Polysemous Words, Idioms and Conceptual Metaphors Cognitive Linguistics and Lexicography

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Abstract

The present paper investigates polysemous words, idioms and conceptual metaphors in a cognitive linguistic framework. The focus is on the motivation of the meanings of polysemous words and idioms (including phrasal verbs), and its implications for lexicography. Cognitive linguistic research on polysemous words and idioms suggests that their meaning structure is motivated by conceptual mechanisms such as conceptual metaphors and metonymies, and it can be accounted for in a systematic way. This paper claims that lexicographers can make use of meaning analyses focusing on motivation and apply these in the structure of dictionaries.

Motivation in Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics claims that the conceptual system and the linguistic system as such are related to each other. The same principles and motivational forces operate in both. Motivation is a central phenomenon in cognitive linguistics. We can talk about the motivation of something in language or thought when that thing is neither arbitrary nor predictable: "The relationship between A and B is *motivated* just in case there is an independently existing link, L, such that A–L–B 'fit together'. L *makes sense* of the relationship between A and B" [Lakoff 1987:448]. The reason for its centrality is that "*[i]t is easier to learn something that is motivated than something that is arbitrary. It is also easier to remember* and *use* motivated knowledge than arbitrary knowledge" [346]. Motivation is not the same as prediction since it is not claimed that we can predict what a word like *branch* means in the expression *a local branch of the organization,* or that the meaning of this word is arbitrary. We can understand what *branch* means because the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS motivates its meaning. In addition to conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymy (CONCEPT A FOR CONCEPT B: *hold one's hand* – THE HAND STANDS FOR THE ACTIVITY), conventional knowledge (the shared information in a given culture concerning a conceptual domain: *hold one's hand* 'stop an activity to see whether or how to continue the activity'), image schemas (UP–DOWN schema), and construals can also provide motivations for word meanings. Conceptual metaphor is the process of understanding one concept/domain (any coherent segment of experience) in terms of another: CONCEPT A IS CONCEPT B, where CONCEPT A is the target and CONCEPT B is the source domain: *I'm at a crossroads in my life* (metaphorical linguistic expression) – LIFE IS A JOURNEY (conceptual metaphor). Motivation plays an important role in cognition and language. As Lakoff [1987] observes, polysemous words and most idioms are motivated since their meanings make use of and are consistent with certain already existing patterns. Naturally, not all word meanings and idioms are conceptually motivated, but often we can find a link between form and meaning.

A Lexical Network Analysis of *Hold* and *Keep*

The cognitive view of motivation can be put to use in the examination of words such as *hold* and *keep*. These words appear to have highly motivated senses that are also important in idioms that contain them. In the following, a discussion of the systematic sense analysis of these highly polysemous words and idioms containing them is presented. If we adopt Lakoff's view on motivation, we can assume that the awareness and knowledge of the motivations of meanings of *hold* and *keep* helps learners master their meanings more easily. In this way, it can be predicted that if a dictionary makes use of the motivational analysis of the senses of polysemous words and the idioms in which these specific words appear, it can be more effective and useful for language learners. This means that lexicographers are advised to make the conceptual links between words and their meanings explicit whenever possible. Thus they can efficiently apply cognitive linguistic principles and the results of cognitive linguistic research on word meanings in making decisions about entry organization in dictionaries.

One of the reasons why *hold* and *keep* are chosen is that they occur very frequently in English: they are within the first 200 most frequently used lexical items according to the Brown Corpus. Both can express basic actions, they have conventionalized metaphorical senses, and they can be found in a number of idioms. Their usage possibly presents a problem for the lexicographers as well as learners of English since they easily confuseable, and they appear to be used in a variety of seemingly unrelated senses.

