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Polysemy and Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Polysemy is the linguistic phenomenon where a word has more than one sense. Polysemy is important to philosophy. This article considers four related strands of discussion in philosophy in which polysemy plays a crucial role: (i) Chomsky's argument against externalist semantics; (ii) copredication and zeugma; (iii) semantic accounts of philosophically significant terms; and (iv) metaphysical debates.

1 | Introduction

Polysemy is widely considered a prevalent phenomenon (e.g., Byrd et al. 1987; Nagy 1995; Rodd et al. 2002, 250). It is often thought that most open class words—the category of words that admit new members—are polysemous. Prototypical examples in English include nouns for animals and animal products (e.g., "chicken" and "lamb") and common verbs (e.g., "run" and "get") and adjectives (e.g., "healthy" and "hard"). Some closed class words, such as prepositions (e.g., see Brugman 1988 on "over"), are also polysemous.

The topic of polysemy has generated extensive discussion in linguistics and psychology, which will inform the characterisation of polysemy in this article (Section 2). The primary focus here, however, is on its relevance to philosophy. The article explores four related strands of discussion. First, in philosophy of language, allegedly polysemous terms such as "book" and "London" feature prominently in Chomsky's criticism of externalist semantics (Section 3). Second, and relatedly, there has been much discussion on the phenomenon of copredication, where nouns such as "book" and "London" permit multiple predicates that appear to simultaneously select different senses of the noun (Section 4). Third, and more generally, philosophers have appealed to polysemy to propose semantic accounts of various philosophically significant expressions (Section 5). Finally, the claim that a particular term is polysemous is often used to inform metaphysical debates (Section 6).[1] Directions for future research on polysemy within philosophy will also be suggested (Section 7).

2 | Polysemy

It is difficult to give a precise definition of polysemy. Consider the following definition introduced by Falkum and Vicente (2015, italics original) in a widely cited article:

> Polysemy is usually characterised as the phenomenon whereby a single word form is associated with two or several *related* senses.

Although the definition offers us an intuitive grasp on the phenomenon, it requires further clarification to distinguish polysemy from related phenomena.

Polysemy is often contrasted with *homonymy*, where two unrelated meanings happen to be represented by the same word form (e.g., "river *bank*" vs "financial *bank*"). The different senses of a polysemous word are thought to be related. There are nevertheless different ways to unpack the notion of relatedness and, subsequently, different ways to draw the boundary

between polysemy and homonymy. Traditional criteria for relatedness include speakers' intuitions and etymology (Saeed 2003, 64; Ravin and Leacock 2000, 2). However, intuitions can diverge among speakers, and senses that are etymologically related may not be judged as intuitively related. An alternative criterion is drawn psycholinguistically based on processing differences (see below): the different meanings of a homonymous word form are stored in distinct lexical entries in the mental lexicon, whereas the different senses of a polysemous word are stored in a single lexical entry (Quilty-Dunn 2021; Vicente 2024; Zyglewicz, forthcoming). Many words which would count as polysemous on the traditional criteria would count as homonymous on this proposal.

Polysemy is sometimes distinguished from *context-sensitivity*, although whether such a distinction exists depends on how both notions are understood. Polysemy can be clearly distinguished from standard context-sensitivity in terms of the number of denotations and how denotations are determined, even though both types of words have distinct denotations across different contexts. Unlike polysemous words, standard context-sensitive terms, such as the indexicals 'I', 'today' or 'here', are not regularly used to stand for a fixed number of denotations. Instead, the terms encode a rule of application, and the denotation is determined by extralinguistic factors within the wider context of discourse at issue, e.g., by whom or when or where the token context-sensitive term is uttered. In contrast, a polysemous word has a conventionalised set of denotations. The denotation is often, although not always (e.g., Falkum 2015; Carston 2021), determined through composition by other lexical items within the sentence, such as the predicate that modifies a polysemous noun (e.g., "The book *was interesting*") or the noun phrase that a polysemous verb takes (e.g., "cut *the lawn*") (for further distinctions between polysemy and context-sensitivity, see Viebahn and Vetter 2016; Viebahn 2022; Collins 2017).

