Some considerations about polysemy¹

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Abstract

The paper deals with the phenomenon of meaning superposition, i.e. simultaneous realization of two or more meanings of a polysemous word. Subtypes of meaning superposition are distinguished; the notions of ambiguity, vagueness, syncretism and meaning conjunction are defined. A classification of possible semantic effects of meaning superposition of the ambiguity type is proposed, based on two independent binary features: the zeugma (pun) effect and the semantic interaction between the superposed meanings.

Keywords

Polysemy, word meaning, ambiguity, vagueness, meaning superposition, pun, zeugma.

1 Ambiguity vs. vagueness

One of the main constituents in the paradigm change that we have been witnessing in linguistics over the last twenty years is the gravitation of the semantic theory away from synonymy, which in the 1960-70s was the basic category of semantics, towards polysemy. Let us note that what is crucial here is the change in the methodological attitude and the general outlook on the phenomenon of linguistic meaning – one may recall the once popular understanding of meaning as an invariant of synonymic transformations relying, in particular, on the ideas of Jakobson.² The point is that the boundary between synonymy and polysemy is largely a matter of conceptualisation: thus, among the “synonymic resources of language” (cf. the subtitle of (Апресян, 1974) book) we find, for example, various transformations relating to diathetic change, – and these kinds of transformation as variable realisations of a word’s semantic potential are among the main concerns of the contemporary

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² See, for instance, (Jakobson, 1955), (Падучева, 1974: 10-33), (Мельчук, 1999: 10).
theory of polysemy. Besides, to the present time Apresjan’s *Lexical Semantics* remains one of the foundational works in the study of polysemy, including regular polysemy, which is still of central interest to today’s semantics.

Phrases and sentences are said to be ambiguous if they correspond alternatively to more than one semantic representation. Depending on the kind of senses involved one distinguishes between lexical ambiguity (cf. *proexat’ ostanovku*: ‘cover a certain distance [between two bus stops]’ and ‘go past a point [a bus stop]’; *pereizbrat’ Petrova*: ‘ elect Petrov for a further term’ and ‘elect somebody else to occupy Petrov’s post’) and syntactic ambiguity (cf. the well-known examples: Lat. *amor patris* [‘love of/for the father’]; *mat’ ljubit doč*: ‘the mother loves the daughter’ and ‘the daughter loves the mother’; *flying planes can be dangerous*, etc.). If the hearer resolves the ambiguity incorrectly, it causes a communication failure. The same happens in some cases of “speech ambiguity”, according to (Апресян, 1974: 176), i.e. when somebody answers *Yes, I do* to the question *Do you know what time it is*? or when a person takes an exam question for an ordinary one; cf. the joke in which to the teacher’s question *When was Pushkin born?* the pupil responds *I wish I had your worries, Sir!*.

A different kind of ambiguity is involved in sentences like *The hussar clanked his spurs* (another type of “speech ambiguity” in (Апресян, 1974: 176)). Here both readings – intentional and unintentional – are quite compatible in the sense that in order to understand sentences like this one the hearer does not have to choose between the two interpretations. Some aspects of the situation may simply remain unknown to us (namely, whether the person did the action in question intentionally or not, just as we may not know why, with what purpose, how, etc. he did it). Likewise, insufficient context may not let us choose, for example, between the resultative and the non-resultative interpretation of the general-factual use of the imperfective aspect in sentences like *Kto stroil etot dom?* ([*Who buildPAST-IMPF this house?*] – the construction of the house may be finished or not; cf. Падучева, 1996: 33), between the perfect (that is, when the result persists to the moment of speaking) and the preterite understanding of the past perfective (e.g., *Ja poterjal bumažnik* [*I losePAST-PF my pocket-book*]; one may have found one’s pocket-book or not). That is, we are dealing here not with ambiguity, but rather with the indefiniteness of some parameters of the situation (which should be considered as a special kind of vagueness).

In order to describe a word’s polysemy one has to divide the multitude of possible uses of this word into classes corresponding to its different meanings (“lexemes”, according to the terminology of MTT). One of the problems which arise here is how we should distinguish, in the case of the “many-meaningness” of a word in a certain context, between an opposition of its two “lexemes” and the variability within one and the same “lexeme”? (Mel’čuk et al., 1995: 59) call the former case ambiguity, which implies the existence of two separate lexemes, and the latter – vagueness; in the case of vagueness two or more semantic components enter the explication of one and the same lexeme as a disjunction. E.g. the French word *peindre* in the sentence *C’est Jean qui a peint le plafond* is ambiguous: it can mean ‘John whitewashed the ceiling’ or ‘John painted the ceiling’, and each of these meanings corresponds to a separate lexeme of the word *peindre*. Yet the word *tante* ‘aunt’ in the

