Systematic polysemy: A pragmatic perspective

Polysemy is usually described as the case where a single lexeme is associated with several related senses. In so-called systematic polysemy, the related senses of a lexeme are predictable on the basis of a general pattern of sense alternation observed for words denoting objects of the same category. This paper investigates the kind of systematic polysemy that rests on the distinction between count and mass uses of nouns. A well-known example is animal terms, which, when used as count nouns, denote the animal (‘Mary shot a rabbit’), and when used as mass nouns, denote its meat or fur (‘Mary had rabbit for lunch/wore rabbit on the catwalk’), or unspecified ‘animal stuff’ (‘After several lorries had run over the body, there was rabbit splattered all over the yard’). Some computational semantic approaches have suggested that such sense alternations are generated by an inventory of lexical inference rules. For instance, Copestake and Briscoe (1996) propose that our lexicons contain a rule of ‘universal grinding’, which creates from a count noun a mass noun with properties appropriate for an unindividuated substance (‘There was rabbit splattered all over the yard’), a specialised meat-grinding rule that yields the meat senses of animal-denoting count nouns (‘We’re having rabbit for dinner’), a fur-grinding rule that yields their fur senses (‘The model wore rabbit on the catwalk’), as well as several other specialised sense alternation rules.

In this paper I question whether such rule-based accounts can be maintained. A difficulty for this type of approach is to provide the necessary interpretive flexibility to account for the variety of context-specific interpretations that the alternation between count and mass uses of nouns may give rise to. A further challenge is to avoid overgeneration (e.g., the three-way ambiguity of the utterance ‘Rabbit is expensive these days’ predicted by the above-mentioned account). If one has to make appeal to some kind of pragmatic mechanism to solve these issues, it seems likely that the same mechanism would also be capable of handling that part of the interpretive work done by the lexical rules; the question, then, becomes whether anything is to be gained by deriving some interpretations in one way (via lexical rules) and others in a distinct way (via pragmatics). At least, considerations of theoretical economy would favour a unitary pragmatic approach.

I sketch a mainly pragmatic account of the sense alternations that rest on the distinction between count and mass uses of nouns. The claim is that although the sense alternations in question clearly have a linguistic component (provided by count-mass syntax), pragmatics plays a crucial role in giving rise to them. I propose to treat the count-mass distinction as a semantic-conceptual distinction being reflected at the level of occurrences of entire NPs (cf. Pelletier & Schubert’s 1989/2001 ‘semantic occurrence approach’ to the count-mass distinction) rather than as a syntactic property of individual nouns. This allows for entire NPs to be encoded as having either count or mass denotations (or as being unspecified with respect to the distinction, as in the chicken). On the basis of such underspecified inputs, highly activated encyclopaedic and logical information associated with the encoded concept, and contextual assumptions derived from the utterance situation, a relevance-optimising pragmatic system (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995) operates to yield the speaker-intended concept (e.g., it specifies whether a use of the NP rabbit communicates ‘rabbit meat’, ‘rabbit fur’, ‘rabbit stole’, ‘rabbit remains’, etc.). Finally, I discuss some possible challenges for the pragmatic account.
References: