polysemy

noun [pol-ee-see-mee, puh-lis-uh-mee]

diversity of meanings.
He left the bank five minutes ago.
He left the bank five years ago
He caught a fish at the bank.

A world record.
A record of the conversation.
Record it!

I need some paper.
I wrote a paper.
I read the paper.
POLYSEMY?
A polyseme is a word or phrase with multiple meanings. The word "polysemy" comes from the Greek for "many signs." The adjective forms: polysemous or polysemic. In contrast, a one-to-one match between a word and a meaning is called monosemey.
Diachronic Approach to Polysemy

- Did the word always possess all its meanings?
- Did some of the meanings appear earlier than the others?
- Are the new meanings dependant on the meanings already existing?
- Can we observe any changes in the arrangement of meanings?
ME a table | primary meaning
OE tabule | “a flat slab of stone or wood”

a table – 1) people seated at a table for a meal;
2) food provided at a table | secondary derived meaning
- **Primary meaning** – the first meaning with which the word appeared in the language

- **Secondary meaning** – could appear only after the primary meaning

- **Derived meaning** – could not have appeared before primary meaning was in existence and is dependant on it
Synchronic Approach to Polysemy

- Are all meanings equally representative of the semantic structure of the word?

- Is the order in which the meanings are registered in dictionaries reflect the place they occupy in the semantic structure of the word?
a table - “a piece of furniture” – basic/central meaning

a table - 1) people seated at a table for a meal
2) food provided at a table

minor/marginal meanings
- **Basic/ central meaning** – the meaning that first occurs to us whenever we see or hear a word, occurs in different contexts, has the highest frequency

- **Minor/ marginal meaning** – less frequent, observed only in certain contexts
Semantic Structure of Words
Semantic structure of the word Table

1. a piece of furniture
2. people seated at a table for a meal
3. sing. food provided at a table
4. a thin flat piece of metal, wood, etc.
5. pl. slabs of stone
6. pl. words cut into them or written on them (ten tables)
7. an orderly arrangement of facts, figures, etc.
8. part of machine-tool on which the work is put to be operated on
Types of Lexical Meanings as Elements of a Word’s Semantic Structure

primary :: secondary
basic :: minor
central :: peripheric
direct :: figurative
general :: particular
abstract :: concrete
neutral :: coloured
present day :: archaic
Polysemy and Context

✓ The meaning of a word in speech is contextual – depends on the context

✓ Meaning is determined by the context

crypt – the minimal stretch of speech determining each individual meaning of the word
crypt- individualizes the meanings, brings them out
Meaning(s) of the word that are least dependent on the context are free or denominative meanings.

*table* - “a piece of furniture”

Types of Contexts
- **Extra-linguistic context** – a real speech situation in which the word is used
  
  “I’ve got it” – 1) **possess**
  
  2) **understand**

- **Grammatical context** – where grammatical structure of the context serves to determine various individual meanings of a polysemantically word

  - **to make** – 1) “to force, to induce” – *make somebody do something* – “*make + smbd + bare infinitive*”
  
  2) “*to become, to turn out to be*” – *make a good wife* – *make + adjective + noun*
Lexical context – the group of words which fill the grammatical pattern which forms the environment of the analyzed word

- **heavy** –”of great weight, weighty” – heavy load, heavy table
- **heavy** + natural phenomenon = “striking, falling with force” – heavy rain, heavy wind
- **heavy** + industry, arms, artillery = “the larger kind of something” – heavy industry, heavy artillery
“normal” sign

synonymy

pants  trousers
form  form
meaning

homonymy & polysemy

form
meaning  meaning
Homonymy (ambiguity)

- **bank** – sloping margin of a river
- **bank** – financial institution
- **race** – competition
- **race** – genetically defined population group
Polysemy

- *summit* ‘top of mountain’
  ‘meeting at the highest political level’

- *table* ‘furniture item’
  ‘information in rows and columns’

→ one form, two related meanings
ambiguity

form

meaning     meaning

e.g. bat

- two different words
- unrelated meanings

polysemy

form

meaning    meaning

e.g. table

- one word
- related meanings

vagueness

form

meaning

e.g. reporter

- one word
- highly similar meanings
TESTS of the ambiguity

• the ‘logical’ test:
  – This is an X but not an X.
  – * This is a banana, not a banana. >> not ambiguous
  – This is a bank, not a bank. >> ambiguous

• the ‘definition’ test:
  – Is there a common meaning?
  – if yes >> not ambiguous
  – if no >> ambiguous
Zeugma and syllepsis are figures of speech in which one single phrase or word joins different parts of a sentence.

But theses tests are not the final answer.
Cognitive linguistics:

same form
two clearly distinct meanings
weakly related through a common meaning

summit
‘mountain top’
‘meeting of decision makers’

same form
two clearly distinct meanings
clearly related through a common meaning

string
‘thin rope’
‘part of a guitar’
same form
very similar meanings
obviously related through a common meaning

wing
‘body part of a bird’
‘part of an airplane’

grandmother
‘mother’s mother’
‘father’s mother’
Advantages of continuum view

• gradience is found in many other linguistic categories
• the traditional tests of ambiguity and vagueness correctly identify cases at the end points of the continuum
• in-between cases are naturally accounted for
How do we know where a word is on the continuum?
What is the basic meaning of OVER?