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3 Strangely enough, there is no appropriate English term. In Russian the term *mnogoznačnost’* (lit. ‘many-meaningness’) is the most general term, with respect to both *neodnoznačnost’* (lit. ‘not-single-meaningness’, which corresponds to the English ambiguity) and to *polisemija* (‘polysemy’).
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sentence *C’est ma tante Juliette* is vague: it can mean ‘sister of my mother’ or ‘sister of my father’ or ‘wife of my uncle’; these three meanings enter the explication of one and the same lexeme in the form of disjunction. (Апресян, 1974: 84) adduces the following example of vagueness: *On obučal malčika istorii, geometrii, jazykam, fextovaniju, verxovoj ezde i strel’be iz luka* ‘He taught the boy history, geometry, languages, fencing, riding and archery’, where *obučat’* (‘to teach’) = ‘cause to know smth or to be able to do smth’. Cf. also *nebo* (‘sky’) = ‘airspace high above the earth as though confined with a vault or this vault itself’ (Урысон, 1998: 232).

So, the indefiniteness (vagueness) results from the fact that some aspects of the situation remain unknown to us (e.g., whether the person did the action in question intentionally or not, whether the speaker meant a sister of one’s mother or of one’s father; whether the person in question has found the lost pocket-book or not and so on).

Let us note that although some technical devices have been elaborated which make it possible to discern between these two cases in order to represent correctly the phenomenon in question in a dictionary (see Mel’čuk et al. 1995: 61-69), there is no substantial difference between them in ordinary communication. If the hearer understood that John painted the ceiling whereas the speaker wanted to say that he whitewashed it, it provokes a communication failure. But surely there are situations where a wrong choice made by the hearer between the sister of one’s mother and the sister of one’s father is no less misleading. Hence, some further discriminations should be made here.

2 Types of meaning superposition

I will distinguish the following types of meaning superposition.

1. **Ambiguity.** A word or a phrase used in a sentence has alternatively two (or more) distinct meanings. An intentional ambiguity can create a punning effect, an unintentional ambiguity can cause a communication failure (for further possible effects see section 3).

2. **Vagueness** (or **indefiniteness**), according to Mel’čuk’s definition, semantic variance within one and the same meaning. Two or more semantic components enter the explication of one and the same word meaning as a disjunction (cf. *aunt* = ‘sister of one’s mother or one’s father’, see above). The members of this disjunction cannot be meant simultaneously.

3. **Syncretism.** This case can be illustrated with an example from (Апресян, 1974: 181): the phrase *borot’sja s eretikami* (‘to fight with heretics’) simultaneously realizes two different meanings: *borot’sja s kem-to za čto-to* – ‘to fight with someone for something’ and *borot’sja s čem-to* – ‘to fight with something’). Here the phrase *s eretikami* fulfils simultaneously both the role of Contragent (as in *borot’sja s Amerikoj za pervenstvo v kosmose* ‘to fight with the USA for superiority

\[4\] For the notion of “meaning superposition” (sovmeščenie značeniij) and the analysis of different kinds of meaning superposition see (Перцов, 1988), (Перцов, 2001: 31f.), (Empson, 1966: ch. I-II.).
in the conquest of outer space’) and the role of Target (as in borot’šja s nedostatkami ‘to struggle against defects’). This case is relatively rare.

4. **Meaning conjunction (ob’edinenie):** two different meanings are realized simultaneously and form a single, more general meaning. In contrast to the disjunction of semantic components within the lexicographic definition of one and the same meaning, here we are dealing with a kind of conjunction of two definitions. This type of meaning superposition will be discussed in section 3.

Below there are some examples of sentences with meaning superposition of the ambiguity type (except for (6) and for a disputable example (7)). They are subdivided into three groups. The first group contains some types of texts exhibiting punning effect (an ambiguous linguistic unit is put in normal non-italic letters).

**(1)** Vstrečajutsja Brežnev i Andropov na tom svete. Brežnev sprašivaet: – Nu i kto že tam v Kremle sejčas glavnyj?
– A Miša Gorbačev.
– Nu i kto ego podderživaet?
– A nikto ne podderživaet, on sam xodit.
‘Brezhnev and Andropov meet in the other world. Brezhnev asks: “And who is now the boss in the Kremlin?” – “Mike Gorbachev”. – “And who supports him?” – “Nobody supports him, he walks by himself”.’