We can also maintain a distinction between polysemous words and words that express ad hoc concepts. A speaker may use a word in an unconventional way to convey a meaning—an ad hoc concept—that deviates from the word's encoded meaning (Carston 2002; Wilson and Carston 2007). For instance, upon seeing my friend John displaying agility on the monkey bars, I might utter the sentence "John is a gibbon" to mean that John is agile like a gibbon (Liu 2023a). The word "gibbon" here is broadened to express an ad hoc concept, GIBBON*,[2] which can refer to agile humans. Nevertheless, the word "gibbon" in this case is intuitively not polysemous in this way. Linguists working in the relevance-theoretic tradition have argued that ad hoc concepts often give rise to polysemy (Falkum 2015; Carston 2021). Viewing polysemy as having a pragmatic root, the distinction between polysemy and ad hoc concepts may merely be a matter of degree of conventionality. In contrast to ad hoc concepts, the different senses of a polysemous word are conventionalised.

Within the category of polysemy, linguists draw various distinctions. One important distinction, although not always clear-cut, is between *regular* polysemy and *irregular* polysemy (Apresjan 1974, 16). Regular polysemy exhibits systematic and productive patterns (on what explains patterns of polysemy, see Ritchie and Prasada 2024). *Metonymy* is thought to be the main mechanism that generates this kind of polysemy. In the case of metonymic extensions, the different senses of a polysemous word stand in a relation of *association*. Types of associative relations include animal for meat (e.g., "cute *lamb*" vs "delicious *lamb*"); count for mass (e.g., "an *oak*" vs "made of *oak*"), material for product (e.g., "made of *glass*" vs "a *glass*").

An important category of regular polysemy that has been discussed extensively is so-called *inherent polysemy* or *logical polysemy* (Pustejovsky 1995; Asher 2011). The different senses of an inherently polysemous word are thought to be closely related. Inherent polysemy is exemplified by nouns. Crucially, nouns of this kind allow copredication, where the noun phrase seems to denote distinct entities simultaneously:

1. The *book* is interesting but weighs two kilos.
2. *Lunch* was delicious but took a long time.

In (1), intuitively it is book-as-content that is interesting and book-as-tome that weighs two kilos. In (2), intuitively it is lunch-as-food that was delicious, and lunch-as-event that took a long time. Other instances of inherent polysemy include place names (e.g., "*The UK*, which is geographically separate from the Continent, voted to leave the EU."), nouns for institutions (e.g., "The *school*, which just had its centennial celebration, burned down in the recent bush fires.") and some verbs (e.g., "She *writes* wittily but illegibly."). A similar phenomenon can also be observed in anaphoric constructions where the pronominal phrase and the antecedent noun phrase seem to denote distinct entities (e.g., "The *book* is interesting. *It* weighs two kilos."). As we will see in Section 3, inherent polysemy plays a key role in Chomsky's argument against externalist semantics.

Metaphor is often thought to be the main mechanism that generates irregular polysemy. In the case of metaphorical extensions, different senses of a polysemous word stand in the relation of *resemblance* (e.g., "Yasin *expired*" vs "Yasin's card *expired*"). Since a metaphor can draw similarities between two things in all sorts of respects, polysemous words which are generated by metaphor frequently show irregular patterns and are often specific to the language they occur in (Apresjan 1974; Vicente 2018). For instance, extended senses of "evangelist" (referring to someone who is a firm advocate of something) and "crusader" (referring to a vigorous campaigner) are tied to the dominance of Christianity.

The study of polysemy also reveals the development and structure of our mental lexicon. From the perspective of developmental psychology, patterns exhibited by the development of new senses of regular polysemous words demonstrate conceptual associations that we tend to draw, and such associations may be cross-culturally invariant (Srinivasan and Rabagliati 2015; Srinivasan and Snedeker 2014; Ritchie and Prasada 2024). Interesting processing differences between polysemy and homonymy, as well as among different types of polysemy, have been identified by psycholinguists (for comprehensive reviews, see Eddington and Tokowicz 2015; Quilty-Dunn 2021; Vicente 2024). This research shows that, in contrast to homonymous words which involve multiple meanings that inhibit one another, different senses of a polysemous word often prime each other, suggesting that they are accessed via a single

