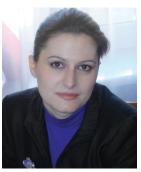# On Some Criteria for Defining
Lexical Semantics

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It is a well-known fact that the majority of words in any language tend to denote more than one referent, thus causing ambiguity of meaning expressed. The prevalence of the lexical ambiguity has inspired considerable research among linguists interested in characterizing the types and levels of ambiguity, as well as its causes. The sources of ambiguity are different such as broad meaning and polysemy, to name a few. From an overview of the literature on these semantic phenomena, it emerges that special attention has been paid to such theoretical issues as defining and characterizing these two linguistic categories, studying the semantic structure and lexical compatibility of broad meaning and polysemy. Researches on specific aspects, namely, revealing the main criteria of classification of lexical units according to their semantics, establishing where polysemy ends and broad meaning starts, are infrequent.

The present paper focuses on some distinctive peculiarities defining such phenomena of lexical semantics as broad meaning and polysemy.

It should be mentioned that there is no generally accepted definition for the lexemes, here termed as broad meaning words. L. Bloomfield and G. Cook name them substitutes, the reason being their main function of substitution at the syntagmatic level (Bloomfield 1968; Cook 2001). Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, H. Schmid suggests the metaphoric term "shell nouns" (Schmid 2000), while E. Clark terms them as "general purpose words" (Clark 1980). In the Russian academic literature one can come across the term "broad meaning" (широкозначность), which seems to be quite appropriate for characterizing the specific nature of such words.

Broad meaning is generally defined as a type of lexical semantics with a high level of generalization. Broad meaning words are described as lexemes that possess broad conceptual basis with a growing tendency to generalization (Amosova 1963:14). In context, the semantic content of such words is restricted due to the meanings of neighbouring words.

According to E. Mednikova broad meaning words correlate with the concepts, which reflect the reality in a maximally generalized way (maximally generalized lexical meaning) (Mednikova 1989:10-17).

I. Arnold defines broad meaning lexemes as generic terms, i.e. words that are semantically wide. He states that these are words "expressing notions in which abstraction and

generalization are so great that they can substitute any word of their class…. They denote in a most general way such objects, actions, states, qualities or relationships between them, that the human mind discerns in the surrounding reality and reflects in notions" (Arnold 1973:121).

In the extended research conducted by S. Dimova, broad meaning is viewed as a unique type of lexical meaning, at the heart of which lie concept categories and generic concepts. The emergence and existence of such concepts are related to the unique human ability for the abstraction of generalization (Dimova 1971).

In some linguistic studies, it is assumed that the existence of broad meaning words depends on the typological character of a language. Namely, it is stated that broad meaning develops in analytical languages where there is a necessity for the words to be actively involved in the formation of lexical units, preserving their own lexico-semantic independence (Plotkin, Grosul 1982:84). Another view is that broad meaning is characteristic of both analytical and synthetic languages. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the existence of broad meaning words in such synthetic languages as Russian (*вещь, штука, предмет*) and their equivalents in Armenian (բան , առարկա, իր).

Broad meaning words are characterized by high frequency of occurrence in the flow of speech, thus contributing to the process of language economy. It is universally known, that a coherent definition of the term "linguistic economy" is provided by A. Martinet. He defines it as the unstable balance between the need of communication and natural human inertia, two essential forces contributing to the optimization of the linguistic system. He states that any change occurring within the system – which is never static – is explained by means of the following dichotomy: a single act of communication requires, on the one hand, clearness and precision, which multiply conspicuous units, and, on the other, a remarkable organic inertia which produces effort relaxation, less numerous, less specific and more frequently occurring units, whose result is a hasty and careless expression (Martinet 1955). Thus, the use of broad meaning lexemes in speech is motivated by mere tendency to economy and is governed by the principle of least effort. The former is related to the lack of time for the speaker to organize and edit his speech, whereas due to the latter, the speaker tends to use a minimal number of linguistic units to cover a maximum amount of information.

One of the characteristic features of broad meaning words that distinguishes them from other lexical units, is their significant tendency to grammaticalization and, consequently, desemanticisation. As is known, grammaticalization is a semantic process involving some shifts in lexical meaning of linguistic units. Specifically, "the change whereby lexical terms and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions" (Hopper, Traugott 2003:1). The term "desemanticisation" or "semantic" *bleaching* refers to the loss of all (or most) lexical content of an entity while its grammatical content is retained (Heine 1993:89). J. Matisoff describes bleaching as "the partial effacement of a morpheme's semantic features, the stripping away of some of its precise content so it can be used in an abstracter, grammatical-hardware-like way" (Matisoff 1991:384).

The seminal role of a word's lexical meaning in syntactic structures was prefigured

by V. Yartseva and principally elaborated by I. Lotova who states that broad meaning words like auxiliary verbs are capable of fulfilling syntactic function. She defines them as semantically blank. In this case, the primary role is attributed to their grammatical meaning and not to the lexical one (Yartseva 1968; Lotova 1977:8).

