

# Polysemy and Homonymy : Difficulties for Japanese Learners

Masako YANASE

This essay refers to semantic categories of English, polysemy and homonymy, and also to vocabulary learning by Japanese learners. Categorization of these two is not easy for non-native speakers like the Japanese. When they learn English as a foreign language, they might, for example, come across two types of entries: first, 'lie<sup>1</sup>' and 'lie<sup>2</sup>', and second, 1 to 4 under one heading 'lip'. The word 'lie' is an example of homonymy, as it has two independent entries, while 'lip' exhibits polysemy because there are several meanings under one entry. In what way do dictionary editors classify a word into these two categories? What are the criteria that differentiate between polysemy and homonymy? This study presents several examples from English, where Japanese learners have some difficulties. It concludes that dictionary editors choose between polysemy and homonymy on the basis of semantic and etymological criteria, taking cultural background into consideration.

Key words: polysemy, homonymy, vocabulary learning

## 1. Introduction

Japanese learners of English, especially at a lower level, cannot often understand why a word is either grouped under one heading or several headings in a dictionary. Their teachers may recognize these difficulties but they rarely teach the criteria by which a word has been classified because they are too busy teaching vast amounts of vocabulary or grammar for entrance examinations. Native English speaking teachers don't teach this criteria, either, because to them word classification is instinctive and they cannot see that it is an obstacle to Japanese learners of English. This means Japanese learners are probably never told by any of their teachers how or why words are categorized in a dictionary.

This essay focuses on polysemes and homonyms and the difficulties they present for Japanese in learning English vocabulary. It also refers to polysemes and homonyms not only from the

linguistic viewpoint but also, by presenting examples of words, from the viewpoint of learning vocabulary.

## 2. Definition of Polysemy and Homonymy

The 'poly' of polysemy stands for 'many' or 'much', which comes from the Greek 'polu-'. The 'homo' of homonymy means the 'same' and the term also dates back to Greek 'homos'. Therefore, a polyseme is a word that has a set of different meanings. A homonym is a word that is spelled or pronounced the same as another word but has a different meaning.

You need only consult a dictionary to find polysemes. For example, the word 'lift' is used as a verb and a noun. The verb 'lift' has several meanings, like 'raise something' (transitive verb), or 'go up' (intransitive verb), etc. The noun 'lift' has several meanings, like 'elevator' and 'ride'. Although their meanings vary slightly, we

can see their semantic relationship because they are similar enough in meaning to be put under the one heading of 'lift'.

Homonyms are a little harder to find in a dictionary. We find fewer homonyms than polysemes. Look up the word 'lie', for example.

Dictionaries usually divide the word 'lie' into two headings: 'lie<sup>1</sup>' and 'lie<sup>2</sup>'. This is because the dictionary considers each meaning of 'lie' to be different from, or unrelated to, the other.

The dictionary says that 'lie<sup>1</sup>' means to 'be at rest on something' and that 'lie<sup>2</sup>' means to '(tell) an intentionally false statement' (COD). The dictionary determines the two meanings to be completely unrelated. Thus, the word 'lie' is a homonym. However, the first time Japanese learners of English, especially at a lower level, come across such examples in the dictionary, they wonder, "Why is 'lie' under two headings but 'lift' only under one heading? Is there any criterion to determine?" The dictionary does not make it clear to the students the reason for this distinction. They can only guess that there must be some reason why 'lift', a polyseme with multiple somewhat related meanings, is under one heading and why 'lie' a homonym with multiple but unrelated meanings, is under two separate headings.

Following are four examples from English that show four types of difficulties. These difficulties are: categorisation, semantic category, etymology, and understanding cultural background of the target language. We will look at and discuss the criteria by which words are either put under a single heading (polysemes) or under multiple headings (homonyms) in dictionaries and why these are obstacles to Japanese learners in the process of learning vocabulary.

