

## Ambiguities we live by: Towards a pragmatics of polysemy<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Contrary to traditional research into polysemy and ambiguity, we argue that polysemy is neither just a phenomenon of the dictionary, nor a purely cognitive phenomenon, but that its exploitation in everyday discourse has important communicational and pragmatic functions. Contrary to current work in psycholinguistics, we argue that ambiguity should not only be studied *in vitro*, as in priming studies and similar approaches using decontextualized samples, but that it should be analysed *in vivo*. Contrary to some older theories of implicature and some newer theories of relevance, we argue that people who engage in conversation do not always strive for rationality and relevance, that they do not always intend words to have one meaning and ‘disambiguate’ polysemous words automatically in context. The use and understanding of polysemous words may have costs in terms of processing time, but what Kittay (1987) calls ‘purposeful ambiguity’ has important semantic, pragmatic and conversational benefits, such as reinforcing the semantic links between the nodes in a network of senses, strengthening the social bonds between those who exploit polysemy in conversation, and helping to negotiate crucial junctures between conversational turns. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Polysemy; Ambiguity; Shared meaning; Cognitive processing; Communicational functions

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## 1. Setting the scene

When starting to think about this topic, our department was being renovated and we kept our office doors open to air the rooms. What we overheard during the next few days brought home to us just how much people play with multiple meanings in their daily linguistic interactions and how much of their linguistic interaction is structured by the play with multiple meanings.

- (1) When the carpet layers were putting down new carpets in the corridor using some special adhesive that comes in giant bottles, carpet layer 1 said ‘Where is the bottle?’ Carpet layer 2 replied: ‘I lost my bottle a long time ago – but seriously, it’s just behind you!’
- (2) When the ceiling contractors were putting in the new lighting system in the same corridor, they switched on the lights to test them and both of them instantaneously exclaimed: ‘I can see the light!’
- (3) One of the ceiling people noticed that Brigitte’s office door was not sliding very well over the carpet and called the overseer of the whole refurbishment operation. She told her that the ceiling people couldn’t adjust the door, but that she would have to recall the carpet people. Whereupon Brigitte said laughingly, pointing to the man up the ladder: ‘Yes, I know, the ceiling people are a bit above that sort of thing, aren’t they!’
- (4) The carpet people came to plane down Brigitte’s door. They were just about to take the door off its hinges when she noticed that she had left her coat and bag on the hooks and said: ‘Shall I take my clothes off?’ Great hilarity all round ... But Brigitte was not the only one to fall into a semantic trap that day, our deputy head of department did so too.
- (5) After hearing the report of our departmental administrator about the need for refurbishing the toilets, he said: ‘Any movement on this issue would be welcome’. Again general hilarity ensued.
- (6) When leaving the department Brigitte saw a removal van parked outside with the inscription saying: ‘We’ll move the world for you!’ And a heating installation van proclaiming ‘XYZ – the hottest name in heating!’
- (7) Brigitte then walked to the bus stop and just saw the 35, a double decker bus, driving away displaying a huge poster on its back, representing a beautiful woman and enticing her to: ‘Look like the back of this bus!’
- (8) When David came home, Brigitte realized how cold it had become in the house and said ‘I have got cold feet’ and even before being able to continue and say, ‘I better get some socks on’, he looked at her half laughing half pretending to be concerned and said ‘And what do you have to worry about today, my dear?’ ... and so one could go on endlessly.

These are all instances of ephemeral, almost unnoticed, but pervasive uses of polysemy in ordinary language use, some of them spontaneous and intentional, some of them spontaneous and unintentional (what we call ‘falling into semantic traps’), some of them non-spontaneous and intentional, as used in advertising. They show

how we make and re-make sense and keep the semantic system of a language going.

## 2. Preconceptions about polysemy and delusions about disambiguation

Polysemy<sup>1</sup> is at the moment a hot topic in cognitive and computational linguistics (see Pustejovsky, 1995; Bougman, 1997; Nerlich et al., forthcoming). Ambiguity has been a hot topic for quite some time in psycholinguistics (word recognition, semantic priming, lexical decision tasks, and so on). All these approaches to polysemy and ambiguity work either with polysemy as a phenomenon of the dictionary or with made up examples of isolated ambiguous utterances, that is, with what one could call ‘artificial polysemy’ or ‘dead polysemy’. We want to study ‘live polysemy’, as it is created and exploited in linguistic interaction. We want to go somewhere towards answering the following questions: How do people use polysemous words in their daily linguistic interaction? How do they become aware of the existence of multiple meanings? and: Do they use them to achieve certain rhetorical, communicational and social effects?

It is generally assumed that, in ordinary discourse, we resist the multiplication of meanings, that we adhere to the principle of conventionality (Lehrer, 1990;<sup>2</sup> Clark, 1993), and that we observe the principle ‘one form-one meaning’. All this holds true for the most mundane and routine forms of information exchanges. However, even here speakers cannot but put much more into their utterances than is obvious from the surface of the sentence, and hearers generally take out much more than is presented to them on the surface.

Normally, this injection with and extraction of an ever present ‘surplus’ of meaning (based either on established ‘polysemies’ or on conversational implicatures, or a mixture of both) goes unnoticed, because this surplus is congruent with the surface forms that hint at it and with the context in which they are used. This normal contextual ‘unfolding’ of that which is implicated (meant) by an utterance used in context, but not ‘said’, has been studied in a Gricean framework, using notions such as conversational implicature and speaker meaning vs. sentence meaning (see Mey, 1993: 98).

