LEXICAL AMBIGUITY REVISITED: ON HOMONYMY AND POLYSEMY

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to assess the two descriptively controversial cases of lexical ambiguity known as polysemy *and* homonymy *in an attempt to illustrate a practical solution to the lexicographic treatment of these phenomena based on Pierre Frath's referential approach and on Ingrid Lossius Falkum's pragmatic approach. Both accounts rest on the mind-world relations that characterise the representation of polysemy and ultimately point to a combination between conceptual atomism and pragmatic-focused analysis as the framework most likely to solve the paradox of polysemy.*

Keywords: polysemy, homonymy, reference, pragmatics, conceptual atomism

Lexical ambiguity is considered the most common form that this phenomenon characteristic of natural languages tends to take, due to the numerous occurrences of polysemous words and to the various cases of homonymy featuring in many of the world's languages. However, it is also the most controversial, both theoretically and practically, since speakers of a language cope with polysemy with little, if any, effort, whereas scholars find it difficult to define and account for this linguistic phenomenon, which has caused some linguists to talk about a "polysemy paradox" (Ravin and Leacock, as well as Taylor). This paradoxical situation results from the problems linguists have encountered in their attempts to clearly distinguish between ***polysemy*** and **homonymy** proper, on the one hand, and to offer a transparent but clear-cut description of lexical ambiguity on the other.

The word "polysemous" is far from being polysemous: it has been given only one definition, namely "having multiple meanings or interpretations", as opposed to having only one meaning or interpretation and, thus, being "monosemous" – e.g. the word *walk* is ***polysemous***, as proven by the following examples:

> Jane preferred to ***walk*** alone. (to go on foot)
> Do you ***walk*** the dog twice a day? (to escort on foot)
> This armchair is too heavy for them to lift; they'll probably choose to ***walk*** it into the living room (to move a large object by rocking it).
> He who dies a violent death in this church is sure to ***walk*** the tower. (to move about a place, haunting it as a ghost).
> The workers threatened to ***walk***. (to move about instead of working at the workplace because one is on strike).
> ***Walk*** with God! (to walk the paths of life by acting in a moral way)

The first known use of the word ***polysemous*** dates back to 1884, but the notion was made popular by Michel Bréal in 1897. Merriam-Webster Dictionary traces the origin of the term, to the Late Latin *polysemus*, from the Greek *polysēmos* (*-poly-* many + *-sēma-* sign). Thus, *polysemy* is a characteristic displayed by some words and phrases that may enjoy multiple yet somehow related interpretations.

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The word "homonymous", first recorded in 1621, came via the Latin *homonymus*, from the Greek *homōnymos*, meaning "of the same name", -*homo*- same + -*ōnymos*- named). In its strictest sense, a **homonym** is a word that not only sounds the same, but is also spelled the same as another word which has a different meaning: **fluke** – a parasitic flatworm of the class Trematoda, **fluke** – part of a whale's tail or the barbed head of on an arrow or a harpoon or an anchor, and **fluke** – a chance occurrence, a fortunate accident, a stroke of good luck (*The Free Dictionary*). There is, however, a looser sense of this term: "a word that sounds *or* is spelled the same as another word but has a different meaning, technically called a homophone (same sound: e.g. die and dye) or a homograph (same spelling: e.g. the metal lead and the present tense of the verb lead)" (*Wiktionary*). Thus, **homonymy** is a feature displayed by a word that sounds the same *and/or* is spelled the same as another word, but has a different, unrelated meaning. This linguistic relation may either be complete (**full homonymy**) or partial (homophony or homography).

According to the above-mentioned definitions, if a word displays multiple rather ***similar*** meanings as part of a large semantic field, it is a case of ***polysemy***:

get can mean - *procure* (I'll *get* the money.)
-*fetch* (I'll *get* the kids.)
-*become* (He'll *get* angry.)
- *understand* (I *get* it.)

fleet can mean - *all the ships of a country's navy*
(*The Spanish **fleet** appeared from behind the dark clouds.*)
- *a number of ships, aircraft or road vehicles managed as a unit*
(*My uncle's transport company has a large **fleet** of service vehicles.*)

Conversely, if two or more **distinct** concepts share the same name, it is a case of **homonymy**: *To* **sow** *the seeds of revolt is all that he wanted.* (the verb – to plant) versus *Have you found the* **sow***?* (the noun – female pig).