To keep the definition of, and distinction between, polysemes and homonyms clear and

simple, as in the examples above of the words 'lift' and 'lie', I will limit the use of each word to the same lexical category; for example, noun, adjective, or other. Covering several lexical categories at once will blur the focus and make the analysis more confusing. I will also simplify the analysis by presenting only the main meanings of each word.

### 3. Four Examples from English vocabulary

#### 3. 1. FLOWER and FLOUR – Difficulty of Categorisation

It is not easy to categorise 'flower' and 'flour'. Their origin is the same according to OED. 'flower-the best, choicest, most attractive or desirable part or product of anything, material or immaterial; the essence, quintessence; also 'the gist' (of a matter).' 'The earliest appearance of this sense in English is in the specific application now differentiated as flour' (OED). This phrase means that in Middle English, 'flower' meant the finest part of a thing and 'flour' also had almost the same meaning. OED mentions that the word 'flour' was 'originally, the 'flower' or finest quality of meal; hence, the finer portion of meal (whether it is made from wheat or other grain). We can conclude, therefore, that these two words 'flower' and 'flour' have the same origin, although we cannot imagine that 'flower', a part of plant, used to mean the same as 'flour', which is fine powder made from grain. Therefore, these two words 'flower' and 'flour' may etymologically be classified as polysemes. Yet there is another problem. Dictionary cannot classify 'flower' and 'flour' under one entry because the spelling is different. Dictionaries are made in alphabetical order. As a result, these two words have come to be regarded as homonyms in spite of having the same origin.

It is quite difficult for Japanese learners to

understand that 'flower' and 'flour' have the same origin because there is little semantic relation between them now. Furthermore, it is more difficult to infer from their alphabetical order in a dictionary that these two words are polysemous. Categorisation is therefore one of the difficulties to understand in learning English vocabulary.

### 3. 2. LIP (noun) – Difficulty of Finding the Core Meaning

'Lip' has three meanings: 1) 'either of the two fleshy parts forming the edges of the mouth-opening'; 2) 'the edges of a cup, container, esp. the part shaped for pouring from' and; 3) 'impudent talk' (COD).

Is the word 'lip' a homonym or a polyseme? Firstly, the first, second, and third meanings etymologically have the same origin, '*lippa*'. As mentioned in the above section, our first criterion for determining whether words are polysemes or homonyms is whether they have the same origin. Since all three meanings of 'lip' have the same origin, we can agree that 'lip' is polysemous.

Secondly, considering that 'lip' is a specific name of a part of human body, its core meaning is the first one, 'either of the two fleshy parts forming the edges of the mouth-opening'. The meaning of the second description, 'the edges of a cup, container, esp. the part shaped for pouring from', is a kind of metaphor of the first, because the part shaped for pouring from looks like human lips. Therefore, the first and the second are possibly linked to each other semantically. In other words, the second meaning is predictable from the core meaning of the first. Japanese learners can also speculate that the core meaning is the first one because all human beings have the same organ, 'lip', even though their languages are different. The name of each organ of the human

body can be easily used as a metaphor. What, then, should we make of the third meaning, 'impudent talk'?

It does not seem to be directly related to the first meaning, 'human organ'. 'Lip' meaning 'impudent talk' is used in a colloquial expression such as, 'That's enough of your lip!' It means, 'Stop saying such impudent words (from your lips)!' (COD). There is a similar expression found in the word 'mouth'. Mouth is a part of a human body and the word 'mouth' means 'talkativeness' or 'impudent talk'. As 'talk' is closely related to the mouth, it has been used metaphorically. So lips may have been used metaphorically, although it went far from the core meaning. So 'lip' may have been used metaphorically, although the third meaning above goes far from the core meaning. 'Lip' can therefore be categorised as a polyseme with three meanings under one heading. Metaphoric use of a word sometimes misleads us into thinking that the word is a homonym. However, as long as the meaning is believed to be derived from one core meaning, it is a polyseme.

