

## THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF POLYSEMANTIC WORDS

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Bogăția unei limbi nu este dată numai de numărul de cuvinte, ci și de bogăția semantică, de numărul mare de sensuri derivate, secundare sau figurate ale cuvintelor din vocabularul acestei limbi. În mod obișnuit, un cuvânt are mai multe sensuri, însă analizat într-un anumit context, el are un singur sens sau înțeles lexical, pus în valoare de relațiile lui cu celelalte cuvinte. Când aceluiași cuvânt i se asociază mai multe sensuri, apare fenomenul numit *polisemie* sau *polisemantism*.

The semantic structure of the word does not present an indissoluble unity (that is, actually, why it is referred to as "structure"), nor does it necessarily stand for one concept. It is generally known that most words convey several concepts and thus possess the corresponding number of meanings. A word having several meanings is called **polysemantic**, and the ability of words to have more than one meaning is described by the term **polysemy**.

Polysemy is characteristic of most words in many languages, however different they may be. But it is more characteristic of the English vocabulary as compared with other languages, due to the monosyllabic character of English and the predominance of root words. The greater the relative frequency of word, the greater the number of variants that constitute its semantic structure, i.e. the more polysemantic it is. This regularity is of course a statistical, not a rigid one [1].

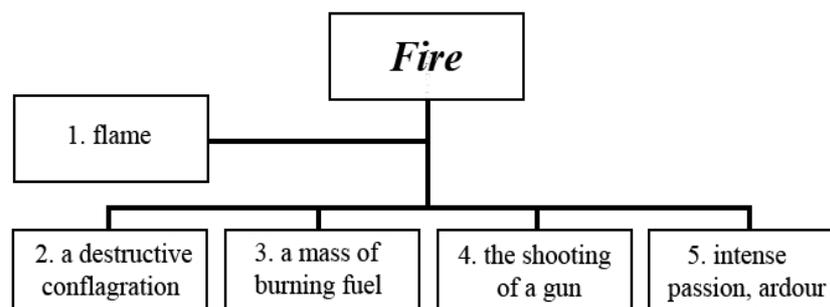
It should be noted that the wealth of expressive resources of a language largely depends on the degree to which polysemy has developed in the language. Sometimes people who are not very well informed in linguistic matters claim that a language is lacking in words if the need arises for the same word to be applied to several different phenomena. In actual fact, it is exactly the opposite: if each word is found to be capable of conveying, let us say, at least two concepts instead of one, the expressive potential of the whole vocabulary increases twofold. Hence, a well-developed polysemy is not a drawback but a great advantage in a language.

On the other hand, it should be pointed out that the number of sound combinations that human speech organs can produce is limited. Therefore at a certain stage of language development the production of new words by morphological means becomes limited, and polysemy becomes increasingly important in providing the means for enriching the vocabulary. From this, it should be clear that the process of enriching the vocabulary does not consist merely in adding new words to it, but, also, in the constant development of polysemy.

The system of meanings of any polysemantic word develops gradually, mostly over the centuries, as more and more new meanings are either added to old ones, or oust some of them. So the complicated processes of polysemy development involve both the appearance of new meanings and the loss of old ones. Yet, the general tendency with English vocabulary at the modern stage of its history is to increase the total number of its meanings and in this way to provide for a quantitative and qualitative growth of the language's expressive resources.

When analysing the semantic structure of a polysemantic word, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of analysis [2].

On the first level, the semantic structure of a word is treated as a system of meanings. For example, the semantic structure of the noun *fire* could be roughly presented by this scheme:



The above scheme suggests that meaning (1) holds a kind of dominance over the other meanings conveying the concept in the most general way whereas meanings (2) – (5) are associated with special circumstances, aspects and instances of the same phenomenon.

Meaning (1), generally referred to as *the main meaning*, presents the centre of the semantic structure of the word holding it together. It is mainly through meaning (1) that meanings (2)-(5) (they are called *secondary meanings*) can be associated with one another, some of them exclusively through meaning (1), as, for instance, meanings (4) and (5).

Yet, it is not in every polysemantic word that such a centre can be found. Some semantic structures are arranged on a different principle. In the following list of meanings of the adjective *dull* one can hardly hope to find a generalised meaning covering and holding together the rest of the semantic structure:

*Dull*, adj.

- 1) Not interesting, boring; e. g. *a dull book*
- 2) Slow in understanding, stupid; e. g. *a dull pupil*
- 3) Not bright or shiny; e. g. *a dull colour*
- 4) Not clear or loud; e. g. *a dull sound*
- 5) Not sharp, blunt; e. g. *a dull knife*
- 6) Not active, slow; e. g. *a dull market*

Yet, one distinctly feels that there is something that all these seemingly miscellaneous meanings have in common, and that is the implication of deficiency, be it of colour (3), wit (2), interest (1), sharpness (5), etc. The implication of insufficient quality, of something lacking, can be clearly distinguished in each separate meaning.

In fact, each meaning definition in the given scheme can be subjected to a transformational operation to prove the point:

*Dull*, adj.