<sup>1</sup> It has become common practice in polysemy research to see polysemy as a graded phenomenon (see Cruse, 1995), ranging between what Weinreich (1966) has called contrastive and complementary polysemy (ambiguity): the former deals with homonyms such as *record*, a written statement of facts or events and the gramophone record or disc, whereas the latter deals with complementary aspects such as the physical object and the music.

<sup>2</sup> According to Lehrer, there are two related principles of conventionality: (1) “If a word already exists to express a meaning, use it; don’t use or construct another one”. (2) “If a word lexicalizes a meaning (concept), don’t use it to mean something else, even if that meaning would fit the patterns of the language” (Lehrer, 1990: 210). She points out, however, that these principles “can, of course, be overridden when there is a good reason for doing so, for example, to be entertaining, literary, shocking, or simply to be unconventional” (1990: 210). “Whenever a principle of conventionality is violated, the hearer, in addition to computing the meaning of the words, must figure out what, if anything, is being implicated by the unconventional choice as well” (1990: 210)

There are however also cases when the inherent multiplicity of meanings is itself brought to the surface, is exposed in our daily conversational interaction, when we challenge the ‘principle of conventionality’ through the introduction of incongruity and dissonance. This common use of polysemy has been sidelined both by Grice as well as by Sperber and Wilson. Although Grice implied in his writings (Grice, 1975) that ‘implicatures’ are an everyday phenomenon, he also stressed that ambiguity, irony, and so on are violations of the communicative ‘norm’. And yet, it is this ‘violation’, this ‘flouting’ of conversational maxims that makes conversations ‘interesting’, that makes people actually engage in, and enjoy conversations. The Gricean sub-maxim of perspicuity, part of his maxim of manner, should therefore be complemented by the maxim of ‘conspicuity’, the first having a homogenising effect on language and communication, the latter a heterogenizing effect (see section 6).

The fact that it is more costly (see section 5) to process ‘conspicuous’ and interesting utterances than perspicuous ones, is the price we pay to keep communication and language going. Sperber and Wilson claimed that

“the sooner disambiguation and reference assignment are achieved, the less processing effort will be required. The greater the number of possible interpretations that have to be borne in mind as the utterance proceeds, the greater the processing effort. It follows that a speaker aiming at optimal relevance should phrase her utterance so as to facilitate early – and correct – disambiguation.” (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 204)

Relevance theorists as well as psycholinguists tend to reduce ambiguity to a purely semantic affair and claim that, with the help of the principle of relevance, we disambiguate lexical items automatically when they occur in their proper, cognitive environments (see Mey, 1993: 81). This theory of communication is mainly a cognitive one, saying very little about real communicative interaction, as it happens in our society (Mey, 1993: 81; see also Giora, 1997b). And yet, it is here that one can observe how much people love juggling with ambiguities. They are less concerned with communicative efficiency and much more with the pragmatic ‘effects’ they want to achieve. In fact, we seem to have evolved an amazing ability to slide effortlessly up and down a scale of semantic options from being precise and monosemous in some circumstances to being vague and polysemous in others, depending on the conversational style and the situation of discourse.

Another widespread assumption in polysemy research is that words *in isolation* can have more than one meaning, but that words *in context* always have only one specific meaning. It is thought that as comprehenders, “we aim at *specifying meaning*, at selecting, out of the many possible interpretations, one interpretation that coheres with our background default assumptions and other contextual considerations” (Kittay, 1987: 80). According to this view, the speaker intends words to have one meaning and the hearer ‘disambiguates’ polysemous words automatically in context. The assumption that communication is aimed at reducing multiple meanings will be challenged in this article. We are not so much interested in ‘disambiguation in context’ but instead in what one might call ‘ambiguation’ in context.

One can frequently observe that a speaker intends a word (phrase, or sentence) to ‘have’ multiple meanings in context or that the hearer notices that a word (phrase, or

sentence) has more than one meaning. This is what Kittay herself calls ‘purposive ambiguity’ (Kittay, 1987: 80). The hearer either ‘gets’ the multiplicity of meaning intended by the speaker or she doesn’t – the ‘polysemous’ utterance, which can be a joke or not, falls flat. On the other hand, the hearer might ‘hear’ more meanings or read more meanings into a speaker’s utterance than the speaker intended (on most occasions this will have a humorous effect). In the first case the semantic contents of the utterance is quite deep, has several ‘layers’, so to speak, but the hearer’s inferences stay on the shallow end, whereas in the second case, the hearer’s inferences go deeper than the original semantic intention of the speaker. The inferential depth to which interlocutors plunge depends on the multiplicity of meanings available, as well as on the situation and function of the interaction.

These constructions and deconstructions of shared (multiple) meanings in conversation have not only the function of keeping meanings and conversations alive, in the long run they also contribute to the steady diachronic changes in the polysemy of words, some meanings coming to the fore, some dropping away (see Sweetser, 1990; Lee, 1990). And again, this is not only of interest to the writers of historical dictionaries or those interested in diachronic semantics. The speakers themselves are aware of this changing status of the polysemous words they use. They know quite well ‘the ambiguities they live by’, their synchronic status and their diachronic changes.