Not all cases are clear-cut, however, since relatedness is clearly a rather vague notion and, as such, does not constitute an infallible test for polysemy. Leech (227) shows that this concept is two-fold: two or more meanings are *historically related* if they originated from the same source, but they may also be psychologically related if speakers of a language intuitively feel that there is a link between those meanings. Moreover, historical relatedness does not imply psychological relatedness, and vice-versa[1284]. Fillmore and Atkins's definition of polysemy (100) is three-fold: 1. the various senses of a polysemous word have a central origin; 2. the links between these senses form a network, and 3. understanding the 'inner' one contributes to the understanding of the 'outer' one. Since *etymology* may help, but is not a definitive test, lexicographers also rely on native speakers' intuition and judgement when

[1284] Leech (1990: 228) quotes Stephen Ullmann's example: "ear" = "organ of hearing" Old English *ēare*, from Proto-Germanic **auzon* (cf. Old Norse *eyra*, Danish *øre*, Old Frisian *are*, Old Saxon *ore*, Middle Dutch *ore*, Dutch *oor*, Old High German *ora*, German *Ohr*, Gothic *auso*), from PIE **ous*- with a sense of "perception" (cf. Greek *aus*, Latin *auris*, Lithuanian *ausis*, Old Church Slavonic *ucho*, Old Irish *au* "ear," Avestan *usi* "the two ears") versus "ear" = "grain part of corn" from Old English *ēar*, (West Saxon), *æher* (Northumbrian) "spike, ear of grain," from Proto-Germanic **akhaz* (genitive **akhizaz*; cf. Dutch *aar*, Old High German *ehir*, German *Ähre*, Old Norse *ax*, Gothic *ahs* "ear of corn"), from PIE root **ak*- "sharp, pointed" (cf. Latin *acus* "husk of corn," Greek *akoste* "barley;" see ***acrid***). See the Online Etymology Dictionary available at: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=ear Although historically they are homonyms, present-day speakers view them as polysemous words.

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deciding whether to assign different entries or only one to words whose status is ambiguous. The solution that Leech (228) advances to the polysemy - homonymy problem depends on acknowledging the psychological reality of lexical rules: if people identify a metaphorical connection between meanings, "what from a historical point of view is a homonymy, resulting from an accidental convergence of forms, becomes reinterpreted in the context of present-day English as a case of polysemy". The classification of words as polysemous rather than homonymous based on the intuition criterion is bound to be subjective. We might be dealing with ***polysemy***, even though the various meanings are relatively far apart, or with **homonymy**, despite the overlap between different meanings. As a result, some speakers may treat the respective item as one word, whilst others might think that there are two or more different words. Thus, even though the different meanings of ***polysemous words*** should be treated under a single dictionary lemma, whereas **homonyms** should feature as separate lemmata, this is not always the case: in some dictionaries even polysemes are listed as different entries, whereas in others homonyms feature together, under a single entry. This situation is, explains Frath (50-51), in dire need of "an exhaustive semiotic and cultural analysis" – basically, the confusion springs from our tendency to view language and reality as isomorphic, which is, obviously, "a fallacy":

> Mankind has kept trying, at least since Aristotle, to organise and comprehend the real world, essentially by matching it with language. Language is a repository of knowledge gained by naming and relating objects. […] When words refer to separate objects, we quite naturally believe that the objects *and* the words *must* share some features. Yet it fails with homonyms, because of some real world discrepancies or because we have forgotten why our forebears named these objects so. And we wonder: why are these two very different things referred to by the same word? We name the mystery homonymy, and add it to the repository. Homonymy is disappointed polysemy; we resort to it reluctantly.

