

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN POLYSEMY

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Abstract: *Polysemy, the phenomenon whereby a linguistic unit exhibits multiple distinct yet related meanings, has always been a topic of great interest for both lexical semanticists and lexicographers. The primary aim of this paper is to investigate what role context plays in the interpretation of the different senses of polysemous lexical items.*

Keywords: context, homonymy, lexical semantics, polysemy, vagueness

1. Introduction

Being a very common feature of any language and a central problem in the study and description in natural language, polysemy or “the multiplicity of meaning of words” poses special problems both for lexical semanticists and lexicographers. 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 and Leacock 2000:1).

One puzzling question that 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 1977:550-552, Lyons 1981:43-47, Lipka 1992:135-39, Lyons 1995:54-60, etc.), homonymy refers to etymologically unrelated words that happen to have the same pronunciation and/or spelling.

Consider the word *ear* with the meanings “organ of hearing” and “head of a corn”, which are distinguished as homonyms because they were formally distinct in Old English and thus have a different etymology: OE. *ĕare* = organ of hearing; OE. *ĕar* = spike of corn (Onions 1966:297). Consequently, they should be treated as two separate words in dictionaries, which is not always the case. It is clearly seen in its treatment by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009:531), in which these two meanings are given under one headword:

- ear 1. PART OF YOUR BODY one of the organs on either side of your head that you hear with: *She tucked her hair behind her ears.*
2. GRAIN the top part of the plant such as wheat that produces grain: *an ear of corn*

In contrast to homonyms, polysemes are etymologically and therefore semantically related, and typically originate from metaphoric usage. Consider words like *body*, related to OE *bodig* (Onions 1966:104). Some of its meanings given in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009:172-173) are as follows:

1. PEOPLE/ANIMALS the physical structure of a person or animal
2. DEAD PERSON the dead body of a person
3. GROUP a group of people who work together to do a particular job
4. MIDDLE PART the central part of a person or animal's body, not including the head, arms, legs, or wings
5. VEHICLE the main structure of a vehicle not including the engine, wheels, etc.
6. TASTE if food or an alcoholic drink has a body, it has a strong FLAVOUR

Although it has a range of distinct meanings, these are related both etymologically and semantically.

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 (Leech 1981:227-229, Lyons 1981:43-47 and Lyons 1995:54-60, etc.). It can be illustrated by the verb “*pass*” with its two meanings: “go past” and “give”, which are etymologically related to OF. *passare* (Onions 1966:655).

Furthermore, as noted by Lyons (1977:551-552, 1981:45), the borderline 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. Relatedness of meaning appears to be a matter of degree. Thus the native speaker's intuitions of 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. A much quoted example is the homonymous *sole*: sole 1 (bottom of the foot/she) and sole 2 (kind of fish). These two distinct meanings are related to F. *sole*, L. *solea* sandal, sill, formed on *solum* bottom, pavement, sole of the foot, with the fish being named so because of its shape (Onions 1966:844).

Homonymy and polysemy often give rise to ambiguity, and context is highly relevant to disambiguate the meaning of utterances. Consider the following example in which the two phenomena appear together (Lyons 1977:397): *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” (“harbour” related to OE. *port* - L. *portus*) or “port” (“a strong, sweet Portuguese wine”, short for Oporto wine), is being used (Onions 1966:697-8) and also which sense of the polysemous verb “pass” (“go past” or “give”) (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2009:1271) is intended.

In recognition of the crucial role that context can play in the interpretation of the multiple meaning of some words, linguists, such as Tuggy (1993), Geeraerts (1993), Ravin and Leacock (2000), Croft and Cruse (2004), Evans and Green (2006), etc. provide a cognitive perspective on the traditional problem of polysemy. They argue that besides homonymy vs. polysemy, a second important distinction has to be made, i.e. between “polysemy” and “indeterminacy”, sometimes referred to as “vagueness”, which means that word meaning is the result of contextual specification. This distinction is at the core of semantic theory as it defines the relation between the semantics of linguistic expressions and the extralinguistic entities to which the expressions refer (Ravin and Leacock 2000:3).

The primary aim of this paper is to highlight the role of context in exploring the meaning of polysemous words and what types of contextual factors affect the nature of polysemy.

2. The Importance of Context for Polysemy

Although some traditional linguists, such as Lyons (1981:44, 1995:55), realized the context-dependence of homonymy and polysemy, context played a surprisingly small role in their lexical semantics. Nevertheless, context can alter the meanings of the words found in it. In other words, word meanings are subject to extralinguistic factors. The fact that context affects the nature of polysemy in several ways is clearly shown by the highly polysemous lexical item *thing*. It has 38 meanings given in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009:1832-33), some of which are as follows:

That’s a terrible <i>thing</i> to say.	(idea)
What’s that red <i>thing</i> ?	(object)
Jim began to unpack his <i>things</i> .	(clothes)
He kept his gardening <i>things</i> in the shed.	(equipment)
<i>Things</i> could be worse.	(situation)
The baby is a nice little <i>thing</i> .	(person)

Even these few examples show that the expression *thing* could be used to refer to almost any entity (an object, an idea, a situation and a person, etc.), yet it seems unlikely that semantic memory links this expression to all the possible entities that it could refer to. Instead, the meaning of this expression is fully specified by context.

As mentioned above, in more recent approaches, such a phenomenon is called “vagueness” or “indeterminacy” (Tuggy 1993, Ravin and Leacock 2000, Croft and Cruse 2004, Evans and Green 2006). Thus these mainly cognitive lexical semanticists distinguish between polysemy (distinct senses stored in semantic memory) and vagueness (meaning “filled in” by context) (Evans and Green 2006:341).

Croft and Cruse (2004:116-138) and Evans and Green (2006:352-355) refer to a number of ways in which context affects the nature of polysemy, such as usage context, sentential context and knowledge context.

2.1 Usage Context

In some cases the usage context influences the meaning of a lexical item. Croft and Cruse (2004:126) and Evans and Green (2006:353) refer to it as a sub-sense or microsense of a lexical item. A subsense is “a distinct word meaning that appears to be motivated by usage context: the specific situational context in which the word occurs” (Evans and Green 2006:53).

Consider how the lexical item *knife* is understood in the following contexts

(*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2009:921):

- (1) John called the waiter over to his table and complained that he had not been given a knife and fork. (cutlery knife)
- (2) The attacker threatened the couple with a *knife*. (flick knife)
- (3) He used a sharp *knife* to cut the meat into thin slices. (carving knife)
- (4) The boy had a *knife* with multiple blades and additional tools. (penknife)
- (5) Kelly was about to go under the *knife* when the surgeon stopped everything. (surgeon’s knife= scalpel)
- (6) You don’t have to mix the paint on your palette: putting different shades on the *knife* gives a more interesting effect. (palette knife)
- (7) He used a *knife* to open his envelopes. (paper knife)
- (8) He went to a craft shop to buy some replacement blades for his *knife*. (craft knife)
- (9) He put his *knife* back into its sheath. (sheath knife)

The following situation also illustrates a context-specific sub-sense of the lexical item *knife* (Croft and Cruse 2004:128, Evans and Green 2006:353):

(10) Mother: Haven't you got a knife, Billy?

Billy (at table, fingering his meat: has penknife in his pocket, but no knife of the appropriate type)

No.

Although Billy does have a knife (a penknife), the context (sitting at the table) stipulates that it is not a knife of the appropriate kind, that is, not a cutlery knife.

However, in certain situations the distinct subsenses CUTLERY KNIFE and PENKNIFE disappear:

(11) The drawer was filled with *knives* of various sorts.

This sentence could appropriately be used to describe a drawer that contained a cutlery knife, a penknife, a surgeon's knife, a flick knife, a paper knife, a craft knife, a sheath knife, and so on. In other words, the example in (11) appeals to a unified meaning of knife in which the contextually induced subsenses disappear. This demonstrates that subsenses do not qualify as fully distinct senses because they require specific kinds of context in order to induce them. Hence, the polysemy associated with the lexical item appears to be heavily dependent upon usage context.

Another polysemous lexical item that justifies the role of usage context usage in identifying its specific subsense is *card*. Consider its following subsenses as they are used in different situations (*Longman Dictionary of contemporary English* 2009:240-241):

(12) Employees must show their *card* at the gate. (information)

(13) Lost and stolen *cards* must be reported immediately at the bank. (money)

(14) I sent her a *card* to her birthday. (greetings)

(15) I sent you a *card* from Madrid where I was on holiday. (holiday)

(16) Let's play cards. There are fifty two *cards* in a set. (game)

(17) My name's Adam Carver. Here's my *card*. (business)

These can be contrasted with the reading of *card* that appears in (18), which is a hyperonymic reading of (12)-(17), in which the context-dependent subsenses of *card* above disappear:

(18) The box was full of *cards* of various sorts.

2.2 Sentential Context

In other cases a particular sense of a lexical item, which is called a “facet” (Croft and Cruse 2004:116, Evans and Green 2006:354), is due to the part-whole structure of an entity selected by a specific sentential context. Coined by Croft and Cruse (2004:116), facets are distinguishable components of a global whole, but they are not capable of being subsumed under a hypernym.

As pointed out by Evans and Green (2006:354), similarly to subsenses, facets are also context dependent because the distinctions between them only arise in certain sentential contexts. For example, consider the lexical item *book*. By virtue of its structure, the concept BOOK consists of both TEXT (the informational content of a book) and TOME (the physical entity consisting of pages and binding). These two meanings are facets rather than subsenses because they relate to the intrinsic structure and organisation of books in general rather than relating to contexts of use. However, these facets only become apparent in certain sentential contexts. Consider the following examples in (19):

- (19) a. That book is really thick.
- b. That book is really interesting.

The example in (19a) refers to the TOME facet of book while (19b) refers to the TEXT facet. In Evans and Green’s view (2006:354), it is sentential context (the presence of the expressions *thick* and *interesting*) rather than the context of use that induces a particular facet. However, just with subsenses, the distinction between facets can disappear in certain contexts:

- (20) Although it’s an expensive book, it’s well worth reading.

In this example, while price (it’s an expensive book) relates to the TOME facet, the fact that the book is interesting (it’s well worth reading) relates to the TEXT facet. The fact that the example in (20) coordinates these two facets without the difference in meaning being marked in any way suggests that the distinction between the facets disappears in this context. In this example, the facets combine to form a unified meaning of *book* that includes both TEXT and TOME.

One might be tempted to say that the facets of book are separate senses, related to separate concepts. However, as illustrated by (20) there exists a global sense “book”, corresponding to the global concept (BOOK, which represents the unification of the two facets), and it justifies the claim that the facets do not have the full status of lexical senses. This must be the reason why dictionaries don’t usually give two separate entries for the facets of *book*:

book 1 - a set of printed pages that are held together in a cover so that you can read them. *I've just started reading a book by Graham Greene.* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2009:177)

book 1- a number of pieces of paper, usually with words printed on them, which are fastened together and fixed inside a cover of stronger paper or cardboard. Books contain information, stories, or poetry. *His eighth book came out earlier this year and was an instant best seller.* (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary 1995:179)

Another example of word with facets is *bank* (in the “financial” sense), which gives the following readings (Croft and Cruse 2004:116):

- (21) a. The bank was blown up. (PREMISES)
- b. It's a friendly bank. (PERSONNEL)
- c. The bank was founded in 1597. (INSTITUTION)

On the basis of the above sentences we might say that the word *bank* has three facets. As noted by Croft and Cruse, facets are not generally considered to represent polysemy in the traditional sense; for instance, they are rarely given separate definitions in dictionaries. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009:116) makes a distinction between the following two meanings *bank* under the same entry:

bank 1 PLACE FOR MONEY. a) a business that keeps and lends money and provides other financial services: *We have very little money in the bank.* b) a local office of a bank: *I have to go to the bank at lunch time.*

The *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995:117) also distinguishes between the same meanings of *bank*:

- bank 1 an institution where people or businesses can keep their money (INSTITUTION)
- bank 2 a building where a bank offers its services. (BUILDING)

As is evident from the above definitions, the PERSONNEL facet of *bank* is missing from both dictionaries, which justifies the fact that this meaning is induced by the adjective *friendly* in the sentence.

