

Towards a Theory of Polysemy

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(invited paper)

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Lexical semantics, once the Cinderella of the linguistic sub-disciplines, is currently enjoying an unprecedented degree of attention. A major focus of interest is the central problem of accounting for the astonishing range of variation in the interpretation of a single word in different contexts — in other words, for the problem of polysemy.

There are two orders of facts about polysemy: a satisfactory theory must account in a natural way for both. The first concerns differences in the semantic content of the interpretations of a word in different contexts. It is this aspect of polysemy which has been the most actively researched, with the aim of discovering regularity and predictability. Noteworthy recent proposals concerning polysemy have emerged from two main sources: firstly, from cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Taylor; secondly, from computational linguists, most notably Pustejovsky.

The second order of facts concerns the polysemic status (i.e. degree of discreteness) of interpretations, as diagnosed by a battery of indices. There is a continuum of discreteness, but for present purposes three may be distinguished: (i) some interpretations are mutually antagonistic in that they compete with one another: if one is operative, the other, except in exceptional circumstances, is suppressed. This is true of homonymous readings like those of *bank*, but is also true of many polysemous readings; (ii) some interpretations are clearly distinct, but are not mutually antagonistic, as with the two readings of *book* : "text" and "physical object"; (iii) yet other interpretations are not truly distinct at all, the differences being entirely attributable to differential modulation by context, as with *teacher* in *John's teacher is on maternity/paternity leave* .

Two questions arise immediately in connection with these facts: first, why is there this difference? second, how do differences of discreteness correlate with differences of content? Other things being equal, an account of content variation from which the observed differences in polysemic status could be predicted naturally would be preferred to one for which this was not possible. An obvious suggestion from Qualia Theory would be that differences of reading involving different qualia roles will be more discrete than those involving only different choices within a given qualia role. Taylor, on the other hand, suggests that distinctness of sense arises when different prototypes are involved and/or the readings are embedded in different domains. However, neither of these approaches yields a fully satisfactory account of polysemic status

It is arguable that both Qualia Theory and Prototype Theory offer valuable insights into the structure of word meanings, and it seems worthwhile to explore the possibility of achieving some rapprochement between the two. Pertinent questions in the search for a synthesis would include, for instance: could a prototype representation incorporate a qualia-like division of meaning types? Are the qualia roles proposed by Pustejovsky the optimum divisions of meaning for the purpose of explaining polysemy? Is a qualia representation of a word's meaning rich enough? Conversely, is the prototype view explicit enough?