semantic representation in the mental lexicon (e.g., Klepousniotou 2002; Klepousniotou et al. 2008). However, polysemous words with distantly related senses, such as many instances of metaphor-based polysemy, behave like homonymous words, suggesting that they might involve multiple semantic representations in the mental lexicon (e.g., Klein and Murphy 2001; Foraker and Murphy 2012; see Vicente 2024 for a defence of the one-representation hypothesis). Putting that suggestion aside, in terms of the one-representation hypothesis, there are different ways to understand this single semantic representation (for a comprehensive survey on different approaches to the semantic representations of polysemy, see Falkum and Vicente 2015; Vicente 2018; Borg 2025). One option is to propose that the representation encodes a literal meaning—likely to be the dominant, more frequently used sense of the word—and other senses are derived through mechanisms such as lexical rules or routinised pragmatic inferences (e.g., Copestake and Briscoe 1995; Falkum 2015). The second is a sense enumeration view where all the senses are listed separately under a single lexical entry (Katz and Fodor 1963; Katz 1964; Pylkkänen et al. 2006). The third is an underspecification approach which comes in two versions: a "thick" model where the representation encodes a body of rich information from which all the senses of the word can be derived (e.g., Pustejovsky 1995; Asher 2011; Ortega-Andrés and Vicente 2019); and a "thin" model where the representation encodes only a thin body of information—for instance, a core meaning that all senses have in common—with the senses enriched in context (e.g., Frisson 2009). The fourth is the pointer theory that takes the meanings of polysemous words as atomic symbols (e.g., Quilty-Dunn 2021) or roots (e.g., Collins 2024a; Collins and Dobler 2025; Pietroski 2018, 2025), which give access to a body of structured conceptual information from which the denotation of the word is determined in context.

In the following four sections, we will turn to philosophical discussions where polysemy plays a key role.

3 | Against Externalist Semantics

Theories of linguistic meaning are divided into two camps: internalism and externalism. Internalists take language-mind relations to be the basic concern for semantics and take linguistic meaning to be fully specifiable in terms of factors within the mind of the individual, without resorting to factors in the external world. Externalists take language-world relations to be the basic concern for semantics and take meaning to depend on or be constituted by factors outside the individual. On the latter approach, a common view is to understand meaning in terms of truth and take the meaning of a sentence to be its truth-conditions (i.e., the way the world must be in order for the sentence to be true) (e.g., Davidson 2001). To put it simply, on this approach "Snow is white" in English means that snow is white. For the latter truth-condition to be met, there would have to be snow in the world—referred to by the noun "snow"—which has the property of being white—referred to by the predicate "is white." Thus, related to truth-conditional semantics as standardly conceived is the assumption that a noun like "snow" refers to a worldly entity.

Against the externalist approach, Chomsky appeals to words such as "London" and "book" to argue that "[i]n general, a word, even of the simplest kind, does not pick out an entity of the world" (see Vicente 2021a; Collins 2017; Pietroski 2005). On "London", Chomsky (2000), 37; italics original writes:

> Referring to London, we can be talking about a location or area, people who sometimes live there, the air above it (but not too high), buildings, institutions, etc., in various combinations (as in *London is so unhappy, ugly, and polluted that it should be destroyed and rebuilt 100 miles away*, still being the same city). Such terms as *London* are used to talk about the actual world, but there neither are nor are believed to be things-in-the world with the properties of the intricate modes of reference that a city name encapsulates.

Although Chomsky does not explicitly mention polysemy, in the literature, as we already saw, nouns such as "London", "lunch" and "book" are often categorised as instances of inherent polysemy (e.g., Pustejovsky 1995; Asher 2011; Falkum and Vicente 2015; Vicente 2018). Chomsky's point is that speakers can use a word like "London" to refer to different entities in the world (e.g., population, geographic area) with distinct persistence conditions (e.g., London-the-area persists, whereas London-the-population ceases to exist). Importantly, such words allow *copredication* (e.g., "London is so unhappy, ugly, and polluted..."; see also (1) and (2)), where a noun in a sentence permits multiple predicates that simultaneously attribute seemingly incompatible properties to a single entity (e.g., a geographic area cannot be unhappy). Yet, there seems to be nothing in the world corresponding to the noun "London" to which all the different properties can be attributed. So nouns such as "London", contra truth-conditional semantics standardly conceived, do not seem to have univocally assigned semantic values.

