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Michael B. Garcia, Lynne Geiser, Corrine McCawley, Alleen Pace Nilsen, and Elle Wolterbeek

Polysemy: A Neglected Concept in Wordplay

Four doctoral students and their professor contemplate the value of play in their high school and college classrooms. They discuss their experiences teaching children’s books, student illustrations, and excerpts from magazines and newspapers that convey the intricacies of the English language through homonyms, homophones, homographs, and polysemy.

The members of the American Dialect Society annually select a “Word of the Year,” broadly interpreted as not just words but phrases. The words need not be new, but they must be newly notable. Most winners are examples of polysemy, literally “many senses.” Polysemy is the workhorse of the English language, so teachers would do well to help students understand how words acquire “many senses.”

The 2005 Word of the Year was truthiness, as popularized by Stephen Colbert on Comedy Central’s mock news program, The Colbert Report. Truthiness is “preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true over concepts or facts known to be true.” Most speakers understand that the added suffixes mark the term as “different” by giving it a sense of “smallness” or “wishy-washiness.”

Other nominated terms included brown-out (an allusion to former FEMA director Michael Brown) for the poor handling of an emergency, whale tail for the appearance of thong underwear above someone’s waist band, and muffin-top to describe the bulge of flesh hanging over the top of low-ride jeans. These terms have a playful sense, but a word that sounds playful in its inaugural year can become a serious part of the language. In 1998, e- as a prefix to stand for electronic was unusual enough to be chosen as the Word of the Year. Less than ten years later, we accept such terms as e-mail, e-signature, and e-submission as Standard English.

Current events, developments, and attitudes cause speakers to devise new sound combinations and to add new senses to ordinary terms. They clip and combine sounds as with blog (from Web log), they change parts of speech as with to google, and they mark new senses with affixes as in truthiness or with unusual spelling as in e-mail. Speakers also provide powerful visual imagery through such metaphorical extensions as muffin-top and whale tail, and they make jokes on coincidental similarities between two words as with Michael Brown’s surname and the practice of cutting electricity off to portions of a city (a black-out is when a whole area is darkened).

The five of us—four teachers in a graduate class and our professor—have been exploring ways that language play is an essential part of serious communication. We are using play in two senses: as having fun and to refer to the “looseness” or “play” that is needed in rubberized brake pads and in the belts used in machinery. If there is too much play in overstretched rubber bands, they are ineffective, while if there is no play, they are useless. Language is much the same. Without a sense of play, babies could not learn to talk nor could adults adjust their language to talk about new concepts.

Benefits of Multiple Meanings
A preliminary lesson to teach students is that communication would be greatly restricted if speakers
had to have unique sounds for every concept; neither the human mind nor the human tongue is capable of wrapping itself around the number of individual words that would be needed. Figure 1 lists only a sampling of the different senses of the useful, one-syllable English word set. Notice how efficiently it carries its general meaning of “to put or place” into different expressions and parts of speech, then think of how big dictionaries and people’s minds would have to be if we did not recyle our words by giving them many “senses.”

Contributions from Other Languages

English has many words that sound the same and are spelled differently. One reason is that English speakers have borrowed many words from other languages, and when the pronunciation is beyond our speaking abilities, we do what children often do when they hear something they don’t understand. They bring the word into their system by pronouncing it in a way that seems right, which is why, for example, young children talk about the game of chess instead of chess. Here are explanations of how some borrowed words became English. That our minds can figure out logical reasons for making these pronunciations fit illustrates language play in the sense of looseness and flexibility.

> Chaise lounge got their name from French chaise longue (“long chair”) because they reminded English speakers of “lounging.”

> A score of love (zero) in tennis came from French l’œuf (“the egg”), which is the same metaphor that people use when referring to a score of zero as “a goose egg.”

> Guerilla warfare comes from Spanish guerra (“war”) and -illa (“little”). All English speakers pronounce it as gorilla, while many also spell it that way.

