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## Polysemy in phraseology

Marija Omazić

Goran Schmidt

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University

### Abstract

The paper focuses on different aspects of polysemy in phraseology and examines the role of cognitive mechanisms in the process of creating polysemy. Special attention will be paid to conceptual metaphor and metonymy and their role in creating the polysemy of idiom constituents, as well as to different effects they may produce. We will further examine the degree of overlap between the existing traditional phraseological accounts of polysemy and newly emergent cognitive theories that seem to provide a more plausible platform for tackling the phenomenon of polysemy in phraseology.

**Key words:** polysemy, phraseology, metaphor, metonymy, conceptual integration.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents initial considerations on polysemy in phraseology as part of a larger research project on polysemy at J.J. Strossmayer University in Croatia. One of the project goals is to investigate the interrelationship between the polysemy of phraseological units and the polysemy of their constituent parts, as well as the influence of context and style on the rise of polysemy, i.e. polysemy will be viewed as a context-based network of semantic variants.

In the second section of this paper we will critically examine the existing selected accounts of polysemy, and especially highlight the cognitive views on polysemy. Section three is an attempt to bring together phraseology, polysemy and cognitive theories using several illustrative case studies.

### 2. POLYSEMY

One of the first linguistic treatments of polysemy was Michel Bréal's 19<sup>th</sup> century *Essai de sémantique* (qtd. in Blank 2003), in which he observes polysemy as a consequence of semantic change. New accounts of polysemy set off from a hypothesis that every single word is polysemous to a certain extent (Nerlich *et al.* 2003), each allowing different degrees of flexibility. This was established in Lee's (1990) study, showing that 98 out of the 100 most frequently used English words are polysemous. Polysemy is now viewed as a graded phenomenon, ranging from unrelated homonyms on the one end of the scale (contrastive polysemy *cf. date* – time, fruit, meeting) to polysemes of common origin on the other (complementary polysemy: *film* – tape, movie), with many inbetween cases. This is unlike the traditional view, in which homonymy is regarded a separate

phenomenon. Cruse (2000: 109), for example, argues for a separate treatment of words that are unrelated homonyms (like *bank* of a river and *bank* as a financial institution), whereas the term polysemy is reserved only for clearly semantically motivated relations between the various related readings of a word (*bank* vs. *blood bank*).

Furthermore, traditional lexical semantic views of polysemy assume that an abstract set of features is shared by all polysemes. Whereas this *abstractionist* view of polysemy, until recently predominant in both linguistics and psychology, postulates that all senses of a word share a common semantic feature, a general core sense, the *cognitive* view argues that the meaning of polysemes can be characterized by metaphor, metonymy and cognitive models as mechanisms of sense extension which motivate the relations between the polysemes. An even more recent development of the cognitive view of polysemy sets it within the framework of Conceptual Integration Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

### 2.1. Polysemy in cognitive theories

There has been much evidence that cognitive mechanisms, i.e. conceptual metaphor and metonymy<sup>1</sup> give rise to polysemy. Lexical semantics now acknowledges that the meanings of polysemous words may be explained using basic cognitive operations that underlie them (Gibbs 1994: 9-11), i.e. that polysemy may be motivated by our conceptual structuring of experience using the mechanisms of both metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff 1987, Lakoff / Turner 1989). Following Wittgenstein, in the light of his categorization and prototype theory, Lakoff (1987: 12) views polysemy as a radial category created by meaning chains made of various meanings of a polysemous word. According to Lakoff (*ibid.*), adjacent chain links are clearly related in meaning, whereas distant ones are not, but they all bear "family resemblances" to one another. Polysemy is based on correspondences within and across idealized cognitive models (ICMs), and it is more common for the meaning of the word in the source domain to be treated as more basic or central (prototypical). Often the non-central senses can-

1 The theory of conceptual metaphor and metonymy proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) is one of the central theories of cognitive linguistics, the one that managed to capture and account for the ubiquity of the two mechanisms in language use. The authors propose that the production and processing of figurative expressions, both novel and conventional, are mediated by metaphorical and metonymic correspondences that are part of the human conceptual system, i.e. that figurative expressions are interpreted as instantiations of deep conceptual metaphors or metonymies. Much subsequent work has challenged the postulates of the theory, testing its claimed universality across languages and cultures (Kövecses 2005, Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005). Despite the fact that some of the criticism is valid, it is beyond doubt that conceptual metaphor and metonymy are at the heart of a wide array of figurative phraseological data.

not be predicted from central senses (Lakoff 1987: 460), but this does not say that they are arbitrary.

