

# POLYSEMY AND MEANING-MAKING OF MEDIA CONTENTS AMONG THE AUDIENCE

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## Abstract

The problem of understanding polysemous words that differ in meaning has dominated discourse in communication studies in recent years. It has not only led to studies on problems of representation between homonymy and polysemy and their linkages in memory, but also involves the various ways that any message can be decoded for understanding. The paper is anchored on two theoretical underpinnings: the framing theory developed by Erving Goffman which explains the use of cognitive skills to make meaning out of individuals' environmental stimuli in daily life; and the relevance theory, which owes its origin to Paul Grice and posits that meaning is first a psychological phenomenon before becoming a linguistic one. The paper examines the concepts of communication production, circulation, use, consumption, distribution, and reproduction, which represent methods by which messages are produced and disseminated; as well as the preferred, the oppositional, and the negotiated forms, which are the major ways that messages are decoded. It also explains how cultural texts or codes, which are essentially systems of meaning whose rules and conventions are shared by members of a culture, lay the foundation for the interpretation of media texts and how 'readers' of media texts can combine their experiences of given media programmes to further communicate such texts to others, a process that is akin to the multi-step flow process of communication by opinion leaders in their extension of influence.

**Keywords:** *Cognitive skills, cultural texts, enantiosemy, homonymy, monosemy, polysemy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

POLYSEMY is defined as a word, symbol, or sentence that has the capacity for multiple meanings or multiple senses. It is defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as a word that has the capacity to take on an opposite meaning and owes its origins to the Greek *poly* + *seme* meaning multiple signs or meanings. The term is said to have been used in this context for the first time in 1884. Vicente & Falkum, 2018 describes it as

a phenomenon in which a single word finds association with two or more related senses. The encyclopedia distinguishes polysemy from monosemy, which refers to a situation where one word finds association with only one meaning, and homonymy, which refers to where one word is unable to associate with two or more related meanings.

Several approaches have, however, been proposed as being responsible for the phenomenon of a lexical item having several related senses. Ursini & Giannella, 2016 propose three approaches, which they name traditional, cognitive linguistics, and modern formal. While the traditional view examines polysemy as a type of conversation because of the assumption that lexical items are monosemous, cognitive linguistics regards most lexical items as being inherently polysemous and assumes that their meanings are idealised in conceptual models. On their part, the modern formal views of polysemy accept the notion that lexical items are polysemous in nature.

Unoh, 1987 lists two problems that affect the meanings of words or images. These are trans-cultural communication problems and inherent ambiguities in languages. From the point of view of trans-cultural communication, it is apparent that words used in one language have the potential for separate meanings when used in other languages. For instance, the word 'gate' in one language may be interpreted to mean something else in another language. The problem of inherent ambiguity is described as a major meaning-related issue that is difficult to solve despite a communicator's thorough knowledge of the cultural background of users of the words. Ambiguity in language is said to manifest at every

level of linguistic description, and this places readers in disadvantaged positions on the issue of interpretation of texts. Unoh, 1987. argues that “while the syntax of a poem could disambiguate instances of homonymy (two different words having the same form, e.g. ear (of corn/hearing organ); bank (building/shore), or polysemy (one word having more than one sense, e.g. face (of a person/of a clock), it is not always easy to disambiguate sentences in which a particular item could perform two different syntactic functions.”

Klepousniotou et al., 2008 investigated the comprehension of polysemous words that differed in meaning overlap as a function of context and meaning dominance. They applied the methodology of Klein & Murphy, 2001 and the working hypothesis that the amount of semantic overlap between the individual meanings or senses of ambiguous words would determine how such words were activated and processed. They tested the hypothesis by presenting ambiguous words in cooperating, neutral, or conflicting contexts and predicted that ambiguous words with highly overlapping senses would differ both from ambiguous words with low overlapping senses and from those with moderate overlapping senses. Their findings were that high overlap words were processed differently from moderate and low overlap ambiguous words in comprehension. They explained that polysemic words were processed separately from homonymous words to the extent that the senses involved in them overlapped semantically. It is remarkable that Klein & Murphy, 2001 studied the problems of representation between homonymy and polysemy and their linkages in memory. Their observation was that while polysemy was the normal, expected presence of related senses in a word, such as an object and the substance making up that object, homonymy represented the unpredictable coincidence of two different words having the same name. They also observed that whereas homonyms were different words that shared the same names, it was not clear how polysemous words with closely related senses were represented. Nunberg, 1979, argues against the issue of distinction between semantic and pragmatic conventions because “there is no way

of determining which regularities in use are conventional and which are not.”