In order to give a systematic analysis of how the different senses of *hold* and *keep* come together, I will employ the principles of Lexical Network Theory formulated by Norvig & Lakoff [1987]. The theory of lexical networks sees "a lexical item as a network of minimally differing senses, with links of a small number of types" [195]. These verbs have a number of senses that are somehow related to each other, but it is inadequate to accept the abstractionist claim that there is an abstract, general meaning that covers all senses, such as *hold an umbrella, hold an opinion, The offer still holds, My brain can't hold so much information at one time*, etc. There is no single sense that would encompass all the possible meanings of *hold* or *keep*. Rather, a plausible explanation for the systematicity in the different senses of both *hold* and *keep* may be given in terms of a network "such that each sense is a *minimal variant* of some other sense" [197]. This means that if sense A is a minimal variant of sense B, there is only a single significant difference between them from which their other differences can be predicted. According to Norvig & Lakoff [1987:197–8], the following links exist which connect the various senses of polysemous words: (1) Image-schema transformation links (links given by natural relationships among image-schemas): Lakoff's study of *over* [1987]: *The bird flew over the yard* vs. *The power line stretches over the yard*. (2) Metaphoric links (links established by metaphoric mappings that exist independently of the given lexical item): *The baby took the toy from its mother* and *He took a glance at the book*: PERCEIVING IS RECEIVING. (3) Metonymic links (links established by metonymic mappings that exist independently of the given lexical item): *The love between them is strong*: LOVE FOR THE RELATIONSHIP IT PRODUCES. (4) Frame-addition links (the addition of a frame): *Max* took *Sadie to the theater* vs. *Sadie* went *to the theater* – addition of the "going to Destination" frame. (5) Semantic role differentiation links (instances where one sense identifies two semantic roles and a minimally related sense distinguishes those roles): *The baby took the toy*

from the table: agent = recipient vs. *The messenger took the book to Mary:* agent ≠ recipient. (6) Profile shift (instances where what is backgrounded in one sense is foregrounded in a minimally related sense): *I took a punch at him* vs. *I took a punch from him* (result profiled).

Some Meanings of *Hold*

The following – not exhaustive – analysis shows that the seemingly unrelated and unsystematic meanings that *hold* can acquire boil down to a systematically ordered network in which the various senses are minimal variants of each other. The primary concrete (or central) meaning of *hold* (*hold–1*) is the *hold* in *She held the purse in her right hand.* In this sense the agent is a human whose hand is in the focus of attention, and the patient is usually a concrete, relatively small, light and easily manipulated object which is not difficult to grasp. Here, no movement is involved. In minimally related senses, the patient can be another person (*The lovers held each other tight*) (*hold–1a*); teeth can be in the focus of the action (*He held the rope in his teeth*) (*hold–1b*); or the agent can be a non-human animate being *The dog held the newspaper between its teeth* (*hold–1c*). What is common to all these meanings (and several others) of *hold* is that there seems to exist a certain force between the agent and the patient. Namely, the patient would tend to move (due to gravitational forces the object would fall to the ground), but the agent exerts some force towards having the patient remain in the given position (being in the hands, etc.). This is a pattern that emerges in Talmy's work as "force dynamics" [1988], which deals with how entities interact with respect to force, and encompasses notions like the exertion of force, resistance to exertion, overcoming of resistance, blockage of force, removal of blockage and others. Thus, in the cases mentioned above, force-dynamic patterns (conflicting force tendencies) are perceptible. Examples where this force dynamic pattern is foregrounded include *Will this branch hold me?* and *A London Underground spokesman defended the decision to hold the train until police arrived.* This is a case of profile shift, in which the force dynamic pattern is profiled (*hold–1d*). In addition, *hold* may imply a continuous action (a durative component) since the agent's main (force) tendency is to prolong the patient's present state, i.e., to keep it in a certain position. Some examples are *We'll hold this book for you. Hold still while I take your picture. The argument still holds.* (*hold–1e*). *Hold–1f* is a minimal variant of *hold–1c* in the sense that there is a non-human, inanimate object, which refers to the location of things: *This box holds all my clothes. Does this pan hold water? The cinema holds about 500.* Here the location is a container with boundaries, an interior and an exterior, which makes it available for storing various things.

Hold–2, the minimal variant of *hold–1*, is motivated by the metaphor POSSESSING SOMETHING IS HOLDING IT IN THE HAND. Thus there is a metaphoric link between the two meanings of *hold*. The rationale for the existence of this sense of *hold* is that when a person holds something, it usually belongs to that person, it is his/her property. Examples include *He did not hold a firearm certificate. The Fisher family holds 40% of the stock.* A further variant (*hold–3*) which is linked to the possession sense is the sense of controlling which is motivated by the metonymy THE HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL and the related metaphor CONTROL IS HOLDING SOMETHING IN THE HAND. Some examples are *The terrorists held them hostage. Demonstrators have been holding the square since Monday.*

Idioms with *Hold*

As Gibbs [1990] claims, most idioms are the products of our conceptual system and have conceptual motivation: their meaning is not arbitrary, and their literal meanings directly contribute to their figurative meanings. Not all idioms are metaphorical *(kick the bucket)*, and not all metaphorical linguistic expressions are idioms. Conceptual devices often motivate the figurative meanings of idioms. People have tacit knowledge of the metaphorical basis of idioms, and they have consistent mental images for idioms *(spill the beans)*.

