What Confuses Chinese Students in Translating English Polysemy Words?
—Homonymy, Prototype, Context and Suggestions

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［**Abstract**］Polysemy words have always been an obstacle for translation beginners. However, this is more than a lexical-level issue. The existence of polysemy has its historical reasons, in particular the development of semantics. One result of such development is homonymy, words sharing the same spelling and pronunciation but varying in meaning, even though students are not so sensible with the difference between the two terms. In spite of homonymy, several meanings of a polysemous word are usually interrelated or even developed through the application of metaphorical tools or in certain contexts, therefore, such meanings are not stable and the translation of such meanings in the target language counts on the ability of the translator. We may call the very center meaning of a polysemous word a "prototype" and other meanings its derivatives. Context has made the process of polysemous words even more complex, as sometimes the translator has to create a new understanding and meaning for the word in the target language. This paper will analyze through cases and comparisons and explain how polysemy has influenced the translation process from three aspects: homonymy, prototype, and context, so as to make some suggestions for improvements.

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1　Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary has given the word "polysemy" an explanation as: the fact of having several meanings; the possession of multiple meanings, senses or connotations. Usually, polysemy words pose, if any, sometimes only small difficulties for a native language speaker in meaning processing. However, polysemy has become a problem for Chinese students in translating. One of the major issues here is the failure in activating the schemata for a polysemy word's meaning. Usually, polysemous meanings exist through the application of metaphorical tools. Other factors, such as habits of language usage, cultural difference, rules and principles for translation will make translating polysemy words even harder. It's a fact that for undergraduate students, the initial stage of learning translation from English to Chinese is still largely concerned with lexical-level meanings, and due to improper translating habits and immature translating concepts, word-for-word translation leads them to the wrong track of dealing with words' meanings. In addition, the failure in treating polysemy words could also be ascribed to homonymy. As noted by Clarke and Nerlich (1997) that the study of polysemy is of fundamental importance for any semantic study of language. With that in mind, this paper is devoted to explaining the possible reasons for failures in translating polysemy and tries to provide some suggestions for improvements of learning of translation polysemy.

2　How does polysemy happen?

As pointed out by Clarke and Nerlich(2003), the concept of polysemy was brought in by Michel Bréal with the French term "polysémie", who also introduced the word "semantics". And Pustejovsky commented that though scholars of Bréal's age are rational about the existence of polysemy and have accounted for it by citing examples like "book", "door" and so on, they haven't developed a formalism to explain it. The study of polysemy rests on the integration of former research foci such as etymology, lexicology, historical semantics and modern interests in psychology, cognitive semantics and so on. Etymologically speaking, when a word is firstly created, there is only one meaning assigned to it and we call it the etymological and first meaning of the word. But researchers gradually

shift their concerns from mere static and uncontextualized meanings to the examination of how words' meaning develop in real use, or in other words, they look at the resourceful "readings" of a word（Clarke and Nerlich, 2003）. Moreover, Pott（1974）referred to the "subjective" and "objective" meaning of a word. According to him, subjective meaning is the root feature of a word that distinguishes it from other signs of a language system, whereas objective meaning should be referential meanings through referring to an ambient object. Then we can gain some confidence to conclude that polysemy partially results from the subsistent and continuous demands of use.

3　Polysemy and homonymy

It's unavoidable to spare a part of this paper and touch on the difference and relation between polysemy and homogeny. Rainer distinguished polysemy and homonymy in lexicology and semantics. Etymological standards categorize two words that are same in form as homonymy if they have different etyma and as polysemy if the two words share the same etymon, while according to semantic criterion, two words that have nothing in common in regard to their meanings are homonymous and are polysemous if the users can notice any semantic relationship. The following examples by Otto Panman（1982）can clearly distinguish between the two concepts：

（1a）The bank of the river was full of flowers.

（1b）He brought his money to the bank.

（2a）The city was near the mouth of the river.