Furthermore, he remarks that while there may be linguistic conventions, their contents, even if construed transparently, are indeterminate. The summary of this position is that there is already an indeterminacy of meaning’ though its influence on linguistic theorising about semantics has not been quite influential. This is apparently why Klein & Murphy, 2001 insist that a psychological theory can readily be constructed that would strike at the core of the meaning of the word with the different polysemous extensions generated using pragmatic and plausible reasoning. Falkum, 2011 is of the view that polysemy is largely unproblematic from the perspective of communication but that it poses a range of theoretical and descriptive problems, a condition that he describes as a polysemic paradox. While arguing against the conceptual approach that word meanings must consist of complex representations to capture the sense relations involved in polysemy, Falkum argues that the solution is to treat polysemy essentially as a communication phenomenon which arises as a result of encoded messages being massively undetermined by speaker-intended concepts.

Moreover, Falkum & Vicente, 2015 share the opinion that polysemy has become pervasive in natural languages and the fact that it is affecting both content and function words indicates that there is a growing difficulty in the theoretical and empirical treatment of the phenomenon. They remark that some of the questions that have occupied the minds of interested linguists, philosophers, and psychologists involve the “representation of polysemous senses to apply in dealing with polysemous words in the compositional theory of meaning.” These include how new senses of words arise in the course of their use in communication, as well as how hearers arrive at the contextually appropriate sense on a given occasion of use.

## **2. TYPES, STRUCTURE AND MODELS OF POLYSEMY**

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It is often assumed that since man began to form ideas about the world that surrounds him

and to find words to name those ideas, he has been consumed by a desire to eliminate the hidden polysemy of initial words that have sought to prevent his better understanding of the world he lives in. The phenomenon of polysemy is said to have been known to be part of human practice for several centuries. Grinev-Griniewicz, 2016 explains that despite the understanding of the phenomenon and its apparent simplicity, there are still some points that are unclear about it. Beyond the problems of the transference of meanings and the problem of the number of meanings isolated by different specialists, he identifies the problems of the terminology of naming and the defining of polysemy as well as advances in investigating polysemy in a number of directions such as translation, terminography (the theory and practice of compiling terminological dictionaries) and cognition.

Also noteworthy is the fact that despite its centuries of acknowledgement, the notion of polysemy only became known after it was proposed in 1897 by Michael Breal. As Wilkins, 1996 remarks, ever since the notion was proposed, it has been puzzling researchers in linguistics, lexicography, psychology, and computer science, among others. Riemer, 1972 explains that metaphor and metonymy are the key notions in the understanding of polysemy. He, however, argues for an approach to meaning that privileges the notion of interpretation over other possible axes of inquiry such as truth, reference, cognition or conceptualisation, and uses. The presupposition here is that language is the intimate product of cognitive and brain structure, but this does not entail a misunderstanding of the separate identities between the semantic structure, which is meaning and conceptualisation. Riemer's, 1972 position is that the recognition of meaning represents a product of the psychological processes of cognition which have language as the starting point. He, therefore, observes that "to ignore the intimate relation between language and cognition would certainly be to lose sight of the essential root of language in human subjectivity."

A natural outflow from this understanding is the question whether meaning can be observed. A basis for learning of this phenomenon is provided in the knowledge that the difference

between semantics and other areas of linguistic analysis lies in the ability to interpret what constitutes data that are being analysed. What is noticeable is that meanings can never be observed. While phonetic materials and the patterns of combination of morphemes can be clearly identified, Riemer, 1972 asserts that a phenomenon such as semantics which represents the study of meanings rather than the forms of linguistic units lack such initial description and, therefore, cannot be displayed. Semantics is, therefore, presented as a phenomenon that is different from other branches of linguistics' quest because it does not provide for pre-existing information in advance. As he observes, "a word's meaning is never a *datum*, never something 'given' to the investigator as whole, fixed and immutable: it is, rather something which the investigator brings to life in a meta-language, with all the possibilities of variation this entails... the meaning of the word is always underlying."

