Thinking linguistically about keywords:
Polysemy, semantic change and divergent identities
SETH MEHL
University College London

Abstract: In this paper, keywords are investigated linguistically by examining the nature of their various meanings and their place within a model of semantic change. From a linguistic perspective, the general use of the term *polysemy* in the discourse on keywords is contentious; I argue that keywords tend to be more *vague* than *polysemic*. I apply specific linguistic polysemy tests to corpus examples of keywords to show that the contested meanings of keywords are not generally constant to the word (polysemic) but contingent upon contextual enrichment (vague). I then employ a model of semantic change to show that the distinction between polysemy and vagueness matters in this context because fluctuating contextual enrichment is definitive of an ongoing, unsettled contestation of meaning. In order to explain why the vagueness in keywords does not tend to resolve into stable polysemy, I refer to sociolinguistic notions of performative identity and accommodation theory to propose that social and cultural debate is a generalizable, pressurizing force that characterizes keywords and impacts semantic change. This paper, then, fills a gap in keywords research by bringing semantic mechanisms to the forefront, and then linking those mechanisms to the nature of social and cultural debate.

1. Introduction

In *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, Raymond Williams (1983) frames keywords in terms of their multiple meanings. These meanings emerge and shift over time in connection with contemporary social and cultural debates. Keywords for Williams are words with 'new senses' and older, often 'weakened', senses (ibid. 12); it is the 'range [of meanings] that matters' (ibid. 17). Keywords exemplify social and cultural change (ibid. 13) vis-à-vis the contrasts between their newer meanings and older ones. The range of meanings in these words 'engages' with 'continuity and discontinuity, and also deep conflicts of value and belief' (ibid. 23). The defining attributes of keywords thus seem to be:

> A. A range of contemporary senses

> B. Very new senses alongside older ones, such that keywords represent semantic change in progress

> C. A central role in social, cultural and political issues, controversies and conflicts

The first two characteristics might be viewed as semantic and linguistic, the third as social and cultural. Because the first characteristic is almost pervasive in lexical semantics, and the second not uncommon linguistically, critical attention may naturally be drawn to the

third characteristic. I would like to posit, however, that closer investigation of the first two characteristics, and of the dynamic relationship between the three characteristics, is crucial. Indeed, Williams explains that an analysis of keywords must be built on an understanding of words as linguistic units (ibid. 15), even if the analysis is also 'deliberately social and historical' (ibid. 21).

In recent keywords research, Bennett et al. (2005: xvii) tend to emphasise the social role keywords play in contemporary discourses more than the linguistic attributes of those words. They assert that '[f]or Williams, the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social, and economic situations and needs'. Durant's (2006, 2008) work on keywords, on the other hand, follows Williams (1983) in its consistent balance between linguistic and socio-historical approaches. Even so, Durant (2006: 12) acknowledges that Williams was 'less concerned with general semantic mechanisms… [and] more concerned with the pressures under which people have extended or transformed word meanings.'

In the present paper, I would like to refocus discussion on keywords by analysing keywords linguistically, examining first the nature of keywords' multiple meanings, and then keywords' place within a model of semantic change. To that end, the present paper presents case studies of three randomly selected keywords - *image*, *intellectual* and *modern*. In section 3, I apply specific linguistic meaning tests to corpus examples of keywords in use; results indicate that the contested meanings of keywords are not generally constant to the word (polysemic) but contingent upon contextual enrichment (vague). Indeed, from a linguistic perspective, the general use of the term *polysemy* in the discourse on keywords is contentious. Then, in section 4, I present a model of semantic change, and show that the vagueness and fluctuating contextual enrichment common to keywords in use is indicative of semantic change in progress, and particularly of an ongoing, unsettled contestation of meaning. Finally, in section 5, I link the semantic analysis of keywords to sociolinguistic theory: I consider sociolinguistic notions of identity, seen as a fluctuating set of personal attributes which can be performatively conveyed using linguistic tools; and accommodation theory, the process by which speakers converge or diverge with the linguistic habits of other language users. Building upon those sociolinguistic ideas, I propose that the social and cultural debates that frame keywords constitute a generalizable, pressurizing force that impacts semantic change.

The present paper, then, fills a gap by bringing semantic mechanisms to the forefront, and then linking those mechanisms to the nature of social and cultural debate. I would reply to Bennett et al.'s (2005: xvii) statement on 'mere' semantic change by proposing that the linguistic complexity of mechanisms of semantic change, and the precise nature of keywords' multiple, shifting meanings, can shed light on the social and cultural complexity of keywords. Given Williams's (1983) own attention not only to the dynamics of social and cultural discourse, but also to keywords as linguistic units, the present approach certainly constitutes a valuable contribution.

2. Keywords and multiple meanings

2.1 Polysemy, vagueness and contextual enrichment

In this section, I define *polysemy*, *vagueness*, and *contextual enrichment*, all of which are central to describing the meaning of a word in use. In the next section, I apply those definitions, along with established linguistic and philosophical polysemy tests, to an analysis of the multiple meanings of keywords.