Chomsky's remarks on words such as "London", which can feature in copredication, are often construed, as we will see in more detail in §4, as presenting a problem for truth-conditional semantics (e.g., Pietroski 2005; Segal 2012; Collins 2017, 2024a; Vicente 2018, 2021a; Borg 2025; Liebesman and Magidor 2025). Interesting questions also remain regarding what Chomsky is doing with the "London" passage and similar passages (e.g., Chomsky 2000, 15–17; Chomsky 2003, 289–291), and their overall role in his argument against the externalist programme (see Liebesman and Magidor 2025, chap. 6, for a critical discussion of Chomsky's argument). Examples such as "London" are embedded in Chomsky's discussion of a naturalistic inquiry of language. On Chomsky's internalist naturalistic approach, a word is "a complex of properties, phonetic and semantic" in the mental lexicon and speakers appeal to different semantic features of a word to talk about the world and interpret what others say (Chomsky 2000, 15). Viewed through this lens, (Chomsky 2000,16–17) provides an explicit critique of contemporary externalism-driven philosophy of language which is preoccupied with the question of *what thing a word refers to*. On one level, Chomsky regards such a question as wrong-headed, since for him, it is *speakers* who use the semantic features in

their I-languages to refer in thought and communication. On another level, Chomsky (2003, 290) takes externalist semantics that evokes the notion of *reference* and assigns worldly objects as semantic values of nouns to register a "lack of interest" in the study of language-world relations that brushes over a variety of problems, including questions about what entities in the world correspond to words such as "London" and "book" (see also Yalcin 2014, 46). Relatedly, Chomsky seems to use examples like "London" to criticise the idea that the externalist approach constitutes a scientifically rigorous study of language. For Chomsky (2000, 21, 37), a naturalistic inquiry into language should be dissociated from common sense perspectives and concepts. In contrast, he seems to think, the externalist approach to language dominant in philosophy often takes common sense perspectives seriously and commits itself to ontologically problematic entities—such as London—as referents of words (see also Stoljar's (2015) construal of this criticism which appeals to Lewis's (1983) notion of naturalness).

4 | Copredication and Zeugma

The discussion on Chomsky's argument against externalist semantics has led to treating copredication as a topic in its own right (e.g., Gotham 2017; Liebesman and Magidor 2017, 2019, 2023, 2024, 2025; Collins 2017, 2021, 2024a, 2024b; Ortega-Andrés and Vicente 2019; Vicente 2021b; Löhr and Michel 2022; Murphy 2024; Liu 2024a, 2024b). Much of the discussion here is directly concerned with explaining why certain copredicational constructions are acceptable while others are not. Compare (1) and (2) with (3) and (4):

1. The *book* is interesting but weighs two kilos.
2. *Lunch* was delicious but took a long time.
3. #The *chicken* is chirpy and delicious.
4. #The *magazine* on the table just held a press conference.

The two sets of sentences are structurally similar: each contains multiple predicates that seem to simultaneously select different senses of the noun. (3) and (4) are clear examples of *zeugma*, where a word—either homonymous or polysemous—is used in different meanings or senses simultaneously. These sentences often generate an intuition of oddness. However, instances of copredication like (1) and (2) also seem zeugmatic, but they are not odd-sounding. The difference here calls for an explanation.

The issue here is important for several reasons. As already mentioned, copredication presents a challenge for truth-conditional semantics. Regarding copredicational constructions that generate oddness, defenders of truth-conditional semantics can say that these sentences are odd because they lack clear truth-conditional contents as the relevant noun is used equivocally. In contrast, the noun in an acceptable copredicational construction does not make distinct contributions and hence the relevant sentence is not odd. The challenge is to work out the semantic value of the noun in the latter type of sentence. One response is to say that the referent is a hybrid object with different components, for example, "book" in (1) denotes a composite object with a physical part and an informational part (Arapinis 2013; Arapinis and Vieu 2015). The challenge here concerns how such complex objects are individuated and counted (see Gotham 2017 for a proposal and Liebesman and Magidor 2019 for criticism). Another response is that the denotation of the noun in copredication is an unproblematic worldly object. For instance, Liebesman and Magidor (2017, 2025) argue that "book" in instances of copredication like (1) only has a single sense, referring to either a physical book or an informational book depending on context. Using the idea of Property Versatility, they (2025, 187) argue that "many properties are considerably more versatile than theorists have often taken them to be"—they can "apply to objects that are very different from each other and apply to different objects in different ways". On both proposals where the semantic value of the noun involved in copredication is univocal, copredication is not about polysemy insofar as the noun does not have distinct denotations in relevant sentences.[3]

