

## Hypersynonymy for *Polyfunctionality*

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### Abstract

The term *polyfunctionality* has an extraordinary number of synonyms and near-synonyms in linguistics, e.g. *multifunctionality*, *polycategoriality*, *conversion*, and *zero derivation*. In this paper I will present many of these terms and discuss possible differences (for some authors) among them. The paper will thus be a case study in *hypersynonymy*, the existence of a very large set of (near-)synonymous terms.

**Keywords:** polyfunctionality, polysemy, zero derivation, synonymy

### Introduction

Terminological confusion and complexity is, unfortunately, a part of linguistics, and may be particularly troublesome for students. For example, for some linguists *stop* and *plosive* have different meanings (as the latter names a subset of the former: plosives are stops which use an egressive pulmonic airstream mechanism), but other linguists take them to be synonyms. The same applies to *opposite* and *antonym*. However, there is one area which seems to have an enormous amount of terminological complexity, even for linguistics: *polyfunctionality*. There are many terms which are synonyms or near-synonyms of this term. In the present paper I will bring up and discuss many of them. It is thus a metalinguistic work, and a study of a case of *hypersynonymy*, by which I mean the situation when there are many terms which are synonyms (or near-synonyms) of each other. I will only be discussing terminology in English, although the same phenomenon occurs in linguistic works in some other languages.

The term *hypersynonymy* is rare, but is used by a few authors, often or usually in discussions of slang. Poynton (1990, p. 226) ascribes this term to Wescott (1976), but it is not clear that Wescott is using it in exactly the same way that I am. My notion of hypersynonymy is in accord with the definition given in Thorne (2010, p. 491): “the coining of a large number of terms for the same or [a] similar concept”.

In this short survey I will not fully discuss all of the terms involved, but one should be able to get an idea of the extent to which hypersynonymy for *polyfunctionality* exists.

### *Polyfunctionality* and Similar Terms

Let us now have a look at what is meant by *polyfunctionality*. Definitions of polyfunctionality are surprisingly difficult to find; for example, there is no entry for *polyfunctionality* (or *polyfunctional*) in linguistics dictionaries such as Brown and Miller (2013) or Crystal (2008). Chancharu (2009, p. 13) states, “most authors who employed the term [*polyfunctionality*] did not even bother to define it, and even if they did, the definitions given were most of the time

inadequate”. He earlier (p. 1) gives what could be seen as a definition: “polyfunctionality is a linguistic phenomenon in which one form is associated with more than one meaning or sense, and the multiple meanings or senses of a polyfunctional form belong to more than one syntactic category.”

Karlsson (2009, p. 419) states, “There are several polyfunctional suffixes [in Finnish] where the grammatical functions cannot be segmented”. One of his examples is the nominative plural ending; it is polyfunctional in his sense because it has two simultaneous functions: marking nominative case and marking plural. This is not the same as the sense of *polyfunctionality* with which I am concerned with, when different instances of the same item (or set of homonymous items) have different functions.

The terms *multifunctionality* and *multifunctional* occur in some linguistics works. For example, Lefebvre (2004, p. 155) states, “A lexical item that fulfils more than one grammatical function is multifunctional”. From a non-technical perspective *polyfunctional* and *multifunctional* would appear to be synonyms. It would therefore not be too surprising if they were treated as such by some authors or editors, and we see this in Laury (2008). The subtitle of this book is *The multifunctionality of conjunctions*, and one would therefore expect the terms *multifunctional* and/or *multifunctionality* to come up often in it. However, in the body of the book there are only two occurrences of the former term and none of the latter; the subject index entry for *multifunctionality* says only “see categoriality, continuum” (p. 252). On the other hand, *polyfunctional(ity)* appears 13 times, including 5 times in the book’s introduction, which is co-authored by Laury.

On the other hand, Chancharu (2009, pp. 14-15) distinguishes between *polyfunctionality* and *multifunctionality*:

It is only to such polysemous forms with multiple syntactic functions as *root* that the term “polyfunctionality” should apply, not to such homonymous forms with multiple syntactic functions as *stalk*. The reason is that, in the case of polysemous forms with syntactic multiplicity, there is diachronic and synchronic motivation for the association between the meanings or senses encoded by different syntactic functions. As a result, it is a worthwhile job to study how some meanings/functions develop into others and how the multiple meanings/functions are organized conceptually. On the other hand, the semantic, and perhaps syntactic, multiplicity of a homonymous form is not motivated, neither diachronically nor synchronically, but is a product of historical accident, and is thus not so interesting a subject matter. Alternative, the unassuming umbrella term “multifunctionality” should be applied to the linguistic phenomenon of syntactic multiplicity in general, including both “polyfunctionality” in this study’s sense (polysemic multifunctionality) and homonymic functionality.

