1981, 1995, Lipka 1992 and Jackson & Amwela, 2007, etc.) usually treated polysemy together with homonymy. In their view, although they have the same shape, homonyms are considered distinct lexemes, mainly because they have unrelated meanings and different etymologies. In fact, homonyms have two types: homographs (same spelling), e.g. *lead* (metal) and *lead* (dog's lead) and homophones (same sound), e.g. *right*, *rite* and *write*.

In traditional approaches, there have been several criteria suggested to distinguish between homonymy and polysemy (Lipka 1992:135–39, Lyons 1981:43–47, Lyons 1977: 550–552, Lyons 1995:54–60 and Jackson & Amwela 2007:68–71). They are as follows:

1. formal identity or distinctness
2. etymology
3. close semantic relatedness

However, as pointed out by the above linguists, none of these criteria seems to be satisfactory for distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy.

2.1 Formal identity or distinctness

As for their formal properties, polysemous words have the same form with a range of different but related meanings, e.g. *plain* (obvious, clear, simple, not

beautiful, etc.), while homonyms can show differences in spelling, e.g. *hoarse* (speaking in a low rough voice) and *horse* (animal) or *threw* (the past form of *throw*) and *through* (from one side to the other), and pronunciation, e.g. *tear* [tɛə] ~ ‘rip’, *tear* [tɪə] ~ ‘a drop of salty liquid that comes out of your eye when you are crying’ or *wind* [wɪnd] ~ ‘moving air’ and *wind* [waɪnd] ~ ‘turn something several times’ as well.

As for homonymy, some linguists, such as Lyons (1981:43–47, 1995:54–60) make a distinction between absolute homonymy and various kinds of partial homonymy. Absolute homonymy must satisfy the following three conditions:

1. their forms must be unrelated in meaning
2. all their forms must be identical
3. identical forms must be syntactically equivalent

Absolute homonymy is common enough: *bank*¹ (a financial institution), *bank*² (the edge of a river); *bark*¹ (the sound of a dog), *bark*² (the skin of a tree); *ball*¹ (a round object), *ball*² (a large formal occasion at which people dance). Obviously, in the above words there does not exist any semantic relationship between the two meanings, which is a necessary requirement of a polysemous lexeme.

In such cases, however, because of the sameness of shape of homonyms, there is a “danger of homonymous conflict or clash” in the sense that two homonyms with totally different meanings may both make sense in the same utterance, where the context plays a decisive role in identifying the relevant meaning of the homonym in question (Jackson & Amwela 2007:72):

- (3) a The *route* was very long.
 The *root* was very long.
 b Helen didn’t see the *bat*. (animal)
 Helen didn’t see the *bat*. (long wooden stick)

Besides absolute homonymy, there are many different kinds of partial homonymy as well (Lyons 1981:43–47, 1995:54–60). One such kind of homonymy is illustrated by *found*. The form *found* is shared by ‘find’ and ‘found’, but they have different forms, such as *finds*, *finding* or *finds*, *founding*, etc. and *found* as a form of ‘find’ is not syntactically equivalent to *found* as a form of ‘found’. As pointed out by Lyons, it is particularly important to note the condition of syntactic equivalence. Although *found* as a form of ‘find’ is not syntactically equivalent to *found* as a form of ‘found’, it is in both cases a verb form. There are certain contexts in which *found* may be construed, syntactically, in either way. Consider the following example:

- (4) They *found* hospitals and charitable institutions.

This sentence is ambiguous, but its ambiguity is lexical: it depends upon a difference in the meaning of *found* (establish) and *find* (get by searching). This

example also shows that context is highly relevant to disambiguate the meaning of utterances.

However, in Lyons' view (1981:44), it is quite possible for partial homonymy never to result in ambiguity. For example, the partial homonymy of the adjective *last* (previous) and the verb *last* (continue to exist) rarely produces ambiguity. Consider the following example:

- (5) It happened *last* week.
Bricks *last* a long time.

Lyons also refers to another kind of homonymy which is often not recognized in standard treatments. For example, the words *rung* and *ring* are partial homonyms as in

- (6) A *rung* of the ladder was broken.
The bell was *rung* at midnight.