Another development in cognitive theory views polysemy as a result of conceptual integration<sup>2</sup>, in the process of which words accumulate or develop new meanings through some sort of accommodation to new contexts in the process of on-line meaning construction.

At the core of their Conceptual Integration or Blending Theory is the view that linguistic expressions prompt for meaning rather than represent meaning. And "massive, though often unrecognized polysemy" is a byproduct of conceptual integration.

### 2.2. Mechanisms that give rise to polysemy

There are various views on polysemy triggering mechanisms, starting from Breal's semantic change, sense extension using cognitive mechanisms, to accommodation to new contexts in online meaning production in Blending Theory. In addition, Aitchison (2003: 263) argues that fading meaning, bleaching, or desemantization is one of the mechanisms that gives rise to polysemy, i.e. that it occurs as a result of layering, simultaneous different usages of the same word. Blank (2003: 270-271) provided an extensive typology of semantic change that gives rise to polysemy, including metaphor, co-hyponymous transfer, semantic extension, semantic restriction, lexical ellipsis, metonymy, popular etymology, auto-converse change, antiphrasis, auto-antonymy, and analogous semantic change.

### 2.3. Types of polysemy

According to Cruse (2000: 110-113) different senses of the same word may have either a linear or a non-linear relation. *Linear polysemy* is found when one polyseme is a specialization (hyponym or meronym) of the other, and it occurs as: a) autohyponymy – narrowing down to a sub-type (*dog* in general and *dog* vs. *bitch*); b) automeronymy – narrowing down to a sub-part (*window* with the fixing vs. *window* – glass pane); c) autosuperordination – (use of *man* to denote mankind including women); and d) autoholonymy (inclusion of the *hand* in *He*

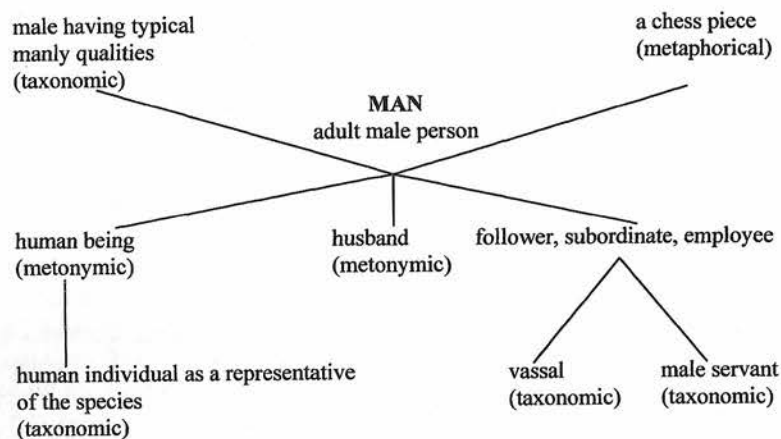
2 A more recent development of cognitive linguistics is the Conceptual Integration Theory, or Blending Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2002). It is currently one of the most promising theoretical frameworks, which provides insight into how we think, create, and understand the world around us, aiming to account for both non-linguistic and linguistic blends. A conceptual integration network is an array of mental spaces, which usually includes two or more input spaces structured by information from different cognitive domains, a generic space and a blended space. The structure of the generic space is common to all input spaces, and the structure of the blended space inherits elements from all inputs, developing a novel, emergent structure.

lost an arm in the accident). *Non-linear polysemy* occurs as either metaphor (a good position to, what's your position on, have an excellent position, to position yourself...) or metonymy (She has a large bank account vs. she married a large bank account). Both metaphor and metonymy may result in systematic polysemy, with many instantiations of UP IS MORE / DOWN IS LESS metaphor, or the same type of metonymy ('painter' for 'painting').

Blank (*ibid.*) used his extensive typology of semantic change provided above as a starting point for a detailed description of different types of polysemy. He identified the following types: metaphoric polysemy, co-hyponymous polysemy, taxonomic polysemy, metonymic polysemy, auto-converse polysemy, antiphrastic polysemy, and auto-antonymic polysemy (2003: 270-271).