An alternative approach to copredication maintains that instances of copredication like (1) and (2) are just cases of zeugma like (3) and (4), but language users do not notice this anomaly (Collins 2024a). Such an approach calls for a psychological explanation for the difference in acceptability regarding equally zeugmatic copredicational constructions. According to the coactivation account proposed by Ortega-Andrés and Vicente (2019), different senses of a polysemous word can form an activation package such that the selection of one sense does not inhibit others (see also Ortega-Andrés 2023; Vicente 2021b). One major drawback of this account is that it fails to explain the difference in felicitousness in sentences like the following, when intuitively the same senses—for example, the building sense and the participant sense—are involved (Liu 2024a; Löhr and Michel 2022):

5. The school caught fire when celebrating students' graduation.
6. #The school caught fire when visiting the museum.

Several subsequent proposals have sought to improve on the coactivation account. For instance, drawing on the simulation view of language processing, Liu (2022, 2024a, 2024b) argues that the acceptability of copredicational sentences is closely associated with the perceptual representations the language user deploys in comprehension, whereby unacceptable sentences involve conflicting simulations and acceptable ones do not.[4]

The issue regarding copredication and zeugma also has broader philosophical implications. As we will see in the next section, what is known as "the zeugma test" is often used to argue for or against the polysemy of many philosophically significant terms. Whether this is a good test depends on what we say about copredication.

5 | Polysemy Accounts of Philosophically Significant Terms

Across different areas of philosophy, various philosophically significant terms have been thought to be polysemous. Representative examples include the following:

Language /Logic	Definite descriptions (Devitt 1997, 2004; Amaral 2008) Some verbs of propositional attitude, e.g., "remember", "fear" (King 2002) Kind terms, e.g., "leaf" (Vicente 2015) Dual-character concept terms (Leslie 2015; Keiser, ms) Satural kind terms, e.g., 'water' (Tobia et al. 2019; Nichols et al. 2016; Bloom 2007) slurs (Jeshion 2020; Zeman 2022) Pejoratives (Castroviejo et al. 2021) Proper names (Kijania-Placek 2023) "true" (Yu 2021; Kölbel 2008)
Metaphysics	"Cause" (Corkum 2022) "Woman" (Bettcher 2013; Schroeter and Schroeter, forthcoming) modals, e.g., "can", "may" (Viebahn and Vetter 2016) Quantifiers (Hofweber 2016, 2019) "Because" (Shaheen 2017a, 2017b) "Part" (Wallace 2021) "Sound" (Killin 2022) nouns for socially significant places (Horden and López de Sa 2024)
Epistemology	"Know how to" (Abbott 2013; Rumfitt 2003; Ditter 2016; Löwenstein 2017; Viebahn 2018) "Know (that)" (Satta 2018a, 2018b, 2020) "Belief" (Marcus 2025)
Mind	Perceptual verbs, e.g., "look", "feel" (Brogaard 2012) "Hope" (Kwong 2022) pain predicates, e.g., "sore", "ache" (Liu 2021, 2023b) Sensory terms, e.g., "red", "soft" (Liu 2023c) "I" (Schellenberg, forthcoming)
Science	"Explain" (Serban 2017) "Kinds" (Godfrey-Smith 2014) "Planet" (Brusse 2016) scientific language (Sterner 2022) "Heritable"/"heritability" (Keller 2010) "Genetic information" (Manson 2006)
Ethics	"Need" (Wiggins 1997) "Ought" (Schroeder 2011) "Reason" (Fogal 2016) "Good" (Mankowitz 2024)
Art	Emotional descriptions of music (Davies 2011; Liu 2024c) Fictional terms (Recanati 2018; García-Carpintero 2018, 2022; Collins 2024b)

In the work cited above, theorists either explicitly state that the relevant expression is polysemous or implicitly endorse the polysemy claim. In the latter case, theorists make the claim that the relevant expression is *ambiguous* (e.g., Devitt 1997, 2004; Rumfitt 2003; Godfrey-Smith 2014). Given the relevant expression, if ambiguous, is usually polysemous rather than homonymous, as the senses are related, we can take these theorists to subscribe to the claim that the relevant expression is polysemous (see also Liebesman and Magidor 2024, 554).