In Lyons' view (1981:44), it represents a kind of partial homonymy that "does not necessarily involve identity of either the citation-forms or the underlying stem-forms of the lexemes in question".

In some cases of homonymy, besides the difference in meaning and in spelling/pronunciation, the syntactic aspects must also be taken into consideration (Lyons 1981:43–47, 1995:54–60, Lipka 1992:136 and Jackson & Amwela 2007:72, etc.). Thus homonyms may also be kept apart by syntactic differences, i.e. they belong to different word classes. Consider the following examples (Mayor 2009:128–129):

- (7) a A *bear* is a large strong animal with thick hair.
b Please don't leave me. I couldn't *bear* it.

In sum, there are various safeguards against any possibility of confusion between homonymous words: the difference in spelling, the difference in meaning, the difference in overall context and the difference in word class. In the case of homonymous words that belong to the same word class and have the same spelling, etymology might help as well.

2.2 Etymology

Consider *bat*, the homonymous noun mentioned in example (3), the two meanings of which have a different historical origin:

- (8) bat 1. (club, stick) OE. *batt*; 2. mouse-like winged quadruped ME. *backe*, *bakke* (Onions 1966:78)

Similarly, the word *ear* with the meanings 'organ of hearing' and 'head of corn' are distinguished as homonyms because they were formally distinct in Old English and thus have a different etymology: OE. *ēare* = organ of hearing; OE.;

ēar = spike of corn (Onions 1966:297). Consequently, *bat*^{1,2} and *ear*^{1,2} should be treated as two separate words in dictionaries, which is not always the case.

In contrast, on the basis of their shared etymology, the words *pupil*¹ (a child at school) and *pupil*² (the small black round area in the middle of your eye) should be treated as polysemes (Onions 1966:724):

- (9) pupil: (O)F. *pupille*, L. *pūpillus*, *-illa* orphan, ward, secondary dim. of *pūpus* boy, *pūpa* girl
 pupil: (O)F. *pupille*, L. *pūpilla*, secondary dim. of *pūpa* girl, doll, pupil of the eye

Similarly, *flower* ‘part of a plant’ and *flour* ‘powder made by milling grain’ should also be treated as a single polysemous word. In fact, they are etymologically identical, since both go back to the same Middle English word *flour* (OF. *flour*): A) reproductive organs of plants B) pulverised form of a chemical substance (Onions 1966:346). In spite of the different spelling, both are pronounced identically in present-day English. They are considered as two different words not only by speakers but in dictionaries as well, i.e. they are homonyms.

As is noted by Lyons (1977:551–552), in practice, however, the etymological criterion is not always decisive. First of all, there are many words in English about whose historical derivation people are uncertain. Secondly, it is not always clear what is meant by etymological relationship in this context. The lexeme *port*¹ (meaning ‘harbour’) derives from the Latin ‘portus’. *Port*² (meaning ‘strong, sweet Portuguese wine’), on the other hand, came into English fairly recently and derives from the name of the city in Portugal from which the particular kind of wine it denotes was exported. But the name of this city *Oporto* derives in Portuguese from an expression (*O Porto*), which originally meant, simply, ‘the harbour’; and the Portuguese *porto* comes from the same Latin lexeme from which the English *port*¹ derives (Onions 1966:699–670). Thus, whether we say that *port*¹ and *port*² are etymologically related, depends on how far we are prepared to trace the history of words.

Lipka (1992:136) also refers to some other pairs of words with the same origin, such as *glamour* and *grammar*, *catch* and *chase*, *shirt* and *skirt*, etc., which are listed as different entries in dictionaries. Not surprisingly, most native speakers do not possess any etymological knowledge about them. Thus etymology is irrelevant for a purely semantic analysis of some English words:

- (10) *glamour* (magic, spell XVIII; magic beauty XIX. orig. Sc., alteration of GRAMMAR (Onions 1966:400)
catch obsolete chase; capture, grasp, seize; take, get, receive XIII. ME. *cacche-n* ~ AN., ONF. *cachier* (Onions 1966:152)
shirt undergarment for the trunk. OE *scýrte*, corr. formally to LG. *schörte*, MDu *schorte*, G. *schürze* apron, ON. *skyrtá* (whence SKIRT), based on Germ. *skurt*–SHORT (Onions 1966:821)

As is evident from the above examples, the criterion of etymological relationship is not always as straightforward as it might appear at first sight. Furthermore, etymology can also be misleading as native speakers often consider two lexemes derived from different roots in an earlier stage of language as related.

