Interpretation of Polysemy from Diachronic and Synchronic Perspectives Based on Pragmatic Enrichment Theory

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Abstract. Polysemy is an essential feature of English vocabulary, which has always been a focus in linguistic circle. Lexical Pragmatics, as a new discipline in linguistics, mainly studies the pragmatic processing of certain lexical information in utterance interpretation. This pragmatic processing process is called pragmatic enrichment, including pragmatic narrowing, pragmatic broadening, and so on. This paper explored polysemy both from diachronic and synchronic perspectives based on pragmatic enrichment and previous researching results. The researching results show that: from diachronic perspective, the formation and extension of polysemous words senses can be regarded as a pragmatic enrichment process in which the primary or core sense is gradually broadened or narrowed to produce the derived senses; from synchronic perspective, the understanding and selection of polysemous word meaning is restricted by context, and pragmatic enrichment can help determine the exact meaning in context and eliminate ambiguity. These research results shed light on polysemy both from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, bringing significant enlightenment for polysemous words teaching and learning.

Research Background

Polysemy is an essential feature of English vocabulary. In fact, most words in English are polysemous words while monosemous words are very rare. Cognitive linguists made many researches on polysemy. For example, prototype theory was used to study the deviation of senses of polysemy, which regards one of the senses of a polysemous word as the core sense, the others as peripheral senses, and there exists natural relationship between them through family resemblances. Taylor (1995) analyzed the polysemy of "*climb*", and put forward that its core sense was made up of [ASCEND] and [CLAMBER(WITH LIMBS)] and the formation of its other senses was realized through "*meaning chain*". Another important theory in cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, was used to study the derivation mechanism of senses of polysemy. Lakoff held that the production of polysemous words was a systematic mapping process from a concrete conceptual domain to an abstract conceptual domain. He also argued that the extension of the senses of a word was realized mainly through cognitive thinking modes like metaphor or metonymy. However, there are some defects in cognitive linguistic research on polysemous words. The effect of language use on the derivation of senses of polysemy is ignored in the interpretation of formation and development of polysemy; it doesn't give explanations for the process of meaning selection and comprehension from synchronic perspective.

Lexical pragmatics, as a new discipline in linguistics, involves the interface research among semantics, pragmatics, lexics, cognitive linguistics and so on. Taking Grice's conversational principles and Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory as theoretical foundation, lexical pragmatics starts from lexical prototypical meaning or encoded meaning to study the meaning of words dynamically based on pragmatic mechanism, context and encyclopedic knowledge. Pragmatic enrichment is its important theory. Shu Dingfang (2000) pointed out polysemy should be described both from diachronic and synchronic method, and it was not realistic to avoid the origin of polysemy when describing polysemy. Lin Zhengjun (2005) also thought that synchronic and diachronic analysis methods were not mutually exclusive but mutually complemented on the research of polysemy which could be seen as the synchronic reflection of diachronic semantic

evolution. Therefore, we should not only explain the causes and impetus of polysemous words formation and development from diachronic perspective, but also study the understanding and selection of polysemous words in actual use from synchronic perspective.

Therefore, this paper explores polysemy both from diachronic and synchronic perspectives based on pragmatic enrichment and previous researching results.

Theoretical Basis

The pragmatic processing of certain lexical information in target utterance according to contextual information is called pragmatic enrichment, mainly including pragmatic narrowing and pragmatic broadening.
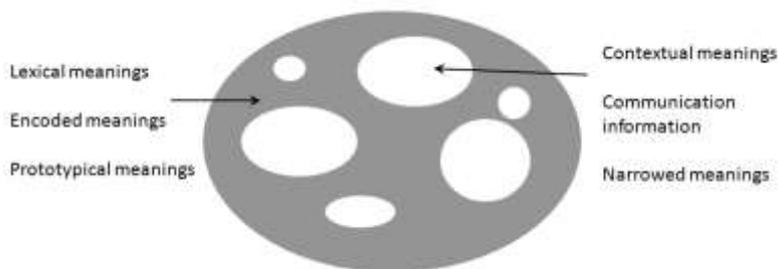

Figure 1. Pragmatic Narrowing (Ran Yongping, 2005).