- (9) Since the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, said euphemistically<sup>3</sup> in a television interview in August 1998, that he had an ‘inappropriate relationship’ with his White House intern, Monica Lewinski, this phrase has become a ubiquitous way of referring not only to all sorts of ‘inappropriate relationships’, but to ‘sexual relationships’ in particular. And people talk about this change in meaning.

One could call these ‘nonce’ polysemies, which are quite ephemeral and superficial and come and go with certain cultural, social or political circumstances. There are however also cases of deeper diachronic changes in the polysemy of words. These too can be brought to the attention of the speakers of a language, as Jane Austin demonstrates in a famous dialogue in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (see Nerlich and Clarke, 1992: 221–222). The woman protagonist talks about a ‘nice’ book and is reprimanded by the male protagonist who says:

- (10) ‘The nicest; – by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding’. [...] ‘I did not mean to say any thing wrong; but it *is* a nice book, and why should not I call it so?’ ‘Very true’, said Henry, ‘and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! it is a very nice word indeed! – It does for every thing. Orig-

<sup>3</sup> As Pedro J. Chamizo Domínguez has pointed out (personal communication), euphemisms are necessarily ambiguous. When a euphemism is lexicalized, it becomes a bawdy or taboo word, as for example *cemetery* which was a euphemism in Greek, meaning ‘sleeping room’, and is now a semi-taboo word.

inally perhaps it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement; – people were nice in their dress, in their sentiment, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word'. 'While, in fact,' cried his sister, 'it ought only to be applied to you [...]. You are more nice than wise'.

In sum: What has been overlooked so far in polysemy research is that ('synchronic' and 'diachronic') polysemy is very much 'alive', that it can be studied in its natural habitat, in the course of conversations and so on.

### 3. Charging the semantic batteries through pragmatic and contextual inferences

Before analysing various examples of pragmatic polysemisation and the pragmatic use of polysemy, we want to say something about the cognitive and communicational roots of this ever present multiplicity of meanings. The reason why we multiply meanings and exploit multiple meanings is that there always is and always will be a discrepancy, a fundamental incongruence, between the supply of words and our communicative demands. Even the fact that most words have several meanings from which one can choose doesn't overcome that problem. There are always occasions when one wants to say something new, interesting, subjective, which has never been said before.

To inject the available old signs and their meanings with new life we have to 'remotivate' them. To do so we have two main options: to create a *metaphor* or a *metonymy* (which, for the sake of this article, will be said to include *synecdoche*). The outcome of these processes of remotivation, such as the *mouth of a river* or the *crown* are themselves subject to the process of conventionalization. Their metaphorical and metonymical life is sapped by use and they become established senses of a polysemous word. To use them for the witty expression of novel and interesting points they can however again be used metaphorically or metonymically and the cycle starts again.

Old (metaphorical or metonymical) senses of a polysemous word can also be reinvigorated by selecting not only one sense but by *using* two senses simultaneously and letting them 'fight' with each other, as in example (6). They are also rejuvenated in the process of *understanding* where the hearer has to apply metaphor and metonymy in reverse, and by rediscovering the original metaphoricality of dead metaphors or idioms (*cataphoresis*). Take example (7). When Brigitte saw the back of the number 35 bus with the picture of a beautiful woman and the slogan 'Look like the back of this bus!', she had to establish a metonymical relation between the picture and the back of the bus, but she also had to remember the pejorative expression based on a simile *She looks like the back of a bus* meaning 'She is ugly' and reinterpret it positively in the light of what is depicted on the back of this specific bus. And as an icing on the cake she should also have understood the illocutionary force of this advert, namely to entice her to go to a certain gym.

#### 4. Exploring layers of meanings, congruent and incongruent

In pragmatics, linguists have for a long time been studying the types of meaning that go beyond the conventional meaning of words and sentences. Since Austin (1962), we know that every sentence has a meaning and an illocutionary force. Since Grice (1975), we know the difference between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. The sentence meaning is considered to be made up of the context-free, conventional meaning of the words themselves and the speaker meaning is considered to be the meaning that the speaker wants to convey to the listener by the use of these words. Thus “what a speaker means by any utterance U is not exhausted by the meaning of the linguistic form uttered” (Levinson, 1983: 18).

In most cases, the hearer can understand what the speaker wants to say by relying on a network of contextual and cognitive clues. And normally the ‘more’ that the speaker wants to convey by uttering a sentence is congruent or consonant with the sentence meaning *qua* sentence meaning. When I say ‘It’s going to rain’ and mean ‘We can’t go for our walk’, the relation between saying and meaning is one of consonance (see Dews and Winner, 1997: 379). And yet, there are occasions when there is incongruence or dissonance. This has long been known about such classic indirect speech acts as ‘Can you pass me the salt?’, in which case, over time, (incongruent) form and communicational function have become congruent and the initial incongruence is no longer felt.

However, whereas pragmaticists have paid attention to the multiplicity of meanings arising from implicatures, they have argued up to now that ‘ambiguity’, as based on the conventional multiplicity of senses of a linguistic form, is a purely semantic phenomenon, involving linguistic meaning rather than speaker meaning. There are intended and unintended senses, relevant and irrelevant senses and deliberate ambiguity is dismissed as irrelevant (see Bach, 1998: 199a). We argue by contrast that the intentional use or the intentional abuse of irrelevant senses has specific pragmatic functions in linguistic interaction.