To the human mind, even historically unrelated items can appear to be somewhat related. A connection can be found, with a stretch of imagination, by invoking some subsuming cognitive elements likely to construe an "undeniable" link between two or more meanings. Thus coerced into resemblance, historical homonyms are turned into polysemous words, due to our overwhelming preference for polysemy and distaste for homonymy.

The boundaries between polysemy and homonymy seem to be characterised by flux, rather than fix, as a result of semantic shift, referential dispersion, semantic closeness, human subjectivity and, first and foremost, a lack of firm ground-rules on the basis of which the distinction between the two is to be drawn.

As Frath (44) shows, the lexicographic treatment of polysemy and homonymy is bound to be problematic, since a dictionary is not meant to explain language, but rather to provide "a snapshot of usage at one particular moment". The semantic treatment of polysemy, however, should not normally be hindered to the same extent, as it may offer an accurate and detailed description of language from a theoretical point of view. Two different approaches have been identified: one that operates with literal versus figurative meanings, with metonymical versus metaphorical connections, and another that operates with core versus specific meanings triggered by context or by generative rules. Frath (47-48) argues that the

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former, known as **the linear theory**, fails to work because, on the one hand, there is no clear-cut method of identifying which the literal meaning is and, on the other hand, "the link between literal and derived meanings cannot always be specified with certainty, even when it is established." The latter, known as **the subsuming theory**, also fails on two counts: firstly, it is unable to explain exactly how speakers use the context to carry out the selection process and, secondly, it can neither "define the original (literal or subsuming) semantic entity", nor "explain the links between the original and (derived or subsumed)" meanings of a word.

Showing that "polysemy is not a single homogeneous phenomenon", Frath (55-56) attempts to explain it in terms of reference. Thus, if a word can be used to refer to various aspects of the same object, the case is that of *referential polysemy*; if a word is employed to refer to a number of similar objects, the case is that of ***lexical polysemy***; and, finally, if words identical in some respect are used to refer to unconnected objects, the case is that of **homonymy**:

> Polysemy and homonymy are the names of ingrained discrepancies in our referring activity: polysemy is *referential* when *one object is linked to several usages of a word*; polysemy is ***lexical*** when ***several resembling objects are linked to several usages of a word***; the phenomenon is called **homonymy** when **several non resembling objects are linked to several usages of a word**.

One of the most frequently quoted and discussed cases is that of the word "bank". There are several reasons for its popularity. Firstly, one's intuition might dictate that the same combination of letters/sounds cannot possibly be treated *both as one word* with several related meanings *and as two different words* with unrelated meanings (web York handout). Nevertheless, if one employs the criterion of psychological relatedness with words like "bank", one needs to distinguish between the apparently different meanings – *financial institution* versus *slope adjoining a river* versus *row of similar things* – whilst acknowledging that for each of these homonyms there are also polysemous uses, as the following entries featured in *Collins English Dictionary* clearly show:

bank[1]

n

1. (Economics, Accounting & Finance / Banking & Finance) an institution offering certain financial services, such as the safekeeping of money, conversion of domestic into and from foreign currencies, lending of money at interest, and acceptance of bills of exchange

2. (Economics, Accounting & Finance / Banking & Finance) the building used by such an institution

3. a small container used at home for keeping money

4. (Group Games / Gambling, except Cards) the funds held by a gaming house or a banker or dealer in some gambling games