Pragmatic narrowing means the encoded meaning of a word or its denotation is narrowed in context to convey a more specific meaning in certain context. Ran Yongping (2005) gives a figure to illustrate pragmatic narrowing and the relationship between encoded meanings and narrowed meanings. As figure 1 shows, encoded meanings also refer to prototypical meanings or lexical meanings defined in dictionary, which are decontextualized and rather general, while narrowed meanings or contextual meanings convey specific communication information in context. For example, in *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, "*long*" has seven senses and the first three are frequently used, which are: ①*measuring or covering a great length or distance*; ②*used for asking or talking about particular lengths or distances*; ③*lasting or taking more time than usual*. These three senses can be regarded as its prototypical meanings or encoded meanings. When using them in certain context, they may be narrowed by the hearer to convey more specific meanings. For example,

(a) It's a *long* story. In a word, I didn't do a good job of it.

(b) This paper is too *long*.

In example (a), "*long*" can be seen as the narrowed meaning of sense ③, which means spending a lot of time giving all the details and indicates that something is complicated than usual. "*Long*" in example (b) is the narrowed meaning of sense ①, implying that this paper occupies more pages. Either of them is narrowed based on the prototypical meaning and conveys more concrete meanings in specific context. Some elements in prototypical meanings may become salient under the constraints of context.
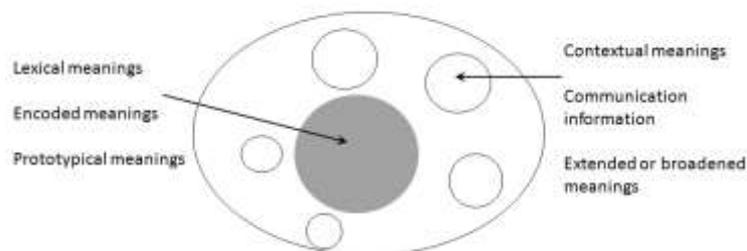

Figure 2. Pragmatic Broadening (Ran Yongping, 2005).

Pragmatic broadening is the weakening or extending process of prototypical meaning of a word in certain context, mainly including approximation, nonliteralness, metaphorical extension, category extension, and so on (Ran Yongping, 2005). Figure 2 shows pragmatic broadening and the relationship between encoded meanings and broadened meanings. In the process of pragmatic broadening, the prototypical meaning of a word is broadened or extended by the hearer to convey a more general meaning than its encoded meaning in certain context. Approximation and metaphorical extension are the two most frequently used kinds. Approximation is a kind of pragmatic broadening in which the prototypical meaning of a word is extended to convey the uncertainty or vagueness of communication information. The broadened meaning falls outside its literally-specified denotation and can be regarded as the looseness of language use. Metaphorical extension is another kind of pragmatic broadening in which one of the important features of prototypical meaning of a word is highlighted so that it refers to something different from its literally-specified denotation.

However, Guo Fuliang and Ye Huijun (2013) considered that the division of pragmatic enrichment into pragmatic broadening and pragmatic narrowing was a rather general categorization, so they introduced a concept called "interior stratification of pragmatic enrichment" to re-categorize lexical-pragmatic enrichment by use of new criteria. They put forward that lexical-pragmatic enrichment could be divided into three types including inter-sense, intra-sense, and exo-sense pragmatic enrichment. Inter-sense pragmatic enrichment takes place at the stratification of all the senses of a polysemous word; intra-sense pragmatic enrichment takes place in the stratification of one of the senses of a polysemous word; exo-sense pragmatic enrichment often takes place in supra-sentential context or extra-linguistic context, in which the meaning of a word is not included in any sense of its definitions in dictionary but is a temporary meaning constructed based on temporary pragmatic information. In this research, inter-sense and intra-sense pragmatic enrichment are used as a supplementary theory to interpret polysemous words selection and understanding.
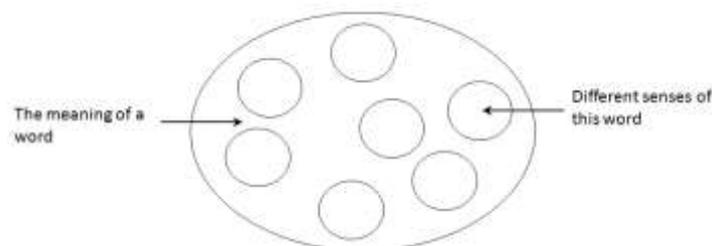

Figure 3. Inter-sense Pragmatic Enrichment（Guo F L, 2013）.
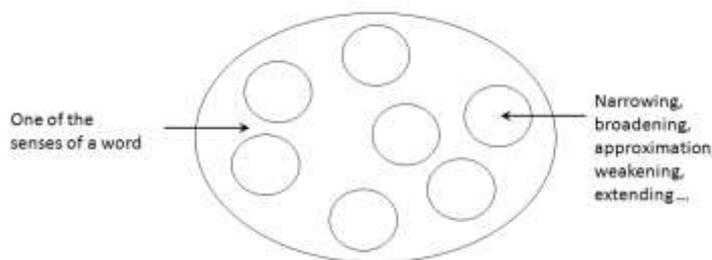