This assumption appears to be quite argumentative as there are numerous cases where these words even at the highest level of grammaticalization reflect some notion. This can be proved by substituting these words with their semantic equivalents (if there are any). Such substitution leads to the distortion in sentence meaning. Thus, we can conclude that the term "grammaticalization", in case of a broad meaning word, does not imply a complete effacement but a partial slackening of its lexical meaning. Grammaticalization here is viewed as a secondary function of broad meaning linguistic units (along with their primary function of nomination) to fulfill the role of function words, seeking to express grammatical relationships between different words within an utterance.

The fact that broad meaning is inherent in lexemes of different parts of speech, namely nouns and verbs, may serve as a basis for considering it a special autonomous lexico-semantic category.

As was mentioned above, another cause for ambiguity can be polysemy. The definitions of polysemy existing in linguistic literature are practically identical with some slight modifications; a word is polysemous if it has several (to be more precise – more than one) meanings semantically related to each other. G. Stepanova and A. Shram define a polysemous word as a flexible and open structure with non-strictly fixed number of meanings (Stepanova, Shram 1980).

It is generally known that different lexical meanings of a polysemous word being semantically interrelated, share one common semantic line or component. Irrespective of the number of meanings a word can possess, this semantic line will be inherent in all the meanings of a word. This semantic line is also known as a common semantic component of various lexico-semantic variants. Thus, one of the characteristic features of a polysemous word is derivational relations between its meanings. A similar relation, with no regard to some differences, can be observed in the semantic structure of a broad meaning word. For instance, from the meaning of the noun *thing* (an object)*,* the meanings "somebody's personal possessions" or "tea, school, swimming things" are derived (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English 2008).

Studying the different meanings of one and the same broad meaning word, V. Sokolova names them *lexical variants*, in contrast to *lexico-semantic variants* of a polysemous word. She defines a lexical variant as "a concrete case of broad meaning realization in a certain distributional formula with a certain lexical content" (Sokolova 1967:25).

The wide use of a broad meaning word in countless contexts has led some linguists to qualify the meanings in periphery as occasional ones. The semantics of the word is dependent on the meaning of neighbouring words. Occasional meanings, as is known, are not included in the semantic structure of a word and are considered to be non-recurrent occasional cases of word meaning realization. This fact is quite arguable as in speech one

can observe regular recurrence of lexico-semantic variants of a broad meaning word which are fixed in dictionaries due to their permanent use to denote a certain number of referents.

The thing that is common to polysemous and broad meaning words is the multiplicity of their meanings. But it should be clarified here that in case of a broad meaning word we have more meanings as the number of its referents is not limited but determined by the theoretically possible contexts, whereas the meanings of a polysemous word are restricted and defined by the referents they denote.

This is also evident in the form of semantic structures of these lexemes. In case of polysemy we have a fragmentary semantic structure with precise number of meanings to some extent differing from each other. Let us compare the following lexico-semantic variants of the polysemous verb *to hold* – 1. to carry something; 2. to put your hand on part of your body; 3. to keep something or somebody in a particular position; 4. to support the weight of something; 5. to have enough space of something; 6. to keep somebody and not allow to leave; 7. to defend something against attack; 8. to remain strong and safe or in position; 9. to remain the same; 10. to keep somebody's attention or interest; 11. to keep something at the same level, rate; 12. to own or have something; 13. to have a particular job or position; 14. to have something you have gained or achieved; 15. to consider that something is true; etc (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English 2008).

Considering the given variants, it would be hardly possible to establish any logical association between some of the meanings of the word *to hold,* especially if one tries to find something linking the meanings in periphery (lexico-semantic variants 14, 15) to the main meaning (lexico-semantic variant 1). This is the result of semantic change which contributes to the constant development of polysemy. Also known as semantic shift, it refers to the evolution of word usage, usually to the point that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage. Polysemy is mainly the result of metaphoric and metonymic derivation. During the gradual development of the systems of meaning more and more new meanings are added to the old ones. Some other meanings are ousted. This complicated process of polysemy development involves both appearance of new meanings and loss of old ones. Consequently, the innate semantic line in all these meanings that links them to each other gradually fades away or sometimes vanishes altogether. This is the main cause of the fragmentary character of the semantic structure of a polysemous word.

In contrast to a polysemous word, the form of the semantic structure of a broad meaning word is of integral character, which is caused by the fact that meanings in it are in hyponymic relationship. The latter is known as a lexical relation, corresponding to the inclusion of one class in another or a word meaning including the meaning of the other word. A hyponym is a subordinate, specific term whose referent is included in the referent of super ordinate term. Thus, the meanings of a broad meaning word are in terms of inclusion. Compare the following lexico-semantic variants of a broad meaning verb *to go* - 1. to move or travel from one place to another; 2. to move or travel, especially with somebody else, to a particular place in order to be present at an event; 3. to move or trav-

el in a particular way or over a particular distance; 4. to move in a particular way; 5. to leave one place in order to reach another; 6. to leave one place and do something different; 7. to visit or attend a place for a particular purpose; 8. to leave a place or travel to a place in order to take part in an activity or a sport; 9. to be sent or passed; 10. to lead or extend from one place to another; 11. to have as a usual or correct position; to be placed; 12. used to say that something does not fit into a particular place or space; etc (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English 2008).