In practice, these types of polysemy for the noun *man* are as follows:

Figure 1. Polysemy of the noun *man*



### 3. POLYSEMY IN PHRASEOLOGY

Palm (1995: 53) defines polysemy in phraseology as multiple meanings of units in the phraseo-lexicon, and states that, based on her case study of English and Swedish phraseological dictionaries, and contrary to expectations, polysemy in phraseology is a widespread and well developed phenomenon. Following Černyševa (1975, 228f, *qtd.* in Fleischer 1982: 71), both Palm and Fleischer (1982) do not consider the literal and the idiomatic meaning of an expression to be polysemes, which is contrary to the view that polysemes are semantically related, and that metaphorical extension gives rise to polysemy. In their view, the semantic shift from the literal to the idiomatic meaning (or idiomatization) is not polysemy, whereas the semantic changes diverging from the idiomatic meaning

are cases of polysemy. Furthermore, all three authors speak of metaphorization chains that give rise to polysemy, paying no heed to other polysemy-triggering mechanisms.

In our view, however, due to the existence of clear semantic links between the literal and idiomatic readings of an expression, both readings should be considered cases of polysemy. These etymological links need not be apparent to an average speaker of a language, but their existence is undeniable. Homonymy, or the semantically unmotivated readings of one and the same expression, is rare in phraseology, because of the existence of etymological links between the literal readings and idiomatic meanings of an expression. Phraseology is far from arbitrary linkages of form and meaning, and as such is not a fertile ground for homonymy.

Most accounts of polysemy in phraseology derive from the Russian and Germanic tradition of "doing phraseology", and do not take any of the cognitive approaches into consideration, and this paper is an attempt to take the cognitive apparatus and use it in a study of polysemy of selected idiomatic expressions. Most studies of polysemy focus on the polysemy of single words. As phraseology is concerned with multi-word units, whose individual components are often polysemous themselves, and this is often the case with the unit itself, any account of polysemy in phraseology should be able to deal with polysemy at different levels.

Psycholinguistic research has shown that idioms are neither dead metaphors, nor phrases with special meanings, completely devoid of individual word meanings (Gibbs 1994). Glucksberg (1993: 11) argues that the repeated idiomatic use leads to what he calls "phrase-induced polysemy" (PIP), which adds additional senses to idiom constituents, allowing the processing of modified idioms. We will examine Glucksberg's hypothesis in our case study II.

#### 3.1. Case study I: *red-eye*

Polysemy in phraseology may generally be said to exist at two different levels, at the phrase level, and at the level of individual idiom constituents. There are phrases that are highly polysemous, like *red-eye*, which besides its literal reading (medical condition in which the sclera of someone's eye appears red in colour) may have the following idiomatic readings:

- red-eye, n.
- *Informal* a danger sign on a railroad
  - red-eyed salt water fish (like *bass*)
  - red-eyed vireo (*preacher bird*)
  - *Slang* AmE, a night flight, an airplane flight that departs between 01:00 AM and 04:00 AM local time (*caught the redeye from Los Angeles to New York*)
  - *Slang* inferior whiskey



These dictionary definitions cover only a handful of lexicalized and lexicographically recorded uses of the expression, yet a simple search discovers that there is a much wider range of meanings and uses for *red eye*:

*Red-eye effect*, the appearance of red eyes in photos due to the use of a flash

*Red Eye wide angle adapter*, a lens attachment for video cameras

*Calgary Red-Eye*, a drink made of beer and tomato juice considered to be a potential hangover remedy.

*Red Eye*, Beer with Clamato (spiced clam and tomato juice).

*Red-eye gravy*, a sauce used in the cuisine of the Southern United States.

*Red eye (drink)*, a cup of coffee with a shot of espresso in it.

*Red-Eye (energy drink)*, energy drink from Australia.

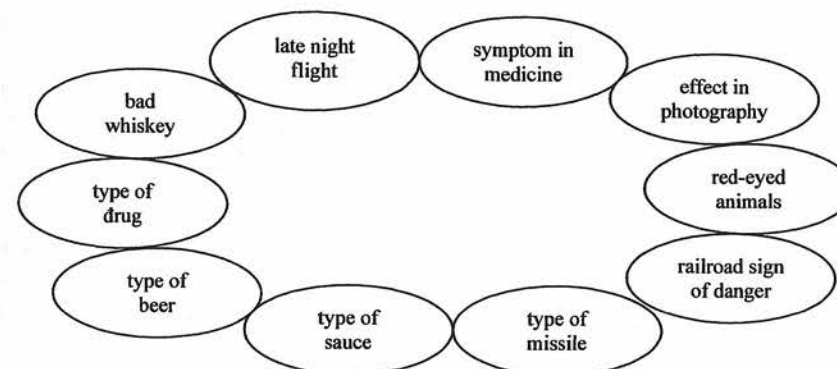
*FIM-43 Redeye*, a type of US surface-to-air missile common in the Vietnam War.