Polysemy describes words with distinct or discreet senses,[1] while *vagueness* refers to lack of specificity (cf. Cruse 2004).[2] To use a typical example, *crane* is polysemic in that it can refer to a bird, or by metaphorical extension to a tool for hoisting heavy objects. Each of the two senses of *crane* is also vague in that some of each sense's attributes remain unspecified. *Crane* (bird) is unspecified for gender and age: a *crane* may be male or female, young or old. *Crane* (tool) is unspecified for a range of heights: a *crane* may be 10 stories high or 2 stories high.

In particular instances of use, contextual clarification of *crane* (bird) for gender or of *crane* (tool) for height may be helpful or necessary: the meaning added by such contextual enrichment is *contingent* meaning, as opposed to *constant* meaning. Contingent meaning contributed to a word by contextual enrichment was recognized by nineteenth century philologists (cf. Paul 1920 [1880], cited in Geeraerts 2010: 16), and is also the subject of ongoing research in contemporary semantics and pragmatics (cf. Traugott and Dasher 2002; Evans and Wilkins 2000; Carston 2008; Falkum 2011). Contingent meaning supplied by contextual enrichment relates directly to vagueness insofar as contextual enrichment clarifies unspecified elements of a word's meaning.

The distinction between polysemy and vagueness may be fuzzy for some words in use (cf. Geeraerts 2006 [1993]). For example, *dog* can be interpreted as vague for gender: *dog* can refer to a male or female canine, and we can comfortably assert that *Fido is a dog and so is Lady*. However, *dog* can also be interpreted as 'male canine', in opposition to *bitch*, 'female canine'. In that case, the proposition *Fido is a dog, but Lady is not a dog* may be acceptable as well. *Dog* might therefore be interpreted as vague for gender in some instances of use, and in other instances of use polysemic with the distinct senses 'canine' and 'male canine'. This kind of fuzziness is not problematic: an examination of a word's polysemy or vagueness is an exploration of the active relationships between the meanings a word can convey, and the meaning contributed by a word's context. A discussion of the polysemy and vagueness of *dog* need not reach a binary conclusion: the discussion can instead serve to

---

[1] Cruse (2004: 104) prefers the term 'discreteness' to 'polysemy', and Quine (1960: 129) prefers 'ambiguity' to 'polysemy'. I adopt Geeraerts's (2006 [1993]) terminology in referring to *polysemy*.
[2] Terminology for vagueness is relatively consistent, though Kempson (1977) and Cruse (1986) distinguish between vagueness as indeterminacy and vagueness as lack of specificity. It is only the latter that I address here.

enhance our understanding of the word in use and the nature of its meanings and their interactions. In section 4, I describe two useful polysemy tests and apply them to the case studies there. As I show, the tests can be seen as nuanced tools for describing *degrees* of vagueness and polysemy, and for understanding the semantic attributes of the words in question.

Williams (1983) recognized the significance of vagueness and polysemy in interpreting keywords and the problems that they represent, though he did not employ the terminology used here. He approaches the notion of constant and contingent meaning, and the role of contextual enrichment, by observing that, on one hand, 'individual words should never be isolated, since they depend for their meanings on their actual contexts' (1983: 22), while on the other hand 'the problem of meaning can never be wholly dissolved into context'. In the entry for *culture*, for example, Williams (ibid: 93) asserts that 'the complexity… is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate'. Williams actively negotiated the balance between the meaning in the word and the meaning derived from context. That balance is equivalent to the balance between polysemy (in which multiple meanings are constant to a word) and vagueness (in which various meanings are contingent upon context).

The distinction between vagueness and polysemy has also been suggested by Durant (2008: 136-7) in his description of keywords, though his terminology also differs from mine:

> 'In clearest cases [of keywords]… polysemy is a matter of relatively distinct senses, any one of which closes off other meanings that the word is capable of conveying in other circumstances. Under some conditions of use, however… pragmatic cues… prompt divergent lines of inference.'

Using the terminology outlined in the present paper, Durant's statement suggests that keywords may be more or less polysemic or vague. Durant's negotiation of that territory resembles Williams's; the present paper continues to negotiate that territory.

2.2 Recognising polysemy and vagueness

Numerous philosophers and linguists have forwarded tests for recognizing polysemy and vagueness in use. The most firmly established philosophical methods for identifying polysemy are Aristotle's (cf. Barnes 1984) and Quine's (1960). In linguistics, Cruse's (1986, 2004) semantics textbooks neatly sum up the problems of identifying polysemy; Geeraerts (2006 [1983]) has written an extremely valuable examination of polysemy tests; and numerous other linguistic studies have applied polysemy tests in some way (cf. Lakoff 1970; Zwicky and Arnold 1975; Tuggy 1993). Tests can generally be divided into three categories: definitional tests (such as the Aristotelian); logical tests (such as the Quinian); and linguistic tests (such as the antagonism test). Enfield (2003: 34) decides to reply primarily on the Quinian test, and Cruse (2004: 106) considers the antagonism test to be definitive of polysemy. In concurrence with Enfield and Cruse, I apply the Quinian test and

the antagonism test here.[3] The former functions as a relatively straightforward diagnostic tool; the latter requires some creativity.

