Monosemy and the Dictionary

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I. The Notion of "Monosemy" in Linguistics

The notion of "monosemy" is often mentioned by linguists, though not always under that name—Cruse (1986), for example, uses "univocality", Catford (1983:24) discusses the use of terms such as "oligosemy" "eurysemy" and "stenosemy" — but it is hardly ever defined or exemplified. Also, few linguists have tried to evaluate the quantitative importance of monosemy: how many words can be considered monosemous in English and in other languages? When evaluations are attempted, the results are surprisingly divergent, the discrepancies probably being due to the indeterminacy of the definition of "monosemy".

The situation is all the more surprising as "polysemy" is discussed in every single book about semantics. Lexical polysemy has been considered as an unfortunate imperfection by many linguists in the past (dialectologists, after Gilliéron, and structuralists), but nowadays it is often presented as an indispensable feature of language: without polysemy, language could not cope with the diversity and the variability of the notions to be expressed. If every single "referent" had a different name, the lexical code would impose an extraordinary burden on the memory of the language user (see Hagège 1985:126).[1]

Whichever attitude is adopted, polysemy is important for the semanticist: indeed, for some, it is *"the very object of semantics"* (Rey-Debove 1971:256).

If monosemy is inseparable from polysemy, it must be an equally fundamental concept. Its study is particularly important in terminology, since it is one of the most often quoted characteristics of the *term* as opposed to the *word*, but it is also important in lexicology and lexicography. It certainly deserves more than the cursory attention that is generally given to it; at the very least, it deserves an adequate definition.

II. Definitions of Monosemy

The definitions of monosemy that do exist are simple in their formulations: for example, *"consisting of a single meaning"* (Crystal 1985). Though brief, they are enough to discard several clearly inadequate notions of monosemy. First, despite the morphology of the word, monosemy cannot mean "consisting of a single seme", since the meaning of a lexical element cannot be a single seme.[2] Secondly, monosemy cannot mean "having only one referent" if one defines "referent" as *"entity (object, state of affairs, etc.) in the external world to which a linguistic EXPRESSION refers"* (Crystal 1985). All lexical elements must be "monoreferential" in discourse, even if they are "multireferential" in the language; otherwise communication would be impossible.

Simple as they are, the definitions of monosemy are not easy to use. However one defines meaning, it is difficult to devise ways in which the "unicity" of meaning of a lexical element can be established. It is complex enough to establish the number and diversity of meanings of a form (Lyons 1981:22), and unicity is still harder to demonstrate.[3]

Monosemous words might be "defined" as those words with only one "simple" definition in the dictionary, but this only begs the question of the accuracy of semantic analyses in dictionaries. There are also practical difficulties in deciding what counts as a simple definition.

III. Monosemy, Polysemy, Contextual Meanings and Lexical Creation

A. Polysemous Words are Monosemous

Let us start with the statement that a word is monosemous when native speakers think of the meaning as a single unit. If such a definition is adopted, it is possible to argue that polysemous words are monosemous — and consequently that all words except homonyms are monosemous.

The process of lexical creation through polysemy is well-known: it has been called "shift of application" (Ullmann 1962), "semantic shift" (Cowie 1988:129), etc. (see also Bolinger 1965: 566—567). Such lexical creation works because users perceive the semantic similarity between the original concept and the new one. The agent of lexical change is the perceived "unity of meaning": the objective of lexical creation through polysemy is not to destroy that unity, but to preserve it while extending the meaning of the word.

Of course, with the passing of time, the semantic links may be lost, in which case the words become homonyms. But all polysemous words correspond to a certain type of unit of meaning—let us say a "macro-unit"—and it can indeed be argued that all polysemous words are "monosemous" in that sense.

B. Monosemous Words are Polysemous

Now let us say that polysemy is when native speakers think of the meaning as several separate but related units. It can be argued that some, if not all, "monosemous" words are polysemous.

Every time a form is used in discourse, it corresponds to a meaning which is "new", since the situational context must necessarily be different for each occurrence. Firth puts this rather strongly: "*[. . .] each word when used in a new context is a new word*".[4] Bloomfield (1933:407) had said much the same in more moderate terms: "*every utterance of a speech-form involves a minute semantic innovation*". Of course, some would say that this is a matter of reference, not sense, but the two are obviously linked.

