

SOME PROBLEMS OF HOMONYMY AND POLYSEMY IN MODERN ENGLISH

Homonymy is a widely spread phenomenon in many languages, especially in English. In this paper we are mainly interested in the most typical kind of homonyms -lexical homonyms.

As other phenomena in other sciences, homonymy also may be treated both synchronically and diachronically. A diachronic approach to it will testify that there are two main sources of homonymy: 1) convergent development of sound forms of two or more words of different origin; 2) divergent development of meanings of one polysemantic word. The second is also known as disintegration or split of polysemy.

It should be noted that from the point of view of differentiation between homonymy and polysemy cases of divergent meaning development are more doubtful than those of convergent sound development. It is due to the fact that in the case when two or three words of different origin accidentally coincide in sound we have a definite linguistic criterion (i.e. of etymology) to go by, while in the second one we have none. It is to the purpose to mention here that there is a scholar (V.I.Abayev) who accepts as homonymy only instances of etymologically different words; everything else in his opinion is polysemy. It is also interesting to note that out of 2540 homonyms listed in Oxford English dictionary only 7% are due to disintegration of polysemy, all the others are etymologically different. So the great majority of homonyms are formed due to convergent sound development. Thus, the conclusion is that in a diachronic approach the only more or less reliable criterion is that of etymology.

When treating homonymy synchronically, it is even harder to draw a demarcation line between homonymy and polysemy, as the criterion of etymology becomes irrelevant. Moreover, there is no (or almost no) safe means of differentiating between the meanings of one polysemantic word and different words identical in sound form. The traditional semantic

criterion which is based on the delimitation between related and unrelated meanings is very subjective; so, it is not reliable.

A criterion of distribution has been suggested by some linguists., but it is helpful mainly in cases of grammatical and lexico-grammatical homonymy, as words belonging to different parts of speech differ in their syntactic function and, therefore, in distribution.

A criterion of context is also of little help in distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy; it can only serve to differentiate meanings.

Another kind of procedure called 'explanatory transformation' may be used here. It is based on the assumption that if different senses rendered by the same phonetic complex can be defined with the help of an identical kernel word-group, they may be considered sufficiently near to be regarded as variants of the same word, if not, they are homonyms.

Thus, all the above mentioned means (though not formal) can help us to some extent in differentiating between polysemy and homonymy. Yet, the truth is that there exists no universal criterion for the distinction between polysemy and homonymy, unless one accepts the solution offered by Abayev and follows the data of etymology. But the etymological criterion may very often lead to distortion of the present-day situation The English vocabulary of today is not a replica of the Old English vocabulary with some additions from borrowing. It is in many respects a different system, and this system will not be revealed if the lexicographer is guided by etymological criteria only.

Now let us see how this problem of polysemy and homonymy is treated by different dictionaries. We shall consider a few examples:

Far as mortal eye can compass sight

The mountain-howitzer, the broken road,

The bristling palisade, the force overflowed,

The stationed bands, the never-vacant watch.. .(Byron)

Taking from the recesses of their pure white band-box those flat, grey curls...(Galsworthy)

It is clear that the semantic structure of these words is quite different, band, denoting 'a group of people joined together for a common purpose'

band₂ – “a narrow strip of cloth used to bind, line, decorate”. The etymological picture of band₁, looks like this: Fr.bande < ML.banda < Goth.binda < bindan, BIND; that of band₂: ME. <ON. band < Fr. bande < OFr. bende < ML. benda < Goth, binda < bindan, BIND. It is worth mentioning here that the Anglo-Armenian, Anglo-Russian dictionaries and the Webster's New World Dictionary Of The American Language have two separate entries for band₁ and band₂, while Webster's New School And Office Dictionary and Webster Handy College Dictionary have one entry for them. The thing is that the source of both band₁ and band₂ is one and the same Anglo-Saxon word 'bindan'. Therefore, it must have been a polysemantic word in some ancient period of the history of the English language. And though its meanings through the development of the language went greatly apart, yet a certain connection between them can be felt even now. So it is doubtful whether they ought to be considered homonymous or polysemous.