Philosophers argue for the polysemy of philosophically significant terms in different ways. Some appeal to polysemy as the *best explanation* for a particular linguistic phenomenon (e.g., King 2002; Vicente 2015; Leslie 2015; Yu 2021). For instance, in explaining kind terms like "woman" and "philosopher" that can express dual character concepts (e.g., "Although Sally is a philosopher, she is not a real philosopher)"; see Knobe et al. 2013 on dual character concepts), Leslie (2015) argues that they are polysemous between a descriptive sense and a normative sense (for discussion of Leslie's account, see Hesni 2021; Lemeire 2023; Baumgartner 2024; Keiser, ms). Some appeal to *ordinary usage* to argue for polysemy (e.g., Devitt 1997; Wiggins 1997; King 2002; Schroeder 2011; Bettcher 2013; Godfrey-Smith 2014; Fogal 2016; Killin 2022). For instance, in arguing for the attributive-referential ambiguity of definite descriptions, Devitt (1997, 126) notes that the referential use and the attributive use of "the F" are regular and conventional. Bettcher (2013) appeals to usage in trans communities to argue that there are multiple meanings involved in the term "woman". Some lay down *criteria* for polysemy and argue for polysemy on the basis that the term at issue satisfies these criteria (e.g., Viebahn and Vetter 2016; Wallace 2021). For instance, Viebahn and Vetter (2016) outline key differences between polysemy and typical context-sensitivity along several dimensions, based on which they argue that modal auxiliaries such as "may" and "can" are polysemous rather than context-sensitive. More often, theorists deploy linguist tests. Two tests for polysemy are important: *the zeugma test* and *the translation test*.

The zeugma test for lexical ambiguity—which is thought to include both polysemy and homonymy—is often done in the following way.[5] Take an expression E that is putatively ambiguous between two senses and construct a sentence S that simultaneously selects the alleged senses. If S is odd, it is evidence that E is ambiguous; E is polysemous if the senses are related. If S is not odd, it is evidence that E is not ambiguous and hence not polysemous.[6] The zeugma test has been widely deployed to argue both for and against the ambiguity of philosophically important expressions (e.g., see Viebahn 2018; Liebesman and Magidor 2024; Liu 2024b). For instance, Brogaard (2012, 13) takes the oddness in sentences such as "I feel tired and that the education in this country is first-rate" to argue that "feel" is ambiguous between an epistemic sense and a perceptual sense. Arguing against the ambiguity of "have" and in favour of treating it as a dummy verb with a nonspecific meaning, Humberstone (1990, 104) appeals to the acceptability of the sentence "Tom is so fortunate: he has a magnificent house in the country, an interesting job, a beautiful wife and two lovely children" as evidence.

However, the zeugma test as outlined above is limited in several ways. On the one hand, the oddness of S is not necessarily evidence for the ambiguity of E. There could be other semantic, syntactic or pragmatic factors underpinning the oddness at issue, which is not due to different interpretations of the expression being forced together (Liu 2024b). On the other hand, the lack of oddness of S does not necessarily show that E is not ambiguous. The issue here is complicated by how one theorises about copredication. If acceptable copredicational sentences involve polysemy, in which case a polysemous noun

is used in different senses simultaneously without rendering the sentence odd, then the fact that a particular zeugmatic construction does not give rise to oddness is no evidence for a lack of ambiguity, assuming that polysemy is a kind of ambiguity (Viebahn 2018; Moldovan 2021). But even if acceptable copredicational sentences do not involve polysemy, there might still be other reasons for positing ambiguity, which does not manifest in certain acceptable copredicational constructions (see Liebesman and Magidor 2024).