5. (Group Games / Card Games) (in various games)

a. the stock, as of money, pieces, tokens, etc., on which players may draw

b. the player holding this stock

6. any supply, store, or reserve, for future use *a data bank a blood bank*

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bank[2]
n
1. a long raised mass, esp. of earth; mound; ridge
2. (Earth Sciences / Physical Geography) a slope, as of a hill
3. (Earth Sciences / Physical Geography) the sloping side of any hollow in the ground, esp. when bordering a river *the left bank of a river is on a spectator's left looking downstream*
4. (Earth Sciences / Physical Geography)
a. an elevated section, rising to near the surface, of the bed of a sea, lake, or river
b. (*in combination*) *sandbank, mudbank*
5. (Mining & Quarrying)
a. the area around the mouth of the shaft of a mine
b. the face of a body of ore
6. (Engineering / Aeronautics) the lateral inclination of an aircraft about its longitudinal axis during a turn
7. (Engineering / Civil Engineering)
Also called banking, camber, cant, superelevation: a bend on a road or on a railway, athletics, cycling, or other track having the outside built higher than the inside in order to reduce the effects of centrifugal force on vehicles, runners, etc., rounding it at speed and in some cases to facilitate drainage
8. (Group Games / Billiards & Snooker) the cushion of a billiard table

bank[3]
n
1. an arrangement of objects, esp. similar objects, in a row or in tiers *a bank of dials*
2. (Transport / Nautical Terms)
a. a tier of oars in a galley
b. a bench for the rowers in a galley
3. (Communication Arts / Printing, Lithography & Bookbinding) a grade of lightweight writing and printing paper used for airmail letters, etc
4. (Electronics & Computer Science / Telecommunications) *Telephony* (in automatic switching) an assembly of fixed electrical contacts forming a rigid unit in a selector or similar device

Secondly, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the first two entries are, indeed, to be viewed as homonyms:

> "financial institution", late 15c., from either Old Italian *banca* or Middle French *banque* (itself from the Italian word), both meaning "table" (the notion is of the moneylender's exchange table), from a Germanic source (cf. Old High German *bank* "bench").

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"earthen incline, edge of a river", c.1200, probably in Old English but not attested in surviving documents, from a Scandinavian source such as Old Norse *banki*, Old Danish *banke* "sandbank", from Proto-Germanic *bangkon* "slope", cognate with *bankiz* "shelf".

Nevertheless, more recent *etymological information* about the lexical item in question actually suggests that the two should feature under one lexical entry, since, as Frath (50-51) explains, *Bank-mound, bank-financial institution* and *river bank* actually have a common origin, the Gothic word *benc*, which originally referred to a small mound. Then it was also used metaphorically for *river bank*, and also as a metaphor for a low table, especially those where bankers used to exchange money, which gave Italian *banca*, French *banque*, and English *bank*.

Lyons (28) also points out that the two senses of the word *bank* **did coincide**, at one point in the evolution of the Italian language, as bankers used to sit on the riverbanks when conducting business. Thus, going to the financial institution was tantamount to going to the margin of the river, hence to the *bank*. Consequently, historical linguistics research revealed an actual link between the two modern senses of *bank*. Yet most people are not aware of this link and fail to see the connection, viewing the two as homonyms. Still, it seems that not all the meanings of ***bank*** are related (the meanings in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and, respectively, 7, 8, 9 are two somewhat distinct groups of examples linked to one another, whilst 6 could be seen as remotely linked to either of the groups, but, as mentioned above, the connection between the meanings of the words used in the two separate groups is, nowadays, rather blurry):

1. They demolished the ***bank*** yesterday. (noun – building)
2. Let's go to the ***bank*** to get a loan. (noun – financial institution)
3. This morning the ***bank*** called about our mortgage. (noun – personnel)
4. Now you are the ***bank*.** (noun – when playing Monopoly)
5. Let's go to the ***bank*** to donate some blood. (noun – storage facility)
6. The typical operator used to sit in front of a bank of switches. (noun – row of similar things)
7. Let's go to the **bank** to watch the fishermen. (noun – sloping land beside a body of water)
8. I had just finished piling up the snow, when he ruined it all by reversing into the **bank**. (noun – large pile of snow, sand, earth, etc.)
9. The divers hid behind a **bank** of about two feet high, hoping to get away from the shark. (noun – a ridge, an undersea elevation) (web afv.gr homonymy and polysemy)

