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Contextualism and Polysemy

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that polysemy is a two-sided phenomenon. It can be reduced neither to pragmatic modulation nor to ambiguity, for it is a mixture of both. The senses of a polysemous expression result from pragmatic modulation (one sense is a modulation of another) but they are stored in memory, as the senses of an ambiguous expression are. The difference with straightforward ambiguity is that the modulation relations between the senses are transparent to the language users : the senses are felt as related — they form a *family* of senses. In other words, whereas two homonymous expressions (e.g. 'bank' and 'bank') are different expressions, with the same phonological realization but distinct meanings, a polyseme is a single expression, i.e. a *semantic* as well as a phonological unit. It has *one* meaning, which should not be confused with the separate senses which it contributes in context. Different ways of thinking of that unitary meaning (Ruhl's and Langacker's) will be discussed, and consequences drawn for the debate between more or less radical version of contextualism.

1.

As I understand it, the debate over contextualism bears on the question : how far does context-sensitivity extend ? Is it a limited and circumscribed phenomenon, pertaining to a specific class of expressions, or does it generalize to all lexical items ?

Contextualism is the view that context-sensitivity generalizes. From a contextualist perspective, indexicality is only one form of context-sensitivity. There is context-sensitivity whenever a distinction has to be drawn between an expression's lexical meaning (invariant across occurrences) and its (contextually variable) semantic contribution. Kaplan's character/content distinction for indexicals is only one particular instance of that general distinction.

There are two main lines of argument supporting the generalization of context-sensitivity to all open-class lexical items (Recanati 2004, 2010). The first one corresponds to the position I dubbed 'Truth-Conditional Pragmatics' (TCP). Just as the content of an indexical depends upon the context of use, the content carried by an ordinary, non indexical expression is said to depend upon whether, and how, the literal meaning of the expression is 'modulated' in context. Modulation covers processes of sense extension (loosening/broadening) and sense narrowing (enrichment) as well as semantic transfer (metonymy) and possibly other phenomena.

Admittedly, there is nothing in the linguistic material that forces modulation to take place. Modulation is optional and entirely a matter of 'speaker's meaning'. Still, according to TCP, it affects truth-conditional content. It is hard to deny that a sentence like 'The ham sandwich stinks' carries distinct truth-conditional contents depending on whether the description is taken literally as referring to the sandwich or metonymically as referring to the person who ordered it. Similarly, 'John is crazy' carries distinct truth-conditions when 'crazy' is taken literally and when it is a hyperbole. So TCP puts modulation on a par with indexical resolution ('saturation') : it treats it as a 'primary' pragmatic process, i.e. a process which maps the linguistic meaning of the sentence to the proposition it expresses in context. There are also secondary pragmatic processes which determine what is meant on the basis of what is said (viz. conversational

implicatures), but modulation, like saturation (and unlike genuine implicatures), directly affects what is said. Such is the gist of TCP.

When modulation takes place, we need to distinguish between lexical meaning and contributed content. The lexical meaning is the input to modulation, and the contributed content its output. Now modulation potentially affects every expression. This justifies generalizing the distinction between conventional meaning and contributed content to all expressions, as TCP does. TCP therefore counts as a form of Contextualism. Yet it is not the most radical form, because (as I have just said) modulation is optional. Its being optional means that it is always possible to use an expression strictly and literally, without modulation. In such cases of zero-modulation, the conventional meaning *is* the contributed content. So the generalization of context-sensitivity which results from adopting TCP is potential rather than actual.

But it is possible to generalize context-sensitivity in a more radical fashion. What, in earlier work, I called the 'Wrong Format view' claims that lexical meaning is constitutively unable to figure as a constituent of content ; it does not have the proper format for that (Recanati 2004 : 140). On this view, which corresponds to the second line of argument announced above, contributed content is *necessarily* distinct from lexical meaning.

It is this line of argument which I will pursue in what follows. I will consider the phenomenon of polysemy and argue that it supports the Wrong Format view, hence a radical form of Contextualism. But first, I will discuss a problem which polysemy raises for TCP.

2.

TCP insists that modulation affects truth-conditional content, despite being a matter of speaker's meaning. One of the reasons offered in favour of the view that modulation is a *primary* pragmatic process (one that contributes to the determination of 'what is said') is the phenomenology of direct access which characterizes modulation in contrast to implicature derivation. In their contextual understanding of words, users of the language are not necessarily aware of the literal meaning undergoing modulation. They may only be aware of the output, while implicature derivation requires the 'availability' of some primary content which *grounds* the implicature. Modulation does not impose any such availability requirement (or so TCP claims). The availability requirement is a hallmark of *secondary* pragmatic processes, those which take what is said as input and yield secondary meanings as outputs.

