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**SOME REMARKS ON FOR AND AGAINST
POLYSEMY IN POLISH COGNITIVE STUDIES**

Abstract: In the article, we ask a question of the role of polysemy in cognitive ethnolinguistic research identified here with the so-called Polish Cognitive Studies (after Tabakowska 2013). We first place polysemy in the context of the homonymy-polysemy dilemma and, then, attempt to establish to what degree polysemy can still be found of use and help in actual research. As we conclude, although polysemy features high on the agenda of the Polish Cognitive Studies circle, it happens at times to be found of limiting application, giving way to the denotation-connotation distinction.

Keywords: polysemy, homonymy, cognitive ethnolinguistics, denotation, connotation.

Introduction

Our main objective is to identify the place and the role of polysemy as an explanatory mechanism of linguistic phenomena in some of the latest cognitively-oriented ethnolinguistic contributions that have appeared either within the framework of or in relation to what Tabakowska (2013) calls “Polish Cognitive Studies” (PCS), a project run by Bartmiński and his collaborators. The choice of the research circle has to do with the fact that, as Tabakowska (2013:321) argues, PCS is *an alternative and at the same time a welcome complement* to

the American and European schools of cognitive linguistics that have *developed separately and almost independently*. If so, as a distinct model of language and linguistic communication, with its own actual and potential applications and methodological implications, PCS requires a separate treatment, often in comparison to, if not just in contrast to, Langacker's cognitive grammar, Layoff's conceptual metaphor, Turner's conceptual blending, and other cognitively-oriented methodologies.

We, thus, assume that with the development of cognitive-functional paradigms, PCS included, the role of systemic lexical semantics has lost most of its structural and formal appeal, and this alone poses a question of, among many other things, the present status of polysemy, a structural construct in its traditional design that is believed to capture the correspondences between related senses of one and the same lexeme, or, as Langacker (2008:240) sees it, *a family of related senses*.

The question of polysemy appears especially pending in the light of the fact that cognitivists typically reject any sensible compromise, or reconciliation, between systemic and cognitive-functional approaches to meaning. Take this from Langacker (2010: 224; emphasis added):

The meaning of a lexical item [...] is not revealingly described just by indicating the systemic relations it bears to others (i.e. its participation in relationships of antonymy, hyponymy, and so on). At least as important – and arguably more fundamental – is the task of providing a positive characterization in terms of conceptual content and construal. Without a specification of content, a system of oppositions is just an empty shell.

What Langacker specifically sees as an alternative to the old (systemic) credo of meaning as sense relation is the new (cognitive) credo of meaning as conceptualization:

Conceptualization is broadly defined to encompass any facet of mental experience. It is understood as subsuming (i) both novel and established conceptions; (ii) not just “intellectual” notions, but sensory, motor, and emotive experience as well; (iii) apprehension of the physical, linguistic, social, and cultural context; and (iv) conceptions that develop and unfold through processing time (rather than being simultaneously manifested). (Langacker 2008:2-3)

It is easy to see now why the idea of sense relations, as understood in mainstream linguistics, must be rejected: subjected to the constant mental process of emerging, or acquiring shape, meaning can hardly be identified with fixed relations reflecting frozen states of the synchronic linguistic system.

Indeed, as the name suggests, lexical semantics deals with the meaning of lexemes.¹ A lexeme, in its turn, is a generalization, an abstraction, a base form for all morphological variants of one and the same word abstracted from all its occurrences. Quite like a phoneme, then, a lexeme is void of a speaker's age, sex, gender, attitude, connotation, real-world association, or experience grounding, its primary meaning being the extra-contextual sense it shows in contrastive distinctions with the other lexemes it is related to. To quote a classic:

By the sense of a word we mean its place in a system of relationships which it contracts with other words in the vocabulary. [...] The sense of a lexical item may be defined to be, not only dependent upon, but identical with, the set of relations which hold between the item in question and other items in the same lexical system. (Lyons 1968: 427 and 443; emphasis added)

This, naturally, invites systemic linguistics, which is where abstractions called lexemes are believed to relate to each other, and, thus, constitute an autonomous system of relations typically called 'synonymy', 'antonymy', 'hyponymy', 'homonymy', 'polysemy', etc. In a way, then, doing lexical semantics is (i) to examine the intra-systemic correspondences between lexemes, (ii) identify the senses of lexemes in terms of necessary and sufficient attributes, and (iii) decide which of the sense relations they actually exemplify. (For more in a specific research context, see Łozowski 2014.)

