

A Study of Difference and Identification between Homonymy and Polysemy

Jing Zheng

South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, 510545, China

87183035@qq.com

Abstract. Lexical ambiguity is an essential problem in practical and applied language processing, but a few relatively information is available about what causes and effect the problem of lexical ambiguity. After many linguistic and professional researched lexical relations for a long time, people found that homonymy and polysemy are two well-known semantic problems. This paper mainly discusses the homonymy and polysemy from the definition, cause of formation, the principles of distinction and semantic ambiguity. At the same time, some methods of distinguishing homonymous and polysemous words are offered in one part of thesis. It is valuable reference for English learning, English teaching and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: homonymy, polysemy, semantic ambiguity, difference, method

1. Introduction

In the theory of lexical semantics of language and meaning, the traditional purpose of lexical semantics was to express the meaning of each word and to show how the meanings of words in a language are related to each other [1]. As we know, there are a lot of different kinds of lexical relation; a particular lexeme or a single word could be in these relationships at the same time, so it is better to think of the lexicon as a network rather than a group of words, as in a dictionary. Lexical field is an important organizational principle in the lexicon, and it belongs to a special activity or extent of professional knowledge, such as the words in sailing and cooking, or used by lawyer and doctor. There are two influences by using them, one is the use of different senses for a word, and the other is lexical relations are more common between lexemes in the same field. The problems of homonymy and polysemy are at the central of semantics [1]. This essay will begin with a detailed discussion of homonymy and polysemy, and then focus on the difference and how to distinguish them in English.

2. The Overview of “Homonym” and “Polysemy”

2.1. Homonymy and Its Categorization

The word “homonym” is from the conjunction of the Greek prefix “homo-” which means the same and suffix “-onym” which means name. Therefore, it refers to two or more words sharing “the same name” [6]. In linguistic theory, a homonym is one of several words which are spelled or pronounced (or both) the same, but mean different things. The state of being a homonym is called a homonymy, and they are unrelated lexemes that happen to have the same form. For example, *stalk* which can describe to part of a plant or to follow someone around; the words *to*, *too* and *two* are pronounced the same but mean different things. Moreover, the following examples are homonyms as well: *bank* which can mean either land sloping up along each side of a river or financial institution; *cricket* which means insect or game; *lie* that means a untrue statement or put someone’s body in a flat or resting position on a horizontal surface; *charge* which means rush forward and attack or price of goods and services; *keep* that means to continue to have something or strongly built tower of an ancient castle; *bow* which refers to a weapon for shooting arrows or bending of the head or body as a greeting. They are different lexical words but the same phonological word. More to the point, some theory claimed that homonym meaning should be unrelated in origin, so that it is distinguished from polysemy by professional.

Lots of linguistic concepts are related to homonymy, but some are considered sub-types of homonyms. There are two common sub-types of homonymies which are homophone and homograph. “Homophones are homonyms that are pronounced the same,

regardless of how they are written". Which means homophone refers to two different words but share the same sound, such as *source* and *sauce*. "Homographs are homonyms that are written the same way, regardless of whether they are pronounced the same". In other words, homograph is two different words that are spelt the same, for example *lead* (chemistry) and *lead* (example).

In addition, sub-types also can be distinguished in detail and in particular according to their syntactic behaviour and spelling. Such as, the first are lexemes of the same syntactic category and spelling: *lap* (single circuit of a track or racecourse) and *lap* (area formed by the upper part of a seated person's thighs); the second one is lexemes of the same syntactic category, but with different spelling: *ring* and *wring*; the third one is lexemes of different syntactic category, but with the same spelling: the verb *record* and the noun *record*; the last one is lexemes of different syntactic, and with different spelling: *not* and *knot* [1]. Hence, professional found that many homonyms are both a homophone and a homograph, and this variety stems in part from the fact that the term "homonym" is ambiguous. Homophones may be spelled the same, but in some cases, they are also homographs, for example *desert* (abandon) and *desert* (barren land), and homophones are spelled differently, but in some cases, they are heterographs, for example *there*, *their* and *they're*. On the contrast, homographs may be pronounced the same, however, in some cases they are also homophones, for example, *bark* (tough outer covering of tree trunks and branches) and *bark* (sharp harsh sound made by dogs and foxes). Alternatively, homographs may be pronounced differently, but in some cases, they are also heteronyms, for instant *row* (propel a boat by using oars) and *row* (argument) [6]. However, changes in pronunciation show that not all speakers have the same set of homonyms, such as, some English speakers make *click* and *clique* in the same pronunciation with different spelling [1].