Words may be said to have a "*range of use*" (Sparck Jones 1986:91). One example: in COD, *bull* is defined as "*uncastrated male of ox 2, or of any bovine animal; [. . .]*". The word, then, can refer to male ox", "male yak", "male zebu", etc. as well as to "male Hereford", "male Friesian" and to all the other varieties of domes-

tic cattle: it clearly has "different" interpretations. Yet surely in that "bovine" sense *bull* should not be considered polysemous.

Some words can be described as either monosemous or polysemous according to the definition adopted for what constitutes a unit of meaning. There are "micro-units" as well as "macro-units"; in fact, there may be a variety of shades of meaning between different uses, from the totally identical to the very different. This means that monosemy and polysemy share a certain "elasticity" of reference, and, potentially, of sense.

This elasticity does not threaten communication, for several reasons: disambiguating power of the context, "goodwill" of the receiver (see Grice's *a priori* of communication), etc.. Most important, the system works because each contextual meaning is close to the next: this is what Sparck Jones (1986:97) calls the "Economy Hypothesis". If I use a form to refer to something which is semantically close enough to another concept normally designated by that same form, the message will be clear. For example, if I use the word *bachelor* of a moose or of a platypus, I shall probably be understood, because the only "reasonable" seme ("having no mate") will be activated.

C. Clusters of Meaning

We create classes of content (referents, concepts, denotata, etc.) for each form. This categorisation is well-known, if not fully understood (see Rosch and colleagues in bibliography). The question is how we group interpretations together to create clusters that are not only designated by the same form, but can be shown to be "thought of as a single unit".

The simplest case, beyond the use of the same form to designate a unique referent over time, is that of those artefacts created in series of "exactly identical" individuals. Slightly more complex is the case of "natural kinds", as well as some other types of artefacts such as the cups and mugs of Labov and Wierzbicka, for which the different individuals are less clearly identical. We perceive their semantic "unicity", however fuzzy the categories may be in the real world. We are certainly helped in some cases by certain natural phenomena: for example, the fact that all animals that "purr" are "cats", etc.[5]

We use intensional criteria that transcend other elements of the situation, like time and space. We naturally group together (i.e. we use the same word with "only one meaning"), entities "in the flesh" and their representations, in two or three dimensions (Wierzbicka 1985:124): the word *bull* that designates a referent in a Hungarian meadow in September 1988 is surely "the same as" the word *bull* that designates another referent painted on a piece of Mycenean pottery in 1500 BC and displayed in the Louvre.

Is there a limit between monosemy and polysemy in this clustering of meaning? Where can it be placed? How far do we retain traces, in our use of language, of the semantic unity of different meanings? In order to answer those questions, we need criteria to characterize "unicity of meaning", or "monosemy".

IV. Ambiguity, Polysemy, Monosemy, and Non-Ambiguity

Polysemy is treated together with homonymy in the writings of many modern (mostly British) logicians, linguistic philosophers or semanticists under the single heading of "lexical ambiguity": Lyons (1977), Kempson (1977), Cruse (1986), etc. A lexical element is said to be "ambiguous" when its form can be interpreted in different ways. On the other hand, a non-ambiguous word has only one interpretation.

Cruse (on whom the following paragraphs draw heavily), starts with the assumption that *"the meaning of a word is fully reflected in its contextual relations"* (Cruse 1986:16), and with the idea that the best way to explore the meanings of lexical elements is to elicit *"intuitions ABOUT"* (rather than *"intuitions OF"*) the meaning of utterances which contain those elements (Cruse 1986:10). He then provides a survey of tests for ambiguity, which he divides up into two sections: indirect tests and direct tests. Only a summary will be given here.

A. "Indirect" Tests

Indirect tests are based on semantic relations between words. They include the "synonymy test"[6]: a word is ambiguous if it admits different synonyms in different contexts; the "antonymy test": a word is ambiguous if it admits different antonyms in different contexts; and the "derivation test": a word is ambiguous if it can be linked with more than one group of derived words.