**(2)** Kakaja svjaz’ meždu Moskvoj i Podmoskov’em? – Moskovskaja sotovaja. ‘What is the link between Moscow and the Moscow Region? – Moscow CellLink.’

**(3)** S našej obuv’ju vy ne rasstanetes’ nikogda ‘With our shoes you will never part.’
(Caption under a picture where a man and a woman are tied to each other with the laces of their shoes). Two competing meanings are: (i) ‘wearing our shoes you will never part from each other’; (ii) ‘you will never part from our shoes’ (And here there is a third semantic component which establishes some substantial link between (i) and (ii), which is implied by the picture).

Exploiting language ambiguity is a favourite trick of advertisers. It is a kind of language game, and the effect achieved by it is based on the pleasure derived from playing the game successfully: the “success” of an advert’s addressee as a partner in the game consists in his or her discovery of two senses simultaneously present in the text of an advert. Note that this pleasure is of purely semiotic nature. Indeed, the secondary sense is often to some extent sexually suggestive, cf. the meaning of the Russian word dvusmyslennyj (lit. ‘two-sense’) as in dvusmyslennaja šutka (lit. ‘a two-sense joke’), that is ‘a joke with an obscene second sense’, or govorit’ dvusmyslenosti (lit. ‘say two-sensenesses’), etc., although this is not necessary, as it follows from the examples (2), (3), (7).

The second group is constituted by examples of meaning superposition in a coordinative construction, which, according to (Апресян, 1974: 84) can serve as a test for compatibility (of two meanings). Mel’čuk calls it “critère de cooccurrence compatible”, or the criterion of Green-Apresjan (Mel’čuk et al. 1995:64). The question is, whether a punning effect arises here at all.
The fact that a linguistic unit can be used in puns is the clearest evidence of its polysemy (cf. Арчесян, 1974: 180). That is, if the use of a word in a given context creates a zeugmatic (punning) effect, contrasting two different understandings, then these two understandings correspond to two distinct meanings of the word in question. Thus, from sentence (4), which involves punning, one can conclude to the existence in the Russian language of at least two meanings for the verb *идти* (‘to go, walk’ and ‘to fall’ as of rain, etc.) as well as for the construction *быть в* (‘to be in’). However, the fact that two meanings may be contrasted in some context does not eliminate the possibility of neutralising this contrast in another context (see below, ex. (11) – (12)).

Sentence (5), on the contrary, contains no pun. Here there is a co-occurrence of two clearly distinct but not incompatible meanings of a word (*конференц-зал* simultaneously designates the room and the many people inside it) which does not create any special effect: this ambiguity goes unnoticed by both the speaker and for the hearer; it is discovered only by the linguist seeking to identify the dictionary meaning(s) of a word.5

(4) Šel dožd’ i dva studenta, odin byl v šljape, a drugoj – v xorošem nastroenii (‘There was rain and two students [lit. there was walking rain and two students], one was in a hat, and the other – in a good mood.’)

(5) Konferenc-zal Institutu russkogo jazyka byl perepolnen i srastno “bolel” za soiskatelja (‘The conference hall of the Institute of Russian language was overcrowded and “passionately supported” the applicant’) (Кибрик А.Е. Константы и переменные языка. М.: РГГУ, 2003, p. 76) [referring to the presentation of a thesis by I.A.Мельчук in 1963]

(6) Ivanova provodili s sožaleniem, s ljubov’ju, uvaženiem, s muzykoj i vinom (‘[His unit, in which he had served all through the war,] gave him a send-off, as was fitting, with regret, love and respect, with music and with wine’) (А. Платонов, The Return)6.

In example (6) the construction “*provožat’ s + Instr*.” has simultaneously two slightly different meanings. Their superposition creates no pun and is almost imperceptible; nevertheless, it engenders a certain semantic effect. The compliments *sožaleniem* ‘with regret’ and *s ljubov’ju* ‘with love’ focus the inner state component of the verb *provožat’* ‘to see of’, while the phrase *s muzykoj i vinom* refers to the actional component of the same word.

Let us adduce now some more sophisticated examples (7) and (8):

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5  This effect of meaning superposition was called “gluing” in (Зализняк, 2006: 27).