（2b）Don't speak with your mouth full.

In the first sentence pair, we know that the two "banks" are the same spelling and pronunciation though their meanings are unrelated, with the first "bank" referring to the edges of a river or other watercourse and the second referring to the commercial institution where people can save or withdraw their money. The two "mouth" in the second sentence pair could be considered the different use of the same word. The first semantic phenomenon could be summarized as homonymy and the second as polysemy. Beretta et al.（2005）believed that historical relations or accidental coincidence of orthography and phonology could provide evidence for the emergence of homonymy, but what is significant is how we view the relation between polysemy and homonymy and such understanding may have some influence on how we perceive a word. Bréal has subsumed homonymy under polysemy, whereas others have separated them from one and the other. The distinguishment between them could be reflected by lexical entries of dictionaries. For instance, if we consult the Oxford English Dictionary online for the word "bank", we'll get the results as follows（see Figure 1）：
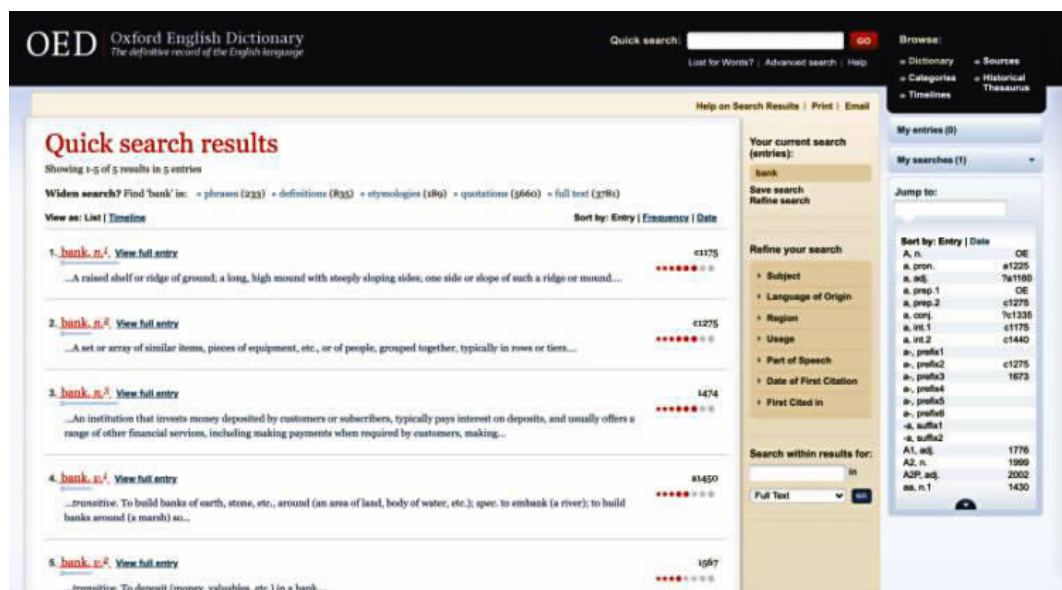

Figure 1. The search results of "bank" in Oxford English Dictionary online

（Source：Oxford English Dictionary online）

As the figure shows, there are five entries for the word "bank" in the dictionary. Each of the entries signifies

both one part of speech for "bank" and the specific meaning of it. If we choose the first entry, we'll get 12 different explanations, but the 12 explanations share one core sense: a mound or slope, and related senses. This is a vivid illustration of how lexicology helps native and non-native English users to construct the meaning structure of a word. However, the existence of homonymy brings difficulties for doing translations. Generally speaking, the word with two unrelated or non-overlapping meanings somehow could be regarded as two names sharing the same form. However, if the translator hasn't been exposed to one of the meanings of the homonymous word, the translation fails when that meaning is the case in the source text.