All those tests are difficult to use "in reverse": for example, one cannot say that a word that admits the same synonym in every possible context of use is non-ambiguous, since there is an insoluble indeterminacy in the number of contexts to be considered, and because the test is logically invalid if the synonyms are themselves ambiguous. Similarly, if a form relates to only one family of derived forms, it cannot be concluded that the word is non-ambiguous: it is easy to imagine a situation in which among the different senses of an ambiguous word one sense only would correspond to a family of derived words. In addition to this, the tests are impossible to apply when a word has no synonym, antonym or family of derived words, a situation which would seem to be fairly frequent for monosemous words (see *chisel, dahlia, iguana, meson, ocarina*, etc.).

The "translation test" advocated by some authors (see Dubois/Dubois 1971:75) is equally unsatisfactory: one cannot prove that a word is non-ambiguous by showing that it always admits the same equivalent in another language, even discounting the problem of which languages to adopt for testing, of how many languages, etc. The "taxonomy test" (not mentioned by Cruse), according to which a word can be considered monosemous if it occupies only one position in only one taxonomy (Cowie 1982), is tautological: the place(s) to be occupied by a word in one or several taxonomies can only be decided if one knows its meaning(s).

B. Direct Tests

Direct tests for ambiguity are more directly concerned with the semantic identity of the words. Cruse (1986:58) considers three types.

1. The Contextual Modulation Test

Ambiguous words are, so to speak, semantically differentiated prior to their use in discourse: consequently, if the interpretation of a word in an utterance requires more information than is provided by the context, the word is ambiguous. On the other hand, Cruse says, a non-ambiguous word is characterized by the fact that all the information necessary for its interpretation must come from the context; otherwise, it would be impossible for the receiver of the message to understand. For example (Cruse 1986:58):

(a) *Arthur washed and polished the car.*
(b) *John lubricated the car.*

In (a), the context clearly indicates that *car* means "the body of the car", whereas in (b) it means "the engine". Since the information used to understand the word *car* is given by the context, *car* can be considered non-ambiguous.

The test indicates that *dahlia, ocarina* and *stallion*, for example, are non-ambiguous despite the existence of two interpretations for each ("flower" and "plant"; "instrument" and "player"; "male horse" and "male horse kept for breeding").

2. The Independent Maximisation Test

Certain contexts make it possible to isolate the different meanings of ambiguous words. For example (Cruse 1986:61):

(c)   A: *Is that a dog?*
      B: (i)*Yes, It's a spaniel.*
          (ii)*No, it's a bitch.*

The two answers are possible because *dog* is ambiguous. In the case of a non-ambiguous word, the same exchanges are impossible (Cruse 1986:61):

(d)   A: *Is the subject of this poem a monarch?*
      B: (i)*Yes, it is a queen.*
          (ii)* *No, it is a king.*

The test is difficult to use, if only because the different interpretations of a word must be determined prior to the testing.

3. The Zeugma Test

According to this test (see also Sinclair 1985 and Robins 1987), the different interpretations of an ambiguous word give rise to zeugma when they are used together. For example (Cruse 1986:61):

(e) * *John and his driving licence expired last Thursday.* Or
(f) * *John's driving licence expired last Thursday; so did John.*

This does not happen when a non-ambiguous word is used. Consider (g) (from Cruse 1986:62):

(g) *My cousin, who is pregnant, was born on the same day as Arthur's, who is the father.*

In this sentence, the first occurrence of *cousin* refers to a "female cousin" and the second to a "male cousin". Yet the sentence is not zeugmatic, which shows that *cousin* is non-ambiguous. Another example (from Cruse 1986:127) shows that *cub* is also non-ambiguous:

(h) *The vixen and the lioness are playing with their cubs.*

An authenic example (from Sinclair 1985:91), shows that *decline* (vb.) is not ambiguous.

(i) *The RCP declined in spirit and in numbers.*

There are many difficulties of application of the zeugma test (see Cruse 1986:63-64). For example, zeugma is at the basis of many puns, and it is sometimes difficult to decide whether an utterance is deviant or not. The effect produced by zeugma seems to be progressively ridiculous as the semantic gap between the different interpretations widens (Robins 1987:69). This indicates that the division between ambiguous and non-ambigous words is in fact blurred. As a consequence, it will be necessary to test the "same" meanings in many different contexts before drawing conclusions.