In the following, four uses of pragmatically relevant incongruence arising from the multiplicity of meanings will be examined: *irony*, *metaphor*, *jokes*, and *explicit double readings* of utterances.

The first example is taken from Dews and Winner (1997). There is dissonance when someone says ironically about a bad taxi driver ‘I love drivers who signal’. In uttering this sentence, he ‘sentence-means’ what he says, but also ‘speaker-means’ more, namely that in this instance he wants to rebuke the driver for *not* signalling. This ironic utterance has two quite opposite meanings. Dews and Winner say that “in literal language, the literal meaning is accepted, and the listener makes further inferences, ones that are consonant with the literal meaning. In nonliteral language, the literal meaning is rejected and the listener makes further inferences, ones that are dissonant with the rejected meaning” (Dews and Winner, 1997: 379). And yet, as their own example shows, it would actually be counterproductive to reject the sentence meaning so as to understand its ironic intent (the rebuke). In fact, we have to keep *both* the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning in mind so as to ‘get’ the intention in that context.

Sometimes, however, the context is so compelling and the ironic use of a phrase so salient (conventionalized) that the hearer hears an irony where it was not intended and responds to the contextually irrelevant secondary meaning to achieve a humorous effect, as in example (8). On the other hand, the ironic meaning of a phrase might also be so well established in a certain discourse type that it is difficult to retrieve the primary meaning of an utterance, as when David said one morning on his way to work (normally an occasion for a certain amount of ‘moaning’):

- (11) ‘Today I am doing the first tutorial for the first years. That’ll be fun’, whereupon I replied, ‘Oh, poor thing’, and he corrected me by saying ‘I didn’t mean that ironically, it really *is* fun’ ...

One could argue that metaphorical language use differs from ironic one insofar as here we really have to *reject* one meaning in favour of another. When someone says ‘her words were razor sharp’, we have to reject the meaning of ‘physical sharpness’ so as to understand that the speaker is talking about a psychological phenomenon. However, it could also be argued that, again, it is much better to keep *both* meanings in mind, to keep the incongruity alive, to juggle with the double meaning of this sentence so as to fully understand what the speaker is on about.

The most obvious example of a type of language in which the exploitation of an incongruity is vital, is the language of humour, as in the classic riddle:

- (12) Why does the teacher wear sun-glasses? – Because the class is too bright.

Here we have to savour the metonymically based double meaning of *class* (room and pupils in the room) and the metaphorically based double meaning of *bright* (sunlit and clever) so as to understand the joke (on incongruity resolution in jokes, see McGhee, 1979; Giora, 1991; Nerlich et al., 1998; Kotthoff, 1998; Crystal 1998). More creative uses of polysemy (monological and dialogical ones) can be found in profusion in any sort of comedy:

- (13) Deborah in *Man Behaving Badly* (BBC 2) asks Tony ‘What happened to your record business?’ – ‘It collapsed’ – ‘Why, because of the recession?’ – ‘No, the stand collapsed and all my records broke ...’
- (14) Mandy in *Emmerdale* (ITV) says: ‘I have really missed Paddy’ and her irate uncle, who had been in a scrap with her lover the day before says, ‘Yes, me too – by two inches ...’

As a final example of the uses of dual meanings we examine the use of the adverb *literally*, as an explicit ‘dual reading’ marker. It is used (amongst other things; see Powell, 1992) to make the hearers aware of the fact that they should not lose sight of (or that they should rediscover) the original literal meaning when interpreting (relatively) dead metaphors. It functions as a ‘flag’ that emphasizes the metaphoricity of an almost ‘dead’ metaphor. It injects ‘subjectivity’ into it and it imparts to the hearer or reader a certain attitude taken towards it (see Powell, 1992: 347). An example of

this use can be found in the commentary given after one of the ‘gladiators’ had lost in a round of *Gladiators* (ITV, 3 October 1998):

(15) ‘He has literally found his Waterloo’.

*Literally* can also be used by the *hearer* to establish a sense of shared meaning which, in general, seems to be strengthened by the exploitation of multiple meanings:

(16) Speaker A: Well you’ve just about worked your fingers to the bone.

Speaker B: Literally!

(Powell, 1992: 349)

A similar function is fulfilled by explicitly flagging the metaphoricity of an expression.

(17) On 8 October 1998, Peter Jay, the British economist, said on the six o’clock Radio 4 news that he feared ‘the global economic meltdown might soon become more than just a metaphor’.

*Literally* is used at one and the same time to inject life into old metaphors and idioms and to instruct the hearer or reader quite explicitly to consider a dual reading of an utterance. In examples (18) and (19) the nonliteral alternative is named, in example (20) it remains implicit:

(18) Ed tried to build the relationship with Paul, hoping to give him the kind of male companionship he had never had, but Paul had slammed the door, literally as well as figuratively, in Ed’s face. (Quoted in Powell, 1992: 342)

(19) The thieves ordered him against the wall and tied his hands. There was no escape. He realized that both literally and metaphorically (i) he was up against the wall, and (ii) his hands were tied. (Kittay, 1987: 76)

(20) For once, Harald Hardrada was caught napping, literally. (BBC 2 Television, 1979, quoted in Powell, 1992: 343)

We wholly agree with Powell who observed that, “[d]ual readings invigorate ordinary language use through doubly perceived accuracy and aptness of fit” (Powell, 1992: 344).