Methodologically, these tests are not mechanistic processes for outputting a correct answer; they are not programs to be run and reported. Indeed, it may be that in light of Quine's broader naturalist philosophy, Quine himself would not have insisted on empirical, scientific reliability for his own meaning test (cf. Kemp 2012). In linguistics, and particularly in Cognitive Linguistics, it has likewise been shown that these tests do not output a binary truth (cf. Geeraerts 2006 [1993]). The tests are instead exploratory tools, heuristics for negotiating the dynamic relationships between the constant and contingent meanings conveyed by a word in use, and for describing degrees of vagueness and polysemy. The tests can be applied in various ways: they can be applied to corpus examples; they can be tested by the linguist's intuition; or they can be employed in psycholinguistic experiments to gauge the collective intuitions of a population. This study includes the first two applications. As always, the third application, psycholinguistic testing, would provide an invaluable complement to the work presented here.

The Quinian or logical test states that if a word can be simultaneously asserted and negated, it is polysemic.

> 1. He saw a crane, but he didn't see a crane.

Example 1 can express that he saw a bird, but not a construction tool. The sense of *crane* changes from the first proposition to the second (negated) proposition, and the variation in sense must be at the level of the word – i.e. the sense must be constant, rather than contingent. The word itself is therefore polysemic. Example 1 cannot express that he saw a male bird but not a female bird; that information is therefore not constant to the word *crane*.

The antagonism or linguistic test evokes two senses of a word simultaneously and tests for zeugma; some creativity is required.

> 2. Conservationists want cranes to be treated well, and so do building contractors.

The antagonism test relies on the fact that humorous, awkward, zeugmatic effects can only arise if two constant senses of a word are at stake. This effect indicates that the word is polysemic. Gauging humor, awkwardness and zeugma is of course intuitive and subjective, but the test can be useful as an exploratory tool.

---

[3] While I do not aim here to evaluate the effectiveness of each existing polysemy test, it seems that the identity test (cf. Cruse 2006: 104) and the 'truth conditions' test (cf. Cruse 2006: 105) can misinterpret vagueness as polysemy. Geeraerts (2006 [1993]) identifies additional issues with each type of test. Definitional tests such as Aristotle's represent a substantially different approach from logical and linguistic tests, and are beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Case studies on keywords and polysemy

3.1 Introduction

For the present case study, three keywords – *intellectual*, *image*, and *modern* - were chosen randomly by computer algorithm from a list of words identified as important keywords by Williams (1983), Bennett et al. (2005) and the Keywords Project (cf. Durant 2006, 2008).[4] The International Corpus of English, Great Britain component (ICE-GB), was consulted for evidence of naturally occurring constructions containing each word. Below, the Quinian test and the antagonism test (as described in 2.2) are applied to the corpus examples in order to indicate degrees of polysemy and vagueness. The tests serve to show that keywords tend to be more vague than polysemic.

3.2 Image

In *Keywords*, Williams (1983: 158-9) identifies an early sense of *image* as a concrete representation or impression, but it seems that he does not consider this sense problematic in social and cultural debate. He then identifies two problematic, abstract senses for *image*: the first is a personal or private mental conception or impression, related to *imagination*; the second relates to publicity, celebrity and politics, as in *public image*, a manipulated representation for sale and consumption.

Crary (2005: 178), in *New Keywords*, asserts that *image* 'has always been marked by a fundamental ambiguity in its parallel designation of visual, graphic, perceptual, psychic and verbal imagery'. Crary does not precisely tease out the various meanings of *image* as Williams does, but Crary does suggest a distinction between: a personal, individual mental conception or impression, related to *imagination*; and a hegemonic, industrial and capitalist *image* involved in systems of control. These two senses can be mapped, if roughly, onto Williams's two abstract senses.

The million-word ICE-GB corpus includes approximately 200 instances of *image* in its various grammatical forms. These instances include the concrete sense, particularly in relation to photography or video technology (example 3); the personal 'mental conception' sense (example 4); and the 'publicity' sense (example 5).[5]

> 3. The images are distributed to users as low-resolution facsimiles. [W2A-037 #74]

> 4. And I had sort of had you know this you know image of how I remembered. [S1A-013 #249]

5. Could a change of image help Douglas Hurd make up some ground in the race to become one? [S2B-009 #98]

In each of the following examples, the two potentially contentious, abstract senses of *image* cited by Williams and Crary do in fact seem problematic in use; *image* might be interpreted here as a personal impression or as a controlled, public representation (though individual reader's interpretations might vary).

6. 'And the whole image of England in the world depends on the arts.' [S1B-022 #46]

7. 'Items he collects now for use in the future can range from the sublime to the ridiculous and in my opinion distort the image of London society…' [W1A-012 #5]

8. '…to foster the image of Charles I as saint and martyr.' [W2A-006 #21]

We can apply the Quinian test to each example, allowing slight alterations, as follows:

9. The whole image of England depends on the arts, but the whole image of England doesn't depend on the arts.

10. The items distort the image of London society, but they don't distort the image of London society.

11. He wanted to foster the image of Charles I, but not the image of Charles I.

Applying the first polysemy test to *image*, it is immediately clear that polysemy tests cannot absolutely determine that a word is vague rather than polysemic. Intuitively, some readers no doubt attempt to construct a situation in which examples 9 through 11 could be viable. The tests as presented here obviously rely on the linguist's intuition, even if they are built on examples from actual use. While a critical linguistic analysis is a valuable first step, future psycholinguistic tests or elicitation tests across a broad sample of language users could complement the present study.