2.3 Close semantic relatedness

Another criterion to distinguish homonymy from polysemy is the unrelatedness vs. relatedness of meaning, i.e. the native speakers' feeling that certain meanings are connected and others are not. In contrast to homonymous words, polysemous words are considered to be semantically related and we can witness a semantic transfer, i.e. metaphor or metonymy between them. Thus semantic relatedness is an important factor for identifying polysemous words. The words for parts of the body provide the best illustration of this (Mayor 2009:791–792, 605–606, 677–678, 996, 1860, 602):

- (11) *hand*: hand¹ (part of a body), hand² (help), hand³ (control), hand⁴ (worker), hand⁵ (hand of a clock)
face: face¹ (front of your head), face² (person: new/different/familiar face) face³ (mountain/cliff: the north face of Mont Blanc, the cliff face), face⁴ (clock: the face of a clock)
foot: foot¹ (body part), foot² (bottom part: the foot of the stairs, mountain)
leg: leg¹ (body part), leg² (meat: roast leg of lamb) leg³ (furniture: the leg of the table), leg⁴ (clothing: the legs of my jeans)
tongue: tongue¹ (mouth), tongue² (language: mother tongue), tongue³ (food: the tongue of a cow), tongue⁴ (shoe: the tongue of a shoe)
eye: eye¹ (body part), eye² (way of seeing/understanding: a critical eye), eye³ (needle: the eye of the needle), eye⁴ (camera: the eye of the camera)

Other good examples of the semantic relatedness of polysemous words are nouns denoting animals (Mayor 2009:691, 1163, 278, and 1140). Consider the following examples:

- (12) *fox*: fox¹ (wild animal), fox² (person as crafty as a fox) fox³ (fur of a fox) and fox⁴ (AmE Inf. someone who is sexually attractive).
snake: snake¹ (an animal), snake² (someone who cannot be trusted)
chicken: chicken¹ (a common farm bird), chicken² (meat), chicken³ (informal coward)
mouse: mouse¹ (small animal), mouse² (computer: a small object connected to the computer), mouse³ (informal a quiet, nervous person)

Having a closer look at the different meanings of the above words, we can notice a transfer of meaning: part of a body can be extended to other objects and a

character of an animal can be extended to a person. In fact, metaphorical creativity is part of everyone's linguistic competence. However, people are generally not aware of the relation between the central and the extended meanings of polysemous words.

Nevertheless, as is generally accepted by traditional linguists (Lipka 1992:139, Lyons 1977:551–552, 1981:45 and Leech 1981:227), psychological criteria, i.e. subjective associations are also involved in determining semantic relatedness in polysemy. As Leech puts it (1981:227), relatedness of the senses can be “historical or psychological”. Accordingly, as is also mentioned above in 2.2, two meanings are historically related if they can be traced back to the same source, or if the one meaning can be derived from the other. Two meanings are considered to be psychologically related if present-day users of the language “feel intuitively that they are related, and therefore tend to assume that they are different uses of the same word” (Leech 1981:227).

Consider *mess* (old fashioned dish of food; dirty or untidy state of affairs) and *crane* (type of bird; machine for lifting), the meanings of which are historically related, but psychologically they are not (Onions 1966:571; 224):

- (13) *mess* – portion or serving of food, dish of food XIII; made dish XV; mixed food for an animal XVIII; medley, confused or shapeless mass XIX
crane – large bird OE; machine for raising and lowering weights XIV.
 OHG. *kran* (G. *kran* machine), OE. *cranoc* OHG *chranuch* (G. *kranich* bird)

Another much quoted example is the noun *sole*: *sole*¹ (the bottom surface of the foot), *sole*² (the flat bottom part of a shoe) and *sole*³ (a flat fish) (Mayor 2009:1673). They are related to L. *solea* (sandal), from *solum* (bottom, sole of the foot) and French *sole*, with the fish being named so because of its shape (Onions 1966:844).