To reanalyse the word ***bank*** by applying Frath's typology, we may state that 1, 2, 3, illustrate referential polysemy (***bank*** being one object that encompasses not only the *building* but also its role as a *financial institution*, as well as the accompanying *personnel*), whilst [1, 2, 3], 4 and 5 are examples of lexical polysemy (the various objects referred to obviously display some resemblance, being connected by the concept of safely storing important items), and so are 7, 8 and 9 (similar in that they are all mound-like elevations either on land or under water). The examples can also be grouped as follows [***1, 2, 3, 4, 5***], 6, [**7, 8, 9**] to show

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homonymy (the different usages of the word refer to distinct objects: ***some kind of storage facility***, row of similar items and **pile of snow, sand or earth**).

Frath's account of polysemy and homonymy (54-55) is based on two premises: that "words have us surmise that the objects they refer to are somehow related" and that "the subsuming entity is ***deduced from*** usage, it is ***not cause of*** usage" (emphasis mine). The former premise implies that if various objects are referred to by employing different words the speakers do not surmise the existence of an obvious relation between those objects. The latter implies that words are not receptacles in which conceptual sub-entities are lying in wait only to later be actualised, rather words can be used to refer to one or more objects. If one word is used to make reference to clearly related objects this is to be viewed as a case of referential polysemy. When one word refers to objects that we perceive as related, though their senses may not be directly linked, the polysemy is lexical. In those cases where no connection is identified by the speakers between the two or more referents, yet they are conveyed by one and the same word, the phenomenon is labelled homonymy, whether the objects happen to share a signifier by mere accident, or the link existed once but is now lost due to the fact that the object that had provided the link no longer exists, or owing to the fact that the connection itself was forgotten and, hence, lost.

Falkum's pragmatic approach points to a combination between the atomist account of lexical semantics and a pragmatic-focused analysis as the framework most likely to solve the paradox of polysemy. In order to bypass the fallacies characterising the existing decompositional theories of word meaning, Falkum (3) shows how a conceptual atomist approach combined with the treatment of polysemy as a basically communicative occurrence yields an approach able to offer a descriptively valid account of this phenomenon. Working within the context of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, Falkum (265) explains that, since speakers possess "an independently motivated pragmatic interpretation system, automatically activated by verbal utterances, which is capable of rapidly generating new senses in contexts", a cognitive linguistic approach is better suited than a purely semantic one when it comes to the interpretation of polysemous words. Thus, when the senses of a word are conventionalised, and there exist more semantic encodings, they should be rendered as separate lexical entries, being homonyms, whilst in the other cases, where there exists a single encoded meaning that, in distinct contexts, can be interpreted slightly differently, the interpretations being derived or constructed through pragmatic adjustment during the on-line processing of the encoded meaning, the various senses should feature under one and the same lexical entry. The representation of the word **bank**'s senses will, if Falkum's theory is applied, look the same as the one devised according to Frath's approach: namely three separate entries for the homonyms meaning ***some kind of storage facility***, row of similar items and **pile of snow, sand or earth**, and for the first and last entry there will feature, as polysemes, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and, respectively 7, 8 and 9.

The two theories outlined above yield similar typologies that, on the one hand, might effectively be employed by lexicographers when drawing the distinction between polysemous lexical items and homonyms, and, on the other hand, can offer a more accurate description of how polysemous words and, respectively, homonyms may be represented in the mental lexicon. Both approaches have thus succeeded in steering clear of the problematic issues traditionally associated with decompositional theories of word meaning by treating polysemy

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cases as aspects of language meaning in use. Falkum views word meanings as unstructured atomic concepts and emphasises the essential contribution of pragmatics in the derivation of word senses, whilst Frath pertinently differentiates between referential and lexical polysemy, a crucial distinction that felicitously completes Falkum's account. In conclusion, since both Frath's reference-centred approach and Falkum's pragmatic-focused theory of polysemy rest on the mind-world relations that characterise the representation of polysemy, a combination of these two accounts could well provide an apposite framework for the interpretation of this controversial linguistic phenomenon.

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