It is worth returning to the example of *crane*, which displays neat polysemy and which can therefore serve as a typical or prototypical example against which other lexemes can be measured. I would contend that examples 9 through 11 are far more difficult to interpret than *crane* in example 2. An interpretation of one instance of *image* as a personal mental conception and the other as a controlled, public representation is relatively difficult, requiring a bit of mental acrobatics, and the distinction between the two abstract senses of *image* does not seem discrete.

It is perhaps intuitively attractive to approach a workable version of examples 9 through 11 using prosodic alteration to emphasize the second instance of *image* via a change in pitch, loudness, or duration: '…but the image of England…'. Such an alteration, however,

constitutes contextual enrichment, in that varying prosodic information is definitively not constant to the word in question, and is therefore not evidence for polysemy.

Inspired by the examples above, we might employ the linguistic test and invent examples 12 through 14 (example 14 is inspired by example 11, but not directly derived from it).

> 12. The whole image of England in the world depends on the arts, and also on the foreign office.

> 13. The mayor's office has distorted the image of London society, but so have many London residents.

> 14. The Vatican fosters an image of Mother Theresa, as do her acolytes.

Example 12 may be more zeugmatic than examples 13 and 14; it might convey humour or awkwardness, and therefore might indicate some degree of polysemy. Examples 14 and 15, however, are difficult to negotiate, and affirm just how non-discrete the senses of *image* can be.

The two abstract senses of *image* are certainly not neatly polysemic in the way that the two senses of *crane* are. Neither, however, are the two abstract senses of *image* entirely vague in the way that *crane* is vague for gender. We will continue to consider this gradient boundary in the remaining two case studies.

3.3 Intellectual

Williams (1983: 170) identifies an early negative sense for *intellectual* as a person who is cold, abstract and ineffective, and a later sense of *intellectual* as an intelligent, productive person with broad interests. Williams also underlines that either type of *intellectual* can either support or threaten a ruling elite, which can in turn affect the overall interpretation of the word in use.

Like Williams, Frow (2005: 189) identifies an early negative sense for *intellectual* as a person who is cold, abstract and ineffective, and a later sense of *intellectual* as a person who is a 'heroic' public spokesperson for enlightened thinking. Also like Williams, Frow (2005: 190) comments that intellectuals' relationship with an *elite* is variable: intellectuals may function as supporters of dominant, hegemonic power structures or as counters to those structures.

ICE-GB includes only around 20 instances of *intellectual* in its various grammatical forms. The following corpus examples suggest one of the two core meanings described by Williams and Frow: an *intellectual* is a person who is cold, aloof and ineffective (example 15); or an *intellectual* is a person who is intelligent, with broad interests, and who presents that intelligence and those interests to the general public (example 16).

15. 'There are magazines that are like out there for intellectuals and unfortunately academics.' [S1A-096 #193]

16. '...which brought together a cross-section of Jewish writers and intellectuals who all from their various perspectives were concerned with Yiddish.' [S2B-042 #70]

The corpus also includes examples with probable interpretations but no definitive clarity in their immediate contexts:

17. 'A devout Anglican and lifelong Conservative, a feminist and an intellectual, she was a classics teacher in Bromley...' [S2B-026 #89]

18. 'Leaders, intellectuals, practically everyone said: "We have compromised since 1943...".' [W2C-010 #86]

19. 'Intellectuals joined the students in the manner of Eastern Europe's anti-communist revolts in late 1989.' [W2C-019 #12]

Applying the Quinian test to each example might give the following sentences:

20. The classics teacher in Bromley was an intellectual, but not an intellectual.

21. Intellectuals said that we had compromised since 1943, but intellectuals didn't say that we had compromised since 1943.

22. Intellectuals joined the students, but intellectuals didn't join the students.

As with *image*, we can construct possible scenarios where these statements might be comprehensible, but I would again contend that these examples are relatively awkward and difficult to interpret naturally. It may be possible to interpret one instance of *intellectual* as cold, aloof and ineffective and the other instance of *intellectual* as intelligent, with broad interests and a public persona, but this interpretation is not particularly clear, especially outside of a philosophical or linguistic discussion such as the present paper. Certainly, none of the above examples is as neat as the typical example of *crane*.

Could the attributes of each sense of *intellectual* be divided differently across each use in the Quinian test? Could example 17 convey that she is cold, aloof, and also effective and intelligent, but not a public representative for anything; or that she is intelligent but that she does not have broad interests? It seems unlikely.

17. 'A devout Anglican and lifelong Conservative, a feminist and an intellectual, she was a classics teacher in Bromley...' [S2B-026 #89]

The overall positive or negative semantic prosody of the two senses of *intellectual* likely reinforces the sense divisions that do exist. These sense divisions may therefore be a

product of some other psychological or cognitive categorisation process – they may not be related to *intellectual* in particular. In that case, we might hypothesize that our general categorical perception of positives and negatives influences our perception of discrete meanings in words. Because many keywords exhibit similar semantic prosody, with overarchingly positive or negative senses (cf. Durant 2008: 136), it would be interesting to investigate the psycholinguistic relationship between the perception of positive and negative senses in keywords and the perception of polysemy in those words.