In short, homonym is two different words that have the same form, and it has two different sub-types and related to syntactic category, spelling and pronunciation. Homonym has relationship with polysemy which will be discussed in following paragraphs. Homonym.

2.2. Polysemy and Its Categorization

Polysemy is from the neo-Latin polysemia, from the Greek polusemous, a combination of poly- (meaning many) and sema (meaning sign); It has given people a linguistic expression that means "having many connotations" or "multiple connotations". The polysemy and polysemous are displayed as "having or characterized by many meanings and the existence of several meanings for a single word or phrase"; they refer to the word or two or more senses in language elements [7]. In lexicology, there is a traditional difference between homonymy and polysemy, both of which involve multiple senses of the same phonological word, but polysemy is expressed when the senses are considered to be related. It is a very significant distinction for lexicographers in their dictionary design method, because polysemous senses are listed in the same lexical entry, whereas homonymous senses are listed in separate entries. "Lexicographers try to use criteria of relatedness to identify polysemy. These criteria include the speakers' intuitions and what is known about the historical development of the items" [1].

Polysemy involves a word that has more than one meaning, but they are different senses of the same word. That is to say, a word is polysemous if it can be used to express different meanings, and the distinction between the meanings should be clear and delicate. A single lexeme may have a few different meanings. For example, the meanings of word *bank* include land sloping up alongside of a river or canal, establishment for keeping money, sum of money held by the keeper of a gaming table, a financial institution, to store and so on. The word *lose* in different context also has

different meaning, it means "fail to win" when it represents to "lose a basketball match", and it can mean "become unable to find" when it represents to "lose my key." As said earlier, a polysemy is a word or phrase with multiple and a related meaning, therefore, a word is considered to be polysemous when it has two or more senses of the word whose meanings are related. Since the imprecise notion of relatedness is used to test polysemy, judging polysemy becomes quite difficult. Because the application of pre-existing words to new situations is a natural process of language change, it is useful, but not the only solution, to examine the etymology of words to determine polysemy. Distinguishing meaning may no longer be helpful when many words begin to lose their etymology. Etymology is not a very accurate method of testing polysemy, as some seemingly unrelated words share a common historical origin. The author of the dictionary also usually relies on the speaker's intuition for the judgement of polysemy in cases where it is at odds with the etymology. English has lots of words that are polysemy. For instance, the verb "*to get*" can mean "*take*" when it refers to "I'll get the drinks", "*have*" when it represents to "I've got three dollars", "*become*" when it refers to "she got scared", and "*understand*" when it expresses to "I get it" [8].

Polysemy can be divided into referential polysemy and lexical polysemy. For instance, the word *piano* can mean sound or piece of furniture. Both usages refer to the same object, while they viewed from two different points of thought. The same phenomenon happens in the word *book*, which can mean object or text. If all the meanings are related to the object which they refer to, this kind of polysemy is called referential polysemy. Sometimes people cannot realize polysemy in those types of examples easily, probably because it seems very obvious that a piano should be a large musical instrument played by pressing the black or white keys of a keyboard. However, professional linguists have given it several different explanations, such as Cognitive Grammar of Langacker. According to the definition of polysemy, people believe polysemy is lexical, when words refer to objects which we think of as being somehow related. There are two kinds of lexical polysemy which are liner polysemy and subsuming polysemy. Liner polysemy means when people can discover a linear link, not matter metonymical or metaphorical, named it before the original object or after a new object, for example, *mouse-rodent* and *computer-mouse*. On the other hand, subsuming polysemy is that usages have created an acceptable common subsuming element. In a word, referential polysemy is some words refer to the many aspects of an object, and lexical polysemy is some words refer to a number of resembling objects [3].

There are several tests which can examine polysemy, and one of them is “zeugma”. If one word seems to show zeugma when applied in different contexts, it is likely that the contexts bring out different polysemy of the same word, while if the two senses of the same word do not seem to match, but seem related, then it is likely that they are polysemous. However, this test also depends on speakers' judgments about relatedness. Even though this test is not extremely accurate for polysemy test, it is still a useful conceptual aid [8].

