

# The Analysis of Polysemy from the Perspective of Decategorization

Lu Hongyan

Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Zhangzhou, China

Luhongyan@xujc.com

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**Abstract:** The cognitive semantics shows reasonable interpretation power as to the relations among the senses of each polysemous word by applying the prototype category theory, while it is far from enough as to the forming procedure of polysemy. Linguistic decategorization is a vital part of the linguistic categorization and shows that cognization is a gradually continual changing procedure, so it can help to analyze the dynamical forming mechanism and procedure of polysemy. This paper studies how decategorization functions in our cognization of the many senses of polysemous word.

## 1. Introduction

According to Cognitive Linguistics, language is the representation of our conceptualization, so the language that we use and our concept are closely related. With the deepening of our cognition, there will be new things adding into our cognitive and conceptual system. In our linguistic system, many new concepts can be expressed by the already existing linguistic forms and constructs. The adding of new concepts into a concrete linguistic entity makes the entity multivocal, and the most common representative is polysemy. It arises from the fact that there are systematic relationships between different cognitive models and between elements of the same model. The same word is often used for elements standing in such cognitive relations to one another.

Polysemy accounts for a large part of the whole vocabulary and it represents the economical principle of language. The many senses of a polysemy are related, which can help to save our memorizing efforts, so it is the result of our cognization. The theoretical significance behind the study of polysemy is that it represents the organizational structures and universal principles of human cognition. Compared with the traditional and classic semantics, cognitive semantics shows more power in the stimulation of producing the senses of a word by applying the prototype category theory. The prototype category theory can provide full explanation for the relations among various senses of a certain linguistic entity and the forming mechanisms of polysemous words. However, the prototype category theory shows its weakness in explaining the forming procedure of the polysemy dynamically, for the study of the relations among the many senses of a polysemy usually tends to be more from a synchronic perspective than a diachronic one.

Linguistic decategorization, a vital part of the linguistic categorization, shows that our cognization is a gradually continual changing procedure, so it can help to analyze the dynamical forming mechanism and procedure of polysemy. In this paper, we study the working mechanism of decategorization in the forming of polysemy and how the cognitive process—decategorization functions in our cognization of the many senses of a polysemous word.

## 2. The prototype category theory in analyses of polysemy

The prototype category theory was first put forward by Rosch[1] in cognitive psychology. Categories, in general, had best examples and that all of the specifically human capacities played a role in categorization. Here the best examples are called “prototypes” (Lakoff, 1987)[2]. For example in the category of birds, a sparrow is more typical than a penguin, so the sparrow is more likely to be the prototype of the bird category. Cognitive linguists study polysemy from different angles, like prototype category theory, frame, image schema, metaphor and etc. The main representative who

studies the prototype category theory in cognitive linguistics is Lakoff. He studied the polysemous word- “over” by applying the prototype category theory. Some semantic relations among a word’s senses are quite common in polysemy. Therefore, the many senses of the polysemy can be regarded as a semantic category and is also the prototype category. Within the prototype theory there are three main principles: a category does not have a clear boundary; the status of each categorical member is different; the relationship between the nuclear members is asymmetrical. Each meaning of the polysemous word does not share the same status; instead, they differ from central and typical to peripheral. The central meaning is called the prototype meaning, which is taken as the most representative meaning. The prototype meaning is usually the meaning that is firstly conceptualized by us. It is the most “direct” meaning of the linguistic sign. It is from the prototype meaning that the meaning category expands or the many senses of the polysemous word form.

The prototype category theory shows its great power in the explanation of the many senses of the polysemous word. The relationship among the senses of each polysemous word can be clearly and reasonably elaborated. However, superiority of the prototype category theory to the structural theory doesn’t mean that is enough to provide comprehensive explanation for the study of polysemy. Liu Zhengguang (2005)[3] studied the linguistic decategorization, and he held that the prototype category theory mainly focused on the static and synchronic study of polysemy, because the prototype category theory mainly explains the relations among the many senses of polysemy, the dynamical and diachronic study should be enhanced.” Thence, it is necessary to study the polysemy phenomenon from a decategorization perspective, in that it makes up the deficiency of the prototype theory.

### **3. The Analysis of Polysemy from the Perspective of Decategorization**

The wholeness of our human cognition contains two cognitive processes: the “categorization”– from specific to universal, and the “decategorization” –from universal to specific. The study of decategorization in linguistics can never be away from semantic, because the change of meaning is the premise of decategorization. It is a process of a categorical member entering another category, which equals the semantic changes of a word. And the forming of polysemy results from the metaphorical extension of the senses of the word.

Categorization functions in: 1) setting up an order for the chaotic world, and finding their relation in way of structure;2) realizing the economical principle of human cognition. In other words, these two functions constitute the intrinsic motivation of the human cognitive categorization. While categorization can efficiently help to cognize the world, it is hard to promote the cognization up to higher level. As a matter of fact, as the cognization keeps moving on, it also becomes more and more complicated. Base on the existing knowledge, the new things continuously demand new structures, which means that the human cognization should break through the boundary. There is a stage of decategorization included in the cognitive categorization.

As an important way of cognition and processing in language creation and development, the importance of decategorization sticks out especially at the start or intermediate stage. Instead of being contrary to categorization, the relation between the two is like the two sides of a coin. They together constitute an organic whole of the processing of both language forming and cognization, which shows the creativity and dynamic character of the mind. The study of linguistic decategorization is within the study scope of linguistic categorization theory.