Another commonly used test is the translation test. Take an expression *E* that is putatively ambiguous between two senses in language *L* and check whether *E* is translated into different nonsynonymous expressions in some other languages. If *E* is translated into different expressions in some, but not all, languages, then there is evidence that *E* is ambiguous—in particular polysemous—in *L*. If *E* is not translated into different expressions in any of the other languages, then there is evidence that *E* is not ambiguous, and so not polysemous either (Kripke 1977, 268). Perhaps the most prominent use of the translation test is in the debate on know-how. A number of theorists have argued, using languages such as Russian, German and Turkish, that "know how to" in English is translated into distinct expressions in these languages, where one expresses a relation between a person and a proposition, tracking propositional knowledge, and another expresses a relation between a person and an activity, tracking practical knowledge (e.g., Rumfitt 2003; Abbott 2013; Ditter 2016; Löwenstein 2017; Viebahn 2018). On the basis of these cross-linguistic data, these theorists conclude that "know how to" in English is ambiguous/polysemous. In the opposite direction, in arguing against the claim that the English definite article "the" is referential-attributive ambiguous, Bach (2004) notes that this putative ambiguity is not translated into distinct expressions in other languages (see Amaral 2008 for counterexamples).

However, the translation test as outlined above is also problematic.[7] Several theorists have noted that the fact that *E* in *L* is not translated into distinct expressions in other languages does not necessarily mean that *E* is not ambiguous, because some patterns of polysemy may be cross-culturally universal (Amaral 2008; Viebahn and Vetter 2016). Others have raised concerns that the fact that *E* in *L* is translated into distinct expressions in some other language on its own is no evidence that it is ambiguous in *L* (Fodor 1998, 54–56; Carston 2002, 273). For instance, the fact that the English word "grandmother" is translated into two nonsynonymous words in Mandarin—nǎinai (paternal grandmother) and wàipó (maternal grandmother)—does not show that "grandmother" is ambiguous in English. What needs to be ruled out is that *E* has a general sense that applies to distinct entities (Carston 2002, 273).

6 | Polysemy and Metaphysical Debates

In making the argument that a particular philosophically relevant expression is polysemous, theorists are not just interested in the semantics of these expressions. In many cases, they draw metaphysical implications, including adjudicating between different metaphysical theories and advocating pluralism regarding the relevant domain. For instance, the polysemy of "know how to" has been used to argue against intellectualism, the view that know-how is merely a kind of know-that (e.g., Rumfitt 2003; Ditter 2016; Löwenstein 2017). Shaheen (2017a, 2017b) argues for the polysemy of "because" and takes it to pose a challenge to the unity of metaphysical explanation and causal explanation. Wallace (2021) argues for the polysemy of "part" as in "is part of" and uses it to motivate compositional pluralism, the view that there is more than one fundamental way for something to be part of another thing. Liu (2023c, 2024b) argues for the polysemy of emotion words and uses it to motivate pluralism about musical expressiveness.

Underpinning these moves is the general principle that language is a guide to metaphysics and the specific assumption that polysemy suggests an underlying ontological distinction. However, the matter here is not straightforward. Although polysemy serves as a good guide for mapping out how our languages or language speakers construe distinctions in the world, the fact that a word is polysemous does not suggest that there are *fundamental* distinctions in reality. Consider an internalist psychological conception of word meaning on which word meanings are tied to semantic representations in the mental lexicon. As we saw in §2, a given polysemous word may be thought to have either a single lexical entry (Vicente 2024) or multiple lexical entries (e.g., Klein and Murphy 2001; Foraker and Murphy 2012). Although distinct lexical entries reveal how language speakers conceive distinctions in the world, such distinctions may not track fundamental distinctions in reality that are scientifically or philosophically interesting. The words "fruit" and "vegetable", corresponding to two lexical entries, mark an intuitive distinction in everyday life, but do not map neatly onto any real distinctions in nature. Consider also polysemous words with single representations. Assume that the word "part" as in "is part of" is polysemous in this way. The linguistic thesis on its own does not support compositional pluralism. One possibility is that "part" could have an underspecified "thin" meaning which is a common core that encodes semantic features shared by all senses of the term (Klepousniotou et al. 2008). If so, then although there are different kinds of parthood relations, these relations nevertheless may have something in common. One could alternatively argue that instances of parthood relations do not share any common features, thus supporting the case for compositional pluralism (Wallace 2021, S4343). But this would be substantive philosophical theorising that goes beyond simply drawing metaphysical conclusions from the polysemy of "part".