The existence of polysemy brings some dangers to people's daily life, because it may make language amusing and funny, so that people should use lexeme cautiously, even a single word. As we found, a word may have different meaning in different background, this often happens in political or moral disputes, where words like *freedom* and *natural* get thrown around in ill-defined and shifting senses [7]. On the other hand, polysemy also gives people convenience to make language easier when communicating. If people have to practice the strictness of definition demanded by mathematics or by symbolic logic in every utterance, communication will really become difficult. Polysemy plays an essential role in communication; it is possible to help people achieve a complexity and a compression that would otherwise be impossible. In principle, people agree that only one word is being discussed at a time, not two words that happen to have the same form. The meaning of the same word is rarely ambiguous in context, but “the less specific the context, the greater the possibility of ambiguity” [7]. For example, the word *crane* means bird and machine, so if someone who is looking a picture says “*What a big crane!*”, it may not be immediately clear to someone who cannot see the picture whether this utterance represents to birds or machines.

In brief, the study of polysemy has a long history in the philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology and literature. According to Dick Hebdige, he stated that polysemy means “each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meaning” [7]. Polysemy will carry some problems for communication among people; however, it is still standing at important part of lexical semantics.

3. The Differences between “Homonymy” and “Polysemy”

Many retrieval systems express documents and queries in terms of the words that are contained in them. There are two problems with the use of words for the description of the content of documents. First of all, words are ambiguous, this ambiguity leads to the retrieval of documents that are not relevant. Second, a document may be relevant even though it doesn't use the same words as the ones that are provided in the query. People are not interested in finding documents by using the exact same word, but rather by using the concepts that these words stand for. Therefore, lexical ambiguity usually includes two different concepts which are homonymy and polysemy, depending on whether the meanings are related or not [2].

The difference between homonymy and polysemy is the central issue to linguists. Homonymy separates concepts that are not related, while polysemy is important because related senses represent parts of the whole. How to distinguish homonymy and polysemy is related to the question of whether the meanings are regarded as close enough to be considered related (polysemy) or different enough to be regarded as unrelated (homonymy). Such as, the word *bank*, there are a lot of meaning with it, but here just list three of them for example.

- A. a financial institution
- B. the building where a financial institution offers services
- C. a synonym for “rely upon” when it represents to “I am your friend, you can bank on me”.
- D. a river

Consequently, a river *bank* is a homonym to A and B, because they do not share etymologies, and the meanings are completely different.

Some linguists analyse the differences that “when a word denotes two or more objects, then we tend to surmise some link between them; when we check the link, we examine the denoted object” [4]. Sometimes people find there is certainly degrees of resemblance, so the words are polysemy, if not they are homonyms. From this viewpoint, words are not containers of linguistic or conceptual sub-entities, because of some factual or formal resemblance, a word or a phrase can denote to various objects. For this reason, if the resemblance seems motivated, we are likely to think the referring words are semantically related by a set of sub-entities, otherwise, we consider them as homonyms.

4. Way to Distinguish “Homonymy” and “Polysemy”

After the research of the method which contributes to distinguish homonymy and polysemy for a long time, it can be summarized some useful measures.

The first way is to look into the etymology of the word. Here is an example that can show how to differentiate homonyms and polysemous words. The word *plain* is polysemous word, it can be thought of “easy to see, hear or understand” as in *plain English* or “not decorated or luxurious, ordinary and simple” as in *plain shirt*. The verb *see* and the noun *see* are homonym, it can be expressed “looking by using the eyes” as verb or “office or jurisdiction of a bishop or an archbishop” as noun, the meaning is completely unrelated [1]. The second way is to look at whether the words have the same historical origin or not. It doesn't matter if words are historically related, but it is important to identify phonological words are homophones unless there is a psychologically real relationship between them. “For example, *bank* (of the river) and *bank* (for money) have the same historical origin, however,

it does not mean there is a real relationship between their meanings in the lexicon in the minds of English speakers". Actually, language is used by people, so the extent of lexicons which stored in speakers' mind is more important to us. The third way is to use dictionary. It can be treated to examine multiple meanings either homonymy or polysemy, but in fact it is not always easy to decide which people are dealing with, and dictionaries sometimes differ in their decision. For example, *table* (furniture) and *table* (list of facts or figures systematically arranged, especial in columns). Are they two different words or the same word with two different meaning? Dictionaries usually think they are on the groups of a shared etymology, but with different meaning. On the contrast, *pupil* (person who is taught in school or privately) and *pupil* (circular opening in the centre of the iris of the eye) are often listed as different words in the dictionary, even though they are sharing the same historical origin [7]. Finally, there are two approaches to identify related sense both across part of speech and within a single homograph: "a) exploiting the presence of a variant of a term within its dictionary definition, b) using the overlap of the words in the definition of suspected variants" [2].