Now, against this background, if polysemy is a traditionally-recognized sense relation, is there any place for it in cognitive linguistic research at all, especially in cognitively-oriented ethnolinguistics? After all, cognitive ethnolinguists aim at reconstructing the linguistic worldview, a language-encoded interpretation of

¹ As can be expected, there is a fair amount of confusion and disagreement as to whether the actual object of investigation in lexical semantics is lexemes, rather than words. To mention the relatively recent publications on general semantics, even within the same formally- and structurally-oriented tradition, some principally argue for the term *lexeme* (e.g., Murphy 2010:5), while others do well without it (e.g. Kearns 2011, or Hurford et al. 2007, or Cann et al. 2009 where the term *lexeme* features just twice, with sense relations claimed to hold between words, not lexemes). Those that do not seem to take any clear position and aim at no specific theory in their analysis either identify *lexemes* with *semantic words* (Saed 2008), or do make a distinction between *word forms* and *lexemes* (Riemer 2010, Cruse 2011:76), or use just *words* in all contexts (Elbourne 2011). What adds to the confusion is that although cognitive semantics holds that *grammatical constructions [...] are themselves inherently meaningful, independently of the content words that fill them* (Evans and Green 2006:215), the very term *lexeme* does survive well, yet in a quite different sense. For example, in his brief discussion of the meaning of *glass*, Langacker (2008:48-50) embraces the idea that "a lexeme not only gives access to a set of domains, but does so preferentially, making some especially likely to be activated," which makes him conclude that "strictly speaking, a lexeme is never used twice with exactly the same meaning." Naturally, that possibility is ruled out in (systemic) sense-relation semantics, a lexeme being an abstraction frozen in its form and its meaning.

reality, where same forms notoriously exemplify a number of related shades of meaning. (See, for example, some of the most recent studies on the concepts of “the people” in Underhill 2013, of “home” in Bułat-Silva 2014, of “dobry” ‘being good’ in Puzynina 2014, or of “house/home” of Saharan Tuaregs in Jackowska-Uwadizu 2014.)

The homonymy-polysemy dilemma

Before we try to answer this question, let us begin with a more general remark having to do with the so-called homonymy-polysemy dilemma (cf. Jaszczolt 2002, among many others). Simply, it is truly convenient and methodologically desirable to approach polysemy in contrast to homonymy. The reason seems to be that the concepts of homonymy and polysemy do indeed prove to be the bone of contention of modern linguistics. With regard to the classification of lexical (sense) relations alone, Cann et al. (2009:6) speak of only *three basic types of sense relations: synonymy, hyponymy, and antonymy*, with no single mention of homonymy and polysemy, Riemer (2010:Ch.5) allows for two more, meronymy and taxonomy, homonymy and polysemy being called a *situation*, whereas Saeed’s (2008:Ch.3) classification includes as many as 8 kinds of relations, homonymy and polysemy included. Concomitantly, each of these authors assumes a different theoretical position on language and linguistics, the homonymy/polysemy dilemma having a direct bearing on meaning-related linguistic inquiries in general.

This also brings us to the observation that functionally-oriented linguists have shifted their research priorities from homonymy to polysemy. For example, Langacker (1987:387) remarks that:

[...] homonymy represents a limiting case, where the comparison of two identically symbolized concepts reveals no similarity that is salient or plausible enough to establish a categorization achieving unit status. For a speaker who fails to notice any special resemblance among the meanings of BILL (proper name; request for payment; protrusion on a bird, cap, or platypus), the semantic units do not unite to form a network and are connected only via their common symbolic correspondent.

