

Functional Shift in Relation to Lexical Semantics

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Abstract

There are three concepts in the English language that tend to confuse some English language users: Functional shift, homonymy and polysemy. Functional Shift can fall under morphological and/or syntactic domain depending on the theoretical approach one adopts. It can also fit into semantics when meaning of words is considered in addition to forms and functions; hence, its relation to semantics. Homonymy and polysemy fall under the lexical semantics which tend to characterize the meaning of a word not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. However, homonymy and polysemy sometimes, pose some difficulties to English language users when compared to functional shift. This paper sets out to critically evaluate these processes with the intention to clear all manner of ambiguities surrounding the distinction of functional shift from homonymy and polysemy by providing a clear cut distinguishing features among these three concepts and present each on an atmosphere devoid of complexities.

Introduction

Functional shift, homonymy and polysemy have to do with the lexicon of the English language. According to Finegan, ‘words are sometimes called lexical items, or lexemes (the -eme ending as in phoneme and morpheme)’ [195]. It is obvious that lexical semantics is the branch of semantics that deals with word meaning; hence, Yule’s assertions:

Not only can words be treated as ‘containers’ or as fulfilling ‘roles’, they can also have ‘relationships’. In everyday talk, we frequently give the meanings of words in terms of their relationships. If you were asked to give the meaning of the word conceal, for example, you might simply reply “it’s the same as hide”, or give the meaning of shallow as “the opposite of deep”, or the meaning of daffodil as it’s a kind of flower”. In doing so, you are characterizing the meaning of a word not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words (118).

Lexical semantics explores the relationships among words, studies how the lexicon is organised and how the meanings of lexical items are interrelated. Lexical semantics’ principal goal is to build a model for the structure of the lexicon by categorizing the types of relationships between words. Homonymy and polysemy among others fall under lexical semantics. Functional shift in its capacity examines the changeless form of word while belonging to another word class and the functions of these words in relation to context. Functional shift, homonymy and polysemy share some relationships. These three concepts consider forms and meaning of words. Although in semantics, the technical approach to meaning is objective and general. It attempts to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what a speaker might want the words to mean on a particular occasion, functional shift, homonymy and polysemy do the same because they focus on linguistic meaning.

Functional shift as morphological and syntactic processes ensures models for words, hence, the forms or structures of word and word class distinction. It also categorizes the type of relationships between words in terms of the words which are roots/bases and the words that are derivatives (i.e. providing directionality to functional shift pairs). Functional shift also incorporates both lexical and syntactic meanings which are linguistic meanings. Interestingly, lexical semantics also focuses on linguistic meaning (Finegan, 196).

We shall now examine the three concepts – functional shift, homonymy and polysemy individually.

What is functional shift?

Crystal defines functional shift as “a term used in the study of word-formation to refer to the derivational process whereby an item comes to belong to a new word-class without the addition of an affix” (114). According to Finegan, the term functional shift is viewed as when a word belonging to one category is converted to another category without any changes to the **form** of the word (57). Here, one’s attention is drawn to the changeless form of the word so converted. As it is, there are many approaches to functional shift in English like semantic/cognitive approach, syntactic approach, morphological approach, pragmatic approach etc. Based on these approaches, functional shift has gained different terms from scholars, such as ‘**Conversion**’ (the term coined by Sweet in 1891), it is also called **functional shift** by scholars like Cannon, Yule, Bauer, Crystal among others; it is called **Zero-Derivation** by Marchand, Adams, Jespersen etc; **Lexical Relisting** by Lieber; **Syntagmatic Derivation** by Kimenyi and **Category underspecification** by Farrel. We have other terms like **Category change**, **Null derivation** etc.