Students in China start learning English from basic conversational expressions like "Hello", "How are you", "What's your name" and so on. Next, they try to recite words. Usually, the last pages of an English textbook are words lists, where new words and expressions and their corresponding meanings in Chinese are given. Didactic English teaching methods only require the teachers to explain the Chinese meaning of a certain word from the word list or by referring to an English-Chinese dictionary. Such learning and teaching leave the students with overt ignorance of the polysemy phenomenon. The result is that doing translations means searching for the corresponding meaning of the English word in mind, and students usually go to the one that intuitively comes first. Even though students prefer to memorize the meaning they first encounter or the first explanation of a word in the dictionary or the textbook, the frequency for the multiple meanings of a word to occur may also explain why translators sometimes fail to understand. Crossley et al. (2010) did research on the development of polysemy and frequency among English L2 speakers. They noted that the frequency of words may affect how rapidly the words are recognized, which means that an English L2 learner can still fail in remembering one polysemous entry of a word if that entry has a low frequency of use. The trimester study revealed that student participants in the study start to generate more polysemous and frequent words in the first semester, but not until the second and third semesters will they begin to extend the core meaning to more lexical entries. Therefore, the duration of English learning may also affect the lexical acquisition of polysemy and may further affect the efficiency of translating.

4 Polysemy and the effectiveness of prototype

Admit it or not, a prototype helps translators to complete a translation task through the operation of their cognitive system. Research on prototype theory yielded fruitful results, and basically, it deals with the categorization of concepts. As bilingual, translators interact with Chinese and English, they come to understand the content through memorizing, analyzing the syntactical structure and context, and matching the words with an appropriate concept so as to form a correct interpretation in their minds. The concept here refers to the mental representation that the category/ categories to which the meaning belongs can trigger, or a kind of mental glue that may create cohesion among pieces of knowledge that could help translators to categorize and understand things (Cohen & Murphy, 1984). In spite of the complicated explanation, we can at least catch the essence of prototype theory somehow: it helps people to group things together and prompts a quick grasp of ideas from numerous words.

Lakoff (1988) suggested that in semantics, words' meanings can be categorized, the difference in meaning signifies different categorization methods, which is followed by Cao (2010), who believed that among all meaning items of a word, there's one coded as the central meaning, with others derived from cognitive processes, such as metaphor and metonymy. Those derivations could be the superordinate and subordinate of the core, while the core is the most often used meaning acquiring first and the easiest to recall (Lewandowska, 2010). Moreover, polysemy happens sometimes within one single category and sometimes within different categories (Lewandowska, 2010) and Crossley et al. (2010) proposed the "law of least efforts", which explains why people would like to extend word senses rather than creating new ones. As a result, English learners are frequently exposed to polysemy that varies in property (for example, from a noun to a verb) though they feel little stress in interpreting the meaning, and the significance for the above aspect of the prototype theory lies in that the translator may deduce a possible explanation for a word which doesn't show up with its central meaning. For instance:

(3a) People are *flooding* into the city.

The core meaning for "flood" is "the flowing in of the tide" (Oxford English Dictionary online), which encourages the imagination of "a great body of water rushing at a high speed". Even though we are more familiar

with the meaning of its noun form, we may still catch the connotation of its verb form and translate it as below：

（3a'）大批　　　　　人　　　正　　　　涌入　　　　　城中。

Dàpī　　　　rén　　zhèng　　yǒngrù　　　chéngzhōng.

Large bulks　　people　　being　　flowing into　　city center.

Large numbers of people are flowing into the city.

Similar examples could be found among the overlapped polysemous meanings for "mount", "award", "praise", "chest" and so on between their noun forms and verb forms.