The meanings of the following idioms appear to be motivated primarily by metaphorical extension. The various meanings of *hold* render it possible that several idiomatic expressions develop whose meanings are motivated partly by the meaning structure of *hold*. The phrasal verbs examined are *hold back, hold down,* and *hold up*. The other idioms examined include *hold one's tongue, hold one's temper,* and *hold one's head up. Hold back, hold down,* and *hold up* strongly evoke the force dynamic situation with conflicting forces. They focus on the exertion of force in order not to let something (change or movement) happen. This is the basis for their metaphorical meanings as well. Thus, the use of *hold back* is motivated by the force dynamic pattern that *hold* implies and by the direction implied by *back*, as in *Judy held her back. Most of us were doing our best to hold back tears. Hold back* can be used in connection with emotions as well, due to the fact that emotions are seen as metaphorical forces acting within the self [Kövecses 2001]. *Hold down* foregrounds the aspect of control in addition to conflicting forces, as in *I was trying all the time to hold down the lid of the box with one hand.* Its metaphorical uses employ the metaphors CONTROL IS HOLDING SOMETHING IN THE HAND and CONTROL IS UP/LACK OF CONTROL IS DOWN. This is the possible motivation for *hold down* in *There would still not be enough forces to hold down the previously subject people.* In *hold down a job,* we again have several sources of motivation. In addition to control, continuity is foregrounded, and at the same time we have cultural motivation for the meaning of the idiom: *hold down* is often used by cowboys to refer to the use of force to keep cows still when branding them. Besides the force dynamic pattern applied in the physical sense of *hold up (Ralph held up his hand),* the metaphorical senses of *hold up* involve the metaphor OBSTRUCTION IS UP. As a result of this motivation, we can use *hold up* in *The whole thing was held up about half an hour* or in *The criminals held up the train.*

The idiom *hold one's tongue* also implies force dynamic patterns (the tongue would but is not allowed to move) as well as control through the metaphor CONTROL IS HOLDING SOMETHING IN THE HAND. In our minds, we also have a conventional image of a person holding his/her own tongue. Evidently, *tongue* metonymically stands for speaking, which means that there is an additional cognitive mechanism working here. *Hold one's temper* is similar in some respects to *hold one's tongue* since it also indicates force dynamic patterns and control, since emotions are often understood as forces to be controlled [Kövecses 2001]. Finally, *hold one's head up* receives motivation from the emotion metaphor THE CONCEITED PERSON IS UP/HIGH. This is again an easily imaginable idiom, with a conventional image implied, in which a person's head is held high up in the air.

Some Meanings of *Keep*

The meanings of *keep* form a network in which each sense is a minimal variant of another sense. The primary means that links the senses is profile shift, that is, something which is

backgrounded in one sense is foregrounded in another, minimally related sense. The primary concrete (or central) meaning of *keep* is the one in *You can keep the change. You can keep your things in here. These old clothes are not worth keeping.* In this sense, *keep* does not involve the use of hands as *hold* does. Rather, the things kept are temporarily in the possession of the agent – not necessarily in his/her hands. This is probably the most important difference between *hold–1* and *keep–1.* As a result, *keep* implies the act of temporary possession in the central sense. In addition, the durative component is strongly emphasized, since *keep* may refer to a lasting state as in *He kept the job.* Also, the force dynamic pattern is present: as Talmy [1988:62] notes, *keep* is "the key force-dynamic word". There are conflicting forces, one towards rest, i.e., remaining in the given position, and another whose tendency is towards motion/change. Typical examples reflecting the various force tendencies are *You are an hour late, what kept you? She kept her promise/her word/the secret.*