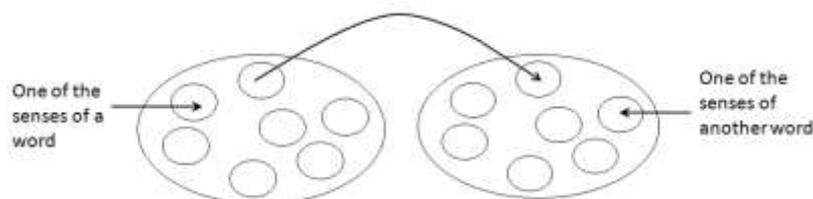Figure 4. Intra-sense Pragmatic Enrichment（Guo F L, 2013）.

Figure 5. Exo-sense Pragmatic Enrichment（Guo F L, 2013）.

The Interpretation of Pragmatic Enrichment on Polysemy from Diachronic Perspective

Language, as a tool for human beings to express and exchange their ideas, is ever changing with the development of human society. Words can reflect such changes mostly, including the disappearance of old words, the formation of new words, and the semantic changes of some words. According to Zhang Shaoquan (2010), semantic changes undergo three stages such as innovation, diffusion and result, which mainly involve the extension or narrowing of word meaning, the elevation or degradation of word meaning, and semantic shift. The extension and narrowing are most common. The extension of word meaning means the new meaning denotation is larger than the old meaning. For example, the word "*virus*" is a term in medical science originally but now it's expanded to computer area; the word "*film*" refers to thin plastic used in cameras but now it can also refer to movie or movie industry. The narrowing of word meaning means the word meaning changes from a general denotation to a narrow one. For example, the word "*desk*" refers to all desks originally, later it's narrowed to refer to the desk at an airport or a hotel "机场、旅馆的服务台". Necessarily the semantic changes of word meaning is closely to social and cultural development. But language use is the important motivation to promote semantic evolution, which is influenced by context and pragmatic consciousness.

From the perspective of lexical pragmatics, the semantic evolution is a pragmatic enrichment process. Context is the necessary condition for the semantic evolution of polysemous words. Context can enable both the addresser and addressee in language communication to expand the word meaning and even create new meaning based on its primary meaning. In humans' frequent communication process, the addresser puts a certain word in new context to use it and activates its new pragmatic meaning. Then the addressee infers its new meaning according to context. When this new usage is used by more and more people repeatedly and accepted by them, this new meaning will be conventionalized as a new sense of this word. In this process, context plays the role of bridging, in which people seek the optimal relevance between the primary sense of the word and contextual information so that the primary sense is broadened or narrowed in context.

Pragmatic broadening and pragmatic narrowing are the two primary types of pragmatic enrichment. "Pragmatic enrichment can make us understand the meaning of a word in use according to context. Once the correct information is received accurately, more and more people will accept that and the new sense of this word gradually comes into being" (Ran Y., 2005). Pragmatic narrowing means that the meaning of a word in use is restricted by context and conveys more concrete meaning so that a subset of the word meaning becomes prominent. It implies that the word in use can convey more concrete information than its encoded meaning, which limits its denotation. Pragmatic broadening refers to that the meaning of a word in use is broadened so that this word expresses a more general meaning than itself and its denotation is broadened. Both pragmatic narrowing and pragmatic broadening can be used to explain the mechanism of polysemous words formation (Sun Zhihui, 2009). From diachronic perspective, pragmatic narrowing and pragmatic broadening are both restricted by context and based on the primary sense to make the primary sense broadened or narrowed after the addressee's pragmatic inference, which promotes the production of the derived senses.