In a sense, we are considering polysemy in the prototype theory from a top-down perspective, which means for a polysemous word, there exists a core sense, while other meanings are the subordinates within it since they share properties in common, so the core meaning could be the superordinate while others the subordinate. However, for translators, one problem that may hinder their job is the inclusiveness, or abstractness of English polysemy. One of the confusing examples is the word "available". We can get the following explanations from the dictionary (see Table 1)：

Table 1. The explanation for "available" in Oxford English Dictionary online

（Source：Oxford English Dictionary online）

Available	
I. That may avail. archaic.	II. That may be "availed of".
1. a.　Capable of producing a desired result; of avail, effectual, efficacious. b.　in Law. Valid. 2.　Of advantage; serviceable, beneficial, profitable (to, unto).	a.　Capable of being employed with advantage or turned to account; hence, capable of being made use of, at one's disposal, within one's reach. b.　U. S. Politics. That the party can avail itself of, for special reasons apart from statesmanship, as a candidate for election.

According to the table, as a polysemy word, the core sense for "available" is "to avail". However, the understanding of "available" relies more on the sentence or the context where it is used, and in Chinese, one usually can't find a corresponding adjective to translate this word as a whole, which means, hardly is there a Chinese phrase or character that can represent the so-called "to avail". For instance (refer to Table 2 for translations)：

（4a）Mr. Green, are you *available* this afternoon?

（4b）This meeting room is not *available* right now.

We can translate the two sentences as follows (see Table 2)：

Table 2. Translations for example sentences in （4a）and （4b）

1. Mr. Green, are you available this afternoon?								
Translation：格林先生,请问您今天下午有空吗?								
格林	先生,	请问	您	今天	下午	有	空	吗?
Gélín	xiānshēng,	qǐngwèn	nín	jīntiān	xiàwǔ	yǒu	kòng	ma?
Green	Mr. ,	excuse me	you	today	afternoon	have	time?	
2. This meeting room is not available right now.								
Translation：这间会议室当前无法使用。								
这	间	会议室	当前	无法	使用。			
Zhè	jiān	huìyìshì	dāngqián	wúfǎ	shǐyòng.			
This	a	meeting room	right now	can't	use.			

The literal explanations in English for the Chinese translation of the sentences are provided. As we can note,

none of the two "available" in the sentences are translated into Chinese adjectives. Instead, one translation adopts a "verb+ noun" form（"有空（yǒu kòng）"—"has/have time"）and the other adopts a verb（"使用（shǐ yòng）"—"to use"）.

Then, another example worth mentioning is the translation of the adjective "good". In Chinese, there's the adjective "好（hǎo）" which literally means "good" and in semantics, the Chinese "好（hǎo）" is as useful as "good" since it is a general meaning for "good" that can be applied to modify anything or anyone with desirable quality. People who come across "good" will translate it into "好（hǎo）" with little hesitation, but this kind of instinct can fail as well. If "good" is applied for the description of a person, it is explained as "having the qualities, characteristics or skills needed to perform the specific role or pursue a specific occupation appropriately or to a high standard"（Oxford English Dictionary online）. Frankly, such interpretation doesn't provide users with any concrete imagination. For instance：

（5a）He is a good Christian.

In this example, few translators will translate the sentence as below：

他	是	一个	好	基督徒。
Tā	shì	yīgè	hǎo	jīdūtú.
He	is	a	good	Christian.

Although this Chinese translation is seemingly a perfect match with the English sentence, Chinese people seldom used "好（hǎo）" to describe a Christian for the matter of collocation, instead, "虔诚的（qián chéng de）", which literally means "being loyal" is a more acceptable one. However, this well-accepted collocation may push translators into a "stereotype trap". Whenever people say, "he is a good Christian", "being loyal to God" is usually among the first interpretations for "good", and then it's followed by other fine qualities as an ordinary person. However, it's important not to ignore that people may prioritize their interpretations differently. Sometimes, contexts may offer hints for distinguishing the more decided aspect of sense for words being used, which requires students in translation to pay more attention to such feature of words.