In contrast, according to Leech (1981:227), there are cases where historically unrelated forms are felt to be related psychologically. It, however, occurs less frequently. Consider *ear* (organ of hearing; ear of corn) or *weeds* (wild, useless plants; mourning garments worn by widows). In both these cases the etymologies of the two meanings are quite different (Onions 1966:297, 997):

- (14) a *ear* (organ of hearing) OE. *ēare* (compare Latin *auris* ‘ear’)
ear (spike of corn) OE. *ēar* (compare Latin *acus*, *aceris* ‘husk’)
 b *weed* (wild useless plant) OE. *wēod* (weed)
weeds (mourning garments worn by widows) OE. *wæd* (garment)

Nevertheless, people sometimes see a metaphorical connection between certain words, and adjust their understanding of the words accordingly. Thus what from a historical point of view is an instance of homonymy, resulting from an accidental convergence of forms, becomes reinterpreted in the context of present-day English as a case of polysemy.

Lyons (1977:551–552, 1981:45) also refers to the less common converse situation, where “historically unrelated meanings are perceived by native speakers as having the same kind of connection as the distinguishable meanings of a single polysemous lexeme”. The example given by Lyons is the noun *shock*. He points out that today a number of people assume that *shock*¹ as in ‘shock of corn’ (a pile of sheaves of corn) is the same as *shock*² as in ‘shock of hair’ (a very thick mass of hair). Yet historically, they have different origins (Onions 1966:822). This example also demonstrates that what, from a historical point of view, is quite clearly homonymy will be sometimes reinterpreted by later generations of speakers as polysemy. Nevertheless, etymology supports the average native speaker’s intuitions about relatedness of meaning although they are often not knowledgeable about it.

All these problems led traditional linguists (Lipka 1992, Cowie 1982 Lyons 1977, 1981, etc.) to conclude that the reason why it is often not easy to distinguish clearly between homonymy and polysemy is due to the fact that they are not absolute opposites and there are various degrees of formal and semantic unity. Thus they must be regarded as “two end-points of a scale with a continuum in between” (Lipka 1992:139).

Cowie (1982:51) also formulated the distinction between polysemy and homonymy in a similar way:

Polysemous words can differ considerably according to the degree of relatedness and difference which their meanings display ..., homonymy (total distinctness of the meaning of identical forms) is properly seen as the end-point of the continuum.

Similarly, Lyons (1977:551–552, 1981:45) also argues that the border–line between polysemy and homonymy is sometimes “fuzzy as even native speakers often hesitate or are in disagreement about it in certain situations”. Some native speakers will claim to see a connection between the different senses of polysemous words, whereas other native speakers deny that any such connection exists.

All these views suggest that the native speaker’s intuitions of the relatedness of meaning in deciding between polysemy and homonymy seem not to be reliable. Although etymology in general supports the native speaker’s intuitions about particular lexemes, it is not uncommon for lexemes which the average speaker of the language thinks of as being semantically unrelated to have come from the same source.

All in all, these traditional approaches to polysemy provide a more or less successful analysis of what polysemy and homonymy are: what lexical items are polysemous and homonymous. Their major problem, however, is that they fail to address several fundamental issues: the reasons why these lexical items have several senses attached to them, how their meanings are structured, whether there is any motivation for the lexical item to convey specific meanings and

whether besides lexis, other areas of language exhibit polysemy as well. In fact, these issues neglected by traditional approaches are at the core of investigation in Cognitive Semantics.