#### **3.1 The definition of decategorization**

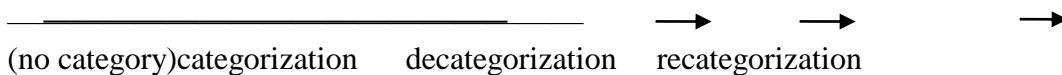
The concept of decategorization was first put forward by Hopper and Thompson (1984)[4], which was mainly applied to explain the dynamics of the word category attributes. Decategorization is the process of a member losing its categorical characteristics under certain conditions. After being decategorized, the categorical member is still in an intermediate state, and has not been recategorized and become the member of another category yet. Between the former category and the new category

there exists a fuzzy intermediate category, which loses the certain typical characteristics of the former category, while gaining some characteristics of the new category at the same time.

Metaphor and metonymy consist of a conceptual working continuity, which can generate the decategorization continuity (Liu, 2005)[3]. In fact, metaphor and metonymy respectively play their roles in different stages in the process of decategorization. Metonymy mainly works in the beginning stage and relatively micro-level, while metaphor at macro-level. The micro-level refers to: in a certain context, the linguistic entity gains a new sense and there are some changes in its categorical attributes as well, which means the metonymy works mainly at the beginning stage and can reflect the gradually changing process. However, the whole decategorization can be taken as the result of metaphor, if focus is on the pre-decategorized and final stages of a linguistic entity. Polysemy can be said as generalized through metaphor (Lakoff, 1987; Johnson, 1980, 1987)[5]. The classic or original sense of the polysemous word is generally concrete, and the sense nearest to it may still somewhat, or at least more concrete and more relative to it than any other senses of the same in the polysemous word. Thus, the process of a word becoming a polysemous one represents the way we conceptualize the world. The whole process of the word's sense straying from its originally concrete into the latter gaining abstract is a process of decategorization, with its meaning becoming more and more metaphorical. Its study is mainly through the trace of semantic changes. The process is actually the changing of the meaning form concrete to abstract, and from specific to general.

### 3.2 Decategorization in the process of categorization

Categorization can be taken as the process from the individual to the universal, while decategorization is from the universal to the individual. Since that categorization is a process, it is supposed to have the beginning, mediate and ending stages. To conform to our cognition, the process of categorization should also be a dynamic and continual one. Liu (2005) [3] thought the whole process of categorization is as follows:



The arrow above is the whole process of categorization. That is to say, the entity may go through several stages. After undergoing the stages from noncategory to category, and then losing some characteristics of the former category, it begins the process of being decategorization. At last, it gradually transforms from the unstable intermediate state into another entity, which owns the stable status in a new category, and thus the decategorization is completed. The virtual part of the arrow means categorization is a recurrent process consisting of different stages, in which the decategorization will recur. The main function of decategorization lies in: by breaking the former categorical balance, it realizes a new breakthrough and thus establishes a new set of relation.

### 3.3 The advantages of decategorization in analysis of polysemy

Inherently, the concept of prototypical characteristic is kind of description, which mainly describes the category in a synchronic way and also the features of the categorical change. It stresses the inequality between the members from the extensional angle. On the study of polysemy, the prototype category is mainly applied to the interpretation of the relations among the many senses of a polysemy, which tends to be kind of static and synchronic description (Liu, 2005)[3]. Having included decategorization as an important part of it, categorization can be better at offering relatively accurate description and interpretation for the developing processes of language at different stages, and thus can present both the relations and differences of the many senses of the linguistic entity under different context and the reasons for the generation of these relations and differences more comprehensively.

The linguistic decategorization has two features: from a semantic perspective, the abstraction and generalization of senses are the premises of decategorization, and from a syntactical level, some typical distributive characteristics of the category gradually vanish and the contrast between categories are neutralized (Taylor, 1995)[6], which make it possible for the categorical member to

span into another new category. The analyses of polysemy belong to the semantic perspective in decategorization. Instead of changing suddenly, there exists an intermediate state between the former category the linguistic entity and the new category it is going to enter. Liu Zhengguang (2005)[3] analyzed process of “going to” being decategorized into auxiliary:

- a. I am going to the town.
- b. Are you going to work?
- c. No, I going to eat.
- d. The rain is going to come.

Obviously, sentences (b) and (c) are the intermediate states of the whole transferring process. In a), “going to” is a notional verb and it refers to the spatial motion. While in d), “going to” becomes an auxiliary and refers to the temporal motion. While in b), “going to” is somewhat fuzzy, for when “work” is a noun, referring to the working place, “going to” means the spatial motion, while when “work” is a verb, then “to work” refers to purpose of the “going to”. As the purpose infinitive is always used together with the future action, thus “going to” refers to the temporal motion. In (c), “to eat” means the purpose of eating, which refers to the future action. In (d), “going to” is pure future tense. From (a) to (d), it is easy to find the motivation of the transforming of “going to” from the concrete spatial motion to an abstract temporal one.

The decategorization includes two levels of senses: on one hand, it refers to the ways we conceptualize. Within the level of linguistic study, we define decategorization as the process of a member in some category gradually losing its categorical characteristics. Before being recategorized, the member is in an intermediate state, which is unstable, that is to say, there exists an ambiguous stage between the former category and the category is going to enter, and it is going to rid some typical characteristics of the former category and gain some new characteristics of the new category. As the decategorization can present the processing of semantic peripherization dynamically, it makes the explanation for motivation of the forming of polysemy more evident and convincing.

#### **4. Summary**

Decategorization, instead of being opposite to categorization, belongs to the categorization theory. In the linguistics, it represents the dynamic process of the linguistic entity losing its categorical characteristics, gaining the characteristics of a new category, and finally becomes a member of it. The adding of the senses into a word, making it polysemous, involves the process of being decategorized. This study offers a dynamic interpretation of the motivation for the forming of polysemy, and reflects the creativity of the human mind.

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