Several types or directions of linguistics have surfaced in recent years given the advancement of research in the area. Grinev-Griniewicz, 2016 classifies these directions into two types: overt which include explicit and open, and covert (hidden and implicit) polysemy. In the first classification, the direction is further sub-divided on the basis of the ways of formation into metaphoric and metonymic subtypes, and on the basis of the developmental character into radial polysemy, which is when the primary meaning stands out centrally and secondary meanings flow from it. Concatenation, also described as chain polysemy in which secondary meanings of a given word develop in succession like a chain is followed by systematic or regular polysemy in which the relation between the senses is predictable such that any word of a particular semantic class fairly has similar variety of meanings. Also in the overt category is enantiosemy which combines opposite meanings in one word. To the "covert or hidden category of polysemy" belongs interlingual polysemy where "monosemic words have different meanings in different languages, and diachronic polysemy in which almost every old word used to have several meanings."

Furthermore, it is Klegr's, 2013 postulation that while the discussion of monosemic and



polysemic ambiguity appears to be double sided, there is an ongoing dispute as to whether a few senses or a single sense should be applied in the mental lexicon for readings to be meaningful. Cruse, 2004 and Geeraerts, 2006 are in agreement that this blurred boundary or borderline between polysemy and monosemy is under-specification, vagueness, indeterminacy or generality. One of the ways to resolve the issue of whether a particular reading is part of the semantic structure of the word or 'contextual specification' as Klegr explains, is by searching for tests of polysemy that would be compatible with different kinds of denotations or the presence of distinct senses. Hall, 1980 offers a theoretical account of how messages are produced and disseminated. He suggests a four stage theory that involves communication production, circulation, use or consumption/distribution and reproduction with each stage being autonomous of each other. In Hall's view, the concept of relative autonomy does not represent the opening of messages to just any interpretation, for messages can only be received by particular targets. He argues that messages are decoded in three ways: the preferred, the oppositional and the negotiated forms. The 'preferred' meaning is described as the hegemonically-dominant form which the decoders or audience would like to accept, though Hall indicates that this may not always be successfully conveyed. Here the viewer receives the connoted meaning from the newscast or newspaper fully and adopts the message as it was sent. Under this scenario, the receiver is said to be operating in the dominant code which is considered as the ideal or typically transparent communication or something close to it. The dominant code informs the professional communicator's assumption in encoding any given message and this is often laced in a hegemonic manner. As Hall, 1980 explains, the professional code which is 'relatively independent' of the dominant code operates within the 'hegemony' of the dominant code.

In the second possibility which is described as the 'negotiated' form, meanings usually result when decoders or the audience accept part or some elements of the 'preferred' messages and reject other aspects. Here, the majority of the audience members understand the defining

dominant issues and events. They relate events to the 'national interest' though they may truncate or invert these issues. In reviewing these hegemonic viewpoints, Hall remarks that they are defined "within the terms of the mental horizon, the universe of possible meaning, a whole sector of relations in a society or culture, and often carry with them the stamps of legitimacy." He describes the decoding of texts within the negotiated meaning standpoint as a mixture of the adaptive and oppositional elements which acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions or accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions. Thus, a text decoder reserves the right to make more negotiated application to 'local conditions' or to its own situations or positions. A negotiated code is said to operate within particular or situated logics and these are sustained by their differential or unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. The 'oppositional' meaning occurs when the viewer or listener is said to 'detotalise' the message in the preferred code in order to 'retotalise' it within some alternative framework of reference. Hall, 1980 affirms that this is often the case of a listener or viewer who listens to a debate on an issue, say an increase in the pump price of a given petroleum product but 'reads' every mention of the term 'national interest' as 'class interest.' Such a fellow is said to be operating with what may be called an oppositional code.

A number of polysemic models and lexical word meanings have also been observed. Vicente & Herriko, 2017 who explain that the standard meaning of a word is the meaning which such a word has as a type, distinguish three models of meanings that lexical words may have. These are:

- Literalism. This means that each word has a literal, denotational meaning. Thus the rest of meanings a word can have relates to linguistic rules, coercion or pragmatic factors;
- Under-specification. This means that the standing meaning of a word is under-specified with respect to its occurrent meaning, and;
- Over-specification. This means that the occurrent meaning of a word is just a part (or a selection) of the total standing meaning of the word.

From these models, it is apparent that the standing meaning of a word can be differentiated from the occurrent meaning of such a word. The standing meaning is defined as the meaning the word has as a type, while the occurrent meaning is the denotation or reference of a particular use of the index word. In the case of lexical words, the distinction is only seen to be significant if it is assumed that these word types have meanings over and above what they seem to express in the utterance. Asher, 2011 endorses literalism and is of the view that lexical semantic studies have observed some interesting phenomena concerning the meaning of words. He notes, however, that literalists lacked a proper formal framework with the necessary tools to account for and model the different meanings of words in context.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frameworks that underpin the concept of polysemy are two-fold. These are the framing theory and the relevance theory.

**Framing theory.** This theory was developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 and explains the use of cognitive skills to make meaning out of individuals' environmental stimuli in daily life. Baran & Davis, 2012 remark that Goffman believed that humans were always monitoring the social environment for social cues that signal when to make changes, and that these cues were tied to relevant social environments. For instance, in a cinema theatre, the movement of the curtain in a rising or falling fashion informs when the scene begins and when it ends. The theory implies that individuals learn social cues following daily interactions and from observing how these interactions shape or are used in media content. McQuail, 2012, however, describes framing theory as a way of giving meaning or interpretation to some isolated items of fact. He argues that in the news context, the concept of framing is that stories are assigned meanings by reference to some 'news values' that connect one news event with another or similar ones. In summary, McQuail postulates that framing defines problems, makes diagnosis of causes and moral judgments, and suggests remedies.

**Relevance theory.** The second theory owes its origin to Paul Grice (1957, 1967, 1989) who posits that meaning is first a psychological phenomenon before becoming a linguistic one. Thus, the meanings the speaker assigns to words and sentences are ultimately analysable in terms of what the speaker has in mind. Wilson, 2016 examines the theory's operation from three assumptions of:

- Meaning as a vehicle for conveying a speaker's meaning, in this case a speaker's meaning is an overtly expressed intention that is fulfilled by being recognised;
- Speaker's meaning cannot be simply perceived or decoded, but has to be inferred from his/her behaviour, together with the contextual information;
- In inferring a speaker's meaning, the hearer is guided by the expectation that the communicative behaviour should meet certain standards.

For Grice, this means a cooperative and conversational maxim, and for the relevance theorists, a presumption of optimal relevance. Furthermore, Wilson lists a number of differences in the description of meanings. The first of these apply to pragmatics. She remarks that Grice's theoretical definition of speaker's meaning was designed to apply to some cases of communication to the exclusion of others. The second difference was in the area of maxims in comprehension of utterances. In Grice's framework, communicators could violate a maxim to trigger the search for an implicature, and this could be done in two ways. The first is that there are figurative accounts or utterances which involve no maxim violation, and second, the speaker can violate the maxim by saying something that is literally false. The third difference is associated with cooperative communication. The principle operated in the direction of "making conversations only as required at the stage that it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which one is engaged."

Sperber & Wilson, 1995 remark that Grice proposed an analysis in his 1957 article entitled '*Meaning*' on what it is for an individual to mean something by an utterance, where such an utterance is to be understood as referring not

just to linguistic utterances but to any form of communicative behaviour.

### **Concept of cultural texts and codes**

McQuail, 2012 defines the term 'text' as media content which can be viewed in two forms. In one sense, it is seen as the 'physical message' which manifests as the printed document, television programme, film or music. The other sense is for the text to be seen as the meaningful outcome of the encounter between the given content and the reader. This is probably why Fiske, 1987 asserts that a "television programme can become a text at the moment of reading, that is when its interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings or pleasures that it is capable of provoking."

