On Defining: Polysemy, Core Meanings and 'Great Simplicity'

Geart van der Meer
Department of English Language & Culture
University of Groningen
PO Box 716,
9700AS Groningen
The Netherlands
g.van.der.meer@let.rug.nl

Abstract
In this paper I have tried to tackle the problem of the presentation of polysemous entries in especially pedagogic monolingual dictionaries. My aim was to examine whether this can be done in such a way that the various meanings are shown to be related in a clear and intelligible way. The ultimate justification of this project was the desirability of semantic descriptions that capture the knowledge of native speakers with respect to how various meanings after all 'hang together' and are not a list of disparate senses.

1. Introduction

One of the hardest problems torturing practising lexicographers has always been the question of how to describe the meaning of so-called polysemous words. The word *polysemous* is generally used to refer to the fact that a lexical item has more than one meaning. In the rather abstruse definition of Hartmann & James (1998) *polysemy* is defined as the 'relation obtaining between the different SENSES of a word or phrase'. The implication of this seems to be that if there is no relation between the senses there is no proper polysemy, and this is borne out by the rest of the entry in Hartmann & James, where it is suggested that we speak of *homonyms* if there is no relation between senses. The question that immediately has to be asked then is what exactly the relations between these 'relations' are supposed to be. Though, as also Hartmann & James point out, it is often far from clear where polysemy ends and homonymy starts, it is possible to partially answer this question. Thus, Svensén (1993: 115) writes that many 'separate units of meaning' as often distinguished by lexicographers are in reality 'just special cases of the *principal* meanings', which are 'nuclei around which various *subsidiary* meanings are grouped' [emphasis mine]. These subsidiary meanings include 'extended meanings, specialized meanings, and metaphorical use' (idem). To this can be added metonymy, synecdoche, amelioration and pejoration (also cf. Cruse 2000: 199-200). Note that Svensén leaves open the possibility of a word having more than one nucleus, as in fact also practised in NODE, which groups so-called subsenses under one or more core senses (cf. Van der Meer 2000 for a discussion of NODE), in a laudable attempt to create some coherence in the semantic description of polysemous items.

In the strong sense, the Hartmann & James definition may be taken to mean that there should not only be a relation between subsenses but also between cores (respectively subsidiary meanings and nuclei in Svensén). If there is not, we are in fact confronted with a case of homonymy. If we do assume such relations, they should in principle be capable of being made visible in the sense definitions. There is a growing tendency in (English) lexicography, and in particular in learner's lexicography, to neglect this principle. Possible reasons for this may be the availability of ever growing digitised databases and the pressure of a type of user-friendliness that favours quick decoding.

The use of the huge computerised databases allows lexicographers to make ever finer semantic distinctions depending on contexts of use, a point already noted by Hanks (1992: 111-2), who warns of the danger of 'creating ... unnecessary complexities that are not actually present in the language'. Not that there are no complexities at all, 'but there are also great simplicities'. Hanks argues for dictionaries capturing 'a very broad level of semantic generalization'.

This 'atomisation of meaning', this listing of ostensibly unrelated senses of polysemous lexical items, creates 'arbitrary knowledge' rather than 'motivated' semantic knowledge in the learner. As it is a well-known fact that patterned (or motivated) data are easier to learn than isolated data, this current practice does not encourage or even enable the learner to master a knowledge of word meaning that resembles native speaker knowledge (cf. for these points Csábi 2002: 249-50). 1 Csábi advises lexicographers to make 'conceptual links between words and their meanings explicit whenever possible (p. 250).

However, writing dictionary entries in the way required by Csábi is easier said than done, as I already discovered when I tried to improve on the NODE description of clear (Van der Meer 2000) or when I tried to do better than the English learner's dictionaries in the case of cut (Van der Meer 2002). Yet we of course should go on trying, if only because Anna Wierzbicka is absolutely right when she rather scathingly remarks, a propos of a number of theoretical semanticists, that 'none of these authors has attempted to test their ideas, original and fruitful as they may be, in large-scale lexicographic studies, involving hundreds of lexical items and hundreds of definitions' (Wierzbicka 1992: 160).