The items in (22) illustrate cases of words possessing facets analogous to those of *book* or *bank* (Croft and Cruse 2004: 116-117):

- (22) a. letter: a crumpled letter

- a moving letter
- b. film
 - a 16mm film
 - a sad film
- c. CD
 - an indestructible CD
 - a beautiful CD

2.3 Knowledge Context

The third kind of context is knowledge context, which relates to “encyclopaedic knowledge” rather than context of use or sentential context. The fact that each individual has different experiences entails that each individual also has different mental representations relating to their experience of particular entities. This creates an encyclopaedic knowledge context that can influence how words are interpreted (Evans and Green 2006:355). Croft and Cruse (2004:137) call this phenomenon “ways of seeing”, which mean different ways of looking at the same thing. The authors propose the following ways of seeing (WOS):

- the part-whole WOS: views an entity as a whole with parts (e.g. a horse, as viewed by a vet)
- the kind WOS: views an entity as a kind among other kinds (e.g. a horse as viewed by a zoologist)
- the functional WOS: views an entity in terms of interactions with other entities (e.g. a horse viewed by a jockey)
- the life-history WOS: views an entity in terms of its life-history, especially its coming into being (e.g. a book as viewed by an author or publisher)

To justify this, Croft and Cruse (2004:138) show that the expression *an expensive hotel* can be interpreted in three different ways depending upon different “ways of seeing”:

(23) *an expensive hotel*

- “kind” way of seeing: “a hotel that is/was expensive to buy”
- “functional” way of seeing: “a hotel that is expensive to stay at”
- “life-history” way of seeing: “a hotel that is/was expensive to build”

Consider some other examples:

(24) *an old friend*

- “kind” way of seeing: “a friend who is not young”
- “life-history” way of seeing: “a friend who someone has known for a very long time”

(25) *a delightful house*

- “part-whole” way of seeing: “a house that is delightful to look at (due to the harmonious distribution of its parts)”
- “functional” way of seeing: “a house that is delightful to live in”

As we have seen above, context can affect our interpretation of a lexical item in different ways.

3. Conclusions

As is demonstrated by the foregoing discussion, polysemy has always been a topic of great interest for both semanticists and lexicographers. In traditional approaches (Leech 1981, Lipka 1992 and Lyons 1977, 1981, 1995, etc.), polysemy is often discussed with homonymy. If two words have either etymologically different meanings or semantically unrelated meanings, they are regarded as homonyms. In contrast, if the meanings concerned are related in some way, generally by metaphorical extension, they are considered to be polysemous, i.e. one single word having distinct senses. However, while some of the senses count as distinct, established senses which are retrieved from the mental lexicon, others are construed at the moment of use. Although traditional lexical semanticists also refer to the importance of context in the interpretation of the meaning of polysemous words, context has not been given much attention in those studies.

The more recent approach to polysemy represented by mainly cognitive lexical semanticists, such as Tuggy (1993), Geeraerts (1993), Ravin and Leacock (2000), Croft and Cruse (2004) and Evans and Green (2006), etc. emphasises the fact that word meanings are subject to context. Thus besides the distinction of homonymy and polysemy, they argue that a second distinction has to be made, i.e. between polysemy and vagueness. In their view, some senses of polysemous words are stored in semantic memory while others are said to be vague, i.e. their meanings are inferred on-line as a result of contextual information. As is discussed above, the contextual factors that play a role in determining word meaning include the situation in which an expression is used, the sentence in which an expression occurs and/or the experience of particular entities each individual has.

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