5　Polysemy and context

Brugman and Lakoff have opposed to justifying that each and every polysemous word has a so-believed core sense, and they tried to explain such linguistic phenomenon through applying metaphorical sense structures in cognitive linguistics（Kishner and Gibbs, 1996）, while contextualization should provide the conditions for senses to work. In their empirical study, Kishner and Gibbs have considered two factors for properly recognizing the meaning of the word "just". Their three-stage study started with attesting six types of senses from 871 sentences where "just" was used. In the second and third stages, they compared the effectiveness of identifying the corresponding senses of "just" by referring to its interactions with words and by referring to the context. The two researchers have obtained positive results under both two conditions while they also proved true that students are more able to get the right understanding with contexts.

Based on the sense categories for "just" in this paper, a comparison is conducted below（see Table 3）to figure out whether or not the senses for "just" in examples could find a corresponding Chinese translation and whether it is commonplace or differences among those translations.

Table 3. Examples for "just" with different senses and translations

Sense categories	Example	Translation of "just" in Chinese
Depreciatory	His soil was "nothing special", *just* prairie land, but he had harrowed in compost until it was loose, spongy and brown black.	只是……而已 Zhǐshì…éryǐ Simply…nothing more

Restrictive	Of course, if you want to throw all caution to the winds and rent an Imperial or Cadillac limousine *just* for you and your bride, you'll have a memorable tour, but it won't be cheap,...	只…… Zhǐ Only
Comparative	Food may act as a sedative, giving temporary emotional solace, *just* as, for some people, alcohol does.	正如…… Zhèngrú Like
Specificatory	There's a spot *just* below your eye.	刚好…… Gānghǎo Just right
Exact	That's *just* what the doctor ordered.	就是…… Jiùshì This is it...
Emphatic	Try that late winter pickup when you are so tired of cold and snow that you feel you *just* can't take another day of it.	真的 Zhēnde Really...

The table above has tried to provide corresponding Chinese translations for the specific senses of "just". It's noticeable that even though Kishner and Gibbs have formulated the six sense categories for "just" from 871 English sentences, translations for "just" will be easier if a sentence with a context is given in advance than simply rely on the sense explanations. At the same time, the sentence examples given above are only a part of the story. Let's compare two different contexts for the sentence in the "Specificatory" and their translations：

Context 1：A and B are twin sisters, and their older brother can easily separate A from B, and the brother tells A that "there is a spot just below your eye".

Context 2：A and B are drawing pictures with markers, and suddenly B starts laughing and tells A that "there is a spot just below your eye".

In the first context, the Chinese translation "刚好"（gāng hǎo, just right...）for "just" could be used to signify the special character for distinguishing the twins. However, in the second context, the "just" would be removed from the translation and only "there is a spot below your eye" remains. Such difference in translation could be caused by the difference in their topics and focus（Lambrecht, 1996）between the two English sentences. If we are allowed to make a dialogue for the two contexts, they probably may turn out to be：

Context 1：

A：What feature enables you to distinguish me from B?

B：There's a spot just below your eye.

Context 2：

A：Why are you laughing?

B：There's a spot just below your eye.

Rather than simply interpreting the topic as something about the "theme", the topic should be in terms of pragmatic concepts of aboutness, and the focus of a sentence should be construed through the delivery of new information. In these two contexts, we may identify that the first interrogation is about "what features" whereas the second one is about "why". Then, the focus of the first "there's a spot just below your eye" is "what & where" whereas the focus for the second should be "what"（some general factual information）. The difference of focus on "what & where" and "what" respectively requires translators to be careful with their dictions in translation, since they mustn't remove anything necessary for the delivery of meaning in the target language, and the like, they should not add anything unnecessary that may divert readers' attention to the core message. In the second context, if the translator renders the translation as "你眼睛下面刚好有个点", readers' focus will very likely be dragged from the fact to the "feeling of coincidence" brought by the "刚好"（gāng hǎo, "just" for Specificatory）.

The above analysis could help translators to justify their removal of the "just" in the second context, while they should not ignore the focus on "where" in the first context and translate it accordingly in Chinese.