The view should be properly understood. It does not say that language users are *actually* unaware of the literal meaning of the word type they use. Awareness of literal meaning is not ruled out, but it comes as an extra : understanding a modulated use does not *require* the subject to realize that the sense resulting from modulation differs from the literal sense of the expression. To reach the notion of the literal sense of an expression, one must be able to reflect upon the uses of that expression *across contexts* so as to isolate the invariant features that make up literal meaning. Such metalinguistic reflection is a form of theorizing, which some authors (e.g. Camp 2006, citing Cappelen and Lepore 1997 and Soames 2002) consider as beyond the reach of 'ordinary speakers'.¹ What they presumably mean by 'ordinary speaker' is a language user to

¹ 'This is indeed a theoretical project : as Cappelen and Lepore (1997) and Scott Soames (2002, p. 68) say, ordinary speakers don't have intuitions about the commitments

whom we credit *only* those abilities that are necessary for the communicative task at hand. Thus understood, the claim that ordinary users of the language don't have intuitions about literal meaning is consonant with TCP. According to TCP, the abilities which support the modulated use of language do *not* include as a proper part the metadiscursive abilities underlying the reflective grasp of literal meaning (however real and important these metadiscursive abilities may be).

To sum up, TCP claims that modulated content has direct-access phenomenology and argues, on that basis, that modulation is a primary pragmatic process. This is the *argument from directness*. Now, that argument raises a significant objection, in connection with polysemy.

The senses of a polysemous item bear modulation relations to each other. By this I mean that one sense can be derived from another through modulation, possibly through a *chain* of modulation operations. Take for example the deverbal noun 'drink'. Like the verb it is based on, it is polysemous and carries both the senses *drink* (in general) and *alcoholic drink*. Now it is pretty clear that the more specific sense can be derived from the more general sense through enrichment/narrowing. Not only it can be derived that way, but there is every reason to believe that the more specific sense actually descends from the general sense through that route. As Benveniste pointed out long ago, modulation is the source of polysemy.² Senses which are initially generated through modulation undergo conventionalization, thus enriching the meaning of the expression. After conventionalization, the expression (type) is associated with a *family* of related senses, bearing modulation relations to each other (e.g. a general sense and a variety of more specific senses). Dictionaries keep track of these senses and their relations, which are known to the language users.

Because of the close connection between modulation and polysemy, it is convenient, when one wants to illustrate modulation without having to provide a detailed description of the context of use, to appeal to the various senses a polysemous expression routinely takes. Most of the examples of modulation I give in *Literal Meaning* thus involve polysemous expressions. For example, I claim that, through loosening/broadening, the verb 'swallow', which literally applies to living organisms with a digestive system, can also apply to an ATM ('the ATM swallowed my credit card'). Several people have pointed out that that extended sense of 'swallow' is actually recorded in dictionaries.³ The verb-type 'swallow' is polysemous because it carries that modulated sense as well as the literal sense, and can contribute either of them depending on the context of use.

But the systematic use of examples involving polysemous expressions undermines the argument from directness or at least weakens it considerably (Camp 2006 : 290). If, as TCP claims, there is direct access to the modulated content in the relevant examples, that can be attributed to the fact that *the senses of a polysemous expression are conventionalized and can be accessed directly (without going through modulation)*. Thus Camp writes :

invariantly undertaken across contexts. (...) Ordinary speakers do have intuitions, however unrefined, about commitments undertaken *in* contexts.' (Camp 2006 : 305)

² Benveniste 1974 : 227. This familiar idea can already be found in the pioneering works of the late nineteenth-century semanticists ; see e.g. Darmesteter (1886) and Whitney (1897).

³ I am indebted to Esther Romero and Belén Soria for discussion of this point.

Dead and dying metaphors like:

(13) The ATM swallowed my credit card,

(16) He vented his anger,

provide the strongest cases for a 'direct expression' view, because we do jump so easily and unreflectively to their metaphorical interpretations. However, it's important to remember that highly routinized metaphors like these lie at one extreme on a spectrum from conventionality to novelty. (Camp 2006 : 290)

So even if there *is* direct access to the modulated content in cases of polysemy, it does not follow that there is also direct access to modulated content in *unconventionalized*, novel instances of modulation. On the contrary, Camp points out, the less conventionalized the modulated meaning is, the more the subjects seem to be aware of the coexistence of two layers of content (literal and non-literal).

As I shall insist throughout this paper, polysemy is a two-sided phenomenon. It is both generative (since senses can be derived from one another according to modulation patterns) and conventional (the senses are stored in memory). Accordingly there are two perspectives on polysemy, which emphasize one or the other aspect. TCP insists on the generative aspect, taking the senses of a polysemous expression to be (more or less conventionalized) instances of modulation. On the alternative picture suggested by Camp's objection, the truth-conditional effects TCP ascribes to modulation are due to conventionalization. It is because the senses of a polysemous expression are conventionalized that they can be accessed directly ('without going through modulation', as I said above in describing the position). On that view polysemy is not a form of context-sensitivity but a form of ambiguity. Ambiguous expressions admittedly contribute different contents in different contexts, but this does not threaten the literalist equation of invariant meaning and contributed content ; for ambiguous expressions carry *distinct* invariant meanings (corresponding to the distinct contents they can contribute). With indexicals and genuine context-sensitivity, the situation is completely different : there is a *single* invariant meaning, and *distinct* contributed contents.

3.

A polysemous expression makes different contributions in different contexts. Since the contributions are conventionalized (in contrast to *novel* instances of modulation), it is tempting to construe polysemous expressions as straightforwardly *ambiguous*. Ambiguous expressions contribute different contents in different contexts, but, as I have said, this does not threaten the literalist equation of invariant meaning and contributed content (since ambiguous expressions also carry *distinct* invariant meanings).