We see from the example 'lip' that semantic relation is the second criterion by which to decide whether a word is a homonym or a polyseme. Since human organ is universal, it is easy to understand a word's core meaning. However, when the word is used too metaphorically to understand the core meaning or when the word goes too far from the core meaning, it becomes confusing to learners. They have difficulties in finding the core meaning and its relation to each of the other meanings.

### 3. 3. LINE (verb) – Etymological Difficulty

The word 'line' has three main meanings; 1) 'mark with lines'; 2) 'position or stand at intervals along'; 3) 'cover the inside surface of a

garment or box with a layer of different material'. The first two meanings originate from the same noun 'line' of the Old English meaning 'rope, series'. To 'position or stand at intervals' means to stand like a line or a rope. If we think about the shape of a 'line' (the noun), it is predictable that the first two are under one heading. Or, both words may have come from the core meaning of the noun 'line'. The third meaning, 'to cover the inside surface of a garment or box with a layer of different material', originates from the fact that people used linen (*line* in the Middle English) for the inside of gowns in the middle ages. Thus, the third meaning comes from 'line' of Middle English, but it is a different 'line' than that from which the first two meanings originates. The first two meanings are polysemous, judging from etymology and from the semantic relation. The third meaning of 'line' is the same in origin, in that it also comes from an older word 'line', but semantically different. It comes from the material for dressmaking and has no semantic relation to the first two meanings. Dictionary concludes that although those three meanings come from 'line', the word 'line' is homonymous and should be put into two different entries. And that is what they have done. However, it is not clear-cut as dictionaries describe. These three separate meanings for 'line' might have had the same origin in older times. A rope is made of flax and linen is woven from flax, too. It is possible that they used to be categorised as a polyseme long ago because both rope and linen were made of the same material. However, as the main meanings gradually drifted apart, the word 'line' may have become homonymous in Middle English. Etymology sometimes betrays us and makes us lose our way. Japanese learners who want to know the usage of the word in

ancient times find it quite difficult because the origin of the word is not always clear.

### 3. 4. RIGHT (adjective) – Difficulty of Understanding Cultural Background

Lastly, we will discuss a problem that is more complicated and difficult than the above examples for Japanese learners. There are some words closely related to the cultural background of their target language. One of the examples is the word 'right'.

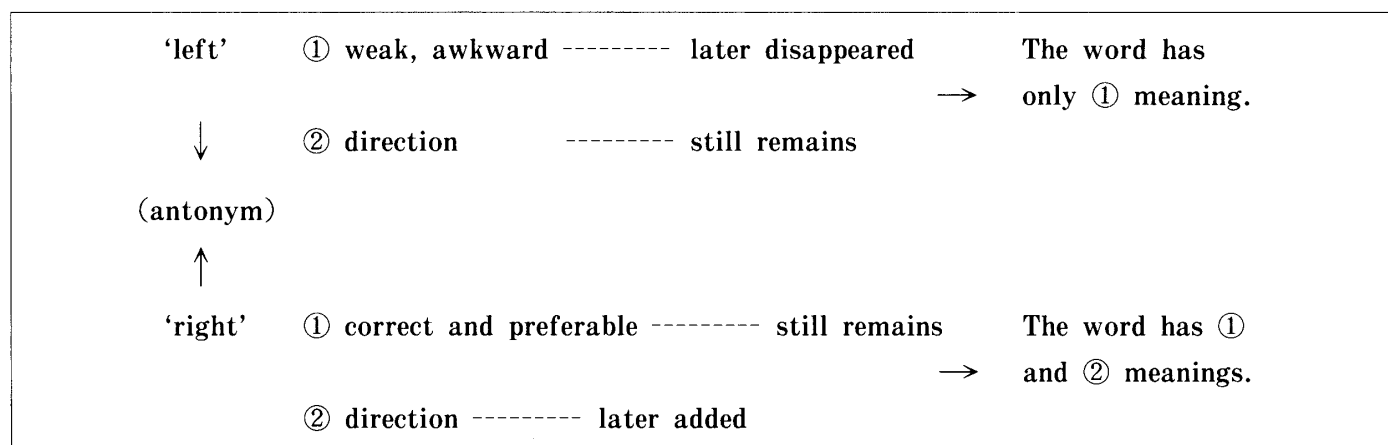
The word has four main meanings. 1) 'just, morally or socially correct'; 2) 'more or most suitable or preferable'; and 3) 'on or towards the side of the human body which corresponds to the positions of east if one regards oneself as facing north'; 4) 'of the Right' which represents 'a group or section favouring conservatism' (COD).