As we have seen, incongruity between multiple meanings pervades the use and understanding of irony, metaphor, jokes, and is explicitly brought to the surface through the use of *literally* and other markers of double reading. Ironic, metaphorical and humorous uses of incongruity all contribute to keeping language alive in various ways, and they all rely on keeping several meanings of a word or expression in mind simultaneously. This process of keeping language alive is one in which speakers and hearers actively collaborate, it is shared meaning making and remaking (see Holquist, ed., 1992; Mey, 1999).

As Voloshinov said, each word ‘is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee’ (1973: 86; original italics) (see also Nerlich and Clarke, in press).

Sometimes this meaning making is a *joint action* in the real sense of the word, sometimes it is an act on the part of the speaker which fails with the hearer, and sometimes it is an act on the part of the hearer who goes well beyond the speaker’s intention, creating a ‘hearer meaning’ which she then proposes for consideration to the speaker, and so on.

The pragmatic use of polysemy and incongruity in discourse seems to be essential in the construction of shared meanings. It also helps to knit separate acts of discourse together, as the following example shows (see also examples 13 and 14). Here we see the participants in the linguistic interaction using/understanding *get* as meaning ‘obtain’, ‘being in possession’ of and ‘come to be’ (in an idiomatically frozen expression):

- (21) In *Coronation Street* (ITV, 9 October, 1998) Alma is supposed to have ‘taken’ a video tape from a security office to help a friend. Spider asks her: ‘Have you got it?’ Whereupon Alma answers: ‘I have got it all right!’ Spider asks: ‘Where, show us?’ Alma replies: ‘I have got the sack’.

Exchanges like this one join conversational turns together at their hinges and weave social relations. They contribute not only to linguistic (semantic and syntactic) ‘bonding’ but also to social bonding.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, ordinary discourse as a smooth exchange of speech acts in which congruence and consonance prevail, does not seem to contribute to this ‘socialization’ of meaning. To keep language alive we have to inject it regularly with a dose of ‘incongruity’. This is the only way of making language ‘expressive’. As Kittay has pointed out:

“*Expressivity* is that capacity of language to make itself available to ever new articulations of experience. We sometimes think of expressivity in terms of its affective import only; but I mean to stress its cognitive import. The cognitive import derives from the articulations which make possible the sorting, differentiation, discrimination, and identification of experience.” (Kittay, 1987: 124)

We shall come back to ‘expressivity’ as one of the ‘functions’ of the pragmatic exploitation of polysemy in section 6.

## 5. The costs and benefits of processing multiple meanings

And yet, expressivity and the exploitation of incongruity for communicative and cognitive purposes have a price. As studies of irony comprehension have shown,

<sup>4</sup> Cases like these can be regarded as an instantiation of a more general phenomenon of ‘dialogic syntax’ (Du Bois, 1998; Giora, forthcoming). Dialogic syntax occurs when a speaker constructs an utterance based on an immediately co-present utterance. Du Bois points to the ubiquity of ‘dialogic syntax’, showing that a vast array of linguistic elements such as syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, lexical, and even phonetic patterns in one speaker’s discourse can be traced back to an immediately co-present utterance.

both the literal and the ironic meaning of an utterance are accessed and stay activated for quite a while, and irony comprehension therefore takes longer than comprehension of the non-ironic counterpart. Experimental studies of the understanding of polysemous words have shown that processing polysemous words results in the continued activation of inappropriate senses for quite some time after the word has been encountered (Williams, 1992; see also Gibbs, 1994: 41).

In the following we shall study first the (cognitive processing) ‘costs’ and then the ‘benefits’ (communicative functions) of the pragmatic exploitation of polysemy. We shall not explore explicitly the ‘cognitive’ benefits of this longer processing time, which can be said to lie in the strengthening of conceptual and semantic connections between senses and the strengthening of such networks of senses as wholes, perhaps even on the neuropsychological level.

In her recent work, Rachel Giora has gone some way towards replacing two outdated dichotomies (the literal/metaphorical and the semantic/pragmatic ones) by a *theory of graded salience* (Giora, 1997a). She has focused her attention particularly on irony and metaphorical language use. Examples of exchanges such as (8) illustrate, according to Giora, that speakers and comprehenders make use of what is available to them, regardless of contextual information or speaker’s intent. Giora asks: “Why should contextually incompatible meanings be activated and infiltrate the ongoing discourse? Why doesn’t context block unintended meanings?” (Giora, forthcoming). The answer to this question can be found in the graded salience hypothesis.

“According to the graded salience hypothesis, salient (i.e., coded) meanings of words or expressions (whose degree of salience is affected by e.g., frequency, familiarity, conventionality) and salient (e.g., frequent) structures should always be accessed and always, first, regardless of contextual bias or speaker’s intent.” (Giora, 1998: 85)

In general, the meaning that is activated first is not always the ‘literal’ meaning and neither is it always the intended meaning, but it is the most salient one.

But salience has not only a function in comprehension, it also influences the process of conversation itself, as salient meanings that have not been deactivated, because they have some role in constructing the meanings currently being built, may be easily reused by the discourse participants for special purposes (Giora, forthcoming). Keeping several semantic options open has cognitive costs, but it also has important benefits for the ongoing process of knitting conversational structures.

In the following we shall examine what are the communicational benefits of retaining, for some time in short term memory, the salient meanings of polysemous words.

