

## Book Review

Augusto Soares da Silva, **O Mundo dos Sentidos em Português. Polissemia, Semântica e Cognição.**  
Coimbra: Almedina, 2006.

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Polysemy is the phenomenon of co-existence of multiple senses within one single linguistic expression. It is also the core issue of Augusto Soares da Silva's anthology of essays on "the world of meanings in Portuguese", which sums up more than 15 years of research on polysemy, semantics and cognition. As the subtitle suggests, the author's approach to the phenomenon of related meanings is a cognitive one. This means that beyond the description of linguistic meanings and the way they are inventoried in single linguistic expressions, the author is concerned with the underlying cognitive operations that establish and stabilize the relations between meanings and that allow for these different meanings to be expressed by the same linguistic form. In other words, the fact that different meanings are conveyed by one single expression reveals an underlying schematic relatedness which sustains the often apparent arbitrariness in the linguistic reference.

This cognitive hypothesis is in fact formulated by the author as an overarching motivation for this collection of studies: "setting off from the study of polysemy, the author hopes to contribute for a broader and better understanding of the nature of linguistic meaning and the workings of the human mind"\* (p. 7). Adding to this ultimate goal, the author proposes two further objectives for this publication: to account for the ubiquity of polysemy in written and spoken language use, as well as in different linguistic areas

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\* All quoted passages were translated by the reviewer.

(lexicon, grammar and even intonation), and moreover to afford an integrated account of polysemy inscribed in the idea of a continuity of meaning and conceptual organization according to prototypes and schemas, i.e. to propose an integrated theory of polysemy.

The goals are high and they are mirrored in the extensive structure of this book, which is a collection of revised and updated papers presented in Portuguese and international fora and publications, as well as original essays that account for more recent research developments. The 13 chapters of this anthology compose an integrated approach to the linguistic phenomenon of polysemy, structured in three general parts.

In the first part (chapters 1 to 6) the author describes the context for the development of a cognitive approach to polysemy, from the considerations of the logical philosophical Greek tradition to the historical-philological approach in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (particularly in the studies by Michel Bréal, to whom polysemy owes its name). Cognitive linguistics emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, proposing a view of meaning as flexible, perspectival, encyclopedic and, particularly, usage-based. In this context, the relation of meanings implied by their common linguistic expression was one of the triggers for the cognitive linguistic and cognitive semantic approach in the study of language (chapter 1).

The author proceeds to describe the problems implied by polysemy, pointing out the paradox that these problems only affect the experts (speakers don't give it a second thought, when it comes to using and understanding polysemic expressions). Such problems concern overall "the definition and structure of the polysemic word" (p. 35). They include ontological issues – the definition and demarcation of polysemy with respect to similar semantic phenomena, such as vagueness/monosemy or homonymy –, structural considerations involving the nature of the relation between meanings, categorical problems related to polysemy as a lexical but also as a grammatical and even a prosodic phenomenon, and finally problems emerging from applied semantics, namely lexicographical issues in the organization of meanings in reference dictionaries, or computational issues, specifically the disambiguation of meaning in the artificial processing of natural language (chapter 2). It is the author's claim that these problems can be better solved from a cognitive perspective, which ensures a better explanation for the compatibility between the change of conceptual structures and the stability of phonological ones, and the affordance of communicative efficiency: "a communication system that tolerates polysemy [is] ecologically more viable than a system of communication rigidly isomorphic, in which each signifier is associated to one single signified and vice-versa" (p. 56).

One of the hypotheses formulated to explain the phenomenon of polysemy is to account for the flexibility of meanings and their organization (Chapter 3). It is suggested that instead of a dichotomy, polysemy and homonymy are better understood and described as a continuum, and that a gradation is a

better concept for the description of meanings and their relatedness than the idea of discrete categories. This continuum is motivated by the flexible organization of meanings in categories and schematic networks. Meanings are thus “adaptable to the context and subject to change” (p. 59), which suggests that meaning is not fixed or determined, but instead it is dynamic. This implies that “the same entity can be conceptualized in discrete terms or in continuous terms, according to the perspective and the purpose of its conceptualization” (p. 65), an idea that is related to the notion of construal, i.e. the process of adopting a conceptual perspective over the object or event that is being conceptualized.

The variation implied by polysemy is synchronically related to the context of meaning production, but it can also be traced back in the diachronic meanders of linguistic change. In the search for the motivations and processes of polysemy, historical pragmatics emerges as an area within cognitive linguistics that seeks to explain why and how meanings change. Within this field of research, two directions have emerged: the study of regularities in meaning change, as well as patterns and paths of conceptualization and lexicalization (this is the field of grammaticalization), and the applications of prototype theory in the internal structure of categories as a means to explain lexical change (p. 86). The diachronic strand in cognitive linguistics is therefore a powerful resource for explaining how apparently unrelated meanings are expressed by the same linguistic forms (Chapter 4).