It is apparent from this explanation that it is the media industry that produces a 'programme' or 'content' which invariably can become translated by the audience or readers/viewers as text. An outflow from this position is that the media text or programme may produce different readings or meanings among the audience. This is, therefore, the basis for the assumption that media messages are polysemic in nature, or have potential for multiple meanings. Another dimension of the concept of multiple textual meanings is found in the work of Newcomb, 1991. He asserts that each culture has separate textual codes which represent different meanings. Thus, each culture has codes of meanings from certain dress types, physical appearance, occupation, religion or social circles. Equally, words that are spoken, specific body language cues in drama and other interactions have meanings that can be derived from them within such specific cultures.

Codes, according to McQuail, 2012, are "systems of meaning whose rules and conventions are shared by members of a culture by what has been called an interpretative community." Its basic function is to lay the foundation for the interpretation of the messages or programmes produced by the media and their understanding by the audience of media messages, without which both the media content producers and the audiences would be operating in isolation of each other. The codes which come

in the form of particular gestures, expressions and forms of dress and images established by constant usage and familiarity, are often presented without ambiguity in terms of meanings and interpretation.

While codes lay the foundation for the interpretation of media texts, it is worth noting that it is possible for the 'reader' of media texts to combine his or her experience of the given programme with advertisements or texts from other media programmes and to further communicate such texts to others, a process that is similar to the multistep flow process of communication by opinion leaders in their extension of influence. This process is described by McQuail, 2012 as intertextuality and applies across boundaries between media agencies such as books, films or radio. Intertextuality is, however, not limited to the audience, but is also a feature of the media agencies which are continually cross-referencing similar messages among themselves. Texts come in two forms, either as 'open' or 'closed' in its meanings. Eco, 1979 explains that an 'open text' is one in which the reader is not constrained to adopt one meaning or interpretation. On the other hand, the 'closed text' suggests that the reader or audience is constrained to adopt one meaning or interpretation for the given media message. A typical example to illustrate this would be the analogy between news stories and soap operas on radio and television. While news reports are often 'closed' because the news agency or media communicate it to lead to one interpretation or meaning, the soap operas are often 'open' because the media often intend to allow the viewers to draw their conclusions or meanings from each of the episodes.

Fillmore, 1985 asserts that one of the best ways of understanding texts is through the introduction of interpretive frames that an interpreter invokes. According to him, a frame is invoked when an interpreter, is trying to make sense of text segment, is able to assign it an interpretation by situating its content in a pattern that is known independently of the text. Thus, if some linguistic form or pattern of a text is associated with the frame in question, such a frame can be evoked by the text. Some frames may be innate, that is they appear naturally and



unavoidably while others can be learned through experience or through training, but the central issue is “that their existence depends on associated linguistic applications.” Van Zoonen, 2017 is of the view that Fiske, 1988 established a notion of intertextuality for the study of media meanings in which he set up a distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary texts. According to him, the primary texts are those contents that can be understood easily without reference to other contents or works. These can be individual books, television programmes or songs and they can be understood by applying the rules of genre or codes. Secondary texts include reviews by critics, actor or writer interviews, red carpet appearances, celebrity magazines, promotion material, merchandise and more while audience interpretations constitute ‘tertiary’ texts that range from individual appreciations, to family routines or fan gatherings.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this work, we have examined the phenomenon of polysemy along many of its associated ramifications. The first review involved a holistic look at the phenomenon of polysemy and textual analysis. Various definitions of the phenomenon have been offered as well as models of polysemic interpretations. Two theories that are associated with polysemy were also explicated. These are the framing theory and the relevance theory. Apart from these, the various types and structures of polysemy as enunciated by Hall and other scholars, along with their meanings were also offered. These polysemic types are the hegemonic or preferred meaning, the negotiated meaning and the oppositional meaning. Equally analysed were the concept of cultural texts and codes, while meanings were not assigned outside the cultural codes as doing so would amount to operating in isolation of the cultural understanding of the given communication. However, the relationship between the two types of texts which are open and closed were analysed as they seek to explain how to define meanings of media contents.

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