Functional shift as a process is highly productive and offers a maximal flexibility to English language users. Yule notes that the process is particularly productive in modern English with new uses occurring frequently (67). So, the **hallmarks of functional shift** are **changeless form, new function, new word class, new meaning** among others. In functional shift, a word which is converted from a base/root is expected to share at least one of the ranges of meanings from the base/root it is converted from. This shows why functional shift pairs share a semantic relation or at most, are semantically dependent on the base/root they are converted from. Functional shift cases could be exemplified using the following words **round, down, back, second, reverse, past**:

- a) We went **round** Lagos in a taxi. (Preposition)
- b) She **rounded** off the discussion. (Verb)
- c) I tried to bring him **round**. (Adverb)
- d) Caroline has a **round** face like a moon. (Adjective)
- e) The nurse was on her round to look after the patients. (Noun)
(Murthy 8)

Similarly, Eyisi made her marks in the use of the word ‘**round**’ as:

- a) He ate six whole **rounds** of bread and butter. (Noun)
 - b) She **rounded** the corner at top speed. (Verb)
 - c) Peter has a **round** mirror in his room. (Adjective)
 - d) Drake sailed **round** the world and came back to England. (Preposition).
 - e) Turn your chair **round** and face me. (Adverb)
- (19)

Apart from Murthy and Eyisi's contributions, the above examples can be rewritten in such a way that the word **round** will function without inflections on the form. Consider the following:

- a) He ate a **round** of fruit salad. (Noun)
- b) We are to **round** the corner at top speed. (Verb)
- c) I have a **round** table in the dinning. (Adjective)
- d) He danced **round** the tree for fun. (Preposition)
- e) Turn the table **round** to face your audience. (Adverb)

2. Examples using the word 'down':

- a) She ran **down** the road. (Preposition)
- b) She fell **down**. (Adverb)
- c) She is feeling very **down** today. (Adjective)
- d) My doona is filled with **down**. (noun)
- e) Watch him **down** this schooner of beer. (Verb)
(Collins and Hollo 32)

Similarly, Yadugiri uses the word '**down**' thus:

- a) Prices will come **down**. (Adverb)
- b) We went **down** the road. (Preposition)
- c) My computer is **down**. (Adjective)
- d) The storm has **downed** several trees in the region. (Verb)
- e) There was a slight **down** on her arms. (Noun)
(210-211)

To suit the uses of **down** in maintaining same form devoid of inflection, the verb use of the word-**down** as used by Yadugiri can be rewritten as:

- We are to **down** our coffees and leave immediately. (Verb)

3. Examples using the word 'back':

- a) She will come **back** tomorrow. (adverb)
- b) We forgot to lock the **back** door. (adjective)
- c) All her friends **backed** her when she decided to contest the election. (verb)
- d) Please sign on the **back** of the cheque. (noun)
(Yadugiri 211)

4. Examples using the word 'second':

- a) She came **second** in the race. (Adverb)
- b) She is **second** in the list. (Adjective)
- c) I **seconded** Ravi's proposal. (Verb)
- d) Change from the first to the **second** . (Noun)
(Yadugiri 211)

5. Examples using the word 'reverse':

- a) She went in the **reverse** direction. (adjective)
- b) She **reversed** into the garage. (verb)
- c) The quality hasn't improved, quite the **reverse**. (noun)
(Yadugiri 211)

6. Examples using the word ‘past’:

- a) A car drove **past** the door. (preposition)
- b) A car drove **past** . (prepositional adverb)
(Quirk and Greenbaum 145)

Other examples include:

Noun to Verb Conversion

1. book(N) → book(v)
2. age(N) → age(v)
3. list(N) → list(v)
4. hand(N) → hand(v)
5. cement(N) → cement(v)
6. sound(N) → sound(v)

Verb to Noun Conversion

1. ally(v) → ally(N)
2. bow(v) → bow(N)
3. attack(v) → attack(N)
4. blow(v) → blow(N)
5. groan(v) → groan(N)
6. challenge(v) → challenge(N)