Minimal variants of *keep–1* profile/foreground different patterns of *keep–1.* In *keep–2* remaining in a certain state or condition (a force dynamic pattern) is profiled, which sense is thus linked to *keep–1* through profile-shift. Examples include *This coat will keep you warm. This fish won't keep; we must eat it now.* In the minimally different sense (*keep–3*) explicated by *He keeps the Sabbath. She kept a diary for over 20 years,* continuity, the durative component is foregrounded. In *Will they keep me in prison?,* continuity is foregrounded in addition to force dynamic tendencies. A special grammatical construction is available with *keep* in which the durative component is profiled again. This is the *keep (on) Xing* structure, which implies repeated (momentary) actions, which may even continue forever: *I keep forgetting it's December. I wish you wouldn't keep on interrupting.* A further variant of *keep–1* profiles not only the aspect of continuity and temporary possession but also the aspect of maintaining a state as well (*keep–4*). This can be highlighted by examples like *It costs more each year to keep a house. He scarcely earns enough to keep himself and his family.*

Idioms with *Keep*

Keep also appears in a number of idioms, including phrasal verbs. In this section, the focus is on the motivation of *keep in, keep out (of); keep one's fingers crossed, keep somebody at arm's length, keep something under one's hat.* All profile the force dynamic pattern characterized above and therefore involve forces with different force tendencies.

The meanings of the phrasal verbs *keep in* and *keep out* relate to the meaning of *keep* in which the durative and the force dynamic components are profiled. The particles *in* and *out* both evoke the image of a container, a bounded area, with things that can be either in or out of it. On the one hand, *keep in* may refer to emotions as in *He could scarcely keep in his indignation,* since human bodies are often understood as containers for emotion, and thus the CONTAINER metaphor is often utilized in talking and thinking about emotions. On the other hand, *keep in* can also refer to a specific situation in school, as in *She was kept in for an hour for talking in class.* In this case, the building of the school, or more specifically, the classroom itself, is a container with the pupil inside it. In line with the above, *keep out* focuses on the outside of the container, i.e., what is out of the container. Usually, there is a boundary which the relevant entity should not cross, as in *The sign said "Ministry of Defense – Danger – Keep out!"* and *That child seems incapable of keeping out of mischief.*

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Keep one's fingers crossed, keep somebody at arm's length, and *keep something under one's hat* also involve various aspects of the meanings of *keep.* Namely, force tendencies and continuity are in focus in each idiom. The aim of the agent is to maintain the state or position of the fingers, of somebody, or of something, respectively. *Keep one's fingers crossed* implies a conventional image, the action of having the fingers in a special position for a long time, which stands metonymically for the action of being anxious or worried about somebody. *Keep somebody at arm's length* has metaphorical motivation as well. Lakoff [1987] examines the metaphors that motivate this idiom, and on the basis of interviews with hundreds of people he concludes that a conventional image and two metaphors motivate the meaning of this idiom. The conventional image that people associate with this idiom is the following: the arm, which is chest high, is oriented forward with respect to the body; the hand is open and the palm is facing away from the subject; the angle of the hand relative to the forearm is roughly 90 to 135 degrees; the arm muscles are tense; and the person being kept at arm's length is facing the subject. The conceptual metaphors involved are INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS and SOCIAL (OR) PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM IS PHYSICAL HARM. This is the reason why the meaning of the idiom ("keep someone from becoming intimate, so as to protect oneself from social or psychological harm") is linked to the specific form of the idiom. *Keep something under one's hat* also implies a conventional image with a person and his/her hat, under which there is something hidden. This image is complemented by the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING. The rationale for the meaning of the idiom is that if something cannot be seen, it is not known either – this is why the secret has to be hidden under the person's hat. This also motivates the idioms *keep the lid on* and *keep something under wraps.*

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to illustrate the claim that form and meaning relationships are in many cases not arbitrary but motivated. As shown above, motivation can arise from various cognitive mechanisms that link the forms and meanings of words. This claim is supported by the meaning analysis of *hold* and *keep.* These words appear to have highly motivated meanings, which are also important in the idioms that contain them. Lexical Network Analysis can offer a systematic approach to deal with polysemous words and idioms, and can explicate motivations of senses and systematically link senses. Therefore, the application of cognitive linguistic research results in the dictionary creation process deserves attention. In the long run, the contribution of cognitive linguistics to lexicography is likely to be beneficial since it may improve and enrich traditional methods.

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