Although drawing metaphysical conclusions from a linguistic claim about polysemy requires careful consideration, the polysemy of a philosophically significant term provides good reason to disambiguate ontological questions of the form "What is x?"—a question frequently posed by philosophers in search for a unified answer. Various theorists have noted that in light of observed polysemy, it is important to clarify the question "What is x?" by introducing subquestions that home in on a specific sense of "x". After arguing for the polysemy of "sound", Killin (2022) points out that in order to answer the question "What is sound?", we need to first determine which sense of "sound" is at issue. Similar remarks are made by Kwong (2022) on the polysemy of "hope" and Liu (2023b) on the polysemy of pain predicates. Borrowing from the literature on dynamic

theories in pragmatics (e.g., Roberts 1996), Corkum (2022) makes a similar suggestion regarding our ordinary causal discourse, noting that in addressing the question "What is the cause of a target event?", an interlocutor can introduce different subquestions to home in on different senses of "cause". The answers to these subquestions also contribute to the answer to the superquestion.

7 | Future Research

In this article, we saw that polysemy plays a key role in discussions in philosophy of language, philosophy of psychology and philosophy more generally. Moving forward, it would not be surprising to see more frequent appeals to polysemy to shed light on philosophical debates. If polysemy turns out to be prevalent, as is usually thought, then one would naturally expect many philosophically significant terms to exhibit patterns of polysemy. Polysemy would then be a useful tool to diagnose philosophical debates. As Wittgenstein (1922, 35) notes in the *Tractatus*, the fact that "[i]n the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways" is a major source of many philosophical confusions.

However, theorists sometimes adopt different conceptions of polysemy in philosophical theorising. Thus in appealing to polysemy, it is important to define what counts as polysemy. This requires careful consideration of the phenomenon of copredication as well as improvements in linguistic tests for polysemy. More attention to polysemy representation and processing should also be beneficial to philosophical theorising. To quote Chomsky (2000, 26), lexical items "are like filters or lenses, providing ways of looking at things and thinking about the products of our minds". Understanding the conceptual structures associated with polysemous words and words in general, through which speakers talk about the world, may be tremendously valuable in understanding and diagnosing how some debates in philosophy arise and persist.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Other discussions on polysemy include whether it is a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon (Falkum 2015; Carston 2021; Devitt 2021; Li 2024; Borg 2025), its role in the debate between minimalism and contextualism (e.g., Recanati 2017; Löhr 2024), and its use in solving philosophical puzzles or paradoxes (e.g., Yu 2021; Liu 2021). However, because of space constraints, this paper will focus on surveying areas where polysemy has been the subject of more extensive discussions in the literature.

[2] I follow the convention of using '*' to label ad hoc concepts.

[3] Vicente (2021a), (2021b) defends truth-conditional semantics by abandoning the idea that nouns involved in copredication have univocal semantic values. On his view, these words provide possibilities for distinct denotations that contribute to the truth-conditional content of the sentence. See Collins (2024a, 378) for potential counterexamples.

[4] For other accounts, see Murphy (2024) on how predicate order and coherence relations affect acceptability, and Löhr and Michel (2022), who use the predictive processing framework.

[5] The distinction between ambiguity and polysemy can nevertheless be drawn in different ways. Collins (2024a) stipulates a definition that treats ambiguity and polysemy as exclusive. Liu (2024b) discusses two conceptions of lexical ambiguity—denotational versus psychological—and on the latter conception, some polysemous words are not ambiguous.

[6] For discussion of the test in philosophy, see Quine 1960; Viebahn 2018; Liebesman and Magidor 2024, 2025; Liu 2024b; for discussion on the test in linguistics, see Geeraerts 1993; Tuggy 1993; Cruse 2004.

[7] For critical discussion on the translation test, see Fodor (1998, 54–56); Carston (2002, 273); Amaral (2008); Viebahn and Vetter (2016).

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