That is, *multifunctionality* can be used to describe all situations when items in different functions share the same form, while *polyfunctionality* should only be used when the items having the same function are etymologically related (or, one could say, when there is in fact only one item which has different functions at different times). (Note that in this passage Chancharu has also used another term which seems to be synonymous with *multifunctionality*, *syntactic multiplicity*.)

*Plurifunctional(ity)* (or *pluri-functionality*) is used by some authors in the relevant sense, e.g. in the following passage from Faraclas et al. (2014, p. 178):

One of the few aspects of the grammars of the Atlantic Creoles about which there is near consensus is the tendency for lexical categories to be less specified in Creole languages than in their Western European lexifier languages. This means that a given lexical item is more likely to be pluri-

functional in an Atlantic Creole than a similar lexical item in its European lexifier language. Plurifunctionality lends itself by its very nature to multiple voicing, because the same lexical item can be interpreted by listeners of different linguistic backgrounds to be playing different grammatical roles in what otherwise appears to be the exact same sentence.

Oddly enough, in the sentence following this passage, the word *multifunctionality* occurs (with what appears to be the same meaning), and the title of the section in which it appears is “Multiple voicing and multifunctionality in the English, Dutch, and Iberian lexifier Atlantic Creoles”. That is, as in Laury (2008), there is inconsistency in terminology.

## ***Polycategoriality and Similar Terms***

*Polycategoriality* is given a definition in at least two works. Lois, Vapnarsky, Becquey, and Monod Becquelin (2017, p. 102) state, “As a working definition, we consider as polycategorial an item used in different lexical categories with an identical form”. Berman (2017, p. 344) says, “‘Polycategoriality’ is defined here as characterizing items which share the same morpho-phonological form, but function in different lexico-grammatical categories”.

From these definitions one might think that *polycategoriality* is more or less equivalent to *polyfunctionality*. However, according to Lois, Vapnarsky, Becquey, and Monod Becquelin (2017, p. 102), “Polycategoriality is not co-extensive with polyfunctionality ... The link between the two depends on the relationship between lexical category and function in a given language”. If I understand this correctly, they distinguish between (lexical) categories and functions, and there is not necessarily a 1-1 mapping between them in a language (in fact, there might rarely be one). A principled discussion of this, and indeed of polyfunctionality and polycategoriality in general, requires precise definitions of *function* and *category*, and this may not always be provided by those who deal with these concepts. In the absence of such definitions the differences between (or synonymy of) *polyfunctionality* and *polycategoriality* in the view of authors may not be clear.

The term *multicategoriality* can also be found in some works on linguistics. For example, Riemer (2010, p. 330) states, “Many languages show widespread **multicategoriality** (roots which may appear as different parts of speech)”. Cauchard (2017, pp. 524-5) distinguishes between *multicategoriality* and *polyfunctionality*, both of which are types of *lexical flexibility* (thus using another term with a similar meaning):

Lexical flexibility can be found on the categorial or functional level. More precisely, flexible lexemes are analysed as either (i) precategorial ..., or as (ii) multicategorial, i.e. belonging to several word classes, or as (iii) polyfunctional, i.e. as belonging to a lexical class whose members are able to perform more than one syntactic function without undergoing any morphological change.

Lionnet (2014) speaks of *ambicategorial* words and *ambicategoriality*; on p. 189 he says, “Exophoric demonstratives in North-Central Ju ... are ambicategorial: adnominal when modifying an NP, verbal when used as predicates”. Perhaps the reason he chose *ambicategorial* rather than *poly-* or *multicategorial* is that the words which he describes with this word belong to two categories, and, just as, in a strict sense *ambiguity* means having precisely two meanings (i.e. not three or more), *ambicategoriality* can be taken to mean being a member of precisely two

categories. The term *bicategorical(ity)* (or *bi-categorical(ity)*) might be clearer, and this term is sometimes used, e.g. by Campbell (2017, p. 442).