Playing with Puns

As teachers we want to demonstrate to students that the English language is systematic and that speakers can use the system of language to find meanings of unfamiliar words and to create new ones. Our students, however, are more interested in having fun and in “proving” that English is an amazingly confusing and difficult language. As a compromise, we created the following activity based on two popular sets of children’s picture books: the Amelia Bedelia picture books by Peggy Parish about a housemaid named Amelia Bedelia, who always misinterprets Mrs. Rogers’s directions but is loved anyway because of her wonderful cooking; and Fred Gwynne’s oversized picture books, A Chocolate Moose for Dinner, A Little Pigeon Toad, and The King Who Rained. These books feature a little girl and what she imagines when she hears adults talking. Readers can immediately understand the girl’s confusions because Gwynne has spelled the words to match what the child imagines. Two other children’s books that could also be used for this lesson include Marvin Terban’s In a Pickle and Other Funny Idioms, which has zany illustrations similar to those in Gwynne’s books, and Vivian Walsh’s Olive, the Other Reindeer. Olive is a dog who, when listening to the “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” song, thinks that the line about “all of the other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 1. Different Senses of Set</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please set the table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to reset your clocks when the power goes off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their quarrel upset the guests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She set her sights on a rich man. Get ready! Get set! Go!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His attorney claimed he had been set up.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
reindeer” is referring to her and so she sets out on a quest to find the North Pole.

We took the Gwynne and Parish books to our various classes and intermixed our reading of them with discussions on whether the puns were based on words that accidentally sounded alike as with reigned and rained or on words that developed “many senses.” Students did not enjoy the Amelia Bedelia books as much as they liked Gwynne’s books. Amelia Bedelia’s misunderstandings are mostly based on her confusing different senses of the same word as when she brings home the train conductor rather than the orchestra conductor or when she thinks “dusting” the living room is putting dust (bath powder) on things rather than taking dust off. Gwynne’s books were funnier because he plays with both kinds of puns and so the surprise is greater and therefore more apt to make readers laugh.

We read one or more of the Gwynne books aloud and students read Parish’s Amelia Bedelia books in small groups. After talking about the various puns, we brainstormed other examples and listed them on the chalkboard or butcher paper. Then, students worked in groups of two or three to make a page for a children’s book.

As each group shared its page, we asked the class members to decide whether the group’s wordplay illustrated polysemy or was based on only a coincidental sound similarity. About two-thirds of the “jokes”—including the ones that students thought were the funniest—were based on two words that sounded the same but differed in meaning, while one-third of the “jokes” were based on words that had deep-structure or meaning relationships. These words developed their additional senses so long ago that many speakers dismiss them as “dead metaphors” and give little thought to how the new meanings relate to the old. We were pleased when students tried illustrating the terms by tracing them to their literal meanings. For example, one group drew a girl “beating a dead horse” with a stick. Another group drew two horses in a race. One with crossed-out eyes and its legs in the air had apparently died just before the finish line, which was being crossed by a healthier and happier horse. Both groups had fun and felt successful in their illustrations, but the class agreed that the picture of the girl beating her dead horse with a stick was closer to the idiom’s source: In the days before automobiles, horses would sometimes lie down in the middle of traffic out of fatigue or as a form of protest or fear. The driver of the wagon or carriage would jump out and beat the horse, but of course it was to no avail if the poor animal had died.

Because we were interested in teaching thinking skills, we led students to focus on the drawings that were examples of polysemy, as shown in Figure 2. Teachers might hesitate to enter into this kind of an open discussion for fear that they won’t be able to explain the source or meaning of an idiom, but good dictionaries provide clues under the key word (capitalized in the figure) and some of our best discussions occurred in relation to the terms whose origins and connections were the hardest to figure out.

What Surprised Us or What We Learned
Corrine McCawley

When we discussed the puns from Gwynne’s A Little Pigeon Toad, my high school sophomores liked the ones that were unexpected, groaned at the more obvious ones, and struggled to grasp more puns than I had expected they would. Gwynne’s puns were almost equally divided between those based on words that are coincidentally similar in sound and those that are in reality metaphors. In the first group all the words have different spellings, while all the ones in the second group illustrating polysemy or metaphor are spelled the same (see fig. 3).