Homonymy is then ascribed with the accidental and peripheral character in favour of variable and gradable cognitive associations that enable humans to expand the lexical boundaries to the extent of subtly-structured multi-polysemous units. This corresponds to Langacker’s (2008:30) conviction expressed more recently that *a single abstract meaning does not fully describe a lexical item’s established semantic value. Such a meaning should always be sought, and - if found - incorporated in the polysemy network.*

Most of the time this polysemy network happens to be postulated at the expense of homonymy. To give yet another example from Langacker (2008:87), it makes sense to ask whether the conditional *if* and the interrogative *if* can anyhow be seen as semantically related. In terms of their respective grammatical functions, the two must be taken as independent and unrelated expressions. In other words, the *if* occurring in conditional clauses (*If it rains we'll stay home*) and the *if* occurring in interrogative clauses (*I wonder if it will rain*) have nothing to do with each other semantically. Yet, as Langacker argues, *supporting a claim of polysemy is the fact that a single form is used in both ways in numerous other languages (e.g. French); [w]ere this merely a case of accidental homonymy, it should not be prevalent cross-linguistically.*

In that respect, our own conviction accords also with what is generally now believed to be the default standpoint in functional linguistics on the polysemy/homonymy issue. As Traugott and Dasher's (2002:14-16) words:

[...] homonymy should be postulated only when there is no clear semantic relation between the meanings of a phonological string, that is, only when there is [...] "contrastive ambiguity". [...] For example, still "without motion, quietly" is no longer associated with still in its temporal sense of "without interruption", or in its concessive sense of "however". [...] Our view is that polysemy is [...] central to a theory of semantics and semantic change. It arises out of processes of invited inferencing.

Once this "inferencing" is given its continuous historical dimension, the pivotal role of polysemy can hardly be overemphasized.

Polysemy in PCS: for and against

While polysemy may be the bone of contention of modern linguistics as such, thus capturing the distinction into structurally- and functionally-oriented paradigms, it also serves the purposes of telling apart related, yet divergent, conceptions within the shared (cognitive) methodology. Confronting Bartmiński's and Langacker's models of cognitive definitions, Mierzwińska-Hajnos (2013) notices that, however cognitively-oriented in his research, Bartmiński is not really prepared to make use of polysemy while offering the definitions of such terms as Polish *fiołek* 'violet', *banan* 'banana', or English *pansy*. Although the secondary meanings of these three can easily be seen as extended applications of the primary ones – respectively, *fiołek* 'violet' ~ 'the tip of a fox's tail', *banan* 'banana' ~ 'a type of vehicle', and *pansy* 'a kind of flower' ~ 'effeminate homosexual', Bartmiński does not make use of polysemy, but explains the meaning extension here in terms of the denotation/connotation distinction. This results in the omission of the secondary (extended) meanings from the cognitive definitions being postulated. In a way, then, instead

of polysemous categories, we have two *fiołek*, *banan*, and *pansy* forms, one being a lexicographic entity and, thus, a lexeme proper, and the other one being merely a matter of perspective, contextualization, and a point of view. As Mierzwińska-Hajnos (2013:397) concludes, *such an attitude makes the cognitive definition in Bartmiński's sense more structural and less flexible and [less] encyclopedic in character*.

Naturally, as he writes elsewhere, Bartmiński has got his reasons why he finds the denotation/connotation distinction enough of explanatory powers to do without polysemy:

I am not interested here in polysemy, in which case systematic differences in a lexeme's meaning (but above all in its denotation) motivate those in categorisation: kamień 'stone', 'figure in a game' or 'unit of weight': kania 'kite' (bird) or 'parasol mushroom', kret 'mole' or 'mole plough', etc. Rather, I am focusing on names with the same denotation but different connotations, depending on different viewpoints and different categorisations, adjusted to the viewpoints. (Bartmiński 2009:87; emphasis added)

In other words, Polish *kania* can mean a bird as much as a kind of mushroom and this *is* a matter of different categorizations only because there are different denotata behind. Similarly, in *żuraw* 'crane' and 'shadoof' or in *baran* 'ram' and 'idiot', we find different meanings because the cognitive structures of the respective concepts 'bird', 'mechanical device' and 'human being' are quite divergent. Yet, the case of *człowiek* 'human being' is different – for Bartmiński, the difference between *człowiek* 'social creature' and *człowiek* 'living organism' does not mark any difference in denotation and, thus, qualifies to be a difference in profiling, and not in meaning. That, as a cognitivist, Bartmiński favours a denotatively-oriented account rather than a polysemy-driven explanation should be noted as an interesting methodological practice that needs to be set against his overall conception of meaning.