Applying the antagonism test to *intellectual* yields the following (a zeugmatic sentence based on example 19 is not readily apparent):

> 23. The beloved classics teacher in Bromley was an intellectual, and so was the reclusive old grouch who lived next door to her.

> 24. Some intellectuals joined the students in the revolts while others stayed inside reading arcane texts.

Neither of these examples seems particularly zeugmatic, awkward or humorous – in fact, both seem relatively natural and plausible. It should be clear, ultimately, that if *intellectual* is to some degree polysemic, it is not polysemic to the degree that *crane* is polysemic; like *image*, *intellectual* is surely much more vague.

3.4 Modern

Williams (1983: 208) describes the earliest uses of *modern* as synonymous with *contemporary*. He then identifies a developed sense of *modern* as 'changed' or 'altered' from an older to a newer form, in a way that requires justification and is not assumed to be positive; and a more recent sense of *modern* as 'changed' or 'altered' in a favourable or desirable way, i.e. 'improved'.

Morris and Sakai (2005: 219) connect *modern* to 'a wide range of historical phenomena characterized by continuous growth and change'. The authors acknowledge the two senses described by Williams, and add that *modern* can more specifically describe: a detrimental lifestyle disconnected from nature and a natural understanding of the world and bound up with 'the machinery of mass production', in contrast with the 'noble savage'; or the purported strengths of the contemporary West in relation to "uncivilized" others.

ICE-GB contains 144 instances of *modern* in its various grammatical forms. Corpus examples suggest both Williams's sense of generally negative alterations (example 25) and that of general improvement (example 26), and also Morris and Sakai's more specific sub-senses of a negative lifestyle disconnected from nature and bound up in machinery (example 27), and of the strong West in relation to uncivilized others (example 28).

> 25. 'Why should they be different from other people in being free from the modern problem of drugs?' [S1B-024 #126]

26. '...modern medicine now enables people to cope.' [S1A-061 #85]

27. 'Modern means of communication now make the manipulation of public opinion possible on a scale that even Goebbels would have found unimaginable.' [W2B-014 #44]

28. '...it resembles in this last respect a developed modern economy such as that of the United States...' [W2A-019 #27]

In the following corpus examples, senses of *modern* may be interpreted in divergent ways by different readers:

29. '...and in so doing rejects modernity for traditionalism.' [W1A-012 #56]

30. 'So they are as it happens very romantic places for modern south Italian brides to go.' [S2A-024 #18]

31. 'They have no access to modern health care.' [S2A-047 #69]

Applying the Quinian test gives us the following examples:

32. He rejects modernity, but not modernity.

33. They are romantic places for modern brides, but not for modern brides.

34. They have access to modern health care, but not modern health care.

Example 32 might be interpreted to mean: he rejects the worsening of contemporary life, but not the improvements. Such a statement might be a clever rhetorical device in a discussion of contemporary life. Examples 33 and 34, however, seem much more difficult to interpret. The linguistic tests below suggest possible interpretations, and help to assess the degree of polysemy in these examples.

The linguistic test can generate the following possibilities (example 37 is inspired by example 31 but not directly derived from it):

35. Faith healers reject modernity, and so did Aldous Huxley.

36. The science museum in London is an attractive place for modern brides, and so is a textile factory in Bangladesh.

37. "Big Pharma" has modernized health care, and so has interpersonal sensitivity training for young doctors.

It is unlikely that example 35 could arise naturally outside of a discussion of the linguistic and cultural complexity of the word *modern*. Example 36 is perhaps more humorous than previous examples. Example 37 seems more difficult. As with *intellectual*, the presence of distinct positive or negative semantic prosody for each sense of *modern* might allow an interlocutor to more readily distinguish discrete senses. *Modern*, as analysed here, does not seem to be polysemic to the degree that *crane* is.

3.5 Summary of the case studies

A critical linguistic analysis of three words is only a starting point: given the interconnected nature of keywords (cf. Durant 2008), a discussion of these three words can and should initiate a discussion of related keywords. Moreover, additional examples from natural language, as well as psycholinguistic experiments, could serve to corroborate the present arguments. Nevertheless, each of the above keywords presents considerable vagueness; senses seem to be more contingent than constant, suggesting that these keywords are not neatly polysemic but to some degree vague. It seems, therefore, that a neat division into polysemic senses (such as that between the concrete and abstract senses of *image*) does not indicate key-ness. Instead, keywords are relatively vague, undetermined lexical items.

4. Semantic Change

For Williams (1983), the multiple contemporaneous meanings conveyed by keywords reflect changes in meaning over time. Indeed, synchronic linguistic variation arises from diachronic change (cf. Weinreich et al. 1968), and contemporary models of semantic change involve the development of polysemy. In this section, I synthesize some elements of existing models of semantic change, and re-frame selected elements in terms of polysemy and vagueness, so as to enhance the final model presented here, and to relate the model to the analysis of polysemy given in the previous section.

