

What is Iconic about Polysemy?

A Contribution to Research on Diagrammatic Transparency

I will first argue that polysemy is not, as Waugh (1994: 60-65) puts it, a constraint on iconicity in the lexicon, but that, on the contrary, it has a great potential to contribute to iconicity in the lexicon. I will then show that this is the reason why polysemy should be treated as one distinct degree when we establish scales of iconicity like Dressler's (1985) scale of diagrammatic transparency and Waugh & Newfield's continuum of iconicity (Waugh 1994, Waugh/Newfield 1995).

Peirce (1955 [1902]) has implicitly stated that there is something iconic about polysemy by distinguishing three types of *icons*: (i) *images*, that rely on a "physical" similarity between form and meaning, (ii) *diagrams*, that represent the relations between the parts of the signified by analogous relations in their own structure, and (iii) *metaphors*, that signify an "object" (Peirce's terminology) by pointing to the parallelism between the "object" and something else. Of course, Peirce is not explicitly addressing polysemy when discussing metaphors, but from the point of view of modern Cognitive Linguistics we can nevertheless easily forge links to polysemy: Cognitive metaphor – and "cognitive metaphor bears the property of Peircean metaphor" (Hiraga 1994:18) – is one of the most important relations connecting distinct senses of one and the same word (Lakoff/Johnson 1981, Blank 1997, Koch 2001). Thus, as a first approach, we might say that there is something iconic about polysemy, because it is closely connected to one of Peirce's icon types, i.e. metaphor.

Taking a closer look at polysemy in general, and following Hiraga's (1994:8) distinction of *structural diagrams* and *relational diagrams*, we can even range it amongst Peircean diagrams: In the context of modern research on lexical motivation (Panther/Radden 2004, Koch 2001) it has been emphasized that words are not simply motivated as wholes, but rather via *lexical units* (in Cruse's sense, i.e. pairs of 1 form + 1 meaning). This view allows Koch (2001) to consider instances of polysemy as being motivated both *semantically* and *formally*. Considering the two lexical units Engl. *mouse* 'small rodent' and *mouse* 'computer device', Koch points out that there is not only a relation between the two senses, but also between the *forms* of the two lexical units, i.e. the relation of *formal identity*. We thus have to deal with two *distinct* units, as we also have in morphologically-related cases like *computer* 'calculating machine' and *compute* 'calculate'. Morphologists, like Dressler (1985), agree that there is a diagrammatic relation between *computer* and *compute*, because morphological reasoning follows, to a certain extent, the isomorphic principle that similarity in form signals similarity in meaning: Being confronted with a known morpheme in an unknown word, the known morpheme gives us a cue to the meaning of the word. Similarly, if two identical forms mean two different things, we are induced to believe that the two meanings must somehow be related, and indeed they very often are, e.g. by metaphor or metonymy. The assumption that polysemy is to be put on a par with other formal motivational devices like affixation implies that polysemy necessarily plays a role also in diagrammatic transparency. This is supported by evidence from our questionnaire studies that show that polysemy should be integrated in scales and continuums of diagrammatic transparency.

References

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