In fact, there are lots of grey area between homonymy and polysemy. Different language speaker may have different reorganization to separate them, so that people will face a variety of problems. Such as, most English speakers seem to think that the words sole (the bottom of the human foot) and sole (a flat sea fish eaten for food) are unrelated and should be considered homonymous. Historically, however, they derive from the same Latin word, solea, meaning sandal. but the word entered the English and French dictionaries at different times, so they are set in separate ways in the dictionaries. Actually, they may be polysemy. A well-known modern English example is the adjective word *gay*, which can mean homosexual or happy and full of fun, light-hearted. Although the former meaning came from the latter one in recent times, many young speakers of English think that the two meaning are unrelated and they could be homonymy [1]. Why would happen this kind of cases? There are three reasons. Firstly, different speakers treat the word differently; secondly, people are dealing with two homonyms, there is overlap between them; lastly, people are dealing with one word whose different uses are relatively far enough apart. Here are two obvious unclear cases to show the "grey area" [9].

Example 1: A. I own a big heavy *hammer*.

B. I could hear him *hammering* away in the house next door.

The word *hammer* in sentence A is a noun referring to a tool with heavy metal head at right angles to the handle. *Hammer* in sentence B is a verb expressing an action that hit or beat with a hammer. Are they homonymy or polysemy, different people have different opinion.

Example 2: A. She is the *brightest* student in our class.

B. The lights in that classroom are very *bright*.

The meaning of these two sentences are obviously not the same, but is it a word that use its metaphorical meaning in sentence A and literal meaning in sentence B, or they are just two different words. In my opinion, according the definition of homonymy and polysemy, example 1 is homonymy, because they are different syntactic category, but with the same spelling. Example 2 is polysemy, because the two meanings of bright are related.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, due to the differences in history and culture of different countries, language expressions present a variety of forms, meanwhile, homonymy and polysemy play an important role in linguistics. As a foreign language learner or translator, it is huge significance to understand the definition and differences of homonyms and polysemous words, for improving language expression and translation skills.

References

- [1] John, I. (2003). *Semantics* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- [2] Robert, K. (1997). *Homonymy and polysemy in information retrieval*. NEC Research Institute.
- [3] Cruse, D. A. (1995). *Polysemy and related phenomena from a cognitive linguistic viewpoint*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Pierre, F. *Polysemy, homonymy and reference*. Département d'anglais of Université Marc Bloch.
- [5] John. (2007). Multiple meanings: Homonymy vs polysemy. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from <http://linguisticszone.blogspot.com/2007/05/multiple-meanings-homonymy-vs-polysemy.html>
- [6] The Free Dictionary. (n.d.). Homonymy. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/homonymy>
- [7] Dean, E. (n.d.). Polysemy and polysemous. Retrieved November 9, 2008, from http://www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/3039
- [8] Wikipedia. (2008). Polysemy. Retrieved November 9, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polysemy>
- [9] Homonymy and polysemy. (n.d.). Retrieved November 13, 2008, from <http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:gUCkvpXWKyIJ:www-users.york.ac.uk/~ez506/downloads/L140%2520Handout%2520-%2520homonyms.pdf+polysemy+and+homonymy&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=46&gl=au>
- [10] Homonymy and polysemy in information retrieval. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://aclanthology.org/P97-1010.pdf>
- [11] Qiao, L. Q. (2004). A study on the status of vocabulary acquisition among non-English major students in China: Based on empirical investigation (Master's thesis, Dalian Maritime University). CNKI.
- [12] Liu, Q. Y. (2005). On word meaning relationships and vocabulary associations of second language learners (Master's thesis, Southwest Normal University). CNKI.

- [13] Xu, M. D. (2013). A cognitive explanation of the construction "degree adverb + noun" in modern Chinese (Master's thesis, Southwest University). CNKI.