How do polysemy, contextual enrichment and vagueness interact in a theory of semantic change? Polysemy is sometimes considered an intermediate step in semantic change, as shown in the following, simplified, model:

Figure 1: A simplified model of semantic change

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Lexeme has sense *a*	Lexeme has two senses: *a* and *b*	Lexeme has sense *b*

However, polysemy can also be viewed less as an intermediary step and more as a final, stable stage of semantic change. Indeed, Traugott and Dasher (2002: 11) assert that with most semantic change, old meanings are not lost; rather, the outcome of semantic change is most often stable, long-term polysemy. Moreover, it is clear that polysemy cannot simply and suddenly appear; it emerges from particular circumstances. To account for the emergence of polysemy, an additional stage has been posited (Evans and Wilkins 2000;

Traugott and Dasher 2002). In that additional stage, before a word develops stable polysemy, it conveys different meanings in different contexts via specific contextual enrichment. Contextual enrichment might include additional lexical material or phonetic information, for example.[6] For the present discussion, I would like to add that contextual enrichment serves to clarify some vague element of a word's meaning. That is, in order for contextual enrichment to facilitate particular implicatures in use, the lexeme in question must be vague, or unspecified, for particular attributes. Figure 2 explicitly formulates a more complete model of semantic change.[7]

Figure 2: A complete model of semantic change

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Lexeme has sense a, which is unspecified (vague) for attributes p and q	Contextual enrichment specifies attribute p to the exclusion of attribute q	Normative usage arises with common contextual enrichment specifying attribute p to the exclusion of attribute q	Lexeme develops stable, discrete new sense p (derived from attribute p) without contextual enrichment; sense p exists alongside sense a

Stage 1 represents the vagueness that is pervasive in lexical semantics. Because all words are unspecified for some elements of meaning, all words can potentially be clarified via contextual enrichment, and this contextual enrichment can in turn give rise to semantic change and polysemy. In stage 2, vague attributes of meaning are clarified via contextual enrichment. Stage 3 represents a process described by Evans and Wilkins (2000) in which recurring instances of specific, clarifying contextual enrichment suggest a new, regular use for the word. Finally, in stage 4, this new regular use becomes so common that it ceases to require contextual enrichment and emerges as a discreet sense, rendering the word newly polysemic. In this new model of semantic change, vagueness, contextual enrichment and polysemy are the key indicators of the process of change.

It is possible to describe a word and its usage in terms of polysemy, contextual enrichment and vagueness, and therefore to identify stages of emergent semantic change: Geeraerts (1997), Evans and Wilkins (2000) and Enfield (2003) have all worked to relate stages of semantic change to synchronic polysemy and contextual enrichment, with fruitful results. Indeed, the relationship between polysemy and semantic change drives Evans and Wilkins (2000: 550) to claim that '…to understand semantic change we must focus on polysemy'. Enfield (2003: 30), on the other hand, posits that 'it is not synchronic polysemy but *synchronic implicature* [or meaning implied by contextual enrichment] that is directly

---

[6] Contextual enrichment may be described as 'inference-driven' (Evans and Wilkins 2000: 550), and can include *invited inference* (Traugott and Dasher 2002) or pragmatic implicature (Enfield 2003).

[7] Figure 1 is adapted from Enfield (2002: 29), and incorporates the model proposed by Evans and Wilkins (2000). Traugott and Dasher (2002) present a comparable depiction of stages of semantic change.

relevant to semantic change'. According to the model I have proposed here, vagueness is also important to understanding change. In fact, all three factors can be seen as keys to a linguistic understanding of semantic change. Given that keywords are meant to be examples of socially and culturally significant semantic change in progress, it would seem that the nature of these three factors would also be keys to an understanding of keywords.

I have shown that keywords are more vague than polysemous. Keywords, however, are neither 'simply' vague, in the way that all words are vague for some attributes, nor stable and polysemous; they represent neither stage 1 nor stage 4 of the above model. Instead, Keywords seem to represent stage 2 or 3. This is unsurprising: keywords are definitively examples of ongoing semantic change, and stages 2 and 3 represent change in progress. In parallel, if vagueness, rather than polysemy, is indicative of ongoing semantic change, then we would expect keywords to be more vague than polysemous, as has been shown. The present argument, therefore, has linked the nature of polysemy and vagueness, as outlined in section 2, with the model of semantic change described in section 4, in order to describe keywords within an overarching semantic framework.

5. Keywords and motivation against stable polysemy

According to the given model of semantic change, contextual enrichment surrounding individual words in specific instances of use eventually leads to the establishment of new discrete meanings and stable polysemy. It would be reasonable to expect, therefore, that as users clarify the problematically vague elements of keywords' meanings in use, those keywords would evolve semantically away from vagueness and towards stable polysemy. Yet, resolution into stable polysemy seems particularly elusive for keywords. Indeed, Durant (2008: 127) has observed that keywords tend to remain problematic through generations of social and cultural discourse. Why should this be the case? Durant (2008: 138) asserts that 'the perceived urgency of a given social agenda or debate… pressurises communication, transforms routine polysemy which in other circumstances is simply passed over into complexity, and confers key-ness.' Given the terminology I have used here, I would rephrase Durant's argument slightly to propose that the urgency of the debate pressurises communication and prevents problematic vagueness from resolving into stable polysemy.

Durant (2006: 9) notes that often the varying senses of keywords are instantiated 'at the level of the language community… between social dialects', each sense associated with a different social identity. Notions of social identity have been prominent in sociolinguistics for decades (cf. Labov 1972; Gumperz 1982; Bucholz 1999; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Croft 2003; Schneider 2007). Identity in contemporary linguistic discourse is seen as a fluctuating set of attributes, which can be performed in various contexts via various signifying processes, one of which is language. That keywords form a part of this identification and signification process is a useful perspective.