Namely, for Bartmiński, the question of polysemy does indeed relate to the problem of profiling: if a given expression can be ascribed to different profiles, there is a temptation to assume that each of these profiles stands for a separate meaning of that expression, which would in effect amount to Langacker's "family of related senses". However, Bartmiński rejects that possibility and finds support in

[...] the domain of proper names, which are said to denote rather than mean, but which can be analysed in terms of profiling. For proper names are accompanied by a 'semantic correlate' which can be variously profiled: a reference to X may concern different aspect of X, depending on the speakers' attitudes and intentions. [This includes, for example, geographical names or the names of people, such as Napoleon, Kosciuszko etc.] The names denote what they do and no-one doubts how

to use them, but the associations they evoke – which do not correspond to meaning as traditionally understood – are strongly diversified at the level of what I described as subjectively and culturally determined profiles. (Bartmiński 2009:92)

Although the case of proper names is pretty straightforward – they can be profiled differently according to a number of categorizing factors, such as, for example, national stereotypes, it is difficult to see why Bartmiński should expect the same of any other kind of vocabulary.

What adds to the confusion is precisely a different treatment of *kania* as a bird and as a mushroom or *baran* as an animal and as a person on the one hand and *człowiek* as a social creature and as a biological organism on the other hand. Still worse, Bartmiński (2009:93) motivates the difference with how the word *as* functions in relation to the head: in ‘*kania*’ and ‘*baran*’, *the expression as is assigned to the head in the formal supposition (i.e. the latter is treated as a word), [whereas in ‘człowiek’] the head is taken in the material supposition, as a concept rather than a name.* This all makes Bartmiński (2009:93) claim that as long as we have different profiles, we do have the same meaning: *different profiles are not different meanings: they are ways of organising the semantic content within meanings.* If so, the role of polysemy happens to be markedly diminished in favour of the traditional denotation/connotation distinction, a solution that is much of a surprise if it comes from a cognitive linguist.²

To complete our selective survey, let us report on yet another piece of cognitive ethnolinguistic research, this time as evidence of the growing importance of polysemy as an explanation factor. In Piekarczyk (2013), semantic relatedness (polysemy) happens to be postulated despite clear structural/distributional divergence. In her contribution, Piekarczyk adopts an onomasiological approach in order to investigate the concepts of ORAL TEXT and WRITTEN TEXT, or, more

² Equally puzzling and revealing is Palmer’s (in print) account of the *ka-__-an* construction in Tagalog-English data. (Naturally, Palmer is not part of the PCS circle and is better known for championing cultural linguistics, rather than cognitive ethnolinguistics, but has recently related to the PCS research, pointing out both points of contact and points of departure between the two, as he says, “sister disciplines”.) Although he distinguishes 5 different senses behind the compound affix construction *ka-__-an* (PLACE, ABSTRACT QUALITY1, ABSTRACT QUALITY2: EXPERIENTIAL STATES, CUSTOM - COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY, and COLLECTIONS: MATERIAL, TOOLS, ASSEMBLED ITEM) and attempts the explanation of the category structure in terms of the prototype theory, he does not present the emerging network of senses in terms of polysemy. It is only by implication that we can safely assume that the mechanism at work is that of polysemy, which comes with Palmer’s explaining the Tagalog-English *ka-__-an* construction as a case of metonymy. After all, one could remember Langacker’s (2008:240) statements that “metonymy is a regular source of polysemy, which results when a particular metonymic usage becomes entrenched and conventionalized”, as in the case of *church* that can profile either a building used for religious meetings or a religious organization that meets in such buildings: *They built a new church just out of town* versus *The church he belongs to has very odd beliefs.*

precisely, to find out what are the portraits or images of oral and written text, as entrenched in the Polish language. In other words, as oral and written text are two fundamental forms of human communication, she finds it interesting to investigate how these forms are portrayed through language and what kinds of judgments about them are linguistically encoded.