In this session, the significance of context in completing successful translation task is justified especially for polysemous adverbs like "just". At the same time, the empirical study done by Kishner and Gibbs also encourages translators to take advantage of the polysemous word and its interaction with other words, and such convenience is more often observed among adverbs and verbs（we can think about the translation of adverb "right" and verb "run" in "run to" and "run for"）.

6　Summary and suggestions for improvements

In this paper, polysemy has been discussed from three perspectives：homonymy, prototype theory and context, and possible obstacles and usefulness of them for hindering or facilitating translation work are also analyzed. Homonymy, such as "bachelor", "bank" and "right", would anticipate misinterpretation by translators if the homonymous meaning is seldom exposed to them, thus forming an "insufficient acquisition of vocabulary" difficulty for translators. The prototype theory for understanding polysemy enables translators to avail themselves of the "core meaning" of a polysemy within its prototype structure and they can deduce the possible interpretation of it in the source text where the polysemous sense should have been derived through metaphor, metonymy and other rhetorical devices. Cruse（2014）has once concluded that the meaning of a word if excluded from a certain context, will not exist and decontextualization of meaning will lead to sense incompleteness, so it's sure that the activation of the rhetorical meaning of a polysemy should be within a context, therefore, polysemy and context are discussed in the third part through introducing the translation of adverb "just" which is based on empirical research done by Kishner and Gibbs（1996）. The analysis in the third session has further enhanced the emphasis on context while it also advises translators not to ignore the efficiency of words interactions, or in other words, word collocations.

Increasing in vocabulary is a key to improving the efficiency of second language acquisition, and it's even held true for translators who should be heavy learners and users of English. Wang et al.（2021）concluded that learning patterns, context, and frequency of exposure to new vocabulary may affect the acquisition of vocabulary. One fact for students learning translation in China is that they have been constrained from getting access to abundant entries to English materials before college. Students have devoted most of their time reciting words with corresponding Chinese meanings provided in the vocabulary lists in their textbooks or in auxiliary vocabulary books, where there are either no examples or very few examples for reference. Under such conditions, it's necessary for students to make use of more systematic and desirable tools. Paper dictionaries are usually good choices, though they generally have given way to electronic dictionaries and online dictionaries for portability concern. The most popular dictionary Apps in China now include "Youdao Dict" and "Power Word", with both two of them providing users with Chinese translations of words meanings and corresponding examples in English. However, students switching their habit from referring only to the first corresponding Chinese translation of an English word to paying attention to the English – to – English explanations of every entry of a word should be a precondition for improvements.

As what is mentioned above, translators are heavy users and learners of English, but even so, sometimes they can still find it hard to translate an English polysemy word. One different aspect between English and Chinese polysemy is that Chinese polysemy features polysemous morphemes（Zhang, 2008）（which are usually one individual Chinese character）that only make senses when they are made into a phrase by adding one more character before or after it, whereas merely one English word may have several inter-related meanings, and one English word may call up several Chinese characters to translate, and if one polysemous sense of a word is triggered by rhetorical tools, for instance："The semester will end up at the end of November, and our papers are mounting up", it is necessary to decompose the meaning and then search for a more substantial way to translate it as "堆积如山"（duī jī rú shān, which literally means "be accumulated into something like a mountain"）. If we simply divide translation into three steps：read, understand, and translate, then cognitively speaking, the translator will sometimes consume more mental energy during producing the target language in Chinese than just understanding the source text in English（the example of "available"）. Johnson and Philip pointed out that "the ability to

paraphrase" should be useful for catching meanings, which would advise both teachers and students to try as hard as possible to de-verbalize English polysemy words in different ways through English and Chinese so as to form as many inspiring mental representations as possible, and in this process students could obtain the inspiration within a shorter period of time to make sense of the polysemous word in the source language (English) and in the target language (Chinese).

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