If individual senses of keywords are associated with individual social identities, then keywords can be seen to embody a sort of factionalism in which each social identity

depends upon a particular sense of a word to the exclusion of other senses. The contrasting senses of *modern* and *intellectual*, above, can be seen to align with contrasting performative identities and social factions. *Modern* likely conveys one sense or another depending on your position in the debate about the benefits and dangers of specific novel developments in contemporary society. *Intellectual* conveys one sense or another depending on how speakers perform their own identities in relation to learning and human knowledge, and how they view learning and its applications in society. Those who identify as artists might tend towards usage of *image* in its personal, expressive sense, while those who identify as public personae, or those who work in public industries, might tend towards usage of *image* in its public sense. (The choice of usage by individuals likely varies from one social context to another, and between modes, as users perform various identities for various interlocutors.) The crucial senses of some keywords, as identified by Williams (1983), Bennett et al. (2005) and the Keywords Project, can also be seen as aligning with contrasting identities and social factions in various ways: *materialism*, *class*, *science*, *city* and *media*, for example. Two of the Keywords Project's new selections align with contrasting identities and social factions in American political discourse in a particularly striking way: *liberal* and *conservative*. The recognition of this factionalism restates and reinforces the definition of keywords as embodying social and cultural debates.

Much research in sociolinguistic identity construction has focused on 'positive identity practices' (Bucholz 1999): processes by which speakers converge towards shared linguistic attributes in order to facilitate effective communication and to cement a shared identity. Convergent practices would allow speakers to negotiate conflicting meanings of keywords and eventually to compromise on a shared meaning. Convergent behaviours are likely the expected norm between interlocutors (Bell 2006). However, accommodation theory also describes divergent linguistic practices (Giles 2001), identified by Bucholz (1999) as 'negative identity practices', through which speakers diverge from the linguistic attributes of others in order to define themselves in opposition to those others. In social and cultural debates, these negative identity practices, in which speakers' linguistic usage is formulated (consciously or not) to contrast the usage of their interlocutors, are likely very important. Thus, speakers may select particular senses or uses of keywords to the exclusion of others not only to converge towards members of their own group, but also to diverge from members of the opposite group, in order to claim a part of the contested ground of a particular debate and to enact and preserve a particular identity. The debate itself constitutes a valuable and necessary social practice: the urgent and unresolved debate nurtures particular performed identities. Those identities are threatened if speakers compromise on a common meaning for the debate's crucial lexicon, its keywords. To that end, even misunderstandings between the two sides of the debate bolster each group's identity in opposition to the other.

Fundamental pragmatic principles of speech acts (cf. Austin 1962) and traditional rules of conversation (cf. Levinson 2000) form general frameworks for the convergence of linguistic and social identities; however, divergence of identities, along with active debate, argument and conflict, are vitally important linguistic acts as well. Even miscommunication may be part of the fundamental nature of language, and as such, one of the very real

functions that language allows. Indeed, Derrida (1972, 1977) and Davidson (1984) have criticized traditional speech act theory for sidelining non-convergent linguistic functions such as deception and miscommunication. Keywords' resistance to resolution into stable polysemy affirms the linguistic vitality of divergence, debate, conflict and even miscommunication.

In order to move towards resolving debates effectively, Quine (1960: 270) advocates a process of 'semantic ascent', which considers the language of an argument in order to clarify the proposition forwarded by the language. Williams (1983: 24), however, did not 'share the optimism that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms'. Indeed, by clarifying the terms of the debate, speakers in no way guarantee progress towards the resolution of the debate; they do, however, run the very real risk of losing a facet of their performed identities that is contingent upon the conflicting, unstable and vague attributes of a given keyword. In this way, debate and conflict, and even miscommunication, are not problematic if they nurture the performance of social identity; and lexical vagueness that facilitates such debate, conflict and miscommunication serves an important function whose preservation benefits language users. While it might be expected, given the model of semantic change presented above, that language users would clarify the problematic elements of keywords' meanings, and that keywords would in turn resolve into stable polysemy, it is now clear that there is motivation against the resolution of those meanings into stable polysemy. This situates keywords and their relative vagueness even more effectively within the model of semantic change.

Traugott and Dasher (2002: 3-4) claim that where semantic change is 'susceptible to extralinguistic factors such as change in the nature or the social construction of the referent', including the nature of evolving social and cultural debates, generalisations about regular semantic mechanisms are particularly difficult to establish. That is undoubtedly true, and it has led many researchers to search for regularity in grammaticalisation processes rather than to investigate semantic change that is susceptible to extralinguistic influences. I have suggested here that processes of performed identity might allow for generalisations about regularity of semantic change, even in particularly difficult social and cultural contexts. That is, linguistic divergence and negative identity practices may nurture divergent lexical semantic usage, such that contrasting meanings do not resolve into routine polysemy. The pressurising force of the debate may constitute a regular motivating factor in semantic change in such cases. This could be further explored by conducting semantic analysis of historical keywords in use within the context of historical social and cultural debates, to determine whether apparent settlement of such debates correlates with apparent settlement of a keyword's semantics from vagueness into routine polysemy.