3. Polysemy in cognitive linguistics

It is widely acknowledged that the advent of cognitive linguistics in the 1980s brought a new approach to polysemy as well (Lakoff 1987, Tyler & Evans 2003, Nerlich et al. 2003, Croft & Cruse 2004, Evans & Green 2006 and Evans 2007). In general, cognitive linguists place central importance on the role of meaning, conceptual processes and embodied experience in the study of language and the human mind and the way in which they intersect. With their focus on linguistic categorisation, as well as with its view that meaning is central to and motivates linguistic structure, the question of polysemy was placed centre-stage again.

This change in perspective was facilitated by new theories of how humans establish categories on the basis of prototypes and family resemblance. The word itself with its network of polysemous senses came to be regarded as a category in which the senses of the word are related to each other by means of general cognitive principles such as metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specification and image schema transformations.

Thus, within the cognitive framework, the main distinction between polysemy and homonymy is the systematic relationship of meanings that take place in polysemy. Cognitive linguists argue that the meanings of polysemous words are related in a systematic and natural way forming radial categories where one or more senses are more prototypical (central) while others are less prototypical (peripheral). It is assumed that the figurative senses of polysemous words are derived metaphorically from the more prototypical spatial senses (Lakoff 1987:418–439). In this view, metaphor is understood as an experientially-based mapping between a concrete source domain and an abstract target domain (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:5).

Furthermore, unlike traditional research into polysemy inside historical and lexical semantics, cognitive analyses go beyond words and polysemy is regarded as a cognitive organising principle shared by other areas of language, such as morphology, phonology and syntax (Lakoff 1987, Tyler & Evans 2003, Croft & Cruse 2004, Evans & Green 2006 and Evans 2007).

Next let us see how the distinct areas of language, such as the lexicon, morphology and syntax exhibit polysemy. As for word meaning, *over*, which has been widely discussed by cognitive linguists, can serve as evidence for polysemy at the level of lexical organisation (Taylor 2003:110–116, Lakoff 1987:418–439, Tyler & Evans 2003:724–765, Evans & Green 2006:328–361). Consider the following examples which illustrate various senses of *over*:

- | | | | |
|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------|
| (15) a | The picture is over the sofa. | ABOVE | |
| | b | The picture is over the hole. | COVERING |

c The ball landed over the wall.	ON THE OTHER SIDE
d The car drove over the bridge.	ACROSS
e The bath overflowed.	EXCESS
f The government handed over power.	TRANSFER
g She has a strange power over me.	CONTROL

As is argued by the cognitive linguists mentioned above, while each sense of *over* is distinct, they can all be related to one another; they all derive from a central ‘above’ meaning via metaphorisation. The TRANSFER sense suggests that not just physical objects but abstract notions such as power can be transferred and the CONTROL sense is licenced by the metaphor CONTROL IS UP.

Just as words like *over* exhibit polysemy, so do morphological categories. It can be illustrated by the diminutives (Taylor 2003, Lehrer 2003, Evans & Green 2006 and Kovács 2011, etc.). Diminutives are affixes denoting small size, such as young age and small quantity. In addition, there are extensions to meanings of affection and pejoration. As pointed out by the above authors, the meaning of small easily shifts to endearment – the affection we feel for small children and small animals and also to pejoration, since small can denote “lesser” importance. While it is a very productive feature of Hungarian and Italian, English has fewer diminutives and their productivity is much more limited. Although *booklet* can be glossed as a little book, *anklet* is not a little *ankle* (ankle chain, or ankle bracelet, is an ornament worn around the ankle). However, the suffix *-let* still connotes small size, e.g. a *hamlet* is a small town, but the base *ham* has no independent identifiable sense. *Starlet* refers to a young actress who plays small parts in films and hopes to become famous.

Besides having a diminutive meaning, the suffix *-ette* is a feminine marker as well. Consider *dinette* (a small space within a dwelling, usually alongside a kitchen, used for informal dining), *kichette* (a small area off the kitchen for casual dining), *kitchenette* (a small cooking area), *luncheonette* (a small restaurant serving light lunches), *statuette* (a small statue), *laundrette* (a self-service laundry) vs. *usherette* (a woman working in a cinema, showing people to their seats) and *majorette* (a girl who spins a baton while marching with a band).