Among the factors that can account for polysemy, from a synchronic perspective, conceptual metaphor and metonymy are particularly relevant, as they are productive in the generation of conceptually related meanings (Chapter 5). This influence can be traced back historically, but it is also detectable in contemporary uses of language. Figurativity and contiguity of senses are among the most productive conceptual mechanisms by which new meanings are anchored in already existing ones, and are then expressed by the same forms. Metaphor and metonymy can work on their own or collaborate in the creation of new meanings, which then become conventionalized in linguistic use.

The final chapter in the first part of the book is devoted to methodological problems in the study of polysemy (Chapter 6), namely the design of inquiries and the criteria for measuring results and data.

The second part of this anthology is descriptive and includes five case studies of polysemy in Portuguese, covering different structural areas of language: lexical polysemy (Chapter 7, the study of the verb *deixar*, ‘to let’/‘to leave’); polysemy in morphology (Chapter 8, the study of the diminutive); polysemy in syntax (Chapter 9, on the indirect object and the ditransitive construction); polysemy in pragmatics (Chapter 10, a study of the discursive marker *pronto*, ‘so’ or ‘o.k.’); and, finally, polysemy in phonology (Chapter 11, a study of rising and falling intonation and their meanings). At the core of these five chapters lies the central tenet of cognitive linguistics that

all language is meaning and therefore meaning-related problems pertain not only to language areas such as lexical semantics, but also to grammatical constructions, pragmatic markers and phonological structures. Because there is also meaning on these levels of linguistic expression, they also manifest issues related to meaning relations and variation. In other words, this second part *demonstrates* what was *postulated* in the first part: meaning variation in all examples is explained from a cognitive perspective.

In the last part of the book, the author sums up and links the theoretical framework of the first part and the descriptive case studies of the second part with an outlook that considers the implication of the research on polysemy for the general study of meaning and moreover the consequences of this approach to meaning for the exploration of the mind (Chapter 12). Supported by evidence from neuroscience and the philosophical reflection that this evidence has triggered, the author makes the claim that polysemy is not only a resource of language, but a mental phenomenon as well. The linguistic study combined with neurobiological research and philosophical enquiry “suggests the *creation* of reality through operations of pre-conceptual and conceptual perspectivation; the *embodiment* of senses in individual, collective and historical experience; the complexity and flexibility of human categorization; the predisposition of the brain to the formation of complex and, why not say it, *polysemic* categories (perceptive, conceptual and linguistic)” (p. 318).

The book closes with an outlook of this research in the context of possible applications (Chapter 13), particularly for lexicography (concretely the study of the relatedness of meanings and the organization of lexical entries) and computational systems (meaning identification and differentiation in the processing of natural language).

This book is an important breakthrough in the study of polysemy in general and in the study of this phenomenon in the Portuguese language in particular. It is moreover a significant contribution for the research in cognitive linguistics, from which both the Portuguese scientific community and international scholars who study the Portuguese language will certainly benefit.

For the cognitive linguistic researcher, the anthology provides an extensive study of polysemy which is not only up-to-date in the cognitive linguistic landscape, but also well informed about studies of the same phenomenon within other schools of linguistics, and moreover aware of the broader context of cognitive science in which cognitive linguistics is embedded. The case studies that accompany it provide enough evidence for a central claim in the book, namely that “lexical items, as well as grammatical classes and constructions, are conceptual categories that have to be studied not with respect to strictly formal linguistic principles, but first and foremost with respect to general cognitive principles.” (p.4) In this sense, the book provides an insight into the study of the human mind and its processes.

The descriptive cases included in this anthology are moreover inspiring of further related studies, in Portuguese as well as in other languages, as they are backed by a rigorous methodological reflection. Furthermore, these studies

focus on less researched areas so far, such as cognitive phonology, revealing them as areas of interest for the cognitive linguistic enterprise.

The extensive bibliography at the end of this book reaches far beyond the study of polysemy both in its historical development and in the current cognitive approach. It is an updated resource that can serve cognitive linguistics scholars working on other topics as well. Moreover, it gives a panoramic view of cognitive linguistics in the Portuguese context.

The three purposes of the author – to account for the importance of polysemy in the lexicon but also in other fields of language; to propose an integrated theoretical account of polysemy; and, on a broader scope, to contribute to the knowledge of the mind by studying one of the linguistic manifestations of the mind's structure – are achieved with this work, which not only constitutes a significant advance in the linguistic research, but is likewise one relevant step further in disclosing the intricacies of the human mind.

With such far-reaching scope, one wonders whether this book might have been called “a universe of senses”, instead of “a world of senses”. Yet here too the book is consistent with a cognitive approach. There are in fact unlimited contents that we can conceptualize and express. However, these infinite contents are conceptualized on the basis of a finite set of cognitive possibilities, mechanisms that are themselves bounded by the limits of our own cognition. This is the core of the compromise between cognitive efficiency and communicative expressivity, which is also what polysemy is all about.

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