## 6. The pragmatics of polysemy: Genres, maxims, functions and social factors

In 1986 David Cooper wrote about metaphor:

“The place of metaphorical talk within social and personal relationships has been badly ignored in the literature. In former times, neglect was due to the concentration on metaphor as a poetic device [...].

Latterly, neglect has been due in part to the emphasis on metaphors as cognitive tools, and in part to the habit of squeezing discussion of the impact of utterances upon people under the heading of ‘speech act theory’. Since metaphorical utterances do not constitute a kind of speech act, they then get left out in the cold.” (Cooper, 1986: 152)

The same can be said about polysemy and its function within social and personal relationships. This function is closely linked to what Roman Jakobson once established as the ‘poetic function’ of language. One of the main characteristics of ‘poetic’ language use in the widest sense of this term is the use of what Kittay calls ‘purposive ambiguity’, which embraces the use of irony, metaphor, intentional double readings and other uses of ‘polysemy’. Kittay points out that in most of our speech “we attempt to avoid overt ambiguity” (Kittay, 1987: 80). There are however, occasions when we do use it for certain purposes.

“In rhetorical modes such as advertising and political slogans, ambiguity is exploited for its attention-drawing quality. [...] An utterance in which a single meaning cannot be specified [...] draws attention to itself and thereby captures our attention.” (Kittay, 1987: 80)

This *purposive use of ambiguity* requires certain linguistic and metalinguistic skills. It “must work against a basic strategy we employ in understanding language: to interpret the linguistic utterance and its contextual setting so that we can arrive at a specified meaning” (1987: 80). Although the “strategy for specifying meaning is not easily thwarted”, acquiring the skill to do so for certain communicational purposes has social and even monetary rewards:

“Skill in purposive ambiguity can lend its purposes to potent ends: the increase of wealth, the acquisition of political power, the enjoyment and enhancement of art. We remark that advertisement-writers are richly rewarded; political speech- and slogan-writers much sought after; and literary writers, when successful, highly esteemed.” (Kittay, 1987: 80)

This attention-drawing function is most obvious in the language of advertising, such as displayed in examples (6) and (7). In (6), the attention of the potential client is drawn to the message by the double meaning of the adjective *hottest*, used in its salient ‘literal’ as well as metaphorical sense. A similar strategy is adopted in the following example, based on a syntactic ambiguity, which itself exploits the literal and metaphorical sense of *spreading*:

(22) A catering van delivering sandwiches to the university displayed the message: ‘XYZ’s sandwiches ... Our fame is spreading’.

The attention drawing function of multiple meanings is also extensively exploited in headlines, as any almost randomly selected example will demonstrate:

(23) On the front page of *The Times Magazine*, referring to an article on a famous boxer, we read: “The hit man. Robert Crampon is knocked out by naz” (where Robert Crampon refers to the reporter, naz to the boxer Prince Nassim) (10 October 1998).

Here the second ambiguity (*knocked out*) helps us to shed light on the first (*hit*)! And if you think that ambiguities in headlines don't really engage readers in 'conversations', you are wrong, as shown by the following Letter to the Editor. Here the writer plays with the two meanings of *to appeal to*: 'to make an earnest or formal request' and 'to be attractive or of interest to':

- (24) The Conservative Party Conference was just taking place, when the (not altogether much respected) leader of the conservative party, William Hague, appealed to party members to rally round him. The newspaper reported this and this letter to the editor followed: "Sir, Reference your front-page report today (early editions) headed: 'Hague appeals to disaffected Tories': his problem, I fear, is that he does not. Yours faithfully, XYZ" (*The Times*, 12 October, 1998)

However, the skilful use of purposive ambiguity can also be observed in ordinary conversational exchanges, especially at critical junctures of conversational turns. As such it can be studied in the framework of what Edmund Leech once called *interpersonal pragmatics* or *interpersonal rhetoric*.

In ordinary conversations we also attempt to draw attention to our utterances. We want to make a point, score a point, make people laugh, break the ice, bring about a turn in a conversation, and so on. We don't necessarily want to be rewarded in monetary terms, but we want to achieve conversational supremacy nevertheless.

It is normally assumed that for communication to work efficiently, we should avoid the multiplication of meanings. This is supported by Grice's description of the Maxim of Manner, according to which we have to 'be *perspicuous*', and therefore, amongst other things, 'avoid ambiguity'. However, we would argue that there is another opposing Maxim of Manner, according to which we have to 'be *conspicuous*' and therefore 'relish ambiguity'. This maxim could be linked to two of Leech's 'principles of pragmatics', the 'Interest Principle', which is part of interpersonal rhetoric and the 'Expressivity Principle', which is part of textual rhetoric.

According to the *Interest Principle* we prefer a conversation which is interesting, in the sense of having unpredictability or news value, to a conversation which is predicable (Leech, 1983: 156). It tells you to 'be witty'. Conversations as mere exchanges of information can be boring, whereas conversations which force us to infer more from the utterances than we actually get on the surface are the ones that we love to engage in, provoke, and prolong. Meaning depends on the information people can take out of an utterance, rather than the information that is already in it. While proof-reading this article we found a similar view expressed by Jacob Mey: 'that is to say: my utterance, in its final analysis, receives its meaning not only from what I put into it, but to an equally high degree from what the other get out of it'. (Mey, 1999: 236) What counts is semantic depth on the one hand (the depth of conversational implicatures) and the witty exploitation or creation of multiple meanings on the other.