Adjective to Verb Conversion

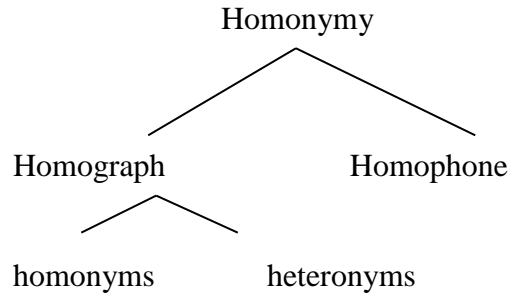
1. blind(A) → blind(v)
2. faint(A) → faint(v)
3. open(A) → open(v)
4. slim(A) → slim(v)
5. secure(A) → secure(v)
6. wet(A) → wet(v)

What is Homonymy?

Yule sees homonymy as the term used when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings. Examples of homonyms are the pairs **bank** (of a river) – **bank** (financial institution), **bat** (flying creature) – **bat** (used in sports), **race** (contest of speed) - **race** (ethnic group), **pupil** (at school) - **pupil** (in the eye) and **mole** (on skin) - **mole** (small animal) (121). Yule makes it clear that one should not get into the temptation of thinking that homonyms must be related in meaning because they are not, but are words which have quite separate meanings, but which have accidentally come to have exactly the same form.

Umera-Okeke defines homonymy as words with accidentally similar form, but unrelated meanings [e.g. can (be able)/can (put something in a container) [54]. She goes further to assert that homonymy can be defined as a word with different origin and meaning but the same oral or written form as one or more other words (54). Crystal defines homonymy as “a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but differ in meaning” (231).

Interestingly, Finegan, Yule, Crystal, Umera-Okeke among others noted that homonymy is a cover term for both homographs and homophones. This can be diagrammatically represented as:



Homograph

According to Finegan, homographs have the same spelling but different meanings (and pronunciations) (203). So, homographs are words that are spelled the same as another word, usually having a different etymology. From Finegan's definition, it is observed that homographs can sometimes, have different pronunciation and some other times, the same pronunciation.

Homographs with the same spelling and the same pronunciation:

1. **bear** (an animal) : **bear** (to support)
2. **pen** (a writing instrument) : **pen** (an enclosure)
3. **bank** (of a river) - **bank** (financial institution)
4. **bat** (flying creature) - **bat** (used in sports)
5. **race** (contest of speed) - **race** (ethnic group),
6. **pupil** (at school) - **pupil** (in the eye)
7. **mole** (on skin) - **mole** (small animal)
8. **can** (be able) - **can** (put something in a container) - **can** (a container itself)
9. **bow** (of arrow) - **bow** (of a ship)
10. **row** (to propel a boat) - **row** (a line) - **row** (a brawl)
11. **sound** (in good condition, free from mistake) - **sound** (a particular auditory impression)

Homographs with the same spelling and different pronunciation:

Verb		Noun
con'vert	→	'convert
re'cord	→	'record
trans'fer	→	'transfer

It is important to note that the above examples of homographs with the same spelling and different pronunciation are technically called heteronyms.

Homophones

According to Finegan, homophones have the same pronunciation but different senses: **sea** and **see**, **so** and **sew**, **two** and **too**, **plain** and **plane**, **flower** and **flour**, **boar** and **bore**, **bear** and **bare**, **or eye**, **I**, and **aye** (203). Homophones are essentially words that sound or pronounced the same as another word but differ in spelling or meaning or origin. Umera – Okeke gives instances of homophone pairs; few examples include:

alter/altar	flare/flair
air/heir	flee/flea
aloud/allowed	fair/fare
beer/bier	formerly/formally
boarder/border	feet/feat

break/brake	flour/flower
bait/bate	forth/fourth
blue/blew	four/fore
bow/bough	fowl/foul
birth/berth	floor/flaw

(55)

What is polysemy?

According to Yule, polysemy is viewed as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings which are all related by extension. Examples are the word **head**, used to refer to the object on top of your body, on top of a glass of beer, on top of a company or department; or **foot** (of person, of bed, of mountain), or **run** (person does, water does, colours do) (121). Similarly, Crystal defines polysemy as a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings (374). To simplify the definition of polysemy, Umera-Okeke presents polysemy as one form; multiple meanings (53). She goes further to explain that some metaphors are polysemy as in saying:

Eye of a needle
Ear of a corn
Leg of a chair
Hands and face of a clock (53).

These according to her, have other meanings apart from their literal meanings. From all these views, it is clear that polysemous pairs enjoy semantic relation/dependency just like the functional shift pairs.

What is the relationship among functional shift, homonymy and polysemy?

Although traditionally, functional shift falls under morphology and/or syntax, homonymy and polysemy fall under semantics - lexical sense relations. It must be noted that morphology has to do with the study of the structure of words – the study of the rules governing the formation of words in a language (Tomori, 21). Syal and Jindal in defining morphology assert that, “Morphology studies the patterns of formation of words by combination of sounds into minimal distinctive units of meaning called morphemes” (20). Yule sees the term morphology as the study of forms (75). So, whenever morphology is mentioned, the idea that readily comes to mind is word formation. Although this is true with morphology, the issue of meaning is inconspicuously embedded in morphology. When we describe morpheme as a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function (Yule, 75), we simply refer to the “semantics” of morphology (though implicitly shown).

In grammar, syntax is defined as a traditional term for the study of rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences in a language (Crystal, 471). Borrowing from the words of Yule, he asserts: “If we concentrate on the structure and ordering of components within a sentence, we are studying what is technically known as the syntax of a language” (100). Similarly, Finegan sees syntax as, “The part of grammar that governs the organisation of words in phrases and sentences” (152). To him, the study of syntax addresses the structure of sentences and their structural and functional relationships to one another. We note that it is the combination

of words that forms a sentence and it is the particular function a word performs in a sentence that determines its meaning and the part of speech/word class it will belong to.

In functional shift as earlier stated, its hallmarks are **changeless form, new function, new word class, new meaning** among others. So, morphology and syntax have some relationships with semantics and particularly, the lexical sense relations. The three notions – functional shift, homonymy and polysemy all deal with the forms of word. They all deal with meanings (functional shift, implicitly; homonymy and polysemy, explicitly). Functional shift links morphology to syntax while dealing with the structure or forms of words and the division of words into parts of speech. This division therefore, forms the basis for further analysis in the English language as we can see later.

How then can functional shift be differentiated from homonymy and polysemy?

For us to differentiate functional shift from homonymy and polysemy, these factors must be considered: Major divisions, Base form pairs, Word class, Spelling, Pronunciation, Meaning, Etymology and Directionality. There may be other analytical tools that are useful for this analysis but for this study, the above analytical tools are adopted.

Functional shift and Homonymy

Functional shift is differentiated from homonymy in the following ways:

1. Functional shift falls under the major division of morphology and/or syntax while homonymy falls under semantics (lexical sense relations).
2. Functional shift has the same base form for the root and the derivative while homonymy may have the same or different base form pairs.
3. Functional shift has different word class for its base and derivative while homonymy may have the same or different word class/parts of speech.
4. Functional shift has the same spelling for its base and derivative while homonymy may have the same or different spellings for its pair.
5. Functional shift has the same pronunciation for its base and derivative while homonymy may have the same or different pronunciation for its pair.
6. Functional shift has different meaning (which is related) for its base and derivative while homonymy has different and unrelated meaning for its pair.
7. Functional shift has the same etymology for its base and derivative while homonymy has different etymology for its pair.
8. Directionality is applicable to functional shift while directionality is not applicable to homonymy.