Meanings are different
Basic and extended senses

✓ Polysemous words have a basic, central sense:
  - conceptually simple
  - frequent
  - learned early by children
  - conceptually connected to many other senses

✓ New senses emerge when a word is used in new contexts

✓ The result of meaning extension is a radial category
Each node in the network corresponds to a representation in the speaker’s mental lexicon?
Perhaps the network reflects linguistic analysis, and not what speakers actually think!
Sandra and Rice 1995

How do ordinary speakers distinguish between different senses of the same word?

Sorting task:
- 29 participants received cards with 20 sentences each for the prepositions **at, on, in**

- Task: Sort the cards according to how the prepositions are used, make as many or as few groups as you like
How often are two particular sentences of the 20 put into the same group?

- Don’t put that in your mouth.
- My pen is in the drawer.
- In Japan they eat raw fish.

) Often together
) Rarely together
1. I can say *How are you?* in Italian.
2. Make sure to get that in writing.
3. I saw him in my dreams.
4. There's a hole in your sweater.
5. Are you putting onions in the stew?
6. Don't put that in your mouth.
7. My pen is in the drawer.
8. I looked him straight in the eyes.
9. In Japan, they eat raw fish.
10. Please come in.
11. What would you have done in my place?
12. What line of work are you in?
13. She didn't believe in Santa Claus.
14. He stared at the bear in wonder.
15. They're so much in love.
16. In what sense do you mean?
17. In retrospect, I would have ...
18. In case you hadn't noticed ...
19. He always comes in time.
20. I'll be with you in a moment.
abstract

1. I can say *How are you* in Italian
20. Make sure to get that in writing.
3. I saw him in my dreams.
13. There’s a hole in your sweater.
15. Are you putting onions in the stew?
19. Don’t put that in your mouth.
16. My pen is in the drawer.
17. I looked him straight in the eyes.

spatial

1. I can say *How are you* in Italian
20. Make sure to get that in writing.
3. I saw him in my dreams.
13. There’s a hole in your sweater.
15. Are you putting onions in the stew?
19. Don’t put that in your mouth.
16. My pen is in the drawer.
17. I looked him straight in the eyes.
18. Please come in.
7. What would you have done in my place?
9. What line of work are you in?
2. She didn’t believe in Santa Claus.
6. He stared at the bear in wonder.
12. They’re so much in love.
4. In what sense do you mean?
8. In retrospect, I would have...
10. I always come in time.

11. I’ll be with you in a moment.

time

1. I can say *How are you* in Italian
20. Make sure to get that in writing.
3. I saw him in my dreams.
13. There’s a hole in your sweater.
15. Are you putting onions in the stew?
19. Don’t put that in your mouth.
16. My pen is in the drawer.
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11. I’ll be with you in a moment.
Sandra and Race 1995

Result

- Language users are clearly sensitive to the different meanings of polysemous items.
- The sorting results show that speakers make fine-grained distinctions.
- However, it is not clear whether these distinctions are made because the task requires it, or because they are already there in the mental lexicon.
Meaning varies with context
Gries (2006): the many meanings of \textit{run}

- run a mile
- run for office
- run a small business
- you can run, but you cannot hide
- ooh you make my motor run, my motor run
- ...

Features of \textit{run}

1. morphological
   - past vs. present, simple vs. progressive aspect, active vs. passive
2. syntactic
   - intransitive vs. transitive vs. complex transitive
   - declarative vs. interrogative vs. imperative
   - main clause vs. subordinate clause
3. semantic characteristics
   - subject: human vs. animate vs. inanimate
   - object: countable vs. mass, concrete vs. abstract
4. collocates
   - Left 1, Left 2, Right 1, Right 2

\begin{itemize}
\item My friend Bob runs a model agency.
\item sense: manage
\item present, simple, active
\item transitive, declarative, main clause
\item human subject, abstract countable object
\item L2: friend, L2: Bob, R1: a, R2: model
\end{itemize}
Conclusion
Polysemy

- the presence of various related meanings associated with a single linguistic unit
- central and extended senses
  - central: conceptually simple, first learned, frequent, highly connected to other senses
- linguists’ analyses of polysemy should correspond to speakers’ mental representations!
  - psycholinguistic experiments
  - corpus-based behavioral profile analyses
Thank you for attention!
Recommended lectures:

https://www.jstor.org

JOURNAL ARTICLE

**Polysemy, Lexical Change and Cultural Importance**

Cecil H. Brown, Stanley R. Witkowski

Head as limit of Capability (in over your head)

Head as Sensibility (you have a good head on your shoulders)

Head as Mind (use your head)

Head as Ego (have a big head)

Head (leader)

(to) Head a company

Head (lead)

Head (Direct)

Head (Orient)

Head (Beginning)

Head (Top)

Head of Lettuce

Head (froth of a beer)

Come to a head

Trail head (the beginning of a trail)

Headwaters (mouth of a major river)

Head over heels