*Transcategorical(ity)* is also found in the literature. Siebenhütter (2018, p. 263) may take it to be equivalent to *polyfunctionality*: “A prominent feature of the isolating languages of Southeast Asia and Africa is polyfunctionality or transcategoriality (categorical change)”.

Finally, there is *acategorical(ity)*; an acategorical item could appear as a word of more than one (or any?) category, as it is not marked as belonging to a particular category. One might think that the difference between such an item and a polycategorical one is that the latter is specified for category, but for more than one of them. *Acategorical(ity)* is used in reference to roots much more often than in reference to words (roots might gain categorial specification in the course of morphological derivation), but some authors do speak of acategorical words, e.g. Zwicky (1984, 159), who denies their existence:

I propose that *there are no acategorical words*; that is, stated positively, *every word (in every language) belongs to one of the syntactic categories provided by (universal) grammatical theory*.

Clitics and inflectional affixes are acategorical ... but every word must be assignable to a syntactic category. [emphasis in the original]

## **Polysemy and Similar Terms**

*Polysemy* is probably a more common term than *polyfunctionality* and *polycategoriality*. For example, it may come up in introductory linguistics courses, and be compared to *homonymy*. In such a context it might be defined as the situation when a single word (lexeme) has two or more related meanings (e.g. *mouth* (part of the body), *mouth* of a bottle, *mouth* of a river). *Homonymy*, on the other hand, refers to the situation when two different words have the same form (e.g. *club* ‘organization and *club* ‘stick for hitting’); these words could be etymologically unrelated, or they could be etymologically related, but speakers are unaware of this.

When defined in this way, *polysemy* may appear to be different from *polyfunctionality*, as it involves semantics (namely meanings of words), while polyfunctionality names a grammatical phenomenon. This is in line with Wang (2014), who says “we introduce the term **polyfunctionality** to represent the number of parts of speech of a word” (p. 46) and “The number of meanings of a word is called polysemy” (p. 65).

However, the following sentence from Horie, Pardeshi and Kaul (2008, p. 195) indicates that (for them) the terms are synonymous: “Polysemy or polyfunctionality is among the most productively explored topics in Cognitive Linguistics”.

In addition, some authors use language indicating that they do not see *polysemy* as being applicable only to cases such as the one of *mouth* described above. For example, in Ahmad and Rogers (2001, p. 611) there is a paragraph labelled “word class polysemy”, part of which reads as follows: “many linguistic forms, particularly in a language such as English, may be partially polysemous, belonging to more than one word class, e.g., *test* (noun), *test* (verb); *exhaust* (noun), *exhaust* (verb).”

Somewhat similarly, Schiller (1989, p. 278) speaks of *syntactic polysemy*: “The term Syntactic Polysemy describes a phenomenon found in a wide variety of the world’s languages, where a single lexical item is found in many different syntactic positions.” One of the cases of it which he presents involves the Khmer word *trəw*, whose meanings include ‘hit’ and ‘correct’ and which can be a verb, a noun, an adjective, and an adverb.

The term *heterosemy* is employed to refer to the same (general) sort of situation. Lichtenberk (1991, p. 476) says that he uses it

to refer to cases (within a single language) where two or more meanings or functions that are historically related, in the sense of deriving from the same ultimate source, are borne by reflexes of the common source element that belong in different morphosyntactic categories. Thus, for example, there is heterosemy if a verb, a directional particle, and an aspect marker all ultimately descend from the same historical source. This definition of heterosemy subsumes even those cases where the reflexes of the common source are not phonologically identical: for example, a grammatical reflex may be phonologically reduced, whereas a lexical reflex need not be.

Rice (1999, p. 227) states that *polyfunctionality* is “more or less equivalent ... to *heterosemy*”. On the other hand, the title of Janssen (1995) gives the opposite impression: “Heterosemy or polyfunctionality? The case of Dutch *maar* ‘but, only, just’”.

## Other Terminology

There is a range of other terms which are (roughly) equivalent to *polyfunctionality*. Perhaps the oldest of these is *conversion*, used by Sweet (1892, p. 38), in a section entitled “Conversion of the parts of speech”:

in English, as in many other languages, we can often **convert** a word, that is, make it into another part of speech without any modification or addition, except, of course, the necessary change of inflection, etc. Thus we can make the verb *walk* in *he walks* into a noun by simply giving it the same formal characteristics as other nouns, as in *he took a walk*, *three different walks of life*. We call *walk* in these two collocations a converted noun, meaning a word which has been made into a noun by conversion.