So, what I want to do is to have another go at what I could now following Csábi call a 'motivated' description of the meaning of a 'polysemous' word.

2. Patrick Hanks and the Case of *brilliant.*

In the paper already referred to, Hanks first shows that a number of conventional dictionaries give as the first sense of *brilliant* 'shining brightly'. However, this is not the most frequent sense, for the 'outstanding or superb' sense is much more common (p. 103).

Hanks in his analysis noted that one can go on endlessly discovering ever finer distinctions in highly particular contexts (in this case for *brilliant*), which threatens to make us lose sight of 'great simplicities'. A better hypothesis would be, as quoted above, that speakers proceed from 'a very broad level of semantic generalization', which when applied results in 'particular interpretations associated with particular *syntactic* and *lexical* collocations' (p. 112) [my emph. GvdM]. It should then be worth trying to describe e.g. *brilliant* in such a way that the entry becomes maximally *motivated* and *coherent*, with

sufficiently clear *relations* between the various senses to be able to speak of genuine polysemy in the Hartmann & James sense.

3. A 'Motivated' Sense Description?

If we look at the OED (2nd ed. online), with its essentially *historical* approach, we see that the 'brightly shining' sense of course comes first (here 'Brightly shining, glittering, sparkling, lustrous') and that the other senses ('Of qualities and actions: Splendid, illustrious, distinguished, striking the imagination') and ('Of persons: Very distinguished or celebrated; esp. distinguished by talent and cleverness; having showy good qualities') are only introduced by the label *fig.* What precisely is the *conceptual* link between 'Brightly shining' and 'Splendid, illustrious, distinguished' etc. or 'Very distinguished or celebrated'? For, if this is really a case of *fig.*, there should be a certain similarity or analogy between the literal and figuratively (i.e. metaphorically) extended senses, which should be reflected in the definitions themselves. If one concept is understood in terms of another concept, can we show this?

In the modern learner's dictionaries with their frequency-based ordering, the relations between senses are usually (made) invisible. Thus, the OALD has the following definitions: '1 extremely clever or impressive [...] 2 very successful [...] 3 very intelligent or skilful [...] 4 (of light or colours) very bright [...] 5 (BrE, spoken) very good; excellent [...]'. If we accept this, it is necessary to establish the *principles* required for definitions which make *overtly* visible the relations and coherence between various senses.

I suggest we try to find these principles by means of two real examples: the adjective *brilliant* as already studied by Hanks, and the semantically related word *bright*. Hanks (p. 104) distinguished four main contexts in which the word *brilliant* is used: 1. human activities, 2. sun and sky, 3. colours, 4. people. Let us assume, as Hanks also is prepared to do, that the literal meaning is the one used in context 2, 'shining brightly', or in the longer OED definition: 'Brightly shining, glittering, sparkling, lustrous'. It is here only 'brightly shining' that approaches the character of a definition by giving a superordinate term or *genus proximum* (SHINING), which is then restricted by a *differens specificum* (BRIGHTLY). Can we use such a definition as the starting point for the treatment I have in mind?

If we analyse this definition we see that *brilliant* is asserted to have a general quality ('shiningness') *to a high degree*, i.e. the shiningness of *brilliant* stands out from all other examples of shiningness. This intensity of quality is a feature shared by the other (in my view: derived) senses: again and again we come across definitions featuring 'exceptionally, extremely, very' (+ ADJECTIVE). If we are looking for 'relations' between senses creating coherence, this is certainly one of them, albeit a somewhat abstract one: INTENSITY OF QUALITY. The more difficult part of our search is the other and less abstract relation(s) between the literal sense and its 'derived' senses.

