

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

Adam Głaz<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Lublin

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

In his paper "[A Corpus Analysis of Polysemy in CEFR-based English Textbooks](#)", the author sets out to explore the extent to which polysemy is taken account of in two EFL textbooks, *Close-up* (Intermediate Secondary) and *Full Blast Plus 4* (Upper Secondary). He does that by focusing on the top 100 of most frequent words in those textbooks, with the assumption that "The findings of the current study have important implications for second language and foreign language education" (p. 3). Interesting as the study is, this is a point where the reader experiences a major disappointment: Hicham Lahlou's paper does not really offer a discussion of those implications, nor does it propose solutions to whatever problems may have been identified. Let me be systematic about it.

The author lists and compares the top 100 most frequently used words in the two textbooks and by comparing them with data from the BNC finds (as much as I can tell) that indeed that choice is basically valid. But two things call for comment here: first, I'm not sure why it is important that those textbooks follow the CEFR framework (i.e., would the results or conclusions be different if they didn't?); second, it is unclear what the author thinks about the fact that as many as 65 words overlap in both sources, despite the difference in the level of their proficiency. Myself, I find it rather unsurprising: those are frequent, everyday words, certainly common in the usage of English speakers at the levels intermediate and higher alike.

In principle, though, I find Lahlou's focus on polysemy very appropriate: polysemy is a regular, systematic, and omnipresent feature of language (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014 call it "rampant"). It's just that there are lots of problems involved in polysemy itself, even prior to how it should be tackled in language teaching. Those involve our notorious inability to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy (in fact, isn't Lahlou's example of *party* a case of homonymy?), through the tensions between polysemy, ambiguity, and vagueness (cf. Geeraerts 1993, Channell 1994, Cuyckens & Zawada 2001), to the intricacies involved in the relationship between polysemy and prototype-based categories (cf. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2007). I'm not saying the author of the article needs to discuss them all, as this would take us nowhere and pull away from the problem on hand. But perhaps a somewhat more in-depth discussion at some points would have bolstered the case – such as, for example, explanation on what basis word senses are distinguished in WordNet and why we should trust them for background to a discussion of other issues. Or, as far as categorization is concerned, the paper seems to be grounded in the assumption that polysemy and prototypes unquestionably go together. Perhaps they do, but there are other models that try to explain polysemy. Indeed, Lahlou himself mentions Langacker's (1987) idea of words serving as access nodes to conceptual networks. And networks are not radial structures; they may

be involve monocentric or polycentric organization, etc. I have myself tried to represent the polysemous conceptualizations of *earth*, *land*, *ground* and *soil* in terms of the network model (Gład 2002) – I certainly don't claim the attempt is successful but I do believe it reveals several polysemy-related issues that go beyond prototypes. (As a side comment, let's note that prototype effects and family resemblance are not the same thing, as Lahlou seems to suggest in passing on p. 4.)

But those issues, important as they are, are sort of theoretical. In the paper on hand, the author is dealing with a specific EFL-related problem. But here too, I must say, one could expect a more extensive discussion. That is, having presented the results of his research, the author does not really offer interpretations of those results other than a description with some statistics, figures, etc. Those are very useful but an expectant reader is tempted to ask: What does it mean? Are those results encouraging or do they show inadequacies in the two textbooks? Are there any specific teaching issues involved? Where do we go from here?. If I read Lahlou's tone correctly, he seems to suggest that perhaps a greater emphasis on contextualized meaning would be needed, since generally the textbooks make use of far fewer word senses than are recognized in WordNet. And yet, context in vocabulary acquisition is a multifaceted and multilayered domain, and can hardly be considered an obvious road to success.