Because we had just read The Taming of the Shrew, I could draw connections between some of Shakespeare’s wordplay and the modern examples we were looking at. When I passed out paper for students to make illustrations, having Gwynne’s phrasing of “Daddy says . . .” or “Mommy says . . .” helped them get started, but others did wonderfully creative drawings of idiomatic expressions such as “Cat got your tongue” and of the president’s critics “Beating around the bush.” The students
FIGURE 2. Polysemy Shown through Meaning-Related Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawing</th>
<th>Cut Line</th>
<th>Teacher/Student Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A mother with a bag of potato chips is holding one up to the wall.</td>
<td>Mama says she accidentally put a CHIP in the wall.</td>
<td>The similarity is between the shape of a chip of paint or plaster. The &quot;joke&quot; is the difference between a chip of paint coming off and a potato chip being put on the wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A baseball player is running off the field to a nearby house in the neighborhood.</td>
<td>The fans told the runner to run HOME.</td>
<td>Home plate is where baseball players love to get to, sort of like we feel happy to get home after school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An oval-shaped table has two plant leaves laid in the middle.</td>
<td>Mom says there are two LEAVES for the table.</td>
<td>Leaves for tables are like flat and thin plant leaves. They can come out like the pages from &quot;loose-leaf&quot; notebooks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mole is digging in a yard while a spy in a suit, a briefcase, and an animal face stands outside an office.</td>
<td>The MOLE was late for his assignment.</td>
<td>Moles are little, brown rodents that dig tunnels, sort of like the moles under people’s skin. Spies are called moles because they work &quot;underground.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person is standing in a puddle of glue that has apparently escaped from a container labeled “Elmer’s.” An extra complication is a hive of bees.</td>
<td>This is a STICKY situation.</td>
<td>Being stuck in spilled glue is literally a sticky situation. The extra joke is the hive of bees, which even without the glue would make for a &quot;sticky&quot; situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A triangular shaped block holds a teeter-totter with round seats on the end. One side has a checkbook on it.</td>
<td>Momma said she needed to BALANCE her checkbook.</td>
<td>One suggestion was that this would be funnier if the other end of the teeter-totter had new clothes or furniture that the mother wants to buy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A man is walking up to a huge plant in a pot that has windows and doors like a factory.</td>
<td>Daddy said that he works at THE PLANT.</td>
<td>Natural plants grow and produce such things as food and wood. Manufacturing plants are similar in that they too produce things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 3. Comparison of Puns in Gwynne’s A Little Pigeon Toad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Puns Based on Homonyms (different words with different spellings that sound the same)</th>
<th>Puns Based on Polysemy (different senses of the same words that are spelled the same)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>threadbare coat vs. bear made from thread</td>
<td>a knot in a rope vs. the appearance of a knot in a tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sowing a field vs. sewing a seam</td>
<td>a sledge hammer vs. the shape of a hammerhead shark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peers in class vs. piers in the ocean</td>
<td>a natural bee hive vs. the appearance of hives on skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a dog that heels vs. an injured dog that heals</td>
<td>the length of a man’s feet vs. feet on a ruler</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

enjoyed the lesson but suggested that they innately understood why wordplay is funny and that my overanalysis “took the fun out of it.”

Elle Wolterbeek
I thought my first-year college class of “basic” writers would be much like the high school classes. This was only partially true. Students who had learned English as a second language were more irritated than amused by Amelia Bedelia, possibly because they hadn’t met her as a child and didn’t feel the pleasant nostalgia that other students felt. Another reason might have been that her mistakes were too close to their own. I have heard comedians say that people will laugh when an anecdote reminds them of someone they know. But if the anecdote makes them think, “Oh, no! That’s me!” they won’t laugh.