The first thing to consider is word origin. Etymologically, all of these four meanings originate from the Old English '*riht*'. Therefore, it seems clear that 'right' is a polyseme from an etymological viewpoint. What, then, about its meanings? The second meaning, 'more or most suitable or preferable' follows logically the first meaning. It is therefore easy to speculate that there is a close relation between the first and the second meanings. The adjective 'right' always refers to something correct and preferable. Therefore, the first two meanings are put together into the same category. In the same way, the third and the fourth meanings are also put together. The fourth meaning, 'a group or section favouring conservatism' comes from the third meaning. Political term 'right' comes from the historical fact that 'originally the more conservative section of a continental legislature was seated on the president's right.' (OED) These two meanings are also classified into the same group. Therefore, we can re-classify the four

## Polysemy and Homonymy

meanings of 'right' into two; one meaning 'correct' and the other meaning 'the direction opposite to the left'. Can we suggest that the meanings of these two groups are closely related? That is difficult to answer. No semantic relation can be found between the two. The word does not look polysemous from the semantic

'right', meaning the opposite direction of 'left'. Weekley (1921) discusses this problem, saying that 'the double sense (of the word 'right') appears in all the Teutonic language, that of opposite to *left* being of somewhat later development.' (Weekly : 1238). Therefore, we can explain 'right' and 'left' briefly as follows:



point of view. It should be a homonym whose entry is divided into two. From an etymological viewpoint, 'right' appears to be a polyseme; from a semantic viewpoint, it appears to be a homonym. Since we have two answers to our question, the analysis gets contradictory. Let us analyse this problem in a different way.

The antonym of the 'right' is 'left'. The original form seen in Old English is '*lyft*' whose meaning was 'weak' or 'worthless'. 'Left-handed' men were considered to be weak and isolated from mainstream because most people were right-handed. 'Left-handed' meant 'awkward or clumsy' because left-handed men were at a disadvantage during war. So the word 'left' originally had two meanings of 'weak' and 'the direction'. 'Right' and 'left' seem to have been used symmetrically in Old English. The former was used positively and meant a good thing, while the latter was used negatively and meant a bad thing.

The word 'right', meaning 'correct and preferable', may have existed earlier than the word

The original meaning of adjective 'left', which was 'weak and awkward', disappeared and is no longer in use. This is because the term 'left' meaning 'weak' or 'awkward' is used to discriminate against left-handed people. Only 'left' meaning direction remained. We can therefore conclude the following: the original and only meaning of 'right' was 'correct and preferable', while 'left' had the two meanings of 'weak' and 'the direction'. As 'right' was the opposite of 'left' meaning 'weak and awkward', 'right' came to mean the opposite direction of 'left' later. However, eventually the first meaning of 'left' disappeared and only the meaning of 'direction' remained. On the other hand, the word 'right' still has two meanings. This is the reason why native speakers' intuition tells them that 'right' is polysemous, not homonymous.

This example is quite difficult for Japanese learners. The two meanings of 'right' seem to have no relation to each other. However, 'right' is a polyseme according to dictionaries. So, the word 'right' is closely related to the cultural

background of Western countries, where the strong 'right'-handed warriors were highly respected. If we had the same cultural background related to the Japanese word 'right', Japanese learners would be more easily be able to understand that 'right' is a polyseme. Let us compare with Japanese words for 'right' and 'left'.

