



## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEVERAL MEANINGS IN A SINGLE WORD**

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### **Annotation**

This article is written about historical development of the several meanings in a single word. Thinking about meaning, language and it's relation to the real and figurative word advanced enormously during the Renaissance, but real research into the multiplicity of meaning only began in the 18th century, with the study of neologisms, synonyms and the figures of speech.

**Keywords:** Language, gestures, system, quality, organic function, meaning, science.

### **Introduction**

The modern term several meanings in a single word was popularized by Bréal in 1887. Most modern linguistics dealing with the topic of several meanings in a single word refer to the crucial date, but they rarely look further back into the past[1].

The “roots” of the concept of several meanings in a single word lie in the Greek philosophy, that is, the debate surrounding the problem of naturalness or arbitrariness of signs as debated in Plato's (429-347B.C.) Cratylus. In his account of Plato's contribution to linguistics, Fred Householder points out that Democritus (460-mid-4th century B.C.) offered four arguments in favour of arbitrariness:

- 1) homonymy or several meanings in a single word – the same sequence of phonemes may be associated with two or more unrelated meanings;
- 2) polyonymy or isorophy – the existence of synonyms;
- 3) metonymy – the fact that words and meaning change;
- 4) nonymy – the non-existence of single words for simple or familiar ideas.

Several meanings in a single word meant primarily what was later to be called “homonymy”, referring to the multiple, but unrelated meaning of a word. Bréal still subsumed homonymy under the heading of several meanings in a single word[2].

The term polyonymy was also used by the Stoics studying how one and the same object may receive many different names, how it can become “manynamed” or polyonomous[3].

### **Analysis and results**

During the Middle Ages the interpretation by the Holy Scriptures came up against the problem of several meanings in a single word that was acknowledged, but one that had been tampted (by the theory of four senses)[4].



The first who used the term polysemous in a relatively modern sense was Dante, who wrote about polysemous character of a poem: “Istius operis non est simplex sensus, immo dici potest polysemum, hoc est plurimum sensum” (“this work doesn’t have one simple meaning, on the contrary, I say that it can be polysemous, that is can have many meanings”)[5].

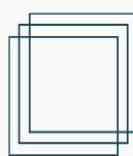
When presenting his poem to Cangrante della Scala, Dante makes immediately clear that it has to be read as a “polysemous” (“polysemantic”)[6] message. One of the most celebrated examples of what Dante means of several meanings in a single word is given in his analyses of some verses of Psalm, in “Exit Israel de Aegypto”. Following the medieval theory[7], Dante says concerning the first verse of the Psalm: “If we look at the letter it means the exodus of the sons of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if we look at the allegory, it means our redemption through Christ; if we look at the moral sense it means the conversation of soul from the misery of sin to the state of grace; if we look at the mystical sense it means the departure of sanctified spirit from the servitude of his corruption to the freedom of eternal glory”[8].

Bréal observed modern meaning of the word, yesterday’s and today’s meaning, with which we first become familiar—something recently rediscovered in England. In 1985, the department of English at the Birmingham ran of computer analysis of words as they are actually used in[9] English and came up with the surprising results[10]. The primary dictionary meaning of words are often far from the sense in which they were actually used. Keep, for instance, is usually defined as to retain, but in fact the word is much more often employed in the sense of continuing, as in “keep cool” and “keep smiling”. See is only rarely required in the sense of utilizing one’s eyes, but much more often used to express the idea of knowing, as in “I see what you mean”[11].

Language understanding and language acquisition follow the opposite route of language change. In both cases, the last, not the first or primitive meaning of a word is a basic meaning.

In Anglo-American world, several meanings in a single word was rediscovered with the advent of cognitive semantics in 1980s. Cognitive linguists began to reconnect synchronic and diachronic research into meaning[12].

Bréal knew that, diachronically, several meanings in a single word stems from the fact that the new meaning or values that words acquire in use do not automatically eliminate the old ones — several meanings in a single word is therefore the result of semantic innovation. The new and the old meaning exist in the parallel[13]. And yet, synchronically, or in language use, several meanings in a single word doesn’t really exist — sense selection in the comprehension process is not a problem at all. In the context of discourse a word has one meaning — except, one should point out, in jokes and puns[14]. The most important factor that brings about the multiplication of meaning diachronically and that helps to “reduce” the multiplicity of meaning synchronically is the context of discourse.



We understand polysemous words because the words are always used in the context of a discourse and a situation, which eliminate all the adjoining meaning in favour of only one in question[15].

However, in the constant dialectical relation between synchrony and diachrony, and between meaning and understanding incremental changes in the meaning of words occur having understood a word in a certain context in a slightly divergent way, become themselves speakers and might use a word in the newly understood way in yet another context, which again bring about different types of understanding, and so on. In the long run, these slightly variations in use and uptake may lead to major semantic changes[16].