A comprehensive study on the issue is e.g. Chodkiewicz (2000). For example, on p. 18 she refers to Nagy and Scott (2000: 271), who point out that even the meanings of familiar words “must be inferred from context”, so that the distinction between entrenched, stabilized meaning and volatile, contextualized meaning is in fact nebulous. Also, there are contexts and contexts, as there are students and students, so that some contexts are “more appealing to some students than others” (Chodkiewicz 2000: 204). Therefore, it is important to identify the many variables of context – only then can one consider the potential implications they might have for vocabulary acquisition (which Chodkiewicz actually does on pp. 219-221).

I also have the impression that Lahlou's otherwise very interesting perspective might benefit from a more careful wording at a few points and so contribute to a better presentation of his views. Let me offer three local improvements:

- On p. 2, the author advocates that students be made aware of “the relationship between source domains and target domains in metaphorical and metonymic mappings”. However, as Lahlou himself notes on p. 4, metonymy involves a domain-subdomain kind of relationship, which makes it distinct from the metaphorical mappings between different domains.
- Also on p. 2, reference is made to the work of Cienki (2007), which is only appropriate. However, the statement “language mirrors reality as humans construe it” is somewhat imprecise: if humans construe reality (mentally), then language does not mirror it but rather enables speakers to externalize those construals, as well as actually build them through constant language-cognition feedback.
- Third, on p. 4 one reads: “if the senses of a lexical item are not systematically related, they are homonyms. For example, the word *bank* has the meanings of ‘place where one puts their money’ and ‘the edge of a river’, which are not systematically related” (reference to Lakoff follows). Perhaps this is precisely what the author intended to say (and what Lakoff says in his book) – if so, I'd like to take issue with that. But perhaps it is just a case of imprecision: I'd rather

say that homonymy is a relationship that obtains between words, not senses of a single word, so that we have two words here, *bank*(1) and *bank*(2), pronounced and spelled in the same way but fundamentally distinct items. That's in fact where homonymy, in principle, differs from polysemy, the latter involving related senses of a single word.

Before I conclude, let me mention one more error, probably due to oversight: on p. 5 the two textbooks being investigated are both described as “intermediate”, which does not agree with what the paper says at other points.

In sum, Hicham Lahlou's study is intriguing and it does address an important and underresearched problem. However, to be fully valuable I believe it should offer an interpretation of the findings. Are we to assume that greater focus on polysemy in textbooks will be beneficial to language learning? At what level of proficiency? My own (intuitive and uncorroborated) judgment is that in fact too much contextual diversity might be confusing to students, at least at the intermediate level. As they progress, focus on contextualized polysemy might increase, but with caution. Is my view legitimate? I don't know and I'd be happy to be proved wrong but until this is done through systematic study, I choose to stand by it.

## References

- Channell, Joanna. (1994). *Vague Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chodkiewicz, Halina. (2000). *Vocabulary Acquisition from the Written Context: Inferring word meanings by Polish learners of English*. Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.
- Cienki, Alan. (2007). Frames, idealized cognitive models, and domains. In Dirk Geeraerts & Hubert Cuyckens (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. 170–187. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cuyckens, Hubert & Britta Zawada (eds.). (2001). *Polysemy in Cognitive Linguistics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Geeraerts, Dirk. (1993). Vagueness's puzzles, polysemy's vagaries. *Cognitive Linguistics* 4: 223–272.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.1993.4.3.223>
- Goddard, Cliff & Anna Wierzbicka. (2014). Semantic fieldwork and lexical universals. *Studies in Language* 38(1): 80–127. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.38.1.03god>
- Gład, Adam. (2002). *The Dynamics of Meaning. Explorations in the Conceptual Domain of EARTH* Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.
- Langacker, Ronald W. (1987). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol. 1: Theoretical Prerequisites* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, Barbara. (2007). Polysemy, prototypes, and radial categories. In Dirk Geeraerts & Hubert Cuyckens (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. 139–169. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nagy, William E. & Judith A. Scott. (2000). Vocabulary processes. In Michael L. Kamil, Peter B. Mosenthal, P. David Pearson & Rebecca Barr (eds.) *Handbook of Reading Research*, Volume III. 269-284. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.