6  Translation by R. & E.Chandler , and A.Livingstone.

7  Платонов’s texts are in this respect an invaluable linguistic source. Along with some obvious violations of compatibility, government pattern, etc. (to which a large body of publications has been devoted), they contain a multitude of barely perceptible shifts, which sometimes provide even greater insights into the way the Russian language is organized.
Figurno il’ bukval’no: vsej sem’jej,/Ot jamščika do pervogo poeta,/ My vse poem unylo ‘Figuratively or literally: the whole family,/ From the coachman to the first poet, We all sing gloomily [...].’ (Pushkin. Domik v Kolomne)

The interpretation of this example is disputable. According to the analysis proposed in (Перцов, 2001: 36) there is no ambiguity here, but rather the realization of semantic invariance of this verb. I believe that in these lines Pushkin intentionally unifies clearly distinct senses, which does not, however, create a pun. It would seem that in this case the possibility for non-zeugmatic meaning superposition is based on a stable European cliché “poet – singer”, which goes back to the actual unification of these functions.

Pariž? – I ja s toboj parju, lit. ‘Paris?’ – ‘And I’m soaring with you.’ [a joke addressing a lady who is in Paris at the moment of speaking; from oral discourse].

Here a fusion between the idea of Paris and that of soaring, which, on the phonetic level, results from the coincidence of sound shapes of the forms Pariž (‘Paris’, pronounced as [par’iš]) and pariš’ (the 2nd person sing. form of the verb parit’, ‘to soar’, also pronounced as [par’iš]) on the semantic level gives a new expression to the Russian cultural myth of Paris; the three ideas together constitute the meaning of this text.

$1 – €1. Čuvstvuite raznicu? Na etom možno zarabotat‘$1 – €1. Do you feel the difference? You can earn a lot of money, if you do’ [an advertisement of a brokerage company].

The effect of this advertisement is based on the fact that the conventional meaning of this text is too banal (the difference between one dollar and one euro is obvious, one cannot feel or not feel it). Then the addressee is forced to look for another meaning, which is ‘Are you able to predict the changes in the exchange rate of these two currencies?’. The word raznica ‘difference’ does not have the required meaning at all: it is “coerced” by the context; an interaction between this derived meaning and the “true” one generates the punning effect.

There are two independent oppositions which are relevant for the classification of possible semantic effects of meaning superposition:

1 Zeugmatic (punning) vs. non-zeugmatic meaning superposition. Whereas punning contrasts and opposes – be it meanings of a word, homonyms or any other superficially similar entities (homophones, homographs, accidentally converging forms, etc.) – non-zeugmatic meaning superposition, on the contrary, unifies different meanings of a word (note that it is possible for polysemes, but not for homonyms). The punning effect is comic: if the co-occurrence of two different meanings of a word causes a comic effect, it means that we are dealing with an instance of zeugmatic meaning superposition.

2 Poetic vs. non-poetic meaning superposition. I call “poetic meaning superposition” the cases where two meanings of a word come into interaction that creates a new (figurative) meaning; this semantic effect does not exclude the comic one. The following Russian joke is a striking example of poetic meaning superposition with a comic effect. Lieutenant Rzhevsky is travelling on the train. An officer and a lady enter the compartment and sit opposite
coexistence of a multitude of different interpretations a word may have is recognised by some researchers to be an inherent property of a literary text: the simultaneous presence of two or more distinct understandings available for a word, phrase or whole text creates a new meaning (see (Jakobson, 1960); (Eco, 1962); (Empson, 1963)).

All the four combinations of values of these parameter are represented (the numbers of examples are indicated in brackets):

- Zeugmatic, non poetic: (1), (2), (4).
- Zeugmatic, poetic: (3), (8), (9).
- Non zeugmatic, poetic: (6), (7).
- Non zeugmatic, non poetic: (5).

3 Conjunction as a particular type of lexical meaning

Now I will discuss the conjunction type of meaning superposition. This term accounts for the fact that an opposition which distinguishes between two meanings of word in some contexts (and justifies the lexicographer’s effort to distinguish between them in dictionary definitions), may be cancelled in some others. In a sense there is no meaning superposition at all – we are dealing with a single meaning of a higher level of generality.

Let us exemplify this thesis by the Russian verb *bojat'sja* (‘to be afraid of’). It has at least two contrasting meanings: the “emotional” one which foregrounds the feeling of fear based on the idea of the negative character of some event (the assertive semantic component is ‘negative’) and the “mental” meaning of probabilistic evaluation (the assertive component is ‘probable’), see Зализняк 1983. The two meanings differently interact with negation. Thus, the sentence

(10) *Ja ne bojus’ s’ezžat’ s etoj gory.* ‘I’m not afraid to go down this mountain.’

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9 For this reason the meaning of a poetic text goes beyond not only its literal but also its conveyed meaning (according to (Grice, 1975)): what the author of a poetic text wanted to say results from the interaction of its explicit and implicit meanings.