*Red Eye*, a drug.

All the readings of *red-eye* are cognitively based, as they all rest on the PART FOR WHOLE OR PART OF THE SCENARIO FOR THE WHOLE SCENARIO metonymies or metaphors. Drinking excessively and traveling at night, as well as taking drugs are sure to give you red eyes. Salt water fish like bass do have red eyes, and they are singled out as their distinctive feature in the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy. *Red-eye* as a sign of danger, however, is metaphorically based, as the circular shape of the warning sign itself resembles that of an eye, which is also the case with the type of missile that has a round red tip, whereas the colour red stands for danger in many both linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts. Traditional phraseology claims that one of these idiomatic meanings is the one from which all the others developed, leaving the central, prototypical meaning (red eye as a symptom in medicine) aside. We, however, feel that this is not the case, and that the best way for accounting for the multitude of these related polysemous readings is to use Lakoff's view of polysemy as a radial category, in which the different readings form links in the meaning chains. Figure 2 shows the polysemy chain for *red-eye*.

The order of these links is not random, adjacent links are taken to be more related in meaning than distant ones. The medical symptom of red eye is clearly related to the red eye effect in photography, or red-eyed animals than it is the case with types of food, missiles or danger signs. One of the reasons for greater transparency of the former is the fact that they are based on metonymic mappings, whereas the lesser degree of transparency is found for the latter, all of which are metaphorical.

Figure 2. Polysemy chain for *red-eye*



### 3.2. Case study II: *spill the beans*

In many semantic accounts, for polysemy to exist, there has to be a interrelation between the different senses of a word. This relation may be an already established and lexicographically recorded, or may be newly created to fit a particular context. Our corpus of *spill the beans* examples includes cases of literal use, idiomatic use, as well as cases of ad hoc polysemy. Example (1) illustrates the literal use of the expression:

(1) *Oro farmers spill coffee beans in joy*

Most people around the world have little idea about how coffee, a favourite hot drink, can move people to do fantastic things. Coffee growers especially pin their hopes on this important cash crop. Near Ogonomu in the Afore area of Northern Province, the people were so overjoyed that coffee buying had resumed that they danced, brandishing 50 kilogram heavy bags of coffee and *spilled some beans* on the ground to express their joy<sup>3</sup>.

There are three indicators that point to the literal use, the first is the accompanying photograph showing a group of farmers spilling coffee beans from bags, and the other two are insertion of a premodifier "coffee", and change of determiner from "the" to "some". These three markers serve as disambiguation tools, aiding the selection of the proper, intended reading of this expression. The next example is also a headline, this time used idiomatically:

(2) *Children spill the beans on their parents*<sup>4</sup>.

3 [http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/news/columnists/the\\_eye/15157921.htm](http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/news/columnists/the_eye/15157921.htm)

4 <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/pdfsfront/090806-PC-frontpage.pdf>

When you first read the headline in the example (2), some ambiguity does occur, as small children are often messy with their food, and it is not unlikely for them to spill it on their parents. Only when one reads on, there are markers of idiomatic use, as the article is about the school poll in which children have revealed their parents' shockingly dirty secrets. Traditional phraseology would discard examples (1) and (2) as polysemes and treat them as cases of homonymy. This is surprising as there are very direct etymological and cognitive links between the literal and the idiomatic readings of this expression. The phrase might even have very literal roots: beans have been known to spill from their pods and fall on the ground. Popular folk etymology for *spill the beans* claims that in ancient Greece, applicants for membership in secret societies were voted upon by having the existing members used beans as ballots, dropping them into a jar. Those who approved of the potential new member put a white bean to the jar, and a black bean was used to indicate a negative vote. The story goes that on occasion, when the jar was accidentally knocked over, the beans poured out and the vote was revealed prematurely.

Finally, we have found a number of ad-hoc uses of the phrase:

- (3) *Spill the beans*, but not in Bay. Is it news when 10 million gallons of raw sewage spills into San Francisco Bay?
- (4) I heard that after having those five cans of beer you had to *spill the beans* in the toilet.