A similar process has taken place with arm₁ 'an upper limb of the human body' and arm₂ 'any instrument used in fighting; weapon'. The semantic structure and etymology of these two words are so closely interwoven that it is hard to separate them. Compare arm₁ (ME. < OE. earm, cog. with L. armus, Gr. harnos, a joint, IE. base *ar-, whence ART) and arm₂ (ME. & OFr. armes, pl < L. arma, weapons, akin to armus, shoulder < IE. base *ar-, to join). In spite of all these ties and communities arm₁ and arm₂ are regarded homonyms in a number of dictionaries (with the exception of Webster Handy College Dictionary).

Now let's pass on to other disputable cases. Words like watch, capital, voice, class, party, spring, etc. belong here. Let's inspect the following two sentences:

"They tell me Jolyon's bought another house", said his father's voice close by. (Galsworthy)

From the point of view of form the passive voice is the marked member of the opposition, whereas the active voice is unmarked.(Ilyish)

A question arises: how do the compilers of authoritative dictionaries account for putting those two different words into one entry? Perhaps they

take into consideration the etymology? Well, we agree that voice₁ 'sound made through the mouth' and voice₂ 'any of the forms of a verb showing the connection between the subject and the verb' are the result of the development of one and the same Indo-European word * wekw > L.vox > OFr.vois. But if only the criterion of etymology is taken into account, then we could equally well call polysemous band₁ and band₂, or arm₁ and arm₂, for, in fact, they are historically traced back to one word. Besides, as was already shown, a more vivid semantic relationship is felt between the above mentioned words than between voice₁ and voice₂. It is interesting to note that in the Anglo-Armenian dictionary there is one entry for both the latter words, while there is another entry for 'voice' in the sense of 'the right to speak, vote, etc.'. This is beyond any logic. By the way, it is easy to prove that voice₁ and voice₂ are homonyms with the help of explanatory transformation - a simple procedure, though not very rigorous. The definition for voice₁ and the definition for voice₂ do not contain the same kernel element that would render the invariant common basis of their meaning. In other words, it is impossible to use the same kernel element present in the first variant of voice (i.e.sound) to explain the meaning of the second variant.

Let's proceed and study another pair of sentences:

Bobbing and bounding upon the spring cushions, silent, swaying to each motion of their chariot... (GALSWORTHY)

It was certainly different from any spring he had ever known, for spring was within him, not without. (GALSWORTHY)

At first sight the underlined words seem to have nothing in common whatsoever. But let's examine the whole semantic structure of the word 'spring' as given in Webster's New' World Dictionary to understand the case better: spring n. - 1. a jump or leap; 2. the quality of elasticity; resilience; 3. a device that returns to its original form after being forced out of shape; 4.a) a flow of water from the ground; b) any source, origin; 5. the time when plants begin to spring up and grow; the vernal season.

The examination contributes to the fact that between every meaning of this word there exists some link. If this is further confirmed by etymology; spring < ME. & OE. springe (A.S. springan). The word 'spring' is regarded as

polysemantic in The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Active Study Dictionary of English, in Webster's New World Dictionary, Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, Chambers School Dictionary, in Webster Handy College Dictionary and Webster's New School And Office Dictionary. Nevertheless, in Muller's and Galperin's Anglo-Russian dictionaries, in the Anglo-Armenian dictionary, in Wilson's Modern Russian Dictionary For English Speakers and Hornby's Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary the first four meanings of the word make up the semantic structure of the polysemantic word spring_1 , while the fifth meaning is set apart as spring_2 - a homonym to spring_1 . The question whether the first or the second view is more acceptable remains open to discussion.

In the end we would like to make some concluding remarks. The problem of distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy is one of the most intricate problems in modern linguistic science. It is also one of the least studied problems. The difficulties are mainly caused by the lack of a unique criterion, by the confusion in applying diachronic and synchronic treatment to the phenomenon, by the ever-changing state of the language due to its continuous development, and so on. A great deal of work is expected to be done to overcome these obstacles and throw light upon the problem. The research work ought not to be limited within the sphere of lexicology or morphology only. Here a helping hand can be lent on the part of comparative-historical linguistics, semasiology, phonetics, history of the language and of the country, etc.

The problem of finding a unique criterion for distinguishing homonymy from polysemy is relevant and important for lexicography and linguistics generally not only from a theoretical point of view. It is also of practical value as upon an efficient arrangement of dictionary entries depends the amount of time spent by the readers in looking up a word: a lexicographer will either save or waste his readers' time and effort.