10 For further types of non-zeugmatic poetic meaning superposition see (Зализняк, 2006: 21-31); (Перцов, 1988).

11 The components ‘negative’ and ‘probable’ as constitutive for the semantics of this verb were identified in (Иорданская, 1970), (Wierzbicka, 1972). Our “emotional” and “mental” meanings of the verb *bojat’sja* correspond, respectively, to the lexemes *bojat’sja I.2b* and *I.2a* in (Иорданская, 1984) and to the lexemes *bojat’sja I.1a* and *I.1b* in (Мельчук & Иорданская 1995). I will here use the labels ‘bojat’sja 1’ for the “emotional” meaning and ‘bojat’sja 2’ for the “mental” one.
realises the “emotional” meaning (= ‘have no fear’), whereas the sentence

(11) Veroj v buduščee ne bojus’/ Pokazat’šja tebe krasnobaem. (Pasternak) ‘With faith in the future I’m not afraid / To appear to you as a phrase-monger.’

presents the “mental” meaning: ne bojus’ pokazat’šja (‘I’m not afraid to appear’) means ‘I don’t think it probable that this will happen’.

The contrast between these two meanings of the verb bojat’šja is also confirmed by the fact that it lends itself to punning 12, which can be illustrated with the following episode related by Šklovsky (O Majakovskom. Moskva, 1940):

(12) Majakovskomu peredali, chto Brjusov jakoby skazal o nem “Bojus’, chto iz Majakovskogo ničego ne vyjdet”. Vladimir Vladimirovič očen’ zabavno pokazyval, kak Brjusov spit i prosypaetsja noč’ju s voplem: “Bojus’, bojus’!” — “Ty čego boiš’sja?”— “Bojus’, čto iz Majakovskogo ničego ne vyjdet”. ‘Mayakovsky was told that Brusov had allegedly said about him: ‘I’m afraid that Mayakovsky will be no good’. Vladimir Vladimirovich [Mayakovsky] very amusingly showed how Brusov sleeps and wakes up in the night shouting: ‘I’m afraid. I’m afraid!’— “What are you afraid of?” – “I’m afraid that Mayakovsky will be no good’.

Yet in other cases, including those under negation, the choice between the two meanings proves impossible – and not because the context is insufficient, but rather because the opposition is absent from what the speaker wanted to say. For example, uttering

(13) Ja ne bojus’ ostat’sja odna. ‘I’m not afraid of being left alone.’

the speaker may have in mind either that this will not happen or that it will not be a bad thing – but this explicit disjunctiveness is present only in our metalanguage; the speaker most probably is not aware of it.

Another illustration of this can be found in the following dialogue from a film by Eldar Rjazanov “Predskazanie” [The prophecy]. Having rescued his beloved from the persecutions of her villainous ex-husband, and finally finding himself safe and alone with her, the hero says: “Ja bojus’, čto posle vsego, čto bylo, ja okažus’ ne na vysote.” ‘I’m afraid that after all that happened I will not live up to the situation’. And the girl answers:

(14) Vot už čego ja ne bojus’. ‘This is something I’m not afraid of at all.’

Semantic analysis produces two possible interpretations of (14): either she is certain that he will ‘live up to the situation’ or she does not think that it matters (does not think that it will be bad if he does not). However, it seems that, in accordance with the author's intention, there is no ambiguity (no punning effect) here: the heroine simply wants to say that everything will be fine, and she does not have in mind the disjunction discussed above. Thus the contrast between the two meanings of the verb bojat’šja (‘to be afraid of’) is irrelevant in this example.

The occurrence of a word in a punning context being a criterion of polysemy, see above.
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Now, if we check for occurrences of the verb *bojat’sja* in Russian corpora (e.g. in the National corpus of the Russian language), we will find out that for at least a half of them there is no evidence for choice between ‘bojat’sja 1’ and ‘bojat’sja 2’; the meaning superposition in these sentences (including negative ones) is rather of the conjunction, than of the ambiguity type.

However, this does not mean that we have to refuse from the differentiation of two meanings of the verb *bojat’sja* (and other words which behave in the same way). It would be a wrong decision, if nothing else, because then we will not be able to explain the different effect of negation in examples (10) and (11), and the punning effect in (12). The opposition of the two meanings of the verb *bojat’sja* should be present in the lexicographic description. But we have to admit that there are cases where these two meanings superpose in such a way that they form a single meaning of a higher level of generality whose lexicographic definition represents a kind of unification (conjunction) of definitions of each of them.

With this reservation in mind, we can agree that “normally every polyseous word is used in an utterance in one of its meanings” (Апресян, 2000: xxvii-xxviii).

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