On the first day of reading the books, we made lists of homonyms and homophones, including words that illustrated the concept of polysemy. On the second day, when I brought the lists back,
along with a variety of art supplies and fresh paper, and told them we were going to make a children’s book, they groaned, but the groans stopped as soon as they began writing and drawing. Students worked individually and in pairs, and the room was soon filled with chatter. Within thirty minutes, some had created more than two pages. A couple of the small groups chose to illustrate sexual allusions. When I pointed out that we had agreed to do “a book for children,” one twenty-three-year-old father of a toddler countered with, “When I read to my son, I want to have some fun, too.” The best I could do was to talk a little about why people have created so many metaphorical ways to allude to topics that make us feel uncomfortable, including ethnic differences, prejudices, sexual matters, and religious beliefs.

Next time I won’t advertise the lesson as being about language play because it would be better for students to be happily surprised if they found themselves amused.

Lynne Geiser
Since our professor had collected and laminated several puns from various magazines and newspapers, I took these into class on the second day of my lesson—partly because I wanted to show students that what we were learning had real-world connections. I held up the full-page ads and read the cut lines and then asked students to rate their understanding as either (1) Got It Right Away, (2) Took Me a Minute But I Got It, and (3) Didn’t Get It. With the smaller ads, I let students work in groups to make their decisions.

The ones the students liked the best were those they had identified as Took Me a Minute. They groaned at the obvious puns; for example, on the top half of a page was a picture of a man wearing a mismatched suit, lots of jewelry, and a Hawaiian shirt, while on the bottom half was a bowl of cereal with milk being poured onto it. The man’s picture was labeled “5% Good Taste,” while the bowl of cereal was labeled “100% Good Taste.” This was one that everybody “got,” but few students were interested in explaining how the two kinds of taste were an example of polysemy.

Three that they liked included a “Lives at Steak” heading on a picture of cattle illustrating an article about mad cow disease, a “Cloning Around” headline on a picture of seven identical babies, and a “VROOOOM at the Top” headline on a story about a new car being promoted by the CEO of General Motors. While most of them got that cloning was a pun on clowning and that steak and steake just happen to sound the same, those who did not catch onto VROOOOM demanded an explanation: VROOOOM is the noise made by a high-powered car, plus it reminds readers of “Room at the Top,” which is where this CEO works.

While most students appeared uninterested in further explanations about meaning-based and sound-based relationships, those who were frustrated by not understanding some of the puns asked for help. This provided opportunities for those who caught on to show their “smarts” and for me to explain that language play is often based on cultural ideas or concepts. One example was a Time magazine story about the war in Iraq that was entitled “Shell Game.” Because of the photo, most students got the reference to ammunition shells, but they had never heard of the kind of shell game that is a fraud or a swindle where something of little value is substituted for something valuable. This usage is a metaphor based on an old game in which people hid things under walnut shells that they would slide around on a flat surface hoping to trick people into picking the empty ones.

Michael B. Garcia
I tend to spend less time on grammar and language than on writing instruction and literature studies, and I felt unsure about leading a discussion on whatever words students would choose to illustrate. But I learned that I could have some fun with students while teaching them something about language. One of the best drawings in my class was of a man dressed in athletic clothes with big, hairy arms that ended in claws. The cut line read, “Daddy says ‘We have the Right to Bear Arms.’” I wasn’t sure where to start with this but decided to have students look up the word bear in their dictionaries so that we could see if the two meanings of bear in the joke illustrated polysemy or coincidence. We found that the word bear, which names the animal, came from Old English bær, which also gave us brawn and brown. The verb bear meaning “to carry” came from the Middle English borne, which is the root of borne, as when a mother “carries” a child for nine months before it is born. These two words just happen to sound the same, but when we went looking for arm,
we discovered that the English word *arm* is a wonderful example of polysemy. It comes from the Latin *armus* ("shoulder" and "arm") and so do such terms as *army, armor, armada, armed forces,* and even *armadillo.* They are all metaphors based on the idea that such weapons as clubs, swords, guns, and whatever else is available enable people who are either attacking or defending themselves to strengthen and extend the length and power of their "arms."

