



PREPOSITIONAL POLYSEMY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *Polysemous words give rise to problems in translation when they appear in decontextualized sentences, since there is no strongly biasing linguistic context that can remove their ambiguity and specify their meanings. The translator then has to resort to the context of situation to eliminate the ambiguity. However, polysemous words might give rise to problems even in the presence of the strongly biasing linguistic context, if the translator does not take the context into his consideration and stick to the core meaning of the word.*

Key words: *Polysemy, inflexion, mass-words, connotative, cases, aspect, meanings.*

That a single word form can be associated with several different meanings is a wellknown fact about language. Take the word run. Its meaning in the verb phrase run a half marathon is clearly different from the one it has in run some water, or, for that matter, in run on gasoline, run on empty, run a shop, run late, run away from responsibilities, run in the family, run for President, and so on. This phenomenon is described as polysemy, and it proliferates in natural languages. This is confirmed by the range of different senses (and/or uses) that any dictionary will have listed under a considerable number of its entries. On top of this comes the range of non-established senses that lexical items may be used to express on different occasions of use, which are contextually derived on the spot.

Polysemy is a semantic inherent in the fundamental structure of the language. All languages have polysemy on several levels. A wide-spread polysemy in English is rightly considered as one of its characteristic features conditioned by the peculiarities of its structure. The main source of the development of regular polysemy is the metaphoric and metonymic transference, which is commonplace and appears to be fundamental in living language.

Polysemic words make up a considerable part of the English vocabulary. Potential polysemy of words is the most fertile source of ambiguities in language.

In a limited number of cases two meanings of the same English words are differentiated by certain formal means, as, for instance, by spelling: born — borne, draft — draught; by word-order: ambassador extraordinary — extraordinary ambassador; by inflexion: hanged — hang. The distinctions between thing-words (countable) and mass-words (uncountable) is easy enough if we look at the idea that is expressed in each single instance. But in practical language the distinction is not





carried through in such a way that one and the same word stands always for one and the same idea [1; 112].

On the contrary, a great many words may in one connection stand for something countable and in the other for something uncountable. Compare:

1) Have an ice.

2) There is no ice on the pond. In the first example ice — any frozen dessert, especially one containing cream, as a water ice, sherbet or frappé. In the second example ice — water frozen icing frosting, any substance looking like ice.

In the vast majority of cases the context, linguistic or situational will narrow down all irrelevant senses [2; 97-98].

Words often signs not of one but of several things. The linguistic mechanism works naturally in many ways to prevent ambiguity and provide the clue to distinguish the necessary meaning. It's also important to take into consideration the significance of the context, linguistic or non-linguistic; many ambiguities are never noticed because the various possible meanings are excluded by the situation. Important observations in this area of the vocabulary have been made by contextual, distributional and transformational analysis [3; 185].

The problem of polysemy, in other words, the use of the same word in two or more distinct meanings is relevant to a number of other important questions. These are: the development of different types of synonyms, as a result of semantic transpositions of lexical units and homonymy.

Defining polysemy as a linguistic development, Charles Bally made distinction between its two aspects: first, when one linguistic sign has several meanings, and then, when meaning is expressed by several linguistic signs.

Words may grow in connotative power in accordance with the nature with the meanings connected with them. In the power of connotation lies the reserve force of language. Without this language would lose much of its expressivity and flexibility.

Polysemy more often occurs in generic words than in specific terms whose meanings are less subject to variation [4; 214-215].

The first to be mentioned here are the verbs to be, to do, to get, to have, to make, to set, to take. The semantic value and functional use of these polysemic verbs offers difficulties in language learning and lexicography. Compare, for illustration, the semantic group of verbs which, besides the verb to be in its locative meaning 'бути, заходитесь', includes at least such verbs as: to live, to stay, to dwell, to reside.

The verbs to live and to dwell, for instance, do not show any special contrast in this respect. In spoken English 'dwell' is now usually replaced by 'live'. The verb to reside is stylistically marked member of the synonymic group characterized by its use in formal English.