Conversion bears some resemblance to derivation, although the mere change of a verb into a noun can hardly be said to make a new word of it.

The last sentence in this passage brings to mind the term *zero derivation* (or *zero-derivation*), which is common. It has the following definition in Matthews (1997, p. 409): “A process of word-formation in which there is no change to the form that undergoes it: e.g. that by which the verb *fish*, seen as one lexical unit, is derived from the noun *fish*, seen as another lexical unit.” In his definition of *conversion* Matthews (ibid., p. 76) says that it is

Often equivalent to zero derivation ... But a distinction can be drawn in principle between a single unit in the lexicon which has both a primary and a secondary role in syntax, and the derivation of different lexical unit by a process like, or of, word-formation.

What apparently distinguishes both of these terms from those brought up in earlier sections is that they both seem to describe processes, while polyfunctionality, etc. describe states or situations (which could be brought about by the process of conversion or zero derivation). Other terms for this type of process are brought up by Davies (2004, p. 3):

Three different terms are applied to the process I am calling ‘conversion’: most current linguists use ‘conversion’, but others refer to the process as ‘functional change’ or ‘functional shift’, and ‘zero-derivation’ or ‘zero-affixation’. Each term is associated with a different connotation, theory and slightly different meaning.

If *zero-affixation* is indeed used to name this type of process, it is misleading, since there are examples of putative zero affixes which do not change word classes, e.g. the putative zero plural marker on *sheep*. Even more synonyms are mentioned by Balteiro (2007, p. 9), including *functional shift*, *reversible syntactic transposition*, *internal derivation*, *improper derivation*, *class extension*, and *word-class exchange*.

Also referring to a process is *recategorization*; it is used by e.g. Dubinsky & Williams (1995). However, the process it names might appear not to result in polyfunctionality, since there might be an implication that an item recategorized no longer belongs to its original category (aside from the fact that recategorization might involve only two word classes (the original one and the new one), while polyfunctionality could involve more than two). This is true e.g. of *during*, one of the words brought up in Kortmann & König's (1992) paper on recategorization; it is now only a preposition and not a verbal form. (The title of this paper contains another term for the process, *categorial reanalysis*.) However, it is not always the case, e.g. the word *for*, which is discussed by Dubinsky & Williams (1995), is still a preposition as well as being a complementizer. One might note also the wording in Kortmann (1997, p. 64), "recategorization or the acquisition of an additional category membership"; if one gets something *additional*, there is the implication that he keeps what he already has. There is also the term *transcategorization*, used by e.g. Brinton (2012, p. 142); the title of Brinton's section 3.4, "Transcategorization (recategorization)", indicates that she sees it as equivalent to *recategorization*.

Another synonym, *transmutation* also seems to name a process, but from the definition of it in Pei and Gaynor (1969, pp. 220) it is not entirely clear that it does:

A term occasionally used by grammarians for the use of a word, without any change in form, in syntactic functions assigned to different parts of speech. (E.g., in English, Chinese, etc., a great many words can be used as verbs, adjectives, nouns, etc.)—Also called *functional change*.

A relatively old term is *class-cleavage*, which was apparently introduced by Bloomfield (1933, p. 204): "The word *one* occurs not only as an indefinite determiner (*one man*), but also in some entirely different functions (as in *a big one*, *if one only knew*); this phenomenon may be designated as *class-cleavage*."

Some ways of describing polyfunctionality include the word *ambiguity*: *part-of-speech ambiguity* (e.g. Milne 1988, p. 45), *word-class ambiguity* (e.g. Stageberg 1966, p. 559), and *categorial ambiguity* (e.g. Florenciano 2018, p. 38). If one interprets *ambiguity* in these phrases strictly, then they would only be correctly applied to situations in which exactly two word classes were involved.

## Conclusion

It can be seen that there is a very large number of terms which are synonyms or near-synonyms of *polyfunctionality* (not all of which I have brought up here). This could be a source of confusion. It is difficult to know what to do about this problem, but it is hoped that this paper will at least raise awareness of the extent of it. There may be theoretical reasons for using one term rather than another or for using more than one near-synonym in the same work. If so, authors should explicitly state these reasons and precisely define the terms which they use. Some, but not all, authors do this.

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