Similarly, the suffix *-kin* can refer to smallness, such as in *napkin* (1. a piece of material (as cloth or paper) used at table to wipe the lips or fingers and protect the clothes, 2: a small cloth or towel), but also to endearment such as in *babykins* (a term of endearment, resulting from intense attachment to an individual and deep concern for their well-being, “How’s your cold, Babykins?”).

The suffix *-ling* can also mean smallness (*duckling*, *sapling*) but with the exception of *darling* meaning endearment, it is affectionately pejorative, such as in *weakling*, *giftling* (trivial gift), *witling* (one with small wit) and *trifling* (unimportant or of little value). However, *starling* refers to a very common bird with shiny black feathers that lives especially in cities.

The suffix *-y/ie* refers to both small size and is also used in babytalk, such as in *doggy*, *blankie*, *drinky*, *horsey* and *tummy*, etc. However, it is more productively used for nicknames, which suggest endearment, such as *Jimmy*, *Tommy* and *Susie*, etc.

In Taylor's view (2003:174) the extension of the diminutive to express an attitude of affection or pejoration is an instance of metonymic/metaphoric transfer. Thinking of entities with a small size can evoke a range of different attitudes. Small things can be regarded with affection or contempt.

Just as lexical and morphological categories exhibit polysemy, so do syntactic categories. Consider the ditransitive construction: SVOO, which has a range of abstract meanings associated with it as illustrated by the following examples (Evans & Green 2006:37–38):

- (16) a Mary gave John the cake.
- b Mary promised John the cake.
- c Mary refused John the cake.
- d Mary left John the cake.
- e Mary permitted John the cake.
- f Mary baked John the cake.

In (16)a AGENT successfully causes recipient to receive PATIENT; in (16)b conditions of satisfaction imply that AGENT causes recipient to receive PATIENT; in (16)c AGENT causes recipient not to receive PATIENT; in (16)d AGENT acts to cause recipient to receive PATIENT at some future point of time; in (16)e AGENT enables recipient to receive PATIENT; and in (16)f AGENT intends to cause recipient to receive PATIENT. While each of the abstract senses associated with ditransitive syntax are distinct, they are clearly related: they all concern volitional transfer although the nature of transfer varies from sense to sense.

It should be apparent from the foregoing discussion that cognitive linguists view polysemy as a key to generalisation across a range of 'distinct' phenomena and argue that polysemy reveals important fundamental commonalities between lexical, morphological and syntactic organisation. Scholars (Lakoff 1987, Taylor 2003, Nerlich et al. 2003, Tyler & Evans 2003, Lehrer 2003 and Evans & Green 2006, etc.) working in this area assume that polysemy is a conceptual rather than purely linguistic phenomenon, i.e. linguistic polysemy patterns reflect, and therefore reveal, systematic differences and patterns in the way linguistic units are organised and structured in the mind.

4 Conclusion

Polysemy provides a problem that has attracted a great deal of attention in semantic analysis. In traditional approaches represented by Leech 1981, Lyons 1981, 1995, Lipka 1992 and Jackson & Amwela 2007, etc., polysemy is usually discussed in conjunction with homonymy. If two lexical items have either 1)

etymologically distinct meanings or 2) semantically unrelated meanings, they are regarded as homonyms. In contrast, if the meanings concerned are related by metaphorical extension – the most typical manifestation of semantic interrelationship – or via some other process of semantic development, they are considered to be one single lexeme with two senses. Several criteria have been suggested to distinguish polysemy from homonymy, such as the formal identity or distinctness, etymology and close semantic relatedness, but none of them seems to be satisfactory. Furthermore, in traditional approaches polysemy is assumed to be a property of lexical categories only.

In contrast, in cognitive linguists' view (e.g. Lakoff 1987, Tyler & Evans 2003, Taylor 2003, Nerlich et al. 2003, Croft & Cruse 2004 and Evans & Green 2006, etc.), the notion of polysemy is essentially extended and is applied to both lexical and grammatical language levels. It is argued that polysemy regulates and systematizes both lexis and grammar and may be considered as a factor which is organizing the language system. Thus polysemy is considered to be a fundamental feature of human language.

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