Tempting though it is, the ambiguitist approach to polysemy briefly sketched in section 2 raises a significant difficulty : it cannot make room for the distinction between polysemy and homonymy. Two homonymous expressions (e.g. 'bank' and 'bank') are different expressions, with the same phonological realization but distinct meanings. A polysemous expression is supposed to be something else. A polysemous expression admittedly carries distinct senses, but *these senses are felt as related* : they form a *family* of senses. That is what characterizes polysemy in contrast to homonymy. So instead of two different expressions with the same shape but distinct meanings (homonymy), what

we seem to have is a single expression, i.e. a *semantic* as well as a phonological unit (polysemy). The expression has a single meaning which (depending on one's theory) either accounts for, or supervenes on, the diversity of its conventional uses. That overall meaning of the polysemous expression should not be confused with the separate senses which the expression contributes in context. If we don't allow polysemous expressions such an inherent meaning, distinct from the various senses they contribute in context, we are bound to *deny* that there is a difference between polysemy and homonymy. In other words : either polysemy does not exist (as a phenomenon distinct from homonymy), or, if it exists, it cannot be accounted for along ambiguit lines.

Of course, a defender of the ambiguit approach may be happy to deny that polysemy exists as a phenomenon distinct from homonymy. The 'feeling of relatedness' I talked about in connection with the senses of polysemous expressions such as 'drink' undoubtedly exists, but why should it matter theoretically ? As Falkum writes,

it is not clear that speakers' intuitions about relatedness and unrelatedness of senses have any bearing on the way in which individuals use and understand words (Lyons 1977b: 552), quite unlike, for instance, intuitions about grammaticality, which have been considered the basic data to be explained within generative grammar. This is because it seems that many of our intuitions about sense relations might be reflective (i.e. arrived at by thinking about language) and thus not a direct reflex of the way in which word meanings are represented in our linguistic systems. (Falkum 2011 : 18)

As one referee for this journal noted, this objection is especially pressing if one accepts that polysemy is conventionalised modulation, given that language users do not have to be (pre-reflectively) aware of the literal sense undergoing modulation but only of the output. This reinforces the idea that intuitions about the relations between the senses of a polysemous expression may themselves be a reflective achievement rather than a core aspect of our competence with polysemes.

I have a couple of points to make in response to that objection. First, virtually all polysemy theorists do accept that polysemy is a genuine phenomenon distinct from homonymy. If we start from that assumption (i.e. take it for granted), then my claim is that the ambiguit cannot account for the difference since she resists positing a single, inherent meaning for the polysemous expression, over and above the conventionalised senses it contributes in particular contexts. Second, the assumption itself can be argued for on the grounds that what characterizes polysemous expressions is less a finite list of *discrete* senses (the sort of thing one posits for homonymous expressions) than an open-ended *continuum* of senses to which it is always possible to add in a creative manner (Recanati 2004 : 134-135). This open-endedness/continuity is manifested in use and documented in corpus studies (see next section), so when I say that language users 'know' the modulation relations that hold between the senses of a polysemous expression (i.e. that they do not merely know the senses themselves), this can be interpreted not in terms of intuitions they have, but rather in terms of abilities they manifest to exploit these modulation relations creatively in new contexts of use.

Be that as it may, I will *assume* that polysemy is distinct from homonymy in what follows ; that is, I will assume that polysemous expressions possess a kind of semantic unity which merely homonymous expressions lack. The issue I want to focus on is that of the nature of that (putative) semantic unity.

4.

What *is* the inherent meaning of a polysemous expression ? According to Charles Ruhl, polysemous expressions possess a single, highly abstract meaning, of which all the contributed senses are modulations (Ruhl 1989). That abstract meaning is not consciously available ; only the contributed senses are. As Ruhl puts it,

General abstract meanings elude consciousness ; the interpretations of the conscious mind by necessity are oriented toward reality, and thus are not purely semantic, but compounds of both semantic and pragmatic. The general abstract meaning is unconscious, providing the foundation for more specific conscious distinctions. (Ruhl 1989 : 51)

For example, it is traditional to distinguish an abstract sense and a concrete sense for many polysemous expressions, and that distinction itself is taken as evidence of polysemy. But Ruhl argues that the expressions in question — those which can take either an abstract or a concrete sense, e.g. the prepositions — are actually monosemic. Their abstract meaning is unitary, he says, but it is *underspecified* in the concrete/abstract dimension, in such a way that both the abstract and the concrete senses are modulations (enrichment or, as he says, ‘pragmatic specializations’) of the underspecified meaning.

Because the underspecified meaning lies below the level of consciousness, what intuitions reveal are the contributed senses. These senses depend on context (both linguistic and extralinguistic) , while ‘a word’s semantics should concern what it contributes in all contexts’ (Ruhl 1989 : 87). The task of the theorist is therefore to imagine a variety of possible contexts (again, both linguistic and extralinguistic) and to extract what is common to the contents intuitively carried by the word with respect to them (Camp 2006 : 305). But that widespread methodology has significant limitations, Ruhl points out. Because of its reliance on conscious intuition and a small data-base of invented examples, it leads to the postulation of a few discrete, intuitable senses for polysemous expressions. Ruhl recommends changing the methodology and collecting *a large set of data*, corresponding to *actual uses* of the polysemous expression under study. Actual data are more diverse and richer in detail than invented examples.⁴ A wide range of actual data shows that there is much more diversity in sense than one would realize from the armchair, and *also* much more unity and continuity behind the diversity : ‘there are unconscious linguistic generalizations that our usual theories, based on fractured conscious categories, have not sufficiently acknowledged’ (Ruhl 1989 : 37).