In Anglo-Saxon cultures the associations of light will no doubt largely be positive, so I assume as a first step that LIGHT IS GOOD OR ATTRACTIVE. Light, and certainly intense light, also attracts attention because it stands out from other light and generally from the entire surroundings, hence LIGHT ATTRACTS ATTENTION, and INTENSE LIGHT ATTRACTS A LOT OF ATTENTION and INTENSE LIGHT STANDS OUT

FROM THE SURROUNDINGS. This knowledge will not predict with any precision the various extended (metaphorical) uses of words like *brilliant*, but it does provide a motivation[2] for the uses we encounter. And I claim that general predictions are not impossible: such as the prediction that any extended use of this adjective will attribute a positive quality to a noun and make it (i.e. its reference) an outstanding example of its kind. It is the semantics of the noun itself that will then decide the particular paraphrases (contextualised meanings) of *brilliant*: that is, the semantics of the noun 'colours in' the rest of the semantics of the adjective *brilliant*. We might compare this to the adjective *attractive*: the general definition 'having the power to attract' can be filled in context-sensitively so as to become 'pretty, good-looking' in *an attractive woman*, but in *an attractive proposal* or *an attractive web-page* they 'mean' different things. So, context decides the 'meaning' here.

   Returning to Hanks's four categories listed earlier, the nouns doing the 'colouring in' are covered by the numbers 1 and 4 (human activities and people), which are apparently the most favoured, and these again may be placed under a more general heading: 'human activities'. It seems that people are only called 'brilliant' when the focus is on one particular activity they engage in. Thus, *a brilliant footballer* excels in the activity of soccer but need not be a brilliant lexicographer (also cf. Hanks 1992: 106 for similar remarks). Cases like *a brilliant book* or *match* in a way also fall under this heading, being the results of excellently performed activities. Hanks (p. 108) also mentions 'rarer' cases like *brilliant news* or *a brilliant time*. In such examples obviously the 'relation' focuses on the intensity of quality in a more abstract sense, but still in combination with the idea of 'good and attractive'.

   A possible proposal might therefore be to define the literal sense of words like *brilliant* first and then try to deal with the extended senses (or perhaps rather 'uses') by means of stripping the literal sense of all *specific* semantic elements *solely* belonging to its original conceptual domain (the domain of light), leaving at least the general associations discussed above and perhaps in some cases some other elements potentially shared between two different conceptual domains. Let us see if a confrontation with the facts survives our proposals so far. A tentative summary of the 'stripped' semantics of *brilliant* might be:

---

   *semantic synopsis of extended **brilliant**:*

QUALITY IS EXTREMELY GOOD OR ATTRACTIVE
QUALITY REFERRED TO BY ADJECTIVE IS INTENSE
QUALITY ATTRACTS A LOT OF ATTENTION
QUALITY STANDS OUT FROM THE SURROUNDINGS

If we now look at for instance OALD's description (6th ed.), we see that the first sense is 'extremely clever or impressive', applied to *idea* and *performance*. It seems to me that the synopsis suffices, as the combination of the synopsis and the noun semantics automatically generates ideas like 'clever' and 'impressive': the *idea/performance* is very

good, attracts attention and stands out from other ideas/performances. The same holds good for the second sense: 'very successful' as applied to *career* and *play*. The third sense 'very intelligent or skilful' as applied to a *young scientist* and *mind* causes no trouble either. The fourth sense definition ('very bright') as applied to *sunshine* (= light) is the literal one. The same definition applied to colours (*brilliant blue eyes*) may require some comment. Though I would like to reserve the qualification 'very bright' primarily for light, our mind apparently also interprets colours in terms of light[3] – light as reflected by coloured objects; hence notions like 'brilliant/bright red' and 'brilliant/bright yellow' and 'brilliant/bright colours' in general. This is only a small step away from the – in my view - most literal sense, but not yet far enough to be called metaphorical, since it applies to the same conceptual domain. The final sense is the one used in the spoken exclamation *Brilliant!*. This case, too, fits the synopsis, even though there is no accompanying noun.[4] The other dictionaries basically do the same.