Bréal was fascinated by the fact that when talking to each other we neither get confused by the multiplicity of meaning that a word may have, nor are we bothered with the etymological ancestry of a word, traced by historical dictionaries. The scientist was acutely aware of the fact that semantic, cognitive and developmental side of the language was not yet on a par with the advances made in the study of phonetics, of the more physiological side of language. With Bréal semantics as a linguistic discipline made a first step into the future, the future in which we are still participating and to which we are still contributing beyond the end of the 20th century[17].

There followed a period of polysemous latency, so to speak, after the advent of transformational generative grammar with its focus on syntax and later feature semantics. Several meanings in a single word was illustrated by the research undertaken by Hans Blumerberg, Uriel Weireich, Harald Weireich, James McCawley, Charles Fillmore[18].

Modern linguists also pay great attention to the investigations in the semantic sphere. The traditional distinction between several meanings in a single word and homonymy is based on whether there is one or two lexical items involved.

Several meanings in a single word is inherent in the very nature of words and concepts as every object and every notion has many features and a concept reflected in a word always contains a generalisation of several traits of the object[19].

A word which has more than one meaning is called polysemantic. Different meanings of a polysemantic word may come together due to the proximity of notions which they express e.g. the word “blanket” has the following meanings: a woolen covering used on beds, a covering for keeping a horse warm, a covering of any kind (a blanket of snow), covering all or most cases used attributively, e.g. we can say “a blanket insurance policy”[20]. There are some words in the language which are monosemantic, such as most terms, synonym, some pronouns (this, my, both), numerals. There are two processes of the semantic development of a word: radiation and concatenation. In cases of radiation the primary meaning stands in the centre and the secondary meanings proceed out of it like rays. Each secondary meaning can be traced to the primary meaning[21].



E.g. in the word “face” the primary meaning denotes “the front part of the human head” Connected with the front position the meanings: the front part of a watch, the front part of a building, the front part of a playing card were formed. Connected with the word “face” itself the meanings: expression of the face, outward appearance are formed. In cases of concatenation secondary meanings of a word develop like a chain. In such cases it is difficult to trace some meanings to the primary one. E.g. in the word “crust” the primary meaning “hard outer part of bread” developed a secondary meaning “hard part of anything (a pie, a cake)”, then the meaning “harder layer over soft snow” was developed, then “a sullen gloomy person”, then “impudence” were developed[21]. Here the last meanings have nothing to do with the primary ones. In such cases homonyms appear in the language. It is called the split of several meanings in a single word. In most cases in the semantic development of a word both ways of semantic development are combined.

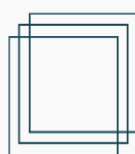
In polysemantic words we are faced not with the problem of analysis of individual meanings, but primarily with the problem of interrelation and interdependence of the various meanings in the semantic structure of the same word[22]. The problem may be approached from two different angles. If several meanings in a single word is viewed diachronically, it is understood as the growth and development or, in general, a change in the semantic structure of the word[23].

The term “diachronic” is composed of the Greek morphemes dia meaning “through” chromos meaning “time”. Thus, the diachronic approach in terms of special lexicology deals with changes and the development of vocabulary in the course of time[24]. The two approaches in lexicology (synchronic and diachronic) should not be contrasted or set one against the other; in fact, they are interconnected and interdependent: every linguistic structure and system exist in a state of a constant development so that the synchronic state of a language system is a result of a long process of linguistic evaluation, the result of the historical development of the language[25].

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A diachronic approach is one that analyzes the evolution of something over time, allowing one to assess how that something changes throughout history. You would use this approach to analyze the effects of variable change on something[27].

Several meanings in a single word in a diachronic terms implies that a word may retain its previous meaning or meanings and at the same time acquire one or several new ones. Then the problem of interrelation and interdependence of individual meanings of a polysemantic word may be roughly formulated as follows: did the word always possess all its meanings or did some of them appear earlier than the others?



If so what is the nature of this dependence? Can we observe any changes in the arrangement of the meanings?

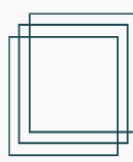
In the course of a diachronic semantic analysis of the polysemantic word table we find that of all the meanings it has in Modern English, the primary meaning is “a flat slab of stone or wood” which was proper to the word in the Old English period (OE. *tabule* from L. *tabula*); all other meanings are secondary as they are derived from the primary meaning of the word and appeared later than the primary meaning[28]. The terms “secondary” and “derived” meaning are to a certain extent synonymous. When we describe the meaning of the word as “secondary” we imply that it could not have appeared before the primary meaning was existence. When we refer to the meaning as “derived” we imply not only that, but also that it is dependent on the primary meaning and somehow subordinate to it. In the case of the word table, e.g., we may say that the meaning “the food put on the table” is derived through metonymic transfer we can also describe it as secondary and metonymic[29].