The Interpretation of Pragmatic Enrichment on Polysemy from Synchronic Perspective

Li Zonghong (2006, 2014) proposed that pragmatic context was the important basis to influence the pragmatic saliency of word meaning, and could eliminate ambiguity of polysemous words in use. In other words, pragmatic context prevents the semantic conflicts caused by multiple senses, and plays a very important role in the extraction and selection of word meaning. It can activate some features of word meaning and make the other features stand behind. In this way, one of the senses becomes salient under the restriction of context while the other senses are hidden behind so that the lexical ambiguity caused by polysemouy can be eliminated. But how does context restrict the selection and understanding of polysemous words? Lexical pragmatics makes further study on it. The following diagram (seeing in figure 6) was improved by the author based on Lin J's (2008)

and Feng H's (2012) figure of "pragmatic process of meaning enrichment", to show how a polysemous word is processed pragmatically to acquire its pragmatic meaning.
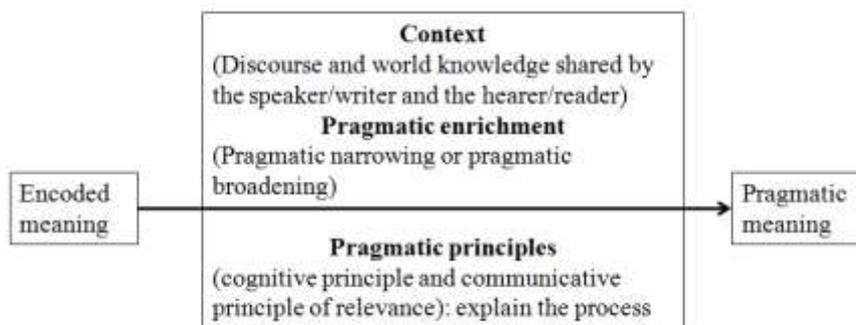

Figure 6. Pragmatic Process of Meaning Enrichment.

"The understanding of pragmatic enrichment on polysemous words is actually a process of seeking the most relevant information, in which the hearer tries to pay least cognitive effort to achieve the most cognitive effect (Zhou Shuang, 2010)." From synchronic perspective, the pragmatic enrichment of polysemous words is actually a pragmatic inference process in which the hearer seeks the optimal relevance between the encoded meaning or prototypical sense of a polysemous word and the context information in the speaker's utterance. The cognitive context shared both by the speaker and the hearer is the presupposition and basis of pragmatic enrichment made by the hearer, which is made up of the speaker's and hearer's stored information and the new information of utterance. Based on the shared cognitive context, the hearer will automatically come into pragmatic inference process after receiving the speaker's linguistic or nonlinguistic ostensive stimulus. In the process of pragmatic inference, the hearer will process all relevant information and get the optimal relevance to the polysemous word in utterance. Then the hearer will seek the most appropriate sense of the polysemous word to satisfy his expectation. If the category of the word meaning is bigger than that of its prototypical sense and satisfies the hearer's expectation, pragmatic broadening will appear; if it does not, the hearer will make more efforts until he can find the exact meaning, and pragmatic narrowing will appear (Xie Qiao, 2009).

The interior stratification of pragmatic enrichment can be used to interpret the pragmatic enrichment process of word meaning in great details. Guo Fuliang and Ye Huijun (2013) re-categorize lexical-pragmatic enrichment into inter-sense, intra-sense, and exo-sense. Inter-sense pragmatic enrichment takes place at the stratification of all the senses of a polysemous word, and intra-sense pragmatic enrichment takes place in the stratification of one of the senses of a polysemous word. Actually, in order to understand the meaning of a polysemous word appeared in the speaker's utterance, the hearer must make pragmatic enrichment twice: (1) since a polysemous word has multiple senses, the hearer need to make inter-sense pragmatic enrichment to select one from all the senses of the polysemous word; (2) since the pragmatic meaning is often more exact than the prototypical meaning, the hearer must make intra-sense pragmatic enrichment based on the selected sense to infer the pragmatic meaning of this word in the context of the speaker's utterance.

Therefore, in many circumstances, just determining which sense to be selected is far from enough to understand the meaning of a polysemous word in utterance, because the meaning of a polysemous word in practical use is much more concrete than its sense defined in dictionary. That's necessarily involved in intra-sense pragmatic enrichment, which takes places at the stratification of one of the senses of this polysemous word. It can be concluded that the understanding and selection of polysemous words is not only a process of seeking the prototypical meaning from the senses defined in dictionary, but also a process of seeking the more concrete meaning, in which one should make pragmatic inference based on the prototypical meaning and contextual supposition.

Summary

The researches results of pragmatic enrichment on polysemy show that: from diachronic perspective, the formation and extension of polysemous words senses can be regarded as a pragmatic enrichment process in which the primary or core sense is gradually broadened or narrowed to produce the derived senses; from synchronic perspective, the understanding and selection of polysemous word meaning is restricted by context, and pragmatic enrichment can help determine the exact meaning in context and eliminate ambiguity. These research results shed light on polysemy both from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, bringing significant enlightenment for polysemous words teaching.

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