This was a "fun" lesson, not in the sense of causing anyone to laugh aloud but in the sense of being something new and different, plus students learned that they could use a dictionary for more than just looking up spelling.

**Alleen Pace Nilsen (Graduate Class Instructor)**

I was surprised by how strongly Corrine, Elle, Lynne, and Michael felt they needed to defend or justify what they were doing. As Lynne mentioned in class, *understanding and appreciating* are not appropriate verbs for *standards.* While I naively thought that teaching high school students to distinguish between wordplay based on polysemy and wordplay based on accidental sound similarities would automatically open doors to better vocabulary scores on high-stakes tests, these four outstanding teachers worried that they were taking time away from required instruction, including test preparation. They felt obliged to point out to students how often they made mistakes with homophones and they passed out definitions for *homonyms* ("same names"), *homophones* ("same sounds"), *homographs* ("same writing"), and *polysemy* ("many senses"). While I think these terms are confusing because the categories overlap, these teachers seemed to feel that the terms lent importance or meaning to their lessons. I was also surprised at how much better they felt, even though it was after the fact, when they found two clearly spelled out Arizona State Standards that they could have written on their chalkboards, properly identified with the kinds of chapter and verse numbers that in my day were reserved for Holy Scripture or for documenting legal precedents in court cases:

Reading Strand 1 (Reading Process), Concept 4 (Vocabulary), PO 1: Draw inferences about meaning of new vocabulary, based on knowledge of linguistic roots and affixes (e.g., Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon).

Writing Strand 2 (Writing Components), Concept 6 (Conventions) PO 11: Demonstrate control of grammar and usage in writing: h) homonyms.

What occurred as a result of this lesson was not that all—or even most—students came away with a new appreciation of polysemy, nor did we manage to convince everyone that the English language is surprisingly systematic and that they should be grateful that homonyms are spelled in different ways. But something almost as wonderful happened. Students began to discuss wordplay of their own accord. In two classes, students brought in examples of advertisements using wordplay. Other students commented to one another and the instructor about different examples they had thought of or heard in the last few days. And we found ourselves being more aware of polysemy so that next time we teach this lesson and tape up sheets of *butcher paper* on which to write examples, we will feel comfortable asking students to conjecture on why we call it *butcher paper.* For those of you who don't know, a couple of generations ago when most Americans lived in small towns, the only place a teacher could get large pieces of sturdy paper was the butcher shop, where the butcher had rolls of white or brown paper for wrapping meat.

Today's butchers use styrofoam trays and plastic wrap; that speakers still use the term *butcher paper* demonstrates how English provides its speakers with daily lessons in polysemy. A hundred such minilessons spread over the course of a semester will probably be more effective than devoting two full weeks to a unit on word study. Perhaps best of all, by teaching such minilessons in the context of their regular classes, teachers won't have to worry so much about searching out and documenting which "Standard" they are teaching.
Works Cited

The writers are PhD students in English Education at Arizona State University. Michael B. Garcia also teaches at Mesa High School, Lynne Geiser at Westwood High School in Mesa, Corrine McCawley at Horizon Community Learning Center in Phoenix, and Elle Wolterbeek at the University of Advancing Technology in Tempe. Alleen Pace Nilsen is the professor of the class in which they worked on this project. email: alleen.nilsen@asu.edu.

EJ 5 Years Ago

Imagination and a Community of Writers

For several years I played [John Lennon’s “Imaginate”] on the first day of my creative writing class, and we discussed its language, its vivid images, and its utopian dream. The first assignment was simple. “Go home. Imagine. Write what you imagine.” The results were sometimes phenomenal; I could always count on this assignment to bring out the poets in the class. It freed them to sing, and it opened the class on a joyous note of creativity; we began the next day by sharing what we’d written, building a community of writers, all joined by our ability to imagine.