6. Conclusions

I have made three central arguments here, based on a linguistic analysis of keywords. First, keywords tend to be relatively vague rather than neatly polysemic; second, the vagueness of keywords situates keywords as unstable, fluctuating entities within a model of semantic

change; and third, performed identities in social and cultural debates can perpetuate the unstable, fluctuating and vague nature of keywords, such that keywords resist resolution into stable polysemy. In this exploration of keywords, a coherent semantic framework has been established to link an analysis of a word's multiple senses with a model of semantic change. In turn, a precise definition of semantic attributes and semantic mechanisms has informed an understanding of the social and cultural attributes of keywords.

I have already proposed further linguistic investigation of additional keywords, including both psycholinguistic tests and extended corpus studies, and including examination of additional words. Such work could corroborate or refute the claims that I have made here.

The Keywords Project has actively addressed the problem of identifying keywords and defining *keyword* (cf. Durant 2008). The present study has shown that vagueness, rather than polysemy, is likely a definitive characteristic of keywords. Indeed, words that exhibit the clearest polysemy are likely the least interesting from the perspective of keywords study. The linguistic analysis presented here facilitates a more precise definition of keywords than earlier discussions have allowed, and these precise definitions should enhance both the general discussion of keywords, and the identification of keywords, in the future.

Original Sources

Survey of English Usage. 2006. International Corpus of English, Great Britain component (ICE-GB). London: Survey of English Usage.

Works Cited

Austin, John L. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon.
Barnes, J (ed). 1984. *The complete works of Aristotle, vol. 1*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Bell, A. 2006. Speech accommodation theory and audience design. In Keith Brown (ed), Encyclopedia of language and linguistics, 2nd edn. Oxford: Elsevier. 648-51.
Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris. 2005. *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Bucholtz, M. (1999). "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. Language in Society 28 (2), 203-225.
Cameron, Deborah & Don Kulick. 2003. *Language and sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Carston, Robyn. 2008. Linguistic communication and the semantics/pragmatics distinction. Synthese 165, 321-45.
Crary. 2005. 'Image'. In Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds), *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Croft, William. 2003. Mixed languages and acts of identity: An evolutionary approach. In Yaron Matras and Peter Bakker (eds), *The mixed language debate*. Berlin: Mouton. 41-72.

Cruse, D. A. 1986. *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: CUP.

Cruse, Alan. 2004. *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP.

Davidson, D. 1984. *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1972. Signature, event, context. Trans. Alan Bass. In Jacques Derrida, *Limited inc*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1-24.

Derrida. 1977. Limited inc a b c.... Trans. Samuel Weber. In Jacques Derrida, *Limited inc*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 29-110.

Durant, Alan. 2006. Raymond Williams's *Keywords*: Investigating meanings 'offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed'. Critical Quarterly 48 (4), 1-26.

Durant, Alan. 2008. 'The significance is in the selection': Identifying contemporary keywords. Critical Quarterly 50 (1-2), 122-42.

Evans, Nicholas and David Wilkins. 2000. In the mind's ear: The semantic extensions of perception verbs in Australian languages. Language 76 (3), 546-92.

Falkum, Ingrid Lossius. 2011. The semantics and pragmatics of polysemy: A relevance-theoretic account. Doctoral dissertation. University College London. http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1139079/1/1139079.pdf. Accessed 28 May, 2013.

Frow, John. 2005. Intellectual. In Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds), *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 189-91.

Geeraerts, Dirk. 1997. Diachronic prototype semantics: A contribution to historical lexicology. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Geeraerts, Dirk. 2006 [1993]. Vagueness's puzzles, polysemy's vagaries. In Dirk Geeraerts, Words and other wonders. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 99-148. [originally published Cognitive Linguistics 1993, 4: 223-72]

Geeraerts, Dirk. 2010. *Theories of lexical semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giles, H. 2001. 'Speech accommodation'. In R. Mesthrie (ed), Concise encyclopedia of sociolinguistics. Oxford: Elsevier. 193-7.

Gumperz, John J. 1982. *Language and social identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kemp, Gary. 2012. Quine versus Davidson: Truth, reference and meaning. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lakoff, George. 1970. A note on vagueness and ambiguity. Linguistic Inquiry 1 (3), 357-9.

Levinson, Stephen. 2000. *Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Boston: MIT Press.

Morris, Meaghan and Naoki Sakai. 2005. Modern. In Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds), *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 219-23.

Quine, Willard van Orman. 1960. *Word & object*. Boston: MIT Press.

Schneider, Edgar W. 2007. *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. Carmbridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, John. 2003. Linguistic categorization. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs & Richard B. Dasher. 2002. *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tuggy, David. 1993. Ambiguity, polysemy, and vagueness. Cognitive Linguistics 4. 273-90.1

Weinreich, Uriel, William Labov and Marvin Herzog. 1968. Empirical foundations for a theory of language change. In W. Lehmann and Y. Malkiel (eds), *Directions for Historical Linguistics*. Austin: U. of Texas Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana Press.

Zwicky, Arnold M. and Jerrold M. Saddock. 1975. Ambiguity tests and how to fail them. In John P. Kimball (ed.), *Syntax and semantics*, vol. 4. New York: Academic Press. 1-36.