

Lexical polyfunctionality in discourse: A quantitative corpus-based approach

This paper presents a quantitative corpus-based study of *lexical polyfunctionality* (also known as *lexical flexibility* or *lexical polycategoriality*) in English (Indo-European) and Nuuchahnulth (Wakashan). Polyfunctional words are those used for multiple discourse functions—reference, predication, or modification—with no overt marking of that function. This pattern is often referred to as *conversion*, *functional shift*, or *zero derivation*. While much research advocates for one or the other theoretical analysis of polyfunctional forms, little work treats lexical polyfunctionality as an empirical object of study in its own right rather than a theoretical problem to be solved. As a field we still know very little about how polyfunctionality operates, how it emerges diachronically, how prevalent it is, and how much it varies from language to language.

This study provides broader empirical coverage of the extent and behavior of lexical polyfunctionality in two languages—English and Nuuchahnulth. I analyze approximately 380,000 tokens of spoken English from the Open American National Corpus (Ide & Suderman 2005), and 8,300 tokens of spoken Nuuchahnulth from a documentary corpus published in Louie (2003) and Little (2003), in order to determine the overall prevalence of lexical polyfunctionality in each language. Using a measure of functional diversity (Shannon's diversity index; [Shannon 1948]), I give each lexical item a polyfunctionality rating from 0 (monofunctional) to 1 (maximally polyfunctional).

I find that English and Nuuchahnulth differ significantly not just in their overall degree of polyfunctionality, but also in the way that polyfunctionality is realized. English stems consistently exhibit a small degree of polyfunctionality, and show a great deal of referent-modifier polyfunctionality in particular, but otherwise center around a clear prototype. Nuuchahnulth stems are typically highly polyfunctional, but primarily between reference and predication. Stems are not frequently used for modification in discourse. In both languages, human animates have a strong tendency to be monofunctional. The two languages exhibit opposite behaviors with respect to property words, however. In English, property words are among the least polyfunctional items, whereas in Nuuchahnulth quantifiers and property words are among the most polyfunctional items.

These findings suggest that lexical polyfunctionality is more common in the world's languages than has previously been assumed, and demonstrate that polyfunctionality is a matter of degree. I argue that lexical polyfunctionality exists anywhere that a language has yet to develop dedicated morphological strategies for distinct discourse functions, or where those distinctions have been diachronically leveled. Lexical polyfunctionality should be viewed not so much as exceptional or exotic, but rather a fundamental design feature of language.

References

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