According to Ruhl, the task of the theorist is to *discover* lexical meaning by extracting from the data some abstract, unitary schema which *all* the uses fit. To achieve that goal, distinctions which lead to a proliferation of senses (concrete/abstract, causal/noncausal, dynamic/static etc.) are to be neutralized by appealing to underdetermination. Values along these dimensions are what differentiates the senses, and such values come from the (linguistic and extralinguistic) context, not from the

⁴ ‘Invented sentences rarely show the radical unexpected specificity of detail and context that actual data provide. Invented sentences tend to be simplistic even when complex : well-behaved (and overexemplified) nouns and verbs link in stereotypic ways’ (Ruhl 1989 : 15).

word. Analyses which posit some kind of ambiguity in the word itself are therefore guilty of what Barwise and Perry (1983 : 38) call the fallacy of misplaced information :

What often happens in polysemic analyses is that contextual contributions to meaning are duplicated into the word ; the original monosemic sense vanishes. (...) In many instances, this changes a word with potentially infinite contextual meanings into a polysemic word with only few 'distinct' meanings. (Ruhl 1989 : xii)⁵

As an illustration, Ruhl provides a corpus of nearly 400 linguistic contexts in which the highly polysemous verb 'bear' is used. This verb is said by the OED to have the following four basic senses (alongside a great number of more specialized senses) :

1. to carry
2. to sustain, support, uphold
3. to push, press
4. to bring forth, produce, give birth to

According to Bolinger, who takes an ambiguitist line, the inherent meaning of 'bear' underlying the diversity is vanishingly thin and possibly nonexistent. That verb

is a veritable jungle of idioms and collocational restrictions with no heart to pump blood through it but with peripheral organs that manage to keep functioning anyway. Idioms include *bear up*, *bear down*, *bear the brunt*, *bear right*, *bear left*. Collocations include *bear a resemblance*, *bear a grudge*, *bear a child*, *bear a burden* — we are less likely *to carry a burden* and quite unlikely *to bear a load*. (Bolinger 1976 : 9, cited in Ruhl 1989 : 25-26)

However, after analysing the occurrences of 'bear' in his corpus and their interrelations, Ruhl eventually denies that '*bear* breaks into a number of discrete semantic parts' (Ruhl 1989 : 63). It is only the request for intuitable senses and the paucity of examples which lead to 'fractured conscious categories'.

If we consider Ruhl's data, we see, indeed, that the senses which the OED distinguish (i) bear modulation relations to each other, (ii) vary along continua, and (iii) result from the productive interaction between the abstract meaning of the verb and the linguistic and extralinguistic context. Where Bolinger sees idiomaticity, Ruhl discloses regularities and productivity. The key point, again, is that for Ruhl the highly abstract meaning of 'bear' is underspecified in many dimensions (not only *concreteness*, the dimension of underspecification I already mentioned, but also *movement*, *agentivity*, and so forth), thus giving rise to many distinct intuitable senses when appropriate values along these dimensions are provided by the linguistic or extralinguistic context.

I said that there are different ways to look at polysemy, which emphasize either the 'modulation' side or the 'conventionalization' side (or both). The most extreme conventionalist approach is the 'ambiguitist' proposal which reduces polysemy to homonymy. On the other side, Ruhl's proposal is no less extreme. He argues that

⁵ See also p. 86 : 'A considerable part of alleged lexical meaning is actually supplied by other means ; words are highly abstract in inherent meaning, often too much so for conscious understanding. It follows that all use of language is heavily modulated.'

polysemous expressions are actually monosemic if we consider only their lexical meaning : the diversity of senses is due entirely to modulation phenomena. For Ruhl as for Bierwisch (1981 : 387ff, cited in Ruhl 1989 : xi), the main semantic characteristic of polysemous expressions is their high degree of schematicity or underdetermination.

Insofar as the lexical meaning is too schematic to reach consciousness, contextual elaboration into determinate senses is a mandatory operation, for Ruhl. This is similar to what Fodor says about vision in *the Modularity of Mind* : when we open our eyes, we can't help but see the world around us ; the schematic data provided by vision are automatically turned into a full-fledged representation of the environment. Likewise, the step from meaning to content is automatic and mandatory : in discourse understanding, the meaning of a polysemous expression is automatically and obligatorily elaborated into a contextually appropriate content. That's arguably why linguistic meaning eludes consciousness. (I will return to the mandatoriness issue in the concluding section.)

5.

What about the conventionalization side of polysemy ? Ruhl does not actually deny that the 'idioms and collocations' Bolinger talks about (*bear up, bear down, bear the brunt, bear right, bear left, bear a resemblance, bear a grudge, bear a child, bear a burden*) are stored in memory, along with the senses they typically express ; but he thinks that does not significantly affect the overall picture.