The cases of polysemy that we have looked at so far have been open-class lexical items (nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs). However, within the cognitive linguistics tradition, the main focus of research on polysemy has been closed-class





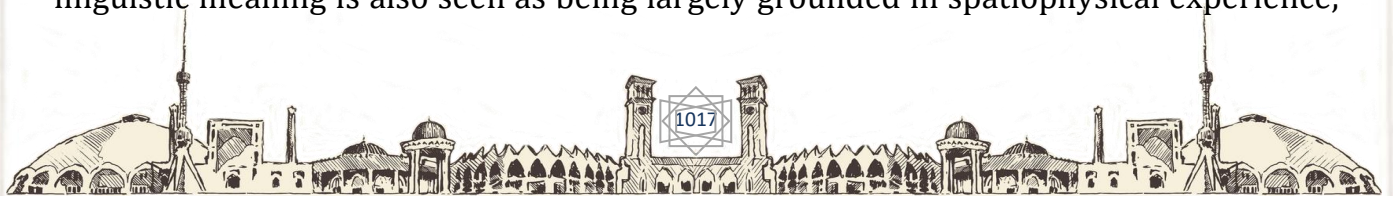
lexical items, specifically prepositions (among many others, Lakoff 1987; Brugman 1988; Brugman and Lakoff 1988; Kreitzer 1997; Tyler and Evans 2003; Evans 2009). There has been little, if any, work on prepositions within the relevance theory framework. However, we might expect the underdeterminacy issue to be even more acutely manifested in the case of such closed-class items (which are few in number and new items cannot usually be added), than in the case of the open-class items we have discussed so far. Since speakers have a very limited set of linguistic resources at hand for expressing a very large (virtually unlimited) set of spatial relations (in addition to the set of abstract relations that they are used to express), pragmatic inference must presumably play a crucial role in the comprehension of prepositional expressions.

Two questions in particular arise from this: First, given the analysis of the polysemy of open-class items as the outcome of an inferential process of *ad hoc* concept construction, can the (presumably massive) underdeterminacy relation that exists between the class of prepositions and the spatial and abstract relations that can be expressed by use of them be resolved in terms of the same type of pragmatic process?

Second, given the three types of linguistic encodings specified in section above (procedural meanings, pro-concepts, full-fledged concepts), what do prepositions encode? While it seems clear that their encodings are in some way conceptual (they are constituents of conceptual representations and, in most cases at least, they affect the truth-conditions of utterances in which they occur), they seem to be much more schematic and abstract than the conceptual representations encoded by lexical items such as *flu*, *wizard*, *rectangular*, *bake*, etc., which, on this account, are claimed to encode full-fledged concepts. In this respect, prepositions have more the flavour of so-called pro-concepts, i.e. schematic concepts that need to be pragmatically fleshed out into full concepts.

As the issue of prepositional meaning could easily serve as the topic of a whole thesis, I will obviously not be able to do more than scratch the surface of it here. In the rest of this section, I will (briefly) consider the 'Principled Polysemy' approach to prepositional polysemy proposed by Tyler and Evans (2001, 2003). This approach, although different from the relevance-theoretic position in important ways, shares the assumption that the constructive role played by pragmatic inference in giving rise to polysemy must be built into an account of the phenomenon. I will end the section with a tentative suggestion for a direction that a relevance-theoretic analysis of prepositional meaning might take.

A reason for the interest in prepositions taken by cognitive linguistics is that they are considered particularly clear illustrations of the so-called 'embodiment thesis' (Lakoff 1999). This is the claim that meaning is grounded in our bodily experiences and interactions with the world, which allows us to conceptualize abstract areas of experience in terms of the familiar and concrete [5; 391]. As a consequence, linguistic meaning is also seen as being largely grounded in spatiophysical experience,





of which prepositions, expressing spatial relations that give rise to a range of non-spatial abstract senses, are prime examples. The paradigmatic example of prepositional polysemy, *over*, repeated in below:

- a. The bird flew *over* the house. ('above and across')
- b. The painting is *over* the couch. ('above')
- c. The truck ran *over* the rabbit. ('across')
- d. Sarah lives *over* the hill. ('on the other side of')
- e. Mary nailed a board *over* the hole in the ceiling. ('covering')
- f. I will read the papers *over* the weekend. ('temporal')
- g. John has a strange power *over* Mary. ('control')

As we saw in Chapter 2, Brugman (Lakoff 1988) and Lakoff (1987) analysed *over* as a radial category composed of a range of distinct but related senses organised around a prototypical, or central sense (which, in their view, was the 'above and across' sense) in a lexical network structure. His approach provided a full specification of the range of possible senses of *over*, all of which were taken to be stored in the long-term semantic memory of speakers.

In the conclusion, I can say that the problem of polysemy may cause difficulties during the translation or communication. To overcome them pupils need to see and practice words in context, since it is the context that allows them to understand the meaning of the word. The problem of polysemy is mainly the problem of interrelation and interdependence of various meanings of the same word.

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