After having read the title in example (3), the reader first has the most salient reading in mind, but reading on, he/she realizes that this is not the intended reading, and neither is it the literal reading in this case, but a case of novel meaning that is negotiated in this particular context. This does not come without communicational costs, the processing is certainly delayed, however short, but the reader takes certain pleasure in cracking this riddle. To resolve the ambiguity, there is a clear marker of ad hoc use in the subtitle, where it becomes clear we are talking about the sewage spill.

Polysemy in these cases is a result of linguistic innovation, triggered by the lower degree of salience of *beans*, and its openness to further sense extension. Interestingly, ad hoc polysemy also has a clear cognitive foundation. In these, as well as similar examples of this kind *beans* are used metaphorically to refer to spilt objects that are unsightly, dirty or stinking (like sewage, excrements, vomit, etc.) because the similarity of colour, shape, consistency, or smell. Our finding is in line with one of the hypotheses of our project, i.e. that there is a correlation between ad hoc context-based polysemy and metaphor, and that the result of such an intervention is often opaque. Some speakers were somewhat puzzled after reading example (4), which is the euphemism for vomit, as the metaphorical link is not immediately accessible or transparent.

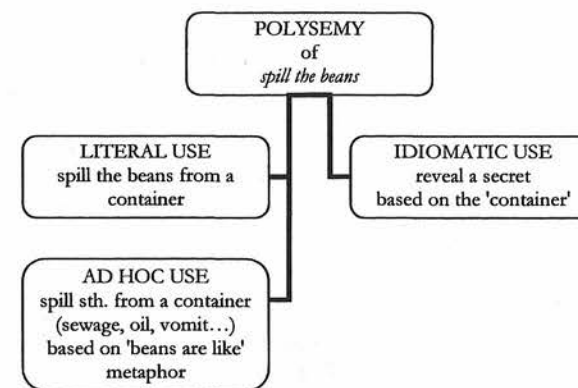
Many authors have noticed similar cases of context-based polysemy. Cruse (2000) calls them cases of "coerced polysemy", and Nerlich (2003: 13) speaks of "purposeful ambiguity". Cruse's term appears to be misleading, as such uses are deliberate and not forced or coerced. Cruse himself claims that "the meanings of words are notoriously affected by context: it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the semantic contribution a word makes is different for every distinct context in which it occurs" (2000: 187). Blank (2003: 267) speaks of "vagueness" or "contextual variation" and observes it as a phenomenon different from polysemy or homonymy:

When we decide to use a word but transgress the traditional range of its semantic invariants, we create a semantic innovation. If this innovation is successful, it becomes, in turn, lexicalized as a new invariant of the word in question.

Blank's term "vagueness" also seems to be a rather confusing, because cases of contextual variation may but need not be semantically vague at all. Blank (*ibid.*) also likens homonymy to ambiguity, where actually homonymy may but actually need not cause ambiguity, so there is clearly some imprecision in the approach and the terminology used.

Complex cases such as examples (3) and (4) may be best explained using the apparatus of conceptual blending. The established expression is projected onto a new context, where it accommodates and develops a new meaning, changing its domain of application. It is evident that the new senses are distant from the input from which they developed, and the distance is created using metaphor as a mechanism of sense extension. We may conclude that polysemy of our example occurs at three different levels:

Figure 3. Polysemy of *spill the beans*



The level of literal meaning is linked to idiomatic meaning through etymological and cognitive links that lead to sense extension. Both literal and idiomatic use can undergo further sense extensions using the same cognitive mechanisms to fit new contextual and communication needs. All the readings are related through the 'content' and 'container' metaphor, and all three have the semantic element of unintentionality, unwillingness, sudden revelation, spoiling, waste or ruin. Only our example (1) does not imply unintentionality, as spilling of coffee beans was a demonstration of joy, but the element of waste or ruin is still present.