Cruse (1986:63), noting that a word may have different interpretations that produce no zeugma when they are used together, introduces the notion of "*antagonism*" of senses. For example, *jacket* seems to be ambiguous in (j) (independent maximisation test), but the same interpretations ("token" and "type") produce no zeugma in (k) because they are not antagonistic:

(j)　A:　*Is this the jacket you want?*
　　B:　(i)*Yes. (It's the type I want.)*
　　　　(ii)*No. (This particular one is shop-soiled.)*

(k) *This is our best-selling jacket: do try it on.*

The conclusion is important: some words can be shown to have more than one meaning by the first two direct tests, but only the zeugma test will reveal whether the meanings are antagonistic or not. This shows that there are different ways in which the interpretations of a form can correspond to a unit of meaning. The test shows that the interpretations of *ocarina* ("player" and "instrument") are antagonistic, but that those of *dahlia* ("flower" and "plant") are not. There is no zeugma in (l), even if *bull* refers to a group of animals including elephants and buffaloes.

(l) *The bulls are particularly dangerous.*

This suggests that some of the meanings of an ambiguous word may be considered together as a group of non-ambiguous meanings.[7]

V. The Nature of Monosemy

A. Direct Tests and Number of Meanings

Direct tests are not totally satisfactory, especially for the lexicographer. They are conceptually difficult to master and, consequently, often difficult to carry out in practice. They are impossible to use with lexical elements like grammatical words (and idioms?). They are even difficult to use when the different meanings correspond to different parts of speech, or to different syntactic patterns (see *crease* and *pucker* in Cowie 1982:57).[8] Also, in order to use them, it is necessary to establish first what the different interpretations of a form may be, so that, oddly enough, the tests are difficult to use with the least ambiguous words. One must be sure that the two interpretations tested are really different: if they are actually the same, and there are others that have not been tested, the tests will be useless. Finally, direct tests only work contrastively, that is for two interpretations of the same form at a time.

Yet when the words that can be shown to be ambiguous (*match, bank, dog, poor, expire*, etc.) are compared with those for which it is impossible to show any ambiguity (*monarch, horse, cousin, dahlia, cub, decline, child, stallion*), it is clear that direct tests together, and the zeugma test in particular, contribute to the detection of "unicity of meaning". According to them, there are indeed different categories of words in terms of "number of meanings".

B. The Limits of Monosemy

Most of the words that "pass" all the direct tests for non-ambiguity (i.e. that show no antagonism of interpretations) are technical or scientific words with minimal extension and maximal intension; this is the type of word that is always mentioned whenever examples of monosemous words are given. But there are also common, ordinary words such as *cousin, monarch* and *horse*. Some of those refer to concepts for which other languages have coined more than one word: they are semantically complex and yet they behave as non-ambiguous words. Hagège (1985:150) mentions languages in which the concepts of *buy* and *sell* are expressed by one and only one word, which must be non-ambiguous. The French word *singe* is non-ambiguous and non-antagonistic, despite the fact that it can be used of referents that are given different names in English (*ape* and *monkey*). Another example is colour adjectives, which behave as non-ambiguous words (Ducrot/Todorov 1972: 303—304). Even the "generic" words of taxonomies (*plant* or *animal*), which are characterized by a vast extension unified by some semantic link, belong to the category: "*[. . .] in ordinary English the word plant[9] is not even polysemous, as has sometimes been suggested. Linguistic evidence shows that in ordinary English it has only one meaning [. . .]*" (Wierzbicka 1985:155)

Lexemes like *ice* and *cold* are a different case: they have at least one "concrete" and one "abstract" (figurative, metonymical, or metaphorical) interpretation, which produce zeugma when used together. Yet, they illustrate the notion of "macro-units" of meaning mentioned earlier: all their interpretations are united by some semantic link, so that they can be provided with an "all-embracing" definition

(Lerot 1985). The conclusion is that the labels "non-ambiguous" or "monosemous" may be applicable to many more lexemes than is usually assumed: for Bäcklund (1981:410), verbs like *recognize* and *realize* should be considered as having "a *unified meaning*"; for Ruhl (1979:93) "*[. . .] common verbs such as take, give, come, go, break, and hit are monosemic, and are judged as polysemic by dictionaries and linguists because their essential, general meanings are confused with contextual, inferential meanings*"; according to Moon (1987a:180), "*top occurs in a large number of contexts but really has one basic meaning*".