To give another example of Bolinger's that Ruhl discusses, a set phrase like 'out of patience' is stored in memory, as a unit endowed with both form and meaning. When the expression is used, the meaning is accessed directly rather than generated :

Suppose we took the phrase *out of patience* and looked for an underlying representation. It would have to contain the same *out of* that is found in *out of money, out of time, out of ice cream*, out of anything that one formerly had a supply of but had no longer. (...) [But] when we say *out of patience* we are not pulling *out of* and *patience* separately from storage and putting them together but retrieving the whole thing at once. (Bolinger 1976 : 3, cited in Ruhl 1989 : 22)

Note that there are two distinct issues here. First issue : Is the meaning of 'out of patience' composed from the meanings of 'out of' and 'patience' ? Can that meaning be generated from the meanings of the parts, or is it a brute fact that needs to be separately encoded ? Second issue : is the phrase, with its meaning, actually stored and retrieved as a unit ?

As should be apparent from my formulations, the difference between the two issues is modal. The second issue bears on the *actuality* of storage as a unit for the set phrase, while the first issue bears on the *necessity* of such a separate encoding. Even if the phrase 'out of patience' turns out to be stored as a unit in memory and globally retrieved, its meaning may *still* be derivable from the meanings of the parts, in such a way that it does not *need* to be separately encoded (even though it actually is). As Ruhl points out,

Even if a phrase is stored as a unit, it need not be isolated from the rest of the language ; it can still be the same *out of*. What has to be shown by idiomatians, and not merely assumed, is that the 'fixedness' of a phrase necessarily changes the semantic status of its words. (Ruhl 1989 : 23)

The view that fixedness (conventionalization as a unit) changes semantic status and precludes generativity follows from a certain 'conception of generality' which Ruhl obviously questions, and which many contemporary linguists have come to reject.⁶ According to that conception, if something (e.g. a particular construction, with a particular meaning) is represented individually in the grammar which spells out the linguistic knowledge of a particular language user, that thing cannot be 'computed': it must be idiomatic, like 'kick the bucket' (otherwise, it wouldn't be individually listed and stored in memory as a unit). Like Ruhl, Langacker explicitly challenges that conception:

⁶ Its rejection is one of the main tenets of 'construction grammar'. Langacker calls that conception 'reductionist' and traces it to the following principle:

If the rules of grammar fully describe the composition of a particular structure, that structure is not itself individually listed in the grammar... Separately listing an expression computable by general rules would be redundant (and redundancy is evil). (Langacker 1991 : 261)

Langacker offers an alternative conception, which 'views the linguistic system as a massive, highly redundant inventory of conventional units. These units run the gamut from full generality to complete idiosyncrasy' (Langacker 1991 : 264):

It is plausible, psychologically, to suppose that speakers represent linguistic structures in different ways, with considerable redundancy built in. It is also reasonable to assume that many structures are learned as established units even when they also follow from general principles – the computability of a structure does not in principle preclude its learnability and inclusion as a distinct element in the cognitive representation of the linguistic system (Langacker 1991 : 262)

In support of his view Langacker mentions plural forms like 'dogs', 'trees', 'toes', 'pins', 'bells', 'walls', and 'eyes':

Clearly, a regular rule of plural formation can be given for English, and these expressions conform to the rule. According to the principle of reductionism, incorporating this rule in the grammar of English precludes the listing of individual plural forms like *dogs*, *trees*, *toes*, etc. The rules allow their computation from the noun stems, hence their inclusion in the grammar would be redundant.

The goal of cognitive grammar is to characterize those psychological structures that constitute a speaker's linguistic ability, i.e. his grasp of established linguistic convention. This notion inspires an alternate approach to forms like *dogs*, *trees*, *toes*, etc. A typical speaker uses frequently-occurring expressions like these on countless occasions; at least some of them must attain the status of units (i.e. familiar, thoroughly mastered structures – cognitive routines). In fact, the pattern itself can only be learned through the observation of instantiating expressions, some of which most likely become units before the pattern is extracted; it is implausible to suppose that these plural forms suddenly lose their status as familiar units when the rule is acquired, and must henceforth be computed from scratch. (Langacker 1991 : 263)

The grammar of a language is defined as a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units. (...) Also included in the grammar are schemas extracted to represent the commonality observed in specific expressions (both units and nonunits). (...) *The coexistence in the grammar of the schema and instantiations affords the speaker alternate ways of accessing a complex but regular expressions with unit status : it can simply be activated directly, or else the speaker can employ the schema to compute it.* (Langacker 1991 : 263-4 ; emphasis mine)

So it is quite possible to hold, with Ruhl, that polysemous words possess a highly abstract (and underspecified) meaning which they carry in all their occurrences and which is responsible for the senses they contextually express, while *also* accepting that some of the contextual senses they regularly contribute have become conventionalized and are themselves stored in the language user's memory. Such a hybrid perspective is made possible by the rejection of the reductionist conception of generality by both Ruhl and Langacker.

6.

Although he makes room for conventionalization, Ruhl tends to eliminate it from the properly *semantic* picture. Even if some particular senses resulting from modulation are conventionalized, they are not an aspect of the *linguistic meaning* of the expression, in Ruhl's framework. The linguistic meaning of a polysemous expression is the abstract, pre-modulation schema which fits all its uses.