When drawing parallels between the above-mentioned meanings, one can not fail to find a generalized meaning covering and holding together the rest of the semantic structure. This is the basic semantic component reflecting in a most generalized way the notion of movement. It can be seen, that the main direct nominative meaning, the first lexico-semantic variant, semantically covers and includes the rest of the meanings. They, in their turn, are semantically included in one another. These relationships provide the integrity of the semantic structure of a broad meaning word.

The multiplicity of meanings within the semantic structure of broad meaning words is a precondition for their correlation with, in some cases, innumerous referents. In this respect it would be appropriate to mention the definition of these words from the cognitive point of view. Specifically, E. Belyaevskaya notes that broad meaning words are "blank cognitive models, which are applied to the frame of the referent to form its semantics" (Belyaevskaya 1992:22).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of broad meaning lexemes is their total and obligatory dependence on context and the ability to be semantically retrieved at the expense of neighbouring words, within syntagmatic relationships. In these terms, broad meaning words have much in common with deictic words as "their collocability with other words is a necessary criterion for their semantic realization. Broad meaning words are context-dependent as they require a syntactic 'extender' to be unfolded and concretized. The latter also refers to deictic words, as they acquire the real meaning in speech where they are 'attached' to a certain referent" (Yerznkyan 1988:28). The context plays a crucial role when it comes to the realization of meanings of a polysemous word. In speech the context singles out the very lexico-semantic variant meant, while cancelling the rest of the meanings.

The confrontation of broad meaning and polysemy does not, however, exclude the possible coexistence of these two linguistic phenomena. This fact was first mentioned by S. Dimova who pointed out six polysemous and two broad meaning lexico-semantic variants within the semantic structure of the noun *way* (Dimova 1971). The coexistence of polysemous and broad meaning lexico-semantic variants within the semantic structure of one and the same word is also admitted by A. Kuzyakin, M. Blokh and A.Aralov (Kuzyaki 1989; Blokh and Aralov 1985). Similarly A. Plotnikova states that broad meaning verbs are linguistic units that possess more than seven meanings in their semantic structure. The meanings denote both concrete physical actions and emotional, verbal as well as social processes. Consequently, the basic distinction from polysemous verbs is that the meanings of broad meaning verbs cover three semantic fields Action, State, Relation which represent denotational situations with various groups of participants (Plotnikova 2009:1).

Considering different definitions and speculations suggested in a great number of linguistic works on such ambiguous issues of lexical semantics as polysemy and broad meaning, we have tried to establish the basic criteria for differentiating these two complex linguistic phenomena. Specifically, **broad meaning words** reflect generalized notions and each meaning has a certain portion of abstraction in it, whereas the meanings of **polysemous words** are semantically more concrete within the framework of correlation with their referents. These words are context-dependent as the only means of realization of their lexico-semantic variants is the linguistic environment which reveals and identifies the very meaning conveyed. Both broad meaning and polysemous words of them possess specific semantic structures, the difference being the fragmentary character of the semantic structure of a polysemous word and that of the integral form of a broad meaning word. The coexistence of such linguistic phenomena within the semantic structure of one and the same word is conditioned by the tendency of some lexico-semantic variants of polysemous lexemes to generalize and strip away their semantic content. A thorough understanding of the criteria involved in the semantic changes and shifts within the semantics of these types of words may eventually lead to a clearer interpretation and distinction of broad meaning and polysemy.

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Բառիմաստի սահմանման չափանիշների շուրջ

Հոդվածն ուսումնասիրում է բառիմաստի երկու կարևորագույն տեսակները՝ լայնիմաստությունը և բազմիմաստությունը: Փորձ է արվում սահմանել այն չափանիշները, որոնք թույլ կտան հստակ կերպով տարանջատել այս բարդ, չափազանց անորոշ, երբեմն մասամբ կամ ամբողջովին համընկնող երևույթները: Ուսումնասիրությունից պարզվում է, որ լայնիմաստ և բազմիմաստ բառերը տարբերվում են միմյանցից ոչ միայն զուգառական և իմաստաբանական առումով, այլն իրենց իմաստաբանական կառուցվածքով, որը իմաստների փոփոխման պատմական գործընթացի անմիջական արդյունք է: Լայնիմաստ բառի դեպքում առկա են ավելի շատ իմաստներ, քանի որ վերջինիս դենոտատների թիվը սահմանափակ չէ, այլ կանխորոշվում է տեսակաfor հնարավոր ենթատեքստերով: Մինչդեռ բազմիմաստ բառի իմաստների թիվը սահմանվում է իր կողմից նշանակություն ստացած դենոտատների թվով: