

Motivability: A Question of Right Measure
Reflections on polysemy as a motivational device

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Though Ullmann (1966:221-222) distinguished between *phonetic*, *morphological* and *semantic* motivation, he was aware of the phenomenon of “mixed motivation” (1962:92) that has recently been shown to be systematic by Koch (2001:1156). Koch argues that a lexical item is motivated if and only if there is a synchronically perceptible formal relation *combined* with a semantic relation to another lexical item. Engl. *blue-bell*, e.g., is not only *morphologically*, but also *semantically* (metaphorically) motivated, because the shape of the flower reminds us the shape of a bell. Going beyond Ullmann, who strictly classifies the relation between different meanings of polysemous words as semantic motivation (1962:91-92), Koch (2001:1159-1160) puts the relation of *formal identity* (=polysemy) on a par with other formal motivational devices enabling speakers to perceive motivation, like e.g. affixation.

Even if Koch’s integration of the relation of formal identity into a set of *formal* motivational devices is legitimate from a theoretical point of view, Ullmann’s isolation of the polysemy cases as pure semantic motivation turns out to be quite pertinent, too, when it comes to speaker judgements: questionnaire studies show that in general morphologically transparent items are motivated much more easily than cases of polysemy, which, in turn, tend to be perceived as motivated by the subjects preferably if the involved concepts are metaphorically related.

In this talk I will first argue that the lack of “motivability” (in Rettig’s sense 1981:152-156) of polysemy cases is primarily due to the fact that the different existing formal and semantic relations are not equally *salient*. The degree of salience of the single relations seems to depend on the degree of formal similarity on the one and conceptual distance on the other hand. In order to be perceived as motivated, lexical units need to be *formally different* enough (but still not too different) and *conceptually distant* enough (but still not too distant) from their potential motivational base. On the formal side, this need of difference accounts for the lack of “motivability” in polysemy cases: two identical forms are just not different enough to be regarded as two distinct items, even if they have different meanings. On the semantic side, the need of conceptual distance accounts for polysemy cases being more likely to be motivated in the case of metaphorical relations than in the case of other semantic relations, just because the involved concepts, belonging to distinct frames, are relatively more distant than in other cases.

In contrast to Rettig (1981:152-156) who argues that lexical items are potentially *motivatable* but not *motivated* per se, I will then claim that “lack of motivability” in the case of polysemy does not necessarily mean “lack of motivatedness”: evidence shows (Klepousniotou 2002) that metonymically related meanings of polysemous words are recognized significantly faster than metaphorically related meanings: thus, on the unconscious level, conceptual closeness helps us inferring one meaning from another, on the conscious level however, conceptual closeness may obstruct our “view” from one meaning to the other.

References

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