All three direct tests for ambiguity make it possible to isolate four categories of words:

(A) apparently non-ambiguous *(dahlia)*,

(B) ambiguous according to some tests, but with non-antagonistic meanings *(jacket)*; strictly speaking, they could also be considered non-ambiguous, since they do not pass all three direct tests for ambiguity, but they are clearly different from those of category (A),

(C) ambiguous, with antagonistic meanings, but with a semantic link between all their meanings *(ice, cold)*, and

(D) ambiguous, with no semantic link *(bank)*.

From the point of view of linguistic theory, there are several equally reasonable answers to the question of the "upper" limits of monosemy, according to what one counts as a unit of meaning. In other words, monosemy can be whatever one decides it to be. However, the most reasonable upper limit, the one that seems to have some sort of psycholinguistic salience (as shown in the zeugma test), is between (A) and (B) on the one hand, and (C) and (D) on the other, that is, between non-antagonism and antagonism of the different interpretations. Thus, monosemy would include general words, but would exclude the words of category (C) and the obviously homonymous words of category (D).

The tentative definition of monosemy that can be reached in this way is as follows: a monosemous word whose contextual meanings cannot be shown to be antagonistic by the zeugma test.

Some words are more monosemous than others, and the most monosemous of all[10] must be, in category (A), those that refer to only one class of strictly identical objects, whose meanings do not vary — or hardly vary — according to the contexts in which they are used, and which are never ambiguous out of context. The words that correspond most to this are not proper names[11], but scientific and technical words, which are also characterized by the fact that they have minimal extension and maximal intension (Béjoint 1988).

Those words tend to be long and rare, whereas frequent words tend to be short and polysemous.[12] Rare words can be long and can remain monosemous because they are not heavily used: it has often been observed that monosemy is essentially unstable (Dubois/Dubois 1971:75; Guilbert 1975:65; Lyons 1981:47).

C. The Rules of Monosemy

Since there are rules that account for the semantic relations between the different meanings of a polysemous word (see particularly the work of Guillaume and its use

by Picoche 1986), there must also be rules to account for the relations between the different interpretations of a monosemous word, that is to say semantic shifts that do not affect the monosemy of a word. The question of the "rules" of monosemy has never been addressed as such (however, see Ruhl 1979 and 1981, Jongen 1985, Robins 1987 and Cowie 1988). Such rules would probably be partly language-specific, maybe even varietal (see the example of *cup* versus *paper cup* in Wierzbicka 1985:58); but there might also be some universal aspects.

— Monosemous words allow for the negation of criterial or non-criterial semes. For example:

(m) *The dog had three legs*

does not imply the creation of a new meaning for *dog*. This may be true of all names for classes of referents, particularly for natural-kinds, perhaps in all languages.

— The examples of *cousin, cub, monarch*, etc. suggest that some nouns referring to living organisms with sexual differentiation allow a choice between masculine and feminine referents.

— For *aunt, uncle, brother-in-law, sister-in-law*, etc., the sex is specified, but not the precise relationship (Robins 1987:64—65). For *cousin*, neither the sex nor the relationship is specified.

— Size seems to be irrelevant in some cases: "*[. . .] different size and appearance does not prevent the lumping of different varieties of dogs together under one generic name*" (Wierzbicka 1985:177).

— The example of *jacket* suggests that some concrete words allow a "token"/"type" choice that does not affect their monosemy. Cruse (1986:141) says that only natural-kind words allow a type reading. This may be a universal trait.

— For some werbs, the way in which the action is achieved does not affect the status of the word: *walk* is monosemous, whatever the number of legs of the creature that does the walking. A similar, but more complex, example about some meanings of *run* is given by Robins (1987:67), which raises the important question of the lexicographical grouping of classes of direct objects:[13]

(n) *He runs an investment trust and a couple of apartments.*

— The example of *door* suggests that the material which something is made of does not affect the monosemy of the word. The unifying element, in many of those artefact words, seems to be function (Wierzbicka 1985; Schelbert 1988).