The lesson so far is that in cases like the one in hand it is not always necessary to try to give full and separate sense definitions fitting any context for the derived, i.e. here figurative, meanings. We thereby create the impression that these are independent meanings and thus obscure the 'relations' we started with in section 1. In fact, we should not really be speaking of separate 'meanings' here but rather of figurative 'applications' or 'uses' of the 'literal' meaning. What happens in such cases is that we use (some of the) *generalisable features* of a semantic concept for something for which it was not originally intended. The ultimate (psycho-linguistic) causes for this different purpose do not here concern me, though they are most likely linked to a possible conceptual metaphorical comparison like 'AN EXCEPTIONALLY GOOD AND STRIKING QUALITY OF SOMETHING is like RADIANT BRILLIANCE (in that it attracts attention in a positive way)'. Accepting this, what we must do is focus on describing the use of words like *brilliant* in such a way that we demonstrate the motivations and hence coherence of the various uses, as far as is practical and useful for dictionary users who are also language learners.

What happens is this in the case of e.g. the expression *a brilliant mind*:

- we want to say about the quality of a certain *mind* that it is outstanding and striking.
- the properties 'outstanding and striking (in a positive way)' are among the (*inherent*) properties of the adjective *brilliant*.
- this allows[5] the use of *brilliant* 'brightly shining' but generalised metaphorically as 'outstanding and striking (in a positive way)' as modifier of *mind*[6]
- *mind* is also, probably simultaneously, briefly subjected to a metaphorising attempt by the full literal meaning of *brilliant*; this happens through the detour of the modifier *brilliant* and not, as in *morass*, due to inherent properties of *mind* itself
- due to the latter, the attempted metaphorisation does not really 'stick',
- moreover, there was from the start no intention to use *mind* as meaning anything other than 'mind, brain', so
- in the final analysis *mind* as head of the construction is not metaphorised into a shining object
- this leads to a 'double take' of both *brilliant* and *mind* in the modifier-head construction *brilliant mind*

- result: *mind* as 'brain' remains literal after considering – and rejecting - a possible metaphorical interpretation, whereas *brilliant* as literal 'shining brightly' has conclusively to be reinterpreted nonliterally in this specific context (since all else fails) by means of (1) stripping off the nonapplicable semantic elements connected with real light, (2) starting from what remains (the grounds)[7] and then (3) colouring in further details from the head noun: 'outstanding and striking' in certain contexts > 'very clever, intelligent' etc.

If I now return to the lexicographical problem of *adjectival* metaphors like *brilliant* and comparable cases my contention is that we may let the precise and more detailed character of this reinterpretation depend on the head noun of the construction. This means that we may save a lot of effort and space, since we may adopt a 'one synopsis fits all' approach: *brilliant* means 'brightly shining' when used literally and is used figuratively as 'of strikingly good or attractive and exceptional quality'. The noun that is modified, or predicated about, by this adjective then automatically fills in the relevant further details in each particular instance of use. For instance, in *a brilliant career* we transfer from the 'source' meaning the general semantic idea of 'of strikingly good or attractive and exceptional quality', after which the head noun *career* suggests, in this particular instance, the more contextualised and more concretised interpretation (or 'gloss') 'very successful'. Similar procedures can be applied to comparable light-based cases like *a glittering/sparkling/dazzling career, sparkling prospects.*

This kind of approach would free the dictionary-makers from trying to find 'sense definitions' for figuratively used words in every possible context. Consider for example such combinations[8] of *brilliant* as with: *brilliant piano arpeggios, brilliant colt, brilliant marquetry ornament, brilliant programme*, which are not really covered by the dictionary definitions given earlier. This approach, moreover, is free from the suggestion in numbered dictionary entries that the figurative 'senses' are in fact independent and unrelated to the other senses. In this respect, my view is the same as for *morass* (cf. my earlier 1997 etc papers): as long as there is a genuine synchronic literal use, metaphorical 'senses' are in reality secondarily derived 'senses' and should be very clearly linked with the literal sense as being special (i.e. metaphorical) applications.

It may be concluded that at least in this case a lexicographical description that does justice to Hartmann & James' 'relations', Hanks' 'great simplicity' and Csábi's 'motivation' is not impossible. I will here make an attempt at showing what an entry based on these principles might look like. I take the OALD6 entry as my starting point.