Conventionalization exists, for Ruhl, *but it does not affect meaning*, or not directly.⁷ This is similar to the idea, floated in the seventies, that there are 'conventions of use' that are not 'meaning conventions' : e.g. the convention that 'Can you pass the salt ?' is a request that should be complied with rather than a question that should be answered.⁸ Literally, 'Can you pass the salt ?' *is* a question. But it is also conventionally associated with a nonliteral meaning which it typically conveys. Likewise, polysemes have a (very abstract) literal meaning according to Ruhl, but they are also conventionally associated with determinate senses which they regularly convey and which, despite being conventional, are pragmatic rather than semantic. To be sure, lexical meaning may be affected indirectly by the conventionalization process : the emergence of new conventional senses may require more abstract schemas to subsume the expanded variety of conventional uses. But this is a *diachronic* matter (over time, repeated patterns of modulation lead to changes in lexical meaning).

Ruhl's theory falls at the modulationist end of the modulation/conventionalization divide, the ambiguity theory at the other end. Now Langacker offers an intermediate position. He takes a word to be a symbolic unit made up of a phonological pole and a semantic pole. When a word is polysemous, the semantic pole is a *complex category*, which Langacker represents as a network :

A lexical item of frequent occurrence displays a substantial, often impressive variety of interrelated senses and conventionally sanctioned usages ; its set of

⁷ Ruhl does not talk about these issues explicitly ; what follows is a friendly reconstruction.

⁸ See Searle 1975 and especially Morgan 1978.

established values can be regarded as a complex category... A speaker's conventional knowledge of such a category cannot be reduced to a single characterization. Even when all its attested values are plausibly analysed as instantiations of a single abstract schema, or as extensions from a single prototype, there is no way to predict from the schema or prototype alone precisely which array of instantiations or extensions — out of all the conceivable ones — happen to be conventionally exploited within the speech community. (Langacker 1987 : 370)

Contrary to the ambiguiist, Langacker acknowledges the semantic unity of polysemous expressions : he ascribes them an inherent meaning, as Ruhl does. But, unlike Ruhl, he views the meaning of a polysemous expression as *internally diverse* and network-like.

For Langacker, the meaning of the polysemous expression is directly affected by the conventionalization facts. The meaning of a polysemous expression is *the network of senses it is conventionally associated with* (including the modulation relations between the senses). The senses that result from modulating prior senses are predictable (that's the 'generative' aspect), but the conventionalization of these modulations, hence the shape of the network, is not predictable : the conventions of the language might have been different. The conventionalization facts have to be learnt, and they differ from language to language. This re-introduces the element of idiosyncrasy noted by Bolinger and others as characteristic of polysemy.⁹

The nodes in the network are mental representations of varying degrees of specificity (some highly abstract and schematic, like Ruhl's lexical meanings, other more particularized, down to episodic representations of particular instances). Crucially, these representations bear 'categorizing relationships' to each other.¹⁰ Langacker's categorizing relationships are, or are closely related to, modulation relations. Application of a schema to something which specifies or instantiates it yields *enrichment*, i.e. elaboration/instantiation of the schema, while *broadening* (sense extension) results from imperfect application of a schema to an entity which does not fully satisfy its specifications.¹¹ When such extension takes place, a new schema emerges to capture what is common to the initial representation or 'prototype' (in Langacker's generalized sense) and the representation of the entity categorized by it. As Langacker puts it,

⁹ See e.g. Nunberg and Zaenen (1992) on the theoretical need for what they call 'licenses', reflecting arbitrary conventionalization facts.

¹⁰ 'The members of a [complex] category are analysed as nodes in a network, linked to one another by various sorts of categorizing relationships. One kind of categorizing relationship is extension from a prototype. (...) A second kind of categorizing relationship holds between a schema and a structure that elaborates or instantiates the schema. (...) A third kind of categorizing relationship (...) amounts to a perception of mutual similarity ; it differs from extension only by lacking directionality.' (Langacker 1991 : 267)

¹¹ Metonymy is arguably based on a relation between roles *within* a schematic representation of situation (a Fillmorean 'frame'). Although Langacker does not have much to say about metonymy, it can easily be accommodated within his framework, while Ruhl's approach has no way to account for it and is, in this respect, less general than Langacker's.

If we think of extension as a 'horizontal' relationship, and schematicity as a 'vertical' one, we can say that the 'outward' growth of a lexical network by extension from prototypes is inherently associated with its 'upward' growth by extraction of schemas. (Langacker 1987 : 372-73)

Langacker mentions as examples the prototypical concept of fruit, which applies to tomatoes only by extension, thus giving rise to a more encompassing concept of fruit. Both concepts are associated with the lexical item 'fruit' : they are both nodes in the network which is Langacker's representation of the meaning of 'fruit'. In the same spirit, Langacker provides a detailed analysis of the meaning of 'tree' in English, starting from the prototypical concept and its successive extensions to cover pine trees and palm trees, each of the extensions generating a new schema also susceptible of extension, up to the super-schema that also subsumes syntactic trees, the tree of life, etc. (Langacker 1987 : 373-86).