— Some monosemous words can refer both to "container" and "contents" (*pitcher, carafe*, etc.). But the zeugma test is inconclusive. Robins (1987:68) gives the example of *bill*:[14]

(o) *He paid the bill and threw it away.*

— *Door*, again, suggests that some concrete words allow a "part"/"whole" choice. Cruse deduces from (p) that *door* is ambiguous (Cruse 1986:65), but other contexts (q) are less clear:

(p) * *We took the door off its hinges and then walked through it.*

(q) ? *The door had been broken, and we could walk through it.*

Surely, if you "paint a car", you do not paint the engine; you can "paint a door", and you can "walk through the door": are they really different doors? *Mouth* is similar: it is polysemous, because the outermost meanings produce zeugma (Moon 1987a:174—175), but some interpretations taken together are non-antagonistic (Cruse 1986:72).

— Most figurative uses and metaphorical extensions generate polysemy, especially when one meaning is "physical" and the other "psychological": see the examples of *expire*, or *cold* (Ruhl 1981:259ff.), of *cat* and *mule* (Ayto 1988). But some apparently do not (Sparck Jones 1986:114 on *weep/lament)*.

This list is certainly not definitive. There are further aspects of word meaning to be considered, such as the syntactic or collocational behaviour of words and the part played by participant roles and by semantic universals (Wierzbicka 1980).[15]

VI. Monosemy in Dictionaries

The criteria used by lexicographers to determine whether a word has several meanings and how far they should be divided up (Cowie 1982, Stock 1984, Moon 1987a:176, Moon 1987b, etc.) are not the same as those used by theoretical linguists; nor should they be (Robins 1987): lexicographers have other considerations to take into account, particularly the usefulness of the information and of its mode of presentation. However, a definition of monosemy based on tests of acceptability could be of use in lexicography since it corresponds to "something" in the way semantic information is used by the average speaker/hearer.[16]

The question of monosemy vs. polysemy being what it is, it is not surprising that different dictionaries should give different solutions to the same problems (and even for different words in the same dictionary). There are many examples of various treatments of the same word: the semantic area of *fasten* is covered in only one "simple" entry in LDOCE2, but it is given seven sub-entries in CED.

Lexicographers have been divided into "lumpers" and "splitters" (Moon 1987a:177ff.). There are cases where modern dictionaries do seem to lump excessively: COD and CTD tend to treat together many different meanings, separated only by a semi-colon whose function does not stand out clearly. For example, *motor car* and *dining car* are treated together in COD. LDOCE2 apparently treats as a single sense *child* "young human being" and "(child) before birth"[17], etc. But there are apparently more splitters than lumpers, in Britain and elsewhere. Indeed, the objective in many dictionaries seems to be to distinguish as many senses as possible within the scope of the work. Murray has been called *"the arch-splitter"*: there are 341 senses of *take* in OED, while there are "only" 134 in Johnson's *Dictionary* (Moon 1987a:177). This tendency to split meanings has been found in English dictionaries in general (Sinclair 1985:91), in all French dictionaries (Rey-Debove 1971:255—256), in Littré (Guiraud 1967: see Rey 1970:233), in the Larousse dictionaries (Matoré 1968:147), etc.. A look at a few dictionaries confirms the impression: CED separates *child* "baby" from the main sense, *cousin* "child of aunt or uncle" from "child of cousin"[18]; W8, like all American dictionaries, tends to "over-split". The solutions adopted are not even consistent: *door* "piece of wood, etc." and *door* "doorway" are always treated as separate senses, in all dictionaries, whereas the same is never done with *window*. For some of these words, the zeugma

test would have shown that the different "meanings" in fact correspond to different interpretations of a single unit of meaning.

The identification of those meanings that deserve to be represented and separated in a dictionary rests on two points:

1. Do the meanings exist? That is, do they exist in the corpus (rather than in the head of the lexicographer)? For example, most dictionaries define *dahlia* as a plant; some give it two definitions: "plant" and "flower"; COB (rightly, I think) defines it exclusively as a flower.