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 1) Not interesting | > deficient in interest                 |
| 2) Stupid          | > deficient in intellect                |
| 3) Not bright      | > deficient in brightness or brilliance |
| 4) Not loud        | > deficient in sound                    |
| 5) Not sharp       | > deficient in sharpness                |
| 6) Not active      | > deficient in activity                 |

The transformed scheme of the semantic structure of *dull* clearly shows that the centre holding together the complex semantic structure of this word is not one of the meanings but a certain component that can be easily singled out within each separate meaning. This brings us to the second level of analysis of the semantic structure of a word. The transformational operation with the meaning definitions of *dull* reveals something very significant: the semantic structure of the word is “divisible” not only at the level of different meanings but, also, at a deeper level.

Each separate meaning seems to be subject to structural analysis in which it may be represented as sets of semantic components. In terms of componential analysis, one of the modern methods of semantic research, the meaning of a word is defined as a set of elements of meaning which are not part of the vocabulary of the language itself, but rather theoretical elements, postulated in order to describe the semantic relations between the lexical elements of a given language.

The scheme of the semantic structure of *dull* shows that the semantic structure of a word is not a mere system of meanings, for each separate meaning is subject to further subdivision and possesses an inner structure of its own.

Therefore, the semantic structure of a word should be investigated at both these levels: (a) of different meanings and (b) of semantic components within each separate meaning. For a monosemantic word (i.e. a word with one meaning) the first level is naturally excluded.

The leading semantic component in the semantic structure of a word is usually termed **denotative component**. The denotative component expresses the conceptual content of a word.

The following list presents denotative components of some English adjectives and verbs:

**Denotative components**

<i>lonely</i>	>	alone
<i>to glare</i>	>	to look
<i>to glance</i>	>	to look
<i>to shiver</i>	>	to tremble
<i>to shudder</i>	>	to tremble

It is quite obvious that the definitions given in the right column only partially and incompletely describe the meanings of their corresponding words. They do not give a more or less full picture of the meaning of a word. To do it, it is necessary to include in the scheme of analysis additional semantic components which are termed **connotations** or **connotative components**.

Let us complete the semantic structures of the words given above introducing connotative components into the schemes of their semantic structures.

	<b>Denotative components</b>	<b>Connotative components</b>
<i>lonely</i>	> alone	> sad, unhappy
<i>to glare</i>	> to look	> steadily, angrily
<i>to glance</i>	> to look	> hastily or briefly
<i>to shiver</i>	> to tremble	> slightly, as from cold or fear
<i>to shudder</i>	> to tremble	> suddenly and violently, as from horror, aversion, etc

The above examples show how by singling out denotative and connotative components one can get a sufficiently clear picture of what the word really means.

One of the most important "drawbacks" of polysemantic words is that there is sometimes a chance of misunderstanding when a word is used in a certain meaning but accepted by a listener or reader in another. It is only natural that such cases provide stuff of which jokes are made, such as the one that follows:

Customer: *I would like a book, please.*

Bookseller: *Something light?*

Customer: *That doesn't matter. I have my car with me.*

In this conversation the customer is honestly misled by the polysemy of the adjective *light* taking it in the literal sense whereas the bookseller uses the word in its figurative meaning "not serious; entertaining".

Generally speaking, it is common knowledge that context is a powerful preventative against any misunderstanding of meanings. For instance, the adjective *dull*, if used out of context, would mean different things to different people or nothing at all. It is only in combination with other words that it reveals its actual meaning: *a dull pupil, a dull book, a dull razor, dull weather*, etc. Sometimes, however, such a minimum context fails to reveal the meaning of the word, and it may be correctly interpreted only through what Professor N. Amosova termed a **second-degree context** [3], as in the following example: *The man was large, but his wife was even fatter*. The word *fatter* here serves as a kind of indicator pointing that *large* describes a stout man and not a big one.

Current research in semantics is largely based on the assumption that one of the more promising methods of investigating the semantic structure of a word is by studying the word's linear relationships with other words in typical contexts, i.e. its **combinability** [4].

Scholars have established that the semantics of words characterised by common occurrences (i.e. words which regularly appear in common contexts) are correlated and, therefore, one of the words within such a pair can be studied through the other.

Thus, if one intends to investigate the semantic structure of an adjective, one would best consider the adjective in its most typical syntactical patterns *A + N* (adjective + noun) and *N + l + A* (noun + link verb + adjective) and make a thorough study of the meanings of nouns with which the adjective is frequently used.

For instance, a study of typical contexts of the adjective *bright* in the first pattern will give us the following sets: a) *bright* colour (flower, dress, silk, etc.). b) *bright* metal (gold, jewels, armour, etc.), c) *bright* student (pupil, boy, fellow, etc.), d) *bright* face (smile, eyes, etc.) and some others. These sets will lead us to singling out the meanings of the adjective related to each set of combinations: a) intensive in colour, b) shining, c) capable, d) gay, etc.

There is an interesting hypothesis that the semantics of words regularly used in common contexts are so intimately correlated that each of them casts a kind of permanent reflection on the meaning of its neighbour. Note how closely the negative evaluative connotation of the adjective *notorious* is linked with the negative connotation of the nouns with which it is regularly associated: *a notorious criminal, thief, gangster, gambler, gossip, liar, etc.*

All this leads us to the conclusion that context is a good and reliable key to the meaning of the word.

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*Prezentat la 23.09.2008*