It is obvious from these analyses that functional shift differ from homonymy in almost everything. The prominent ones being that homonymy have different etymology, different and unrelated meanings and as such, directionality is not applicable. The problem which may arise is one's ability to differentiate functional shift from homonymy in the areas where they share similar features; for example, where homonymy has the same base form pairs, word class, spelling and pronunciation. If one finds it difficult to differentiate functional shift from homonymy, one has to consider these questions: **Do the words in question share the same etymology? Do they share different but related meanings?** Once the answers to these questions are in negation, you will know that directionality will not be applicable and so, a good indication that you are dealing with homonym.

Functional shift and polysemy

Functional shift and polysemy are closely related but still, different from each other. Using the analytical tools presented above, the following are the status of functional shift and polysemy:

1. Functional shift falls under the major division of morphology and/or syntax while homonymy falls under semantics (lexical sense relations).
2. Functional shift has the same base form for the root and the derivative while polysemous pairs also have the same base form.
3. Functional shift has different word class/parts of speech for its base and derivative while polysemous pairs have the same word class/parts of speech.
4. Functional shift has the same spelling for its base and derivative and polysemous pairs have the same spelling also.
5. Functional shift has the same pronunciation for its base and derivative, same applies to polysemous pairs; they have the same pronunciation.
6. Functional shift has different meanings (which are related) for its base and derivative while polysemy also has different but related meanings for its pairs.
7. Functional shift the same etymology for its base and derivative while polysemy also has the same etymology for its pairs.
8. Since functional shift pairs have the same etymology and different, but related meaning, directionality is applicable to the process. In the same way, directionality is applicable to polysemy because it shares the same etymology and different, but related meaning with its pairs.

From the foregoing, functional shift differs from polysemy in its basic division in grammar and the word class/parts of speech of its pairs. In practical situation, the only indication to differentiate functional shift from polysemy is that the functional shift pairs share different word classes/parts of speech, while polysemous pairs share the same word class/parts of speech.

Polysemy is closely related to functional shift because they share almost everything in common; prominent among them being the sharing of semantic relations. In functional shift, the derivatives have to adopt at least one range of meanings from their roots/bases. The semantic dependence guarantees same etymology and by extension, the directionality of functional shift pairs becomes possible. In polysemy, its pairs share semantic relations also. Consequently, polysemous pairs have the same etymology and by extension, directionality becomes applicable to polysemy.

Additionally, Yule asserts that ‘the distinction between homonymy and polysemy is not always clear cut (121). Similarly, Finegan notes that a difficulty arises in distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy; ... [and] if there is clear distinction between homonymy and polysemy, it must involve several criteria ... (204). From our discussion so far, Finegan’s assertion seems most true. One criterion alone may not adequately show a clear cut distinction between homonymy and polysemy. However, the combination of two or three criteria may suffice. Here, using spelling as a criterion may be misleading because homonymy may have the same or different spellings. In situations where it has the same spelling, how can it be differentiated from polysemy? Apart from spelling criterion, one can use **meaning, etymology** and **directionality** to differentiate homonymy from polysemy.

The analyses done before now can be tabulated for visual perception, easy comprehension and/or critical analysis.

S/N	Technical Term	Major Division	Base Form Pairs	Word Class	Spelling	Pronunciation	Meaning	Etymology	Directionality
1	Functional shift	Morphology and/or syntax	wetA/wetV	not the same	same	same	not the same but related	same	applicable
2	Polysemy	semantics	footN/footN (of a person, of bed and of mountain)	same	same	same	not the same but related	same	applicable
3	Homonymy	semantics	raceN/raceN canN/canV altarN/alterV	same/different	same/different	same/different	different / unrelated	different	not applicable

Conclusion

The study done so far proves that these three concepts – functional shift, homonymy and polysemy are similar in some ways. To avoid confusing the concepts, one has to master their differences; for it goes without saying that there is still a distinction among the three notions no matter how closely they tend to look alike. One needs not be confused, but must know that when spelling criterion fails to distinguish homonymy from polysemy and functional shift, then, meaning, etymology and directionality can help in distinguishing them.

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