2. Do they correspond to interpretations that can be proved different? Are they antagonistic or not? If the meanings are antagonistic, this should be indicated, because they correspond to more than one unit of meaning (and thus possibly to more than one pattern of syntactic and collocational behaviour). If they are included, the treatment should be consistent: for example, shouldn't the entries for the names of musical instruments all be written in the same way (either they all mention the "player" meaning, or none of them does)? This is certainly not always the case: for example, in W8, *violin* has a "player" meaning, but not *ocarina*. Of course, the decision may be dictated by other considerations, such as frequency of use as it appears in a corpus, but that does not solve the user's encoding problems.

If the meanings are non-antagonistic and are included, the danger is that there may be no end to them. Also, they may correspond to some psycholinguistic processes that make each meaning more or less "obvious" for the users (hence the importance of establishing what the "rules" of monosemy are, and how universal they are). Again, the decision should be the same for all similar cases (unless there are other considerations): in COB, for example, *carafe* has a "contents" meaning, but not *pitcher*.

Finally, what we have called "macro-units" of meanings, whether they are whole lexemes or part of lexemes, should be indicated (Moon 1987a:176ff.): this would certainly be useful in the internalization of meanings. Present practice is extremely erratic on this point: "general definitions" are few and far between.

Our definition of "monosemy" is far from being a solution to all problems. Yet it may help lexicographers to make more rigorous decisions about the grouping or separation of uses. The search for psycholinguistically valid categories of words in terms of "number of meanings" must be a fruitful one for dictionary-making.

VII. Conclusions

For some, "monosemy" is just another example of the catastrophic influence of the indiscriminate use of labels, which tend to give the impression that there are discrete categories even when this is not the case (Ruhl 1981:268). While it is true that monosemy and polysemy are just labels for different zones on a continuum, it is possible, by using some of the tests designed by semanticists, to distinguish categories of meaning relations that may be labelled "monosemy" and "polysemy", and thus to arrive at a reasonable definition of "monosemy" that can be applied to some of the problems encountered by lexicographers.

The area of monosemy vs. polysemy is a rich one for further study (Rey-Debove 1971:255). The "rules" of monosemy—if their existence can be confirmed—may

prove important for both semantics and lexicography. One possible direction for further study is the use of monosemous words in definitions: are definitions better or worse if they are made less ambiguous by the use of monosemous words?

Notes

1 The idea can be found in Leibniz.

2 From this point of view, things would be clearer if "polysemy" were replaced by "polysememy" and "monosemy" by "monosememy" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1977:251).

3 Absence is always more difficult to demonstrate than presence: for example, it is easier to show that a lexical element admits different synonyms in different contexts than to prove that it always admits the same.

4 This has been called the "extreme contextualist position" (see Saporta 1961:283).

5 Other features are surely irrelevant to the linguistic experience of the average speaker: the "interfecundability" of animals, or the atomic number of *gold* (Putnam 1975).

6 The "names" of the different tests are all mine; Cruse (1986) does not name them.

7 There are other tests for the detection of ambiguity: see, for example, Jeffries/Willis (1982) and their suggestion that the label "polysemous" be attached to those words whose meanings can be differentiated in terms of "participant roles" (*"the various entities which participate in an action"* Carter 1987: 144; see the "théorie des actants" put forward by Tesnière 1959). But the test is difficult to apply in reverse.

8 This raises the problem of whether macro-units of meaning can cross the boundaries of parts of speech.

9 In the vegetal sense of the word only.

10 Though absolute monosemy may not exist (Gentilhomme 1984:29).

11 Note that there is definitely a certain "multiplicity of meaning" in, for example, *"All Plato is on the shelf"*, or *"Peter worries me"*. See *Loire* in Guilbert (1975:64.)

12 This indicates that polysemy might be more adventageous than monosemy in communication (Wierzbicka 1985:86).

13 The important question of collocation and its relation to monosemy/polysemy is not tackled at all in the present article.

14 See Cruse (1986:74ff.) on the similarly problematic case of *book*.

15 Interesting discussions of other cases can be found in recent publications: *post* and *culture* in Cowie (1982); *rise* in Carter (1987:139); see also Stock (1984.)

16 It could for example provide a solution to Jackendoff 1983's problem with *see*, or Aitchison 1985's with *go*.

17 With, incidentally, the phrase *only child* in the wrong place.

18 It also separates *car* (modifier) from *car* (noun), and many other words used in combination from their use in isolation.

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