Langacker argues, convincingly, that a network model is the only way to account for all facets of polysemy. He gives the example of the verb *run*, associated with a complex network of which he specifies ten nodes bearing various modulation relations to each other :

A strict reductionist approach would seek maximum economy by positing a single structure to represent the meaning of a lexical category. However, if our goal is to properly characterize a speaker's knowledge of linguistic convention, any such account is unworkable. From neither the category prototype alone, nor from an all-subsuming superschema (should there be one), is it possible to predict the exact array of extended or specialised values conventionally associated with a lexeme (out of all those values that are cognitively plausible). A speaker must learn specifically, for instance, that *run* is predicated of people, animals, engines, water, hosiery, noses, and candidates for political office ; the conventions of English might well be different. Equally deficient is the atomistic approach of treating the individual senses as distinct and unrelated lexical items. The claim of massive homonymy implied by such an analysis is simply unwarranted — it is not by accident, but rather by virtue of intuitively evident relationships, that the meanings are symbolized by the same form. A network representation provides all the necessary information : an inventory of senses describing the expression's conventional range of usage ; the relationships these senses bear to one another ; schemas expressing the generalizations supported by a given range of values ; and specifications of distance and cognitive salience . (Langacker 1991 : 268)

Langacker's position represents a welcome middle ground between Bolinger and Ruhl.¹² Ruhl's emphasis on generality and schematicity is honored by including abstract schemas as nodes in the network. But, in Langacker's picture, they are not the whole meaning. The idiosyncrasies emphasized by Bolinger are also represented in the network, whose nodes 'run the gamut from full generality to complete idiosyncrasy' (Langacker 1991 : 264). 'A schema and its instantiations represent different facets of

¹² That position is anticipated in Lindner's 1971 dissertation. See also Lakoff's work on complex categories (e.g. Lakoff 1987).

linguistic knowledge', Langacker says, 'and if they have the status of units, both are included in the grammar of a language' (Langacker 1991 : 265).

7.

The motto of this paper has been that polysemy is a two-sided phenomenon, where one side is modulation and the other convention. Polysemy is *conventionalized modulation*.

The ambiguitist approach which I dismissed out of hand rejects the modulation operations into diachrony, making them an etymological matter, and retains in the semantics only the resulting senses, treated as distinct conventional senses of an ambiguous expression. This neglects the fact that the modulation relations between the senses are known to the language users and characterize an aspect of their linguistic competence (Langacker 1987 : 376). In a sense, the phenomenon of polysemy exists only because the modulation relations between senses are known to the language users, and remain productive (as Ruhl convincingly shows).

At the other extreme, Ruhl's modulationist approach treats the convention facts as irrelevant to meaning. They only become relevant to meaning in diachrony when the modulation relations between senses are no longer present to the consciousness of the language users, i.e. when polysemy turns into homonymy, or when the lexical meaning evolves because more abstract schemas are needed to accommodate the extended uses that have undergone conventionalization.

It is notable that both the ambiguitist and the modulationist recognize only two genuine options : monosemy (plus modulation) and homonymy (plus disambiguation). The intermediate phenomenon of polysemy disappears from view. A more balanced position such as Langacker's is needed to capture what is characteristic of polysemy : the two-sided aspect. One can reduce polysemy neither to modulation nor to convention, for it involves both.

It is time to return to the issue we started from. For Ruhl and Langacker alike, polysemy is a sort of context-sensitivity. *Whether we take the meaning of a polysemous expression to be an abstract schema or a network, there is a principled difference between the linguistic meaning of a polysemous expression and the sense the expression contributes when used in context.* Context-sensitivity thus generalizes in a way which supports Radical Contextualism (or, more specifically, the 'Wrong Format view').

Ruhl's theory and Langacker's actually make polysemy somewhat similar to *indexicality*. Not only does the content contributed by a polysemous expression depend upon the context, as the content of an indexical does ; in addition, the step from meaning to content is mandatory both in the case of indexicals and in the case of polysemous expressions. As I pointed out in *Literal Meaning*, 'With [Radical] Contextualism, the distinction between mandatory and optional pragmatic processes is somewhat blurred' (Recanati 2004 : 97).¹³ Radically contextualist positions like Ruhl's and Langacker's seem incompatible with a sharp distinction between modulation and indexical resolution, based on the optionality criterion (modulation being optional while indexical resolution is mandatory).

¹³ See also Robyn Carston : 'on [the Wrong Format view] the pragmatic process of finding an appropriate semantic value is no longer optional, so cannot be distinguished on those grounds from the obligatory process of indexical resolution' (Carston 2012 : 621-22)

But my hunch is that they are not *really* incompatible, and that the disagreement between Radical Contextualism and TCP is mostly verbal. If I am right, the two theories do not talk about the same thing. What is mandatory is *the step from meaning to sense/content*. An expression cannot directly contribute its lexical meaning, which has the 'wrong format' for being a constituent of content. The lexical meaning must be contextually converted into an appropriate sense through various context-sensitive operations (whose detail depends on one's particular theory — that won't be the same thing for Ruhl and Langacker, for example). That's the claim which Radical Contextualists of all stripes, including myself, make. But lexical meaning itself supervenes on the senses which words contextually express in communication. Word meaning supervenes on facts about speaker's meaning (Grice 1989) : *Nihil est in lingua quod non prius fuerit in oratione* (Benveniste 1966 : 131). So, in an important sense, meaning derives from sense. Senses are basic. Now, in language use, *senses multiply and diversify through modulation operations, which are optional in the sense of context-driven (as per TCP)*. So the overall view we get is consistent and it marries TCP and Radical Contextualism.