Leech's *Expressivity Principle* is "concerned with effectiveness in a broad sense which includes expressive and aesthetic aspects of communication, rather than

simply with efficiency” (Leech, 1983: 68). We argue that the uses of polysemy are governed by one subjective Maxim of Manner which tells you to ‘be conspicuous’, to attract attention, and therefore not to avoid ambiguities. This maxim subsumes two general pragmatic principles: ‘Make your conversation as interesting/witty/surprising as possible’ and ‘Make your utterance/text as expressive as possible, but still accessible’.

But what are the specific functions of the uses of polysemy guided by these pragmatic principles and maxims? One can distinguish three very general functions and a multitude of more specific ones. The three general functions are:

- to inject the language you use with *subjectivity* (a topic that has for a long time been at the centre of the French ‘pragmatic’ tradition, the theory of enunciation; see Benveniste, 1971 [1958], and nowadays underlies work on grammaticalization, see Traugott, 1989);
- to jointly *reappropriate* the language we use as a shared, *inter-subjective* system for the expression of meaning, and (as a hidden result of these processes);
- to *remotivate* the language we use so that we can go on using it for ever new communicative purposes.

One way to achieve this subjective and intersubjective reappropriation and rejuvenation of language is through the negotiation of multiple meanings.

As shown above, there are various ways of creating and exploiting multiple meanings: in ironic language use, in metaphorical language use, in humorous language use, and so on. The social functions of these ‘rhetorical’ uses of language vary. Irony can function as a muted form of negation (Giora et al., 1998), as a muted form of criticism, or a muted form of praise (Dews and Winner, 1997).

The use of metaphors brings about changes in the conceptual systems and the belief systems of the interlocutors, but it also stabilizes the conceptual systems in which the ‘metaphors we live by’ are embedded (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). However, metaphorical language use has not only this cognitive function. Cohen (1979) sees the social function of metaphorical talk as presupposing and reinforcing ‘intimacy’ between speaker and hearer. Others have drawn attention to a similar role, the role of social bonding, in joking (see Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997). We claim that the creation of intimacy and social bonds is the social function of ‘polysemous’ talk in general.

Another important function of the purposive use of ambiguity can be summarized in the old rhetorical adage: to educate while entertaining. This function of ‘pragmatic polysemy’ is at the heart of most children’s films and television programmes (see Nerlich et al., 1998: 346). Here one can find a profusion of humorous uses of polysemy. The following examples are taken from *Cartoon Critters* (BBC 1, 31 August 1998), where two puppet dogs, Dogsboddy and Fleur present short cartoons interspersed with real wildlife documentaries:

- (25) Pingu, the famous Plasticine penguin, is trying to build a wind-sledge. Dogsboddy, the commentator says: ‘Pingu has problems with wind, if you know what I mean’.

- (26) We see seagulls feeding their chicks by regurgitating food, whereupon Dogsboddy says: 'Food's coming up'.
- (27) We see some elephants 'washing' themselves with blasts of dust, and Fleur says: 'Some animals like dishing the dirt'.

Children themselves also enjoy playing with polysemous expressions. This joy in the play with the multiple meanings of words seems to grow out of children's pretend play, their multiple uses of objects, their creation of multiple possible worlds and parallel social situations.

The frequency with which purposive ambiguity occurs in adult language depends on *social factors* which structure linguistic interaction in general. Sociolinguists have studied these factors under two headings: preverbal factors and interactional factors. How we interact in a conversation is determined on the one hand by our age, sex, our geographical origin and our socio-economic status, on the other by the purpose of the conversation, the field of discourse (or topic of discourse), the medium and mode (whether spoken or written, spontaneous or non-spontaneous, written to be spoken as if it had not been written, and so on), and the register (the degree of formality/informality).

In actual conversations, purposive ambiguity is most common in interaction between friends and members of family and least common in legal and technical discourse. The people conversing should also have equal status and have access to each other's background knowledge. The consumption of alcohol might increase the use and abuse of purposive ambiguity, innuendoes and double entendres, as social inhibitions are overcome and the efforts to make a 'serious' contribution to a conversation are abandoned. In such relaxed surroundings highly salient topics of conversation, such as, at the moment of writing this article, President Clinton and his sex, lies and audio-tapes, that is, the current (1998) particular socio-political constellations, will trigger purposive ambiguity.

## 7. Situations and triggers: Learning how to make the most of multiple meanings

Exploiting polysemous words is the 'easiest' way to draw attention to your contribution in a conversation. But you first have to acquire the skill to take advantage of the right constellation between two factors: the situational support and the available words. Both, situation and word(s), can serve as triggers, as illustrated in example (3), when Brigitte used the situation of a man standing on a ladder to create a humorous repartee, and (4), when Brigitte's words triggered a humorous response (such as 'Oh, we didn't know that such things went on at the university ...'). To use the language inherited from the interactional theory of metaphor: you have to insert the right *focus* (the figurative, or in our case, polysemic expression) in the right *frame* (the co-text and context), or you have to exploit the right focus in the right frame so as to achieve your communicative aim of being 'interesting', 'witty', and so on. As Delia Chiaro has pointed out in her book on the language of jokes:

“When it comes to lexical play using the options mentioned above [use of homophones, homonyms and polysemes], the joker has simply to find an environment in which to place an item which is already two-faced in its own right. In other words, rather than render an item ambiguous by meddling with the item itself, it is the situation around the item which has to be adapted to contain the duplicity already inherent in the focus item.” (Chiaro, 1992: 38)

Victor Raskin has studied the interaction between certain linguistic *triggers* (what Chiaro calls focus items) and *scripts* (what one could also call ‘frames’) in his book on the language of humour. He points out that it is not always necessary to place a two-faced item into the stream of conversation so as to achieve your ends, you can also exploit innocently available items, some of them serving as almost irresistible triggers for the practised ‘joker’:

“The presence of an *obvious trigger* in the situation starts perhaps more jokes than anything else. The popularity, accessibility and frequency of the simple pun can be explained by this factor. For many speakers, the mere exposure to a homonymous or polysemous word or phrase constitutes an irresistible temptation to make a joke. If the hostess at a dinner party mentions breasts or legs distributing the chicken, compulsive punners may be a menace and an embarrassment, and the attempt to avoid this situation by using such euphemisms as *dark meat* and *light meat* may provoke a reference to the blondes and brunettes in the company or at least to the time of day.” (Raskin, 1985: 141)

The best puns of this kind are based on the speaker discovering a potential trigger and one script already in position. She then constructs a text evoking another script which is incongruous with the given one. Quite often this other script is prompted by the other meaning(s) of the homonymous or polysemous trigger (Raskin, 1985: 142). More often than not the evoked script is a sexual one, as in example (4), but it doesn’t have to be:

(28) David had been sent an e-mail saying: ‘Your ring-binder files and ledger book have arrived and are in the photocopying office’. He wrote back: ‘This is all news to me! (The answer could be could be that the e-mail address David.Clarke@nottingham.ac.uk has only recently been passed to me, having previously belonged to someone else who has left the University, I believe.)’. He received the following answer: ‘Spot on. The chef at XYZ Hall has the same name. We shall attend to the matter without interfering with either server or menu. Watch this pla(i)ce. Yours, xyz’.

Here the trigger is the word *chef* which evokes the ‘meal preparing’ script while the sender is actually thinking inside the ‘computer’ script. As a result he exploits the polysemous words *server* and *menu* for humorous purposes. The homophone used at the end (*place/plaice*) is an added bonus. The trigger is not very obvious but has been skilfully exploited.

## 8. Semantic traps, trips of the tongue, and misunderstandings

Our awareness of polysemy affords us with opportunities to show our wit and to sparkle in conversation. However, sometimes polysemy can jump on us unawares. It

affords not only opportunities, it also has its hazards. As Jean Aitchison has pointed out:

“We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in the sticky strands.” (Aitchison, 1997: 80)

Whereas the exploitation of polysemies for communicational purposes can be compared quite readily with the exploitation or flouting of conversational implicatures or recognition of *intended* inferences, falling into semantic traps is based on an *unintentional* flouting of conversational principles (i.e. avoid ambiguity!) on the side of the speaker and the unashamed and, in a sense, uncooperative exploitation of the unintentional conversational effect on the side of the hearer (see example 4). The following examples, taken from a programme devoted to television ‘take outs’, entitled *It’ll be all right on the night* (ITV), illustrate the potential *hazards* of polysemy. The first example is situated on a gradient between polysemous opportunity and polysemous hazard:

- (29) A woman comes out of a house, because her husband has just arrived in the car packed with suitcases. The woman says: ‘Did you have a good trip?’ While saying it, she trips up on the steps, so her husband says: ‘Did you have a good trip?’

The next two examples show again quite clearly that words and phrases with salient sexual senses are the greatest hazards in conversation:

- (30) Two women are talking about the possibility of having a platonic relationship with a boyfriend. One of the women recounts her experience: ‘We got physical, very physical but then he pulled out and ...’ – laughter ...
- (31) A television cook chops the skin off a cucumber with a little hatchet. The reporter says: ‘You do almost everything with that chopper of yours, don’t you?’ – laughter ... (based on the slang expression ‘chopper’ for a certain male organ)

Although falling into semantic traps may be dangerous and more often than not embarrassing to the interlocutors and the onlookers, it normally leads to joint laughter and is, again, a source of social and semantic bonding.

What about genuine *misunderstandings* which arise from polysemy? They certainly occur, as this jocular example shows, based on the confusion between two salient meanings of a very common English word:

- (32) In the film *Dr Dolittle* (October 1998), all sorts of animals (pigs, pigeons, rats, dogs, ducks, sheep etc.) form a barricade to keep the police away from Dr Dolittle who is operating on a tiger. The pigeons shout: ‘Pigs go home! Pigs go

home!’ The pigs grumble: ‘Okay, if you see it like this ...’ and begin to march off, whereupon the pigeons shout: ‘No, not you, the police!’

## 9. Conclusion

The function of the pragmatic exploitation of multiple meanings in ordinary discourse is to draw attention to the utterances we make and to fit them into the ongoing flow of conversation. As a result, interlocutors keep meaning(s) alive, adjust the semantic bonds between various meanings, and cement the social bonds between themselves. Our ability to juggle with multiple meanings, especially at the ‘joints’ of conversational turns should be regarded as being part of our linguistic competence in general and of our communicative competence in particular, of what Helmuth Feilke has recently called common sense-competence or contextualizing competence (Feilke, 1994). Language is used to top up the context, not the other way round.

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