---

brilliant
1 (of light or colours) exceptionally and attractively bright: *brilliant sunshine, brilliant blue eyes*
2. figuratively: exceptionally good and attractive, characteristically in combinations like: *What a brilliant idea! A brilliant performance / invention; A brilliant career. The play was a brilliant success; A brilliant young scientist. She has one of the most brilliant minds in the country;* (BrE, spoken) *'How was it?', 'Brilliant!' Thanks. You've been brilliant.*[9]

In my view, these two main sense distinctions would suffice to describe the semantics of *brilliant* in a dictionary. There will no doubt be many similar cases where a too fine-grained description is not really needed and where we may achieve Hanks' 'great simplicity'.

4. The Less Straightforward Case of *bright*

Having done this for *brilliant*, it is no more than fair to tackle a less easy case, to wit the semantically close word *bright*. For reasons of space I can here only present the outcome of my efforts and not all the arguments:

ө   The full entry (minus the idiom part) as based on OALD could look like:

---

bright
1. full of attractive light; shining strongly and attractively (also of colours). Exx.: *bright light / sunshine; a bright room; her eyes were bright with tears; a bright morning* (= with the sun shining); *I like bright colours; a bright yellow dress; Jack's face turned bright red.*
2a. 'causing or expressing the effect bright light has on people: hence, cheerful, or making cheerful', with the exx. *She gave me a bright smile. Why are you so bright and cheerful today? His face was bright with excitement* and now also *This young musician has a bright future; prospects for the coming year look bright. a bright start to the week.*
3a. (figuratively) like bright light (mainly referring to people and their intelligence): standing out in an attractive, positive and pleasing sense, as in *the brightest pupil in the class; Do you have any bright ideas* (= *clever ideas)?*
4. (figuratively, of sound, like light standing out in an attractive, positive and pleasing sense) 'clear, of high frequency': *a bright laugh, the bright notes of the trumpet.*

Having come this far it is time to ask if this is really more helpful for learners. Though this description certainly is more 'motivated' its 'simplicity' is capable of improvement. Especially the numbering into four senses creates the impression that there is no real coherence. I therefore suggest using something akin to the 'semantic synopsis' I used in Van der Meer 2002 for *cut*. We would then get:

BRIGHT adj.
1. full of attractive light; shining strongly and attractively and making objects stand out from their surroundings (also of colours). Exx.: *bright light / sunshine; a bright room; her eyes were bright with tears; a bright morning* (= with the sun shining); *I like bright colours; a bright yellow dress; Jack's face turned bright red.*
2. VARIOUS FIGURATIVE APPLICATIONS: APPLYING THE ATTRACTIVE AND POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS OF BRIGHT LIGHT AND THE PROPERTY OF MAKING THINGS STAND OUT PLEASINGLY FROM THE REST:
a: applied to people and their behaviour: cheerful, making cheerful: *She gave me a bright smile. Why are you so bright and cheerful today? His face was bright with excitement;*
b: applied to events etc.: promising, hopeful etc.: *This young musician has a bright future; prospects for the coming year look bright. a bright start to the week.*
c: applied to people and their intelligence: outstandingly intelligent, clever: *the brightest pupil in the class; Do you have any bright ideas?*
d: applied to sound: pleasantly clear, of high frequency:[10] *a bright laugh, the bright notes of the trumpet.*

---

5. Conclusion and Epilogue

In this paper I have tried to apply some ideas relating to polysemy (Hartmann & James), motivation and nonarbitrary knowledge (Csábi) and the simplicity of semantic descriptions (Hanks). I feel that in the case of *brilliant* I have been comparatively successful, and in the case of *bright* a little less, though my attempt at *bright* has generated some ideas worth exploring a little further. I am convinced that especially in the case of learner's dictionaries we should strive to mirror the native speaker's knowledge of word semantics, including the knowledge that meanings are related. Though we have some ideas about the relations between meanings (cf. Cruse's metonymy, metaphor, generalisation, specialisation and synecdoche, amelioration and pejoration, Cruse 2000: 199-200) it is not yet quite clear how to present this intelligibly, concisely and of course usefully in a learner's dictionary, without requiring the users to possess detailed knowledge of lexicography or indeed linguistics in general. The two words chosen here (*brilliant* and *bright*) have made it clear that in particular the effects of 'synaesthesia' will have to be studied more extensively to enable it to be presented intelligibly and concisely. In the present paper I have made a start on attempting to solve this problem. I hope that I will be able to return to this issue in future publications and also that others will take up this challenge.