Let me spell out the distinctions we need to make Radical Contextualism and TCP compatible.

First, we need a clear distinction between lexical meaning and sense. Senses are what words convey in context; they are 'intuitable', i.e. they serve as building blocks of thoughts (thoughts being what utterances express). Lexical meanings, on the other hand, are theoretical entities: properties of word types that the linguist posits to account for the observed uses. According to Radical Contextualism, there is something intrinsically schematic and pattern-like which makes lexical meaning too abstract (and also, in a sense, too rich) to be the contributed content. Conversion into sense becomes mandatory, as indexical resolution is.

Second, we need to distinguish conversion into sense, whose input is *lexical meaning* (not sense), from modulation proper, whether conventionalized or not. Modulation proper is an operation *on* senses, taking senses not only as output, but also as input. In language use, as I said, senses multiply and diversify through modulation operations, which are context-driven (hence optional): the sense which an expression *e* standardly conveys may (but need not) get modulated in a new context to adjust to the peculiarity of the situation talked about. Think of the first time the word 'swallow' was used to refer to what an ATM sometimes does with credit cards. The sense of 'swallow' was then creatively extended so as to exploit the similarity between the ATM situation and ordinary swallowing-situations. What was extended (the input to modulation) was the standard sense of 'swallow' as it applies to living organisms with a digestive system. The output of modulation was the (broadened) sense in which an ATM can be said to swallow a credit card. As a result of conventionalization, the extended sense has become part of the network of senses which make up the lexical meaning of 'swallow', but the modulation relation between the extended sense and the prototypical sense is still alive in the consciousness of the language users. So we must distinguish between three things: (i) the lexical meaning of 'swallow', which has the wrong format for being a constituent of content (it is or comprises a network of senses); (ii) the standard or prototypical sense of 'swallow' (with respect to living organisms), which was the input to modulation in the ATM example; and (iii) the extended sense relevant to ATMs, which was, and is still perceived as, the output of modulation. Accordingly, we must distinguish the relation between the lexical meaning of 'swallow' and the extended sense the word takes in ATM-situations, namely a special case of conversion into sense, from the

relation between that extended sense and the standard, prototypical sense of 'swallow', namely modulation. That distinction tends to be neglected because it is often (wrongly) assumed that the lexical meaning of 'swallow' is its standard/prototypical sense.

The extended sense counts as a modulation of the standard sense, in the usual, TCP-sense of 'modulation'. It is *not* a modulation of the lexical meaning of 'swallow' --- for the lexical meaning of 'swallow' is not the same thing as its standard or prototypical sense. If this is right, then it is no longer possible to write, as I did in section 1, that

When modulation takes place, we need to distinguish between lexical meaning and contributed content. The lexical meaning is the input to modulation, and the contributed content its output.

It is not the lexical meaning, property speaking, that is input to modulation: we need to distinguish modulation (a relation between senses) from conversion into sense (a relation between the lexical meaning of an item and the sense it contextually expresses). Nor is it possible to maintain that

it is always possible to use an expression strictly and literally, without modulation. In such cases of zero-modulation, the conventional meaning *is* the contributed content.

When no modulation occurs, as in 'John swallowed, cleared his throat, and started talking', the contributed content is the standard or (as Langacker says) prototypical sense of the verb.¹⁴ It is not its lexical meaning — at least not if the Wrong Format view is correct.

To be sure, Ruhl speaks of 'modulation' for conversion into sense, which he takes to be a matter of 'pragmatic specialization' (enrichment/elaboration of an abstract schema) ; but what he has in mind cannot be modulation in the sense of TCP, or at least cannot be merely modulation, for the very reason that conversion into sense is mandatory (while modulation is optional). Once the distinction between modulation and conversion into sense is in place, we can fruitfully inquire about their relations, which are rather subtle. What does conversion into sense involve, in a case like 'swallow'? It involves *selecting from the conventionalized senses stored in memory that which is the most relevant to the situation at hand, plus (if necessary) modulating that sense to secure fine-tuned adjustment to the particulars of the situation*. So conversion into sense is not modulation, but it may (optionally) involve modulation in addition to sense-selection. However, there is a more fundamental way in which conversion into sense does involve modulation, in the ATM example : the selected sense is (perceived as) a modulation of a more central sense from which it derives. *The extended sense counts as a modulation of the prototypical sense even though it was directly selected in context due to the conventionalization of that sense, stored in memory as a unit*.

To sum up, the apparent conflict between TCP and Radical Contextualism comes from the fact that TCP is generally formulated in the traditional framework that sees the lexical meaning of an expression as nothing but a particular sense that happens to be conventionalized and linguistically encoded. If the Wrong Format view is true, however, no lexical meaning is a sense. But this does *not* prevent us from distinguishing, with TCP,

¹⁴ Or one of them. We must distinguish the senses carried by 'swallow' on its transitive and intransitive uses.

the standard/prototypical sense(s) of an expression and the modulated senses that it may contribute in context (and which may themselves get conventionalized, thereby enriching the stock of standard senses). That distinction is fully compatible with the further distinction, emphasized by the Wrong Format view, between lexical meaning and sense (whether standard or modulated).¹⁵

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