**Workshop: Polysemy, Concepts and Representation**

**CPS & IFIKK, UiO**

**22–23 May 2024**

**Titles and abstracts**

## Invited speakers

### Robyn Carston: Words and Roots – Polysemy and Allosemy

Polysemy is cross-categorial, so the linguistic unit ultimately underpinning polysemy is not the word but the categoryless root of related words, e.g. the root √stone common to the three homophonous words (noun, verb and adjective) 'stone', whose meanings are semantically-pragmatically interrelated.  In some current root-based approaches to morpho-syntax (Marantz 2013, Harley 2014, Embick 2015), it is proposed that roots themselves are polysemous, albeit with meanings that are realized only in specific grammatical contexts (a phenomenon known as *allosemy*, parallel to allomorphy on the phonological side). In this talk, taking the polysemy of words as established, I assess the notion of allosemy and conclude that there is very little evidence for its existence, and that roots themselves are (most likely) meaningless, with atomic meanings (or 'Content') mapped to categorized linguistic structures of varying complexity (Borer 2013, 2014), that meaning being typically pragmatic in origin (Carston 2022, 2024).

### John Collins: Polysemy and Roots: Wide vs. Narrow Fetching

On Pietroski's (2018) model lexical items are not assigned semantic values (worldly entities) but encode instructions to *fetch* and *build* concepts from memory addresses that potentially contain a number of concepts. We shall view this model as a blueprint for how to understand polysemy, and shall fill it in with a *narrow* individuation of fetch, which best captures Pietroski's intention. By these lights, the 'meaning' of a lexical item is an instruction to take *some* concept or other from an address, without any concept being necessarily delivered; that is, fetch targets an address rather than whatever is at the address. Thus, the address itself becomes akin to a root concept on the model of a lexical root. A *wide* individuation of fetch, which we suspect is how Pietroski's model is naturally viewed from a traditionalist optic, amounts to fetch always delivering a concept for a lexical item viewed in isolation of any syntactic structure. Wide fetching, as it were, *does* occur, in the sense that concepts at addresses are delivered, but which concept is fetched is a function of stages of syntactic construction in which the given lexical item sits. In this sense, the meaning of a lexical item cannot be an instance of wide fetching. Consideration of polysemy will bear out this conclusion. So, we think the polysemy/copredication challenge can be met by a non-truth-conditional model.

### Michelle Liu: Polysemy, Mental Simulation and Language Comprehension

According to the simulation view, language comprehension often constitutively involves perceptual-motor simulations. In this talk, I will survey the empirical evidence for the simulation view. Drawing on recent work on semantic representation, I make suggestions as to how the simulation view can be reconciled with the traditional view on which language comprehension constitutively involves amodal symbol manipulation, elaborating on when perceptual-motor simulations may be deployed for language

comprehension. I shall also illustrate how the simulation view can illuminate our judgements about zeugmaticity with respect to sentences involving polysemous words with closely related senses. I end the talk by noting how perceptual-motor simulations can have a significant impact on language users through different forms of language.

**Georges Rey: Could a linguistic semantics explain the *a priori* as philosophers have hoped?**

## Organizers/speakers

**Nicholas Allott: Why do we think polysemy exists? Revisiting traditional arguments in light of recent scepticism**

It's traditional to distinguish between monosemy, homonymy and polysemy, where a polysemous lexical item is one with more than one related sense. Polysemy is poorly understood but has received considerable theoretical and experimental attention in recent years, including at least one paper arguing that it doesn't exist (Brody & Feiman, 2024).
I focus on two traditional motivations for taking words to be polysemous. The argument from translation claims polysemy is evidenced by some (not all) cases where a word in one language requires two distinct lexical items to translate it in another. The argument from meaning change claims that historical changes of sense rely on a stage where the lexical item is polysemous. I try to evaluate the reach and force of these arguments, in the process articulating some of the assumptions they rely on and shedding light (I hope) on a number of live discussions, including whether regular and irregular polysemy are distinct kinds, whether polysemous words have univocal lexical representations, and when polysemy claims are about lexical representations and when they are about components of a proposition expressed by the speaker of an utterance. In passing, I suggest that Borer's view of lexical semantics implies that one of Brody & Feiman's arguments has a broader reach than they have claimed.

**Terje Lohndal: Polysemy and the nature of the mental lexicon**

The mental lexicon is typically assumed to consist of lexical entries ('words'). On a lexicalist view, these entries have a lot of information stored in them, information that typically projects into syntax. Anti-lexicalist views, on the other hand, assume a very different structure of the mental lexicon. For instance, approaches such as Distributed Morphology (e.g. Embick 2015) and Borer's exoskeletal approach (Borer 2005a, b, 2013) hold that the mental lexicon consists of roots. Exactly what roots are differs among approaches, but they have no syntactic category and typically very little, if any, meaning. Carston (2019, 2021, 2023) argues that this anti-lexicalist view provides a fruitful foundation for understanding and modeling polysemy.
This talk will survey some of the evidence in favor of anti-lexicalist views of the mental lexicon and outline their basic assumptions. It will also address some challenges and avenues for future research.

**Ingrid Lossius Falkum: The pragmatics of count-mass polysemy**

In this talk I discuss a subtype of systematic polysemy which in English (and several other languages) appears to rest on the distinction between count and mass uses of nouns (e.g., shoot a *rabbit*/eat *rabbit*/wear *rabbit*). Traditional computational semantic

approaches have analysed such sense alternations as being generated by an inventory of specialized lexical inference rules. In this talk I discuss some evidence that the linguistic component provided by count-mass syntax leaves a more underspecified semantic output than is usually acknowledged by rule-based theories, and argue in favor of an analysis which treats count-mass syntax as a procedural constraint on NP referents, combined with a single, relevance-guided lexical pragmatic mechanism that can cover the same ground as lexical rules, as well as those cases in which rule-based accounts need to appeal to pragmatics.