Endnotes

[1]. Also compare Fillmore and Atkins's remark a propos of 'links' between senses of a 'network' that 'there is a cognitive asymmetry in that the understanding of each derivative sense is aided by knowledge of the sense from which it is derived' (Fillmore & Atkins 2000: 100).

[2] Cf. Csábi (2002: 249): 'Motivation is not the same as prediction', but it allows us to understand word meaning better.

[3] We speak of 'light' and 'dark' colours.

[4] Obviously, the 'noun' is to be supplied from the linguistic or extra-linguistic context: something, whatever it is, is exceptionally good, attractive, and attracts attention.

[5] Note: we have to say 'allows' here, not 'causes'!

[6] I use the word 'metaphorical' though I am not quite sure if we have a genuine case of metaphor here: we certainly have a crossing from one conceptual domain to another as in the case of proper metaphors, but the (perceived) similarity between meanings is somewhat problematic – it is rather a case of sharing general abstract features. But then this may be true of all cases of metaphor: the grounds are rather general similarities and these will then in their new context become more concrete and detailed again.

[7] The outstanding and striking quality.

[8] From the free sample of the British National Corpus)

[9] Thus, by means of giving the most typical collocators we may try to give the clearest possible indications of 'sense' 2.

[10] It seems that in linguistics *synaesthesia* (of which this is an example - also often invoked to 'explain' the terms *dark and clear [l]*) is used somewhat loosely. In a medical context synaesthesia means literally the failure to keep senses apart: it is a rare disorder and may mean that for example people literally see red when hearing a certain sound, which may be the result of incomplete modularisation of the senses, for whatever reason. It seems to me that synaesthesia in linguistics is not a disorder but a special case of non-modularisation of conceptual domains, i.e.

simply a case of figurative use of language, as described in this paper. Synaesthesia has been employed purposely in the arts (literature, music, painting) by e.g. Rimbaud, Scriabin, Kandinsky.

References

Dictionaries:

NODE = *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*; Ed. by Patrick Hanks; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

OALD = *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*; Sixth Edition, ed. by Sally Wehmeier; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000

OED Online = *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.; http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl

Other references:

Cruse, Alan. 2000. *Meaning in Language. An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Csábi, Szilvia 1992. 'Polysemous words, idioms and conceptual metaphors. Cognitive linguistics and lexicography'; *Proceedings of the tenth EURALEX international congress, Copenhagen, Denmark August 13-17, 2002.* [pp. 249-254]

Fillmore, Charles J. & B.T.S Atkins 2000. 'The Case of 'Crawl' '; in Yael Ravin & Claudia Leacock (eds.) *Polysemy. Theoretical and Computational Approaches*; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hanks, Patrick 1992. 'Computational analysis and definitional structure'; *Lexicographica, International Annual for Lexicography 8*; Max Niemeyer Verlag: Tübingen. [pp. 100-113]

Hartmann, R.R.K. & Gregory James (1998). *Dictionary of lexicography.* London and New York, Routledge.

Meer, Geart van der, 2000. 'Core, subsense and the New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE). On how meanings hang together and not separately'; *Proceedings of the Ninth EURALEX International Congress, EURALEX 2000, Stuttgart, Germany, August 8th - 12th, 2000.* Volume I: pp. 419-432.

Meer, Geart van· der, 2002. 'Dictionary entry and access. Trying to see trees and woods'; Anna Braasch and Claus Povlsen, *Proceedings of the tenth EURALEX international congress, Copenhagen, Denmark August 13-17, 2002.* [pp. 509-520]

Svensén, Bo, 1993. *Practical Lexicography: Principles and Methods of Dictionary-making*; Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Wierzbicka, Anna 1992. 'Back to definitions: Cognition, semantics and lexicography'; *Lexicographica, International Annual for Lexicography 8*; Max Niemeyer Verlag: Tübingen. [146-174]