### 3.3. Phrase-induced polysemy?

We have also examined Glucksberg's phrase-induced polysemy hypothesis in a case study of various uses of the *spill the beans*<sup>5</sup> itself and its components taken separately. Our aim was to establish whether this familiar idiom has induced component polysemy, i.e. whether *spill* and *beans* are used individually in non-idiomatic contexts, where *spill* would be used individually and metaphorically to mean *reveal*, *disclose* or *divulge* and *beans* would stand for *a secret* or *confidential information* or *plan*. Internet searches and BNC searches have been used to provide examples for our case studies and see if the phrase-specific meanings are used metaphorically outside the canonical phrase form. Dictionaries have been consulted to establish whether polysemy has been recorded for separate idiom constituents. We also wondered if *spill* got its current reading of *reveal* due to the fact that has repeatedly been used in the idiom, or it has been recorded earlier. It may be a typical chicken and egg situation, if it wasn't for the recorded origin of the verb *spill*<sup>6</sup>. *Spill* came into Old English as *spillan*, 'to kill'. Middle English *spillen* also meant slaughter and destruction: 'to kill, destroy, shed (blood)', as in today's *spill blood*, meaning 'to kill or wound'. Between the 10th and the 18th centuries, it came to mean to ruin something, ruin the soul of someone, injure morally, or waste something, like time or effort. The present sense of causing something to fall from or pour out of a container still connotes wasting or ruining the contents. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a 1574 quote for *spill it* meaning 'to divulge, let out'. *Spill the beans* was first attested in 1919. The diachronic data suggest that, contrary to Glucksberg's theory, *spill* did not get its meaning 'to divulge' from the repeated use in *spill the beans*. Moreover, Glucksberg's PIP model should suggest that the noun *beans* may have acquired the sense of 'secrets' through constant re-use. Looking at the examples of the attested uses of *beans*, it has never been used individually to mean 'secrets'

5 to *spill the beans* - to divulge confidential information or secrets; the secret is usually revealed by accident or imprudently; spilling the beans often ruins some surprise or plan (*Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*).

6 <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20010223>

or in contexts like \**reveal the beans*, \**tell the beans*, \**dark / dirty beans*, \**hide / keep the beans*, or \**dirty beans*, nor has it been used in the sense of 'secrets' in the absence of *spill*. Another interesting finding is that *beans* are used individually and metaphorically only after the stage has already been set by a previous mention of the entire phrase. This is not the case with *spill*, as it can be used with a number of different objects, as well as alone:

- (5) *spill the works / the soup / everything / what you know / your guts / it*
- (6) Five DOLLY readers have *spilled their secrets*.
- (7) India wants Coke and Pepsi to *spill the secret formulas*.
- (8) Inside iPod: Apple doesn't want to *spill the secret sauce*, but we tear down its megaseller music machine.
- (9) The Eye thinks so, but some of the people who do the *spilling* apparently don't.

Having established this, it becomes apparent that not all words in a phraseological unit contribute equally to the overall meaning of that expression, i.e. some elements may be more salient, some serve a purely grammatical function (e.g. articles or conjunctions) whereas others may serve as fillers, as seems to be the case with the less salient *beans*. It is therefore (not) surprising that in a number of examples in our corpus, it is the noun *beans* that served as the point of departure for innovative context-based readings of the expression.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite traditional views that polysemy in phraseology does not exist between the literal and the idiomatic reading of an expression, we side with the cognitive linguistic theories that establish undeniable conceptual links between the literal and the idiomatic reading, as well as undeniable, though not always surface-transparent, etymological links.

Polysemy in phraseology is found to appear at three levels: the level of literal use, idiomatic use, and ad-hoc use. These levels are not unrelated and discreet, i.e. an ad-hoc use may build on both literal and idiomatic uses of an idiom. The theory that lends itself best to accounting for these three levels at which polysemy occurs is Lakoff's view of polysemy as a radial category. Links in the polysemy chain are related through different cognitive mechanisms, from simple metaphorical and metonymic mappings, to more complex cases that can be adequately provided for using the conceptual integration theory.

The case study of *spill the beans* polysemy does not show any evidence of what Glucksberg, who uses the same idiom as an example, claims to be phrase-induced polysemy. Further detailed case studies are needed to test the applicability and validity of his theory.



Metaphorical extensions of idiom components in ad hoc polysemy in our case studies appear to lead to a certain degree of opacity, but further targeted studies are necessary to confirm this observation. Our future research will focus on setting the limits of tolerating polysemy in phraseology as a phenomenon that leads to maximizing the economy in the system, but results in a more taxing interpretation process, as well as in the preferred polysemy disambiguation, or marking strategies.

#### Contact and acknowledgements

Authors' e-mail address: momazic@ffos.hr; gschmidt@ffos.hr

The research done for this paper is part of the research project on polysemy conducted at Osijek University, Croatia. The authors wish to thank the project coordinator, dr Mario Brdar, for his support in preparing this paper.

The authors would like to thank dr Dubravko Kucanda, head of the English Department of Osijek University, who unfortunately passed away in December 2006, for his unselfish support, inspiration, and the wealth of ideas he contributed to this paper. We dedicate it to him.

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