It follows that the main source of several meanings in a single word is a change in the semantic structure of the word. As can be seen from the above, in diachronic analysis of several meanings in a single word we can use many concepts and terms discussed in the paragraphs devoted to the change of meaning[30]. We can speak, for example of metaphoric or metonymic meanings if we imply the nature of dependence of the meanings, of extended or restricted meanings, if we are connected with the interrelation of meanings as a result of semantic change.

Several meanings in a single word may also arise from homonymy[31]. When two words become identical in sound-form, the meanings of the two words are felt as making up one semantic structure. Thus, the human ear and the ear of corn are from the diachronic point of view two homonyms. One is etymologically related to Latin *auris*, the other to Latin *acus*, *aceris*. Synchronically, however, they are perceived as two meanings of one and the same word[32]. The ear of corn is felt to be a metaphor of the usual type (cf. the eye of the needle, the foot of the mountain) and consequently as one of the derived or, synchronically, minor meanings of the polysemantic word ear. Cases of this type are comparatively rare and, as a rule, illustrative of the vagueness of the border line between several meanings in a single word and homonymy.

Semantic changes result as a rule in a new meanings being added to the ones already existing in the semantic structure of the word. Some of the old meanings may become obsolete or even disappear, but the bulk of English words tend to increase in a number of meanings[33].

To conclude we may say that, several meanings in a single word viewed diachronically is a historical change in the semantic structure of the word resulting in a new meanings being added to the ones already existing and in the rearrangement of these meanings in its semantic structure.



As the semantic structure is never static the relationship between the diachronic and synchronic evaluation of individual meanings of the same word may be different in different periods of the historical developments of language[34].

In connection with the polysemantic word table discussed above we are mainly concerned with the following problems: are all the nine meanings equally representative of the semantic structure of this word? Does it reflect the comparative value of individual meanings, the place they occupy in the semantic structure of the word table? Intuitively we feel that the meaning that is actually representative of the word, the meaning that first occurs to us whether we hear or see the word table, is “an article of furniture”. This emerges as the basic or the central meaning of the word and other meanings are minor in comparison.

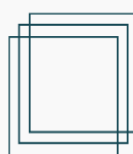
It should be noted that whereas the basic meaning is representative of the word table in isolation its minor meanings are observed only in certain contexts, e.g. “to keep the table amused”, “a piece of contents” etc. Thus we can assume that the meaning “a piece of furniture” occupies the central place in the semantic structure of the word table. As to other meanings of this word it’s hard to grade them in order of their comparative value[35]. Some may, for example, consider the second and the third meanings (“the persons seated at the table” and “put food on the table”) as equally “important”, some may argue that the meaning “put food on the table” should be given priority. As viewed synchronically there is no objective criterion to go by, it may be found difficult in some cases to single out even the basic meanings as two or meaning of the word may be felt as equally “central” in its semantic structure. If we analyse the verb to get, e.g., which of the two meanings “to obtain” (get to London, to get into bed) shall we regard as the basic meaning of this word?

A more objective criterion of the comparative value of individual meanings seems to be the frequency of their occurrence in the speech. There is a tendency in a modern linguistics to interpret the concept of the central meaning in terms of the frequency of occurrence of this meaning. In a study of five million words made by a group of linguistic scientists it was found that the frequency value of individual meanings is different[36].

Of great importance is the stylistic stratification of meanings of a polysemantic word as not only words but individual meanings may differ in their stylistic reference. Stylistic (or regional) — status of monosemantic words is easily perceived. For instance, the word daddy can be referred to the colloquial stylistic layer, the word parent to bookish. The word movie is recognizably American and barnie is Scottish. Polysemantic words as a rule cannot be given any such restrictive labels. To do it we must state the meaning in which they are used. There is nothing colloquial or slangy or American about the word yellow denoting colour, jerk in the meaning of “a sudden or stopping movement” as far as these particular meanings are concerned. But when yellow is used in the meaning of “sensational” or when jerk is used in the meaning of “an odd person” it’s both slang and American.

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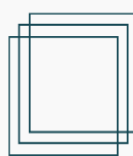


## **Conclusion**

Stylistically neutral meanings are naturally more frequent. The polysemantic words worker and hand, for example, may both denote “the man who does manual work”. But whereas this is the most frequent and stylistically neutral meaning of the word worker, it is observed only in 2.8% of all occurrences of the word hand, in the semantic structure of which the meaning “a man who does the manual work” (to hire factory hands) is one of its marginal meanings characterized by colloquial stylistic reference. Broadly speaking the interdependence of style and frequency in meanings is analogous to that existing in words.

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