When she comes to discuss *the relationship between written text and its sender plus receiver*, she concludes that the relationship is *complex and difficult to grasp* (p. 256), which is what she ascribes to the polysemy of the verbs of writing, especially *pisać* ‘write.’ In what follows, she presents four *pisać* forms, each having a different set of structural constraints, or requirements.

In its basic meaning, i.e. when it denotes the action of writing graphic symbols, *pisać1* requires only one personal complementation, as well as an indication of the product of the action, the instrument, and the writing surface. The structural/syntagmatic limitations of *pisać1* can be presented as follows – this and other figures adapted from Piekarczyk (2013:256-258):

X {*pisze1* ‘is writing’} } *czym* ‘with what’ // *w/na czym* ‘in/on what’ } *na czym* ‘on what’ // *w czym* ‘in what’ // *po czym* ‘over what’

This structure looks different when *pisać* is meant to be a verb of text production, that is in the sense of *tworzyć coś* ‘create, compose something’:

X {*pisze2* ‘is writing’} *coś* ‘something’ } *dla...* ‘for’... // *do...* ‘to/for’... // *na...* ‘for’...

This time *pisać2* opens three argument positions. As Piekarczyk (2013:257) explains:

*Because these verbs [like *pisać2*] denote an action whose end product is a communicative text and because the second argument [i.e. *coś* ‘something’, ‘a product’] is realized only by the name of that product (the name of the text or its part), the first personal argument is identified with the sender of the message. However, the third argument need not be the receiver; for its manifestations may be such expressions as *do druku* ‘for publication,’ *do gazety* ‘for/to a newspaper,’ *na konferencję* ‘for a conference.’*

The set of structural requirements is still different in the case of *pisać3* ‘preserve something in writing’, as in *zapisać* ‘write down,’ *notować* ‘take notes,’ *protokolować* ‘take minutes.’ Sentences with these verbs inform about the texts that are created not in order to communicate something, but in order to preserve what has been communicated orally. In other words, the forms in question here *point to texts that have arisen as a result of speech (or of thought) being transferred into*

the written form (Piekarczyk 2013:257). Finally, Piekarczyk presents the following structure of *pisać* used in the sense of ‘inform/communicate about something’:

X {*pisze* ‘is writing’} Y-owi/do Y-ka ‘Y-DAT/to Y-GEN’} *że.../żeby...* that.../in order to... OR *na o + loc* on/over} W loc

In Piekarczyk’s words (2013:258), *the left-hand-side argument denotes the text’s sender, the second personal argument denotes its receiver, and the non-personal arguments denote the text itself and the medium of the message*. In other words, text is understood here as a message (the most typical argument is an event). Thus, the structure of *pisać* captures the communicative situation as something already completed.

What we see in Piekarczyk’s analysis is one lexical form being ascribed to 4 different structural requirements and 4 different senses, which could otherwise be enough to claim that all the four *pisać* forms constitute homonyms, or separate words of unrelated senses. Yet, despite formal divergence in the form of different structural/distributional requirements, all the four senses are placed within the bounds of one and the same verb *pisać* (and similar verbs of writing). No wonder then, that Piekarczyk (2013:246) wants to make it clear that in her analysis *ORAL TEXT and WRITTEN TEXT are treated not as lexemes but as concepts that can be realized linguistically in manifold ways*. In short, what brings *pisać* senses together, and what makes *pisać* polysemous, is the conceptualization (of WRITTEN TEXT) they share, without any pretence to sharing the same set of formal requirements.

Concluding remarks

As we attempt to show above, PCS researchers do not seem to be in unison with regard to the role and place of polysemy in their research. Some would opt for the denotation-connotation distinction precisely where some others would eagerly postulate polysemy. As polysemy has been elevated to the position of primary linguistic phenomenon only recently, one could expect that with subsequent developments within the PCS circle and a stronger cognitive orientation, there will be more and more polysemy-based accounts and examinations.

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