『日本国語大辞典』(*Dictionary of Japanese Language*) has one entry or heading for the word 'right', the same as English dictionaries. Under this entry are 11 meanings. They can be classified into three main meanings: 1) on or towards the side of the human body which corresponds to the position of west if one regards oneself as facing south. 2) Conservative Party which is contrasted to the radical left wing. 3) the superior one of the two.

The first meaning corresponds to the direction in English. The second one corresponds to the concept in English of 'right' wing, which comes from the historical fact that the more conservative section of a continental legislature was seated on the president's right. This meaning may have come into Japanese from English. Since Japanese has borrowed and assimilated foreign words, it is also possible that it has assimilated this 'conservative' concept of 'right'.

The third meaning seems to correspond to the meaning in English of 'right and favourable'. The dictionary explains as follows: 'In the court of ancient China, the right-side seats were regarded to be for the people whose rank was higher than those of the people on the left side. Therefore the word 'right' came to have a good and favourable meaning.' (Translated by author.) However, in older time Japan, the left-seated aristocrat was said to be superior to the right-seated aristocrat. We cannot say that 'right' was superior while 'left' was inferior in Japan.

In neither China nor Japan was there any connection between the word 'right' and war or between 'right' and the strength of warriors. 'Right' was only related to seating position and rank. Therefore, this example is the most difficult for Japanese learners to understand.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have discussed some criteria by which to judge a polyseme and a homonym. There are mainly two factors to distinguish between the two. The first is to base distinction on etymology. The second is to find the core meaning of the word, compare other meanings with it, and analyse the relatedness of the meanings. Therefore, as the above examples have shown, the criteria by which to classify a word is as follows:

*If each meaning of a word has the same origin or if the meanings are closely related semantically, the word might be a polyseme. If the origin is different or the meanings are quite unrelated, the word might be homonym. Therefore, semantics and etymology are the criteria used to determine whether a word is a polyseme or homonym.*

However, it is not an easy task to distinguish the meaning of a word like 'line'. Even though we investigate it by etymology and try to find out close relation between the different meanings, the distinction is not always clear-cut.

Another problematic example is 'right'. Whether 'right' means superior or not depends on the cultural background of languages. In addition to semantics and etymology, learners should understand the cultural background as well. Therefore, another criterion will be added as follows.

*In order to distinguish these two categories of polysemy and homonymy, we need to understand the cultural background of each word.*

The above mentioned three criteria will be helpful if learners are curious about learning the origin, core meaning, and cultural background of each word. These are among the most difficult part of vocabulary learning. But they are also among the most rewarding. If learners try looking at a word from these three points of view, they will improve their ability to master new vocabulary.

Although Lyons says, 'Perhaps we should rest content with the fact that the problem of distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy is, in principle, insoluble.' (Lyons. 1981a : 148), this should not discourage learners from trying, because the effort will yield rewards in the learning of English vocabulary.

#### Acknowledgements

I should like to express my thanks to Professor Palmer of Reading University for providing pieces of good advice on the linguistic part of this essay. I am also grateful to Mr. Boyle for proofreading, which gave me an idea of writing clear and precise English. All errors of omission and commission remain, of course, my own.

#### Main Bibliographies

- Brison, B. and Kinoshita, T. (trans.) 1997. *America Monogatari 1. 2./Made in America*. Kawadeshobo Shinsha.
- Inoue, K. 2000. *Moshi migi ya hidari ga nakattara/What would happen without right and left?* Taishukan.
- Lyons, J. 1981a. *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1981b. *Language, Meaning & Context*.

Fontana Paperback.

- Palmer, F. R. 1981. *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Skeat, W. W. 1989. *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Wedgwood, H. 1865. *English Etymology. Vol. II, III*. Trubner & Co.
- Weekley, E. 1921. *Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. John Murray.

#### Dictionaries

- Oxford English Dictionary OED
- Concise Oxford Dictionary CED
- 国語大辞典 (Dictionary of Japanese Language) 1993. 15 edition.
- The New Global English-Japanese Dictionary 1994 1 edition.