

Review of: "A Corpus Analysis of Polysemy in CEFR-based English Textbooks"

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This article highlights a key issue in language learning and teaching – what is the most appropriate unit for learning vocabulary. The vast majority of work, both in language learning and in corpus linguistics, has taken the surface form of words as the unit to learn and analyze. If the focus is on meaning, however, the sense would seem to be the most appropriate meaning for polysemous words. As the most common words are most likely to be polysemous and textbooks at CEFR B1 level are likely to focus on more common words, in these textbooks the words focused on are likely to have several senses. Identifying which senses and how many senses are covered in these textbooks provides a useful alternative way of examining textbook vocabulary which has the potential to shift the way educators look at vocabulary in second language learning. The topic is therefore very worthwhile.

As the article distinguishes between surface forms and senses, a lot of care is needed in choosing terminology. For instance, does “lexical item” refer to a surface form or a sense? Should phrases such as “knowledge of single words” be used if “single words” are not the unit of analysis?

While I find the topic of great potential value, I’m afraid that much of the methodology is opaque making it difficult to gain a full understanding of the findings. There are several points at which I would appreciate more detail:

1. I would like to know why the two textbooks analyzed were chosen rather than other textbooks.
2. Textbooks present vocabulary in two ways: vocabulary can simply occur in the textbook without any explicit teaching/learning focus; and vocabulary items can be learning objectives (listed in the contents, for example, and with activities specifically devoted to helping learners learn these words). In this article, the analysis only looks at the first of these – the occurrences of the words in the textbooks. It would be useful to know if any of the frequently occurring words were also a focus of learning, and, if this is the case, whether the occurrences in the textbooks illustrate the sense provided in the focus of learning.
3. I am unclear why WordNet was used to identify the number of senses of words. Although it is relatively straightforward to identify the number of senses of a word from WordNet, WordNet is not designed to be applicable to language learning. It may be more useful to use a language-learning-oriented word list, such as the sense-based General Service List, to identify the number of senses.

My main point of confusion with the methodology is how the number of senses of a word in the textbooks was identified. An example to illustrate the process of doing this would be helpful for the reader and could provide a model for other researchers who wish to investigate word senses. It would also be possible to show if the senses of words identified mean the word is being treated as polysemous or as a set of homonyms (e.g. 'letter').

Perhaps because of the lack of detail in the methodology, I find some of the interpretive paragraphs in the results section very difficult to follow (e.g. the last paragraph on p. 8 and the first paragraph on p. 10).