

## **Polysemy and Homonymy in Language and Linguistics**

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### **Abstract**

The present article is an attempt to explore the concept of polysemy and homonymy in language and linguistics. It tries to elaborate various approaches to the study of polysemy and homonymy providing examples in the semantic field of body part terms in Tibetan<sup>1</sup> language. It discusses the polysemy of the body part terms 'go' 'head' and 'kha' 'mouth' in Tibetan language and shows how the study of polysemous categories plays important role in linguistic analysis in terms of prototypes, metonymy and metaphor that are central to cognitive linguistics.

**Key words:** Polysemy, Homonymy, Metaphor, Semantics, Semantic Field, body part terms, Tibetan language.

### **Introduction**

The term semantics is used broadly to refer to the study of meaning. It is also central to the communication (Leech, 1981). Though the 'meaning' or the information one wants to communicate can be conveyed through a number of means like gestures, pictures, signals, etc., language is the main tool of communication of the human beings. According to what has long been the most widely accepted theory of semantics, meanings are ideas or concepts, which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying them, as it were, in the forms of one language or another (Lyons, 1981: 136).

The word "semantics" itself denotes a range of ideas, from the popular to the highly technical. It is often used in ordinary language to denote a problem of understanding that comes down to word selection or connotation. This problem of understanding has been the subject of many formal inquiries, over a long period

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<sup>1</sup> Tibetan language is spoken in Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and India. The classical Tibetan language is used and written throughout the Indian Himalayan belt stretching from Leh Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. As per Census of India 2001 report, the Tibetan language is spoken by 85,278 Tibetan refugees in India.

of time. The word is derived from the Greek word *semantikos*, "significant", from *semaino*, "to signify, to indicate" and that from *sema*, "sign, mark, token". In linguistics, it is the study of interpretation of signs or symbols as used by agents or communities within particular circumstances and contexts. Semantics is the subfield that is devoted to the study of meaning, as inherent at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse (referred to as texts).

A distinction is generally drawn between the meaning of words lexemes and the meaning of sentences: between '*lexical meaning*' and '*sentence-meaning*'. It is now recognized that one cannot account for the one without accounting for the other. Therefore, the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning of its constituent lexemes; and the meaning of some lexemes depends upon the meaning of the sentences in which they occur.

Lexical semantics is a subfield of linguistic semantics. It is the study of how and what the words of a language denote (Pustejovsky, 1995). Words may either be taken to denote things in the world, or concepts, depending on the particular approach to lexical semantics. The units of meaning in lexical semantics are lexical units. One can continually add new lexical units throughout one's life, learning new words and their meanings.

Lexical semantics covers theories of the classification and decomposition of word meaning, the differences and similarities in lexical semantic structure between different languages, and the relationship of word meaning to sentence meaning and syntax. One question that lexical semantics explores is whether the meaning of a lexical unit is established by looking at its neighborhood in the semantic net (by looking at the other words it occurs within natural sentences), or if the meaning is already locally contained in the lexical unit. Another topic that is explored is the mapping of words to concepts. As tools, lexical relations like synonymy, antonymy (opposites), hyponymy and hypernymy, polysemy and to a certain degree homonymy as well - are used in this field.

Polysemy has been a central concern in lexical semantics, lexicography, translation studies, and natural language processing. Its study has been particularly prominent in so-called Cognitive Linguistics. Taylor (1995: 99) defines polysemy as "the association of two or more related senses with a single linguistic form".

Polysemy is a sub-area in the broader problem of meaning and its analysis. The study of polysemy, or of the '*multiplicity of meanings*' of words, has a long history in the philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, and literature. Words often have several meanings in all the human languages of the world. Polysemy is at the centre of current semantic research, a phenomenon whereby a single linguistic form is paired with a number of distinct but related meanings or senses. In another words, it is a state of meaningfulness in which a given word expresses more than one meaning. Therefore, it is intimately linked with the

problem of ambiguity. In some sense polysemic analysis tends to become an exercise into disambiguation of a sentence.

The term polysemy was popularized by Breal in 1887. Presently, the term is used both in semantic and lexical analysis with a special connotation where it implies a word with multiple meanings or senses. The English term *polysemy* is of Greek origin and it can be split into two morphemes as *poly* and *semy*. *Poly* refers to 'many' and *semy* refers to 'meaning.' Thus the term *polysemy* means 'multiple meanings' or 'many meanings' but all the meanings come from the same etymology. For example, the word 'mouth' (of a river vs. of an animal) is a case of *polysemy*. 'The two senses are clearly related by the concepts of an opening from the interior of some solid mass to the outside, and of a place of issue at the end of some long narrow channel' (Hurford, 1983: 123). Apresjan (1973: 5) defines *polysemy* as 'the similarity in the representations of two or more senses of a word'.

Surprisingly, all the very polysemous words are rarely a problem in communication among the speakers of the language. We are so adept at using contextual cues that we select the appropriate senses of words effortlessly and unconsciously. Although it is rare problematic in language use in day-to-day life, but it poses a problem up to great extent in semantic theory and in semantic applications, such as translation or lexicography and also in pedagogy.

### **Historical Background of Polysemy**

The complex relations between meanings and words were first noted by the Stoics. However, concrete research into the multiplicity of meaning only began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was continued in the nineteenth century by 'linguists interested in meaning from the point of view of etymology, historical lexicography or historical semantics' (Nerlich & Clarke, 1997: 351).

An important linguist in this nineteenth century historical tradition was Breal, whose research into polysemy marked a new starting point, in that he shifted the study of polysemy away from lexicography and etymology and investigated 'polysemy as the always synchronic pattern of meanings surrounding a word, which is itself the ever changing result of semantic change' (Nerlich & Clarke, 1997: 378). The focus of studies on polysemy shifted from diachronic perspective to synchronic perspective.

With the emergence of cognitive linguistics in the eighties, the concern for relationship between language and psychology has grown and the notion that lexical items are conceptual categories, that have to be studied and investigated as reflecting general cognitive principles rather than purely formal linguistic principle, has penetrated through to linguists. Their interests toward polysemy increased and polysemy became an essential issue in linguistics.

### **Polysemy vs. Homonymy**

When it comes to the issues of polysemy, one point meriting our note is the distinction between homonymy and polysemy. Homonymy refers to the relation between different lexical entries which have unrelated meanings but accidentally

exhibit an identical linguistic form, orthographic or phonetic (Ravin & Leacock 2000). A polysemous word, in contrast, is one single lexical item which bears different, but etymologically related, meanings (Lyons 1995, Ravin & Leacock 2000). 'There are two kinds of lexical ambiguity, one of which depends on homonymy and the other on polysemy' (Lyons, 1977: 550). 'It is commonplace to describe a lexeme which has a number of senses as polysemy (or as manifesting the property of polysemy), and a lexical form which realizes lexical units belonging to more than one lexeme as homonymy' (Cruse, 1986: 80). 'Homonymy refers to a situation where we have two or more words with the same shape. Although they have the same shape, homonyms are considered distinct lexemes, mainly because they have unrelated meanings and different etymologies (Jackson & Amvela, 2000: 61).

The issue of lexical ambiguity has been of great interest because it addresses foundational issues regarding the nature of the mental lexicon and lexical access. There exist rich behavioral and theoretical linguistic literatures on ambiguity and the nature of the lexicon. Ambiguity can arise in different ways, and by far, the least common type of ambiguity is the type that is based on unrelated meanings which traditionally known as *homonymy*, where two words happen to share the same orthography and phonology. In contradictory, the ambiguity between related senses is known as *polysemy*. So ambiguous words can be either homonymous or polysemous, and it is also possible for one or more meanings of homonyms to be polysemous. In addition, the number of polysemous senses a word may have can vary a great deal. The definition of *homonym* offered in **WordNet** can be stated as follows:

*"Two words are homonyms if they are pronounced OR spelled the same way".*

For example, in the case of homonymy, the meanings of the same spelled word are etymologically unrelated in the sense that the term 'thi' (in Tibetan language) for instance of number 'ten thousand' does not have any relationship with that of the meaning 'throne' though a single term is used for both purposes. In the same way, the following words can also be stated as examples of *homonymy* in Tibetan language:

mi	vs.	mi
person		negative 'not'
mTshan	vs.	mTshan
night		name (honorific)

On the contrary, in the case of *polysemy*, mGo 'head of a person' and mGo 'peak of mountain' have etymological relationship since both the meanings refer to the top of the person and the mountain.

The ancient Indian grammarian Bhatihari (AD 450), in his 'Vaakyapadiya' (dealing with the philosophy of grammar), he commented that (literal) meaning of a word could be shifted or extended or changed according to various contexts and that the meaning of a word is derived from its worldly usage.

According to Gergely Petho (2001), polysemy occurs when the same word (or lexeme) has different readings. The concrete, observable readings relate to the abstract, not directly observable lexeme in the same way as contextual (or, to put it more precisely, contextually determined) variants of abstract morphological or phonological units in actual utterances relate to these abstract units. Homonymy is then considered to be two or more words that happen to have the same form or an ambiguity of different kind. Differentiating polysemy with homonymy, he gives the following diagram:

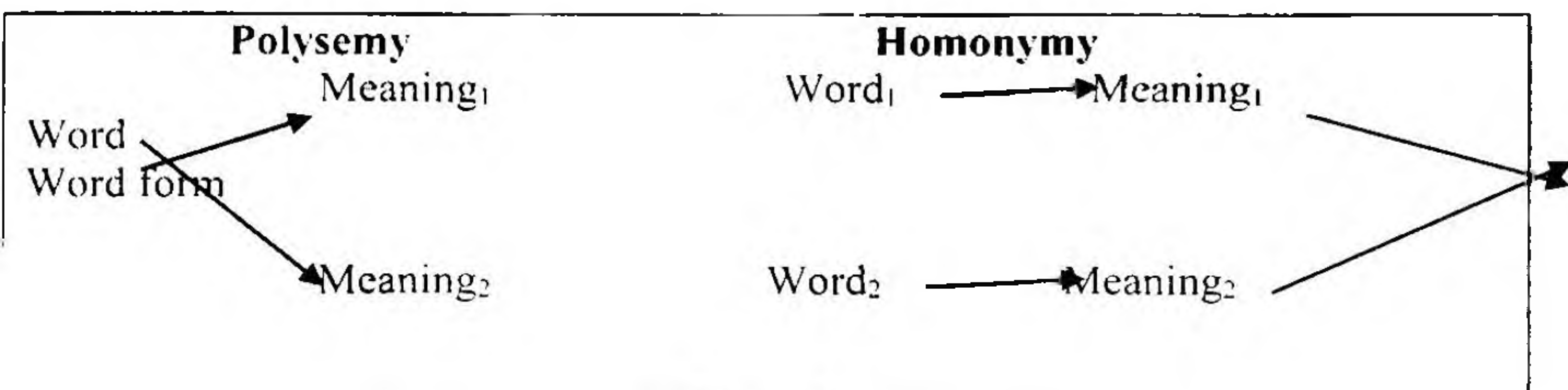


Figure 1

### Polysemy vs. Dictionary

Dictionaries contain information about words. Most of the dictionaries generally include the possible polysemy of the particular language. Dictionaries became the main source of getting information about polysemy that lexical items contain in a particular language. It is said to be the treasure-house of information on polysemy. For example, according to Byrd et al. (1987) in Webster's Seventh Dictionary, out of 60,000 lexical entries, 21,488 or almost 40 percent have more than one sense. It is observed that the most commonly used words tend to be the most polysemous. Thus, the verb 'run' in Webster's Dictionary, for instance, has 29 different senses and further nearly 125 sub-senses.

Dictionaries differ in the number of senses they define for each word, the grouping into sub-senses and the content of definitions. There is little agreement among lexicographers as to the degree of polysemy and the way in which the different senses are organized.

Historical linguists and lexicographers became increasingly interested in the multiplicity of meaning from the point of view of etymology, historical lexicography or historical semantics. Figures of speech, such as metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche provided lexicographers with instant ways of charting the development of the multiple meanings of words (Nerlich, 2003: 60).

### Polysemy of Body Part Terms in Tibetan Language

The study of body parts terminology is one of the most popular areas among linguists. Their enormous potentiality for semantic extension into other semantic domains, as well as their development into grammatical forms has attracted the attention of researchers from different domains (for instance Bilkova (2000),

Chapell and McGregor (1996), Petruck (1986), Svorou (1993) etc.). The terms for body parts in Tibetan language are no exception. They offer a good, varied and rich laboratory for the study of polysemy and conceptualization.

Deignan and Potter (2004) used large computerized corpora of English (which contained 329 million words at the time of study) and Italian (from two corpora totaling around 35 million words) to combine the power of conceptual metaphor theory to explain the non-literal senses of lexis from the field of the human body. They found a number of equivalent expressions across the two languages.

Several important studies have suggested that the domain of body parts is central in metaphorizing bodily experience (for example, Goossens 1990 and Sweetser 1990).

In the present article, the focus is on two body part terms in Tibetan language: *mGo* 'head' and *kha* 'mouth'. These two body part terms, apart from being very common, show a great variety of meanings, which dictionaries usually list limited meanings. The goal of the present research article is, therefore, to show how these semantic extensions are organized and structured by means of several cognitive mechanisms and the senses of *mGo* 'head' and *kha* 'mouth' discussed below are systematically related and bound to the prototypical meaning of *mGo* and *kha* as body parts. In another words, it discusses the polysemy of the body part terms *mGo* 'head' and *kha* 'mouth' in Tibetan in terms of prototype, metonymy and metaphor that are central to cognitive linguistics and shows the possible semantic extensions.

### ***mGo* as 'head'**

The diverse uses of *mGo* 'head' are grouped under four major categories: one signifies 'prototypical' meaning; the second designates metonymically extended senses, the third shows metaphorically extended senses in physical domain and the fourth one shows the metaphorically extended senses in conceptual domain. These four major categories are semantically related to each other by means of a metonymical and metaphorical shift from prototypical meaning to physical space and mental space. The following study on the polysemy of *mGo* implies that the senses of the word are related to one another more or less closely by various means, such as metonymy and metaphor.

### **Prototypical Meaning of *mGo***

The word head described in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2008)* as "The part of the body above the neck that contains the eyes, nose, mouth and ears and the brain". This definition corresponds to the prototypical understanding of the noun *mGo* 'head' as illustrated in example 1 below.

1. *mGo* as 'human head' (TED: SCD<sup>2</sup>)

*mGo* hjog-pas lus shes

<sup>2</sup> Tibetan English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms by Sarat Chandra Das.

head movement-by body know-pst

‘By the movement of the head, the body is known.’

The most central meaning or the prototype meaning of the noun *mGo* in Tibetan language is almost same as “head” in English. In this sense, the meaning in example 1 mentioned above refers to a human head. The ‘prototype’ is the typical member of a category to which other members are related in a motivated way as already mentioned above.

The following investigation on *mGo* illustrates that the existence and properties of polysemy follow directly from the characteristics of human cognition, that is, people tend to group things together by cognitive strategies such as metonymy and metaphor.

### **Metonymic Transfer of *mGo* WHOLE FOR PART/PART FOR WHOLE**

Metonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is common for people to take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect or part of it (Lakoff, 1987: 77). Consider the following examples:

1. *mGo* as ‘hair’ (additional)

mGo-la bshal-sman btang-nas hkhrud-par byed

head-loc purgative give-by wash do

‘One must wash hair by using purgative.’

Sentence 2 is semantic extension of *mGo* via the metonymy WHOLE FOR PART relationship. In some cases, Tibetan language allows the use of the word *mGo* ‘head’ to refer to the ‘hair’. The hair is part of the head. The metonymy at work is HEAD FOR HAIR. The head (the whole) stands for one of its parts: the hair. Here, head is metonymically mapped as the ‘hair’.

### **Metaphorical Transfer of *mGo* (in Physical Domain)**

So far, it is seen that metonymy can provide motivation for extension of a category. Another important kind of motivation comes from metaphoric mappings. Metaphor involves a transfer from one domain of conceptualization onto another. Consequently, there is one meaning involved that is called ‘prototypical’ and another one that is ‘transferred’ or metaphorical. There are several ways in which senses develop from the prototypical meaning, but very often they develop through the processes of metaphor and metonymy.

The following senses in examples 3 to 5 are alike, because their objects are concrete and physical. All these senses are metaphorically transferred within the physical domain to refer to ‘top’ and ‘highest point’ of some concrete objects or locations. These extensions are shifted from human head (animate) to refer to ‘top’ and ‘highest point’ of inanimate objects. Consider the following examples:

2. *mGo* as ‘top of hill’ (TED: SCD)

ri mGo khawa-s gyogs

mountain head snow-agen. cover-pst

‘The hill tops were covered with snow.’

3. *mGo* as 'top, highest, end part of (e.g. pen, needle, bottle etc.)'  
(Additional)  
snyugu-i mGo chags-song  
pen-gen head break-pst  
'The front part of the pen has broken.'
4. *mGo* as 'tip of tongue' (additional)  
ja tsowo btung-nas lchele mgo tshig-song  
tea hot drink-by tongue head burn-pst  
'Tip of the tongue is burnt by drinking hot tea.'

The senses in examples 3 to 5 above are metaphorically extended within the physical domain to refer to some concrete objects 'mountain peak', 'front part of pen' and 'tip of the tongue' respectively. These different senses are yielded by the occurrence of the nouns *ri* 'mountain', *snyugu* 'pen', and *lchele* 'tongue'.

5. *mGo* as 'front side of shoe' (additional)  
lham-gyi mGo dbral-song  
shoe-gen head tear-pst  
'The front part of the shoe is torn.'

In examples 6 above, the senses are metaphorically extended within the physical domain to refer to concrete object 'front side of shoe'. This different sense is yielded by the occurrence of the nouns *lham* 'shoe'.

### Metaphorical transfer of *mGo* (in conceptual domain)

A conceptual metaphor is construed as a systematic correspondence or mapping between two distinct conceptual domains, one relatively concrete (the source domain), and one relatively abstract (the target domain). The more concrete source domain, closely related to bodily experience, is assumed to be a rich source of inferences that may be transferred to the relatively abstract and unstructured target domain, given certain constraints (Lakoff 1987).

In the following metaphorical extensions of the body part term *mGo*, the senses are yielded via the insertion of certain verbs in the conceptual domain.

6. *mGo* as 'beginning' (TED: SCD)  
bod sdug-pahi mGo hdzug  
Tibet misfortune-gen. head begin  
'That was the beginning of the misfortunes of Tibet.'
7. *mGo* as 'be confused' (Bod-rgya-tshig-dzod Chenmo)  
sacha rgyus-med-du slebs dus mGo hkhor yong  
place know-neg.-loc reach time head confuse come  
'(You) will confuse when (you) reach at unknown place.'
8. *mGo* as 'be cheated' (Bod-rgya-tshig-dzod Chenmo)  
skyag-rdzun bshad de gzhan-la mGo skor tang-wa  
lie tell-by other-ben head cheat give-inf.  
'To cheat others by telling lie.'
9. *mGo* as 'be successful' (Bod-rgya-tshig-dzod Chenmo)  
phrugu di mGo thon tsam yong-wa-hdug



child this head complete just come-inf-v  
'This child is about to be settled.'

In examples 7 to 10, the verbs *hdzug* 'begin', *khor* 'turn (intr.)', *skor* 'turn (tr.)', and *thon* 'complete' are used with *mGo* respectively to refer to 'beginning', 'be confused', 'be cheated' and 'be successful' in conceptual domain. The extended senses are yielded because of the verbs attached to the noun *mGo*. These senses are closely related to, but distinct from, the prototypical instance in terms of conceptual metaphor which cannot be physically seen.

The cognitive mechanisms such as metonymy and metaphor have identified the prototypical use of *mGo* as that of referring to a 'human head', and treated the other uses of this lexical item as motivated, non-prototypical senses, semantic extensions via metonymy and metaphor, related to the prototypical sense in a systematic way.

### ***kha* as 'mouth'**

The diverse uses of *kha* 'mouth' are grouped under three major categories: one signifies 'prototypical' meaning; the second designates metaphorically extended senses in physical domain and the third shows metonymically extended sense in conceptual domain. These three major categories are semantically related to each other by means of metaphorical and metonymical shift from prototypical meaning to physical space and mental space. The following study on the polysemy of *kha* implies that the senses of the word are related to one another more or less closely by means of metaphorical and metonymical extensions.

### **Prototypical meaning of *kha***

The word mouth described in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2008)* as "The opening in the face of a person or animal, consisting of the lips and the space between them, or the space behind containing the teeth and the tongue". This definition corresponds to the prototypical understanding of the body part term *kha* 'mouth' as illustrated in example 1 below.

1. *kha* as 'mouth' (Monlam Dictionary)  
mi-yi kha-nas gser bskyug mi-yong  
person-gen mouth-orig gold vomit neg-come  
'Gold will not be vomiting from the man's mouth.'

The most central meaning of the noun *kha* in Tibetan language is almost same as "mouth" in English. In this sense, the meaning in example 1 mentioned above refers to a mouth of human being.

The following investigation on *kha* will illustrate that the existence and properties of polysemy follow directly from the characteristics of human cognition that is, people tend to group things together by cognitive strategies.

### **Metaphorical Transfer of *kha* (in Physical Domain)**

An important kind of motivation for meaning extension comes from metaphoric mappings. Metaphor involves a transfer from one domain of conceptualization

onto another. Consequently, there is one meaning involved that is called 'prototypical' and another one that is 'transferred' or metaphorical.

As already mentioned above, there are several ways in which senses develop from the prototypical meaning, but very often they develop through the process of metaphor.

The following senses in examples 2 to 4 are alike, because their objects are concrete and physical. All these senses are metaphorically transferred within the physical domain to refer to 'mouth of a container', 'brim or the edge of the mouth of the container', and 'mouth of a bag' of some concrete objects. These extensions are shifted from human mouth (animate) to refer to inanimate objects as shown below. Consider the following examples:

2. *kha* as 'opening, mouth of a container, spout' (additional)  
 hayang-gyi kha rgyab  
 vessel-gen mouth close  
 'Close the mouth of the vessel.'
3. *kha* as 'brim, the edge of the mouth of the container' (additional)  
 dkaryol-gyi kha chag-song  
 cup-gen mouth break-pst  
 'The edge of the cup has cracked.'
4. *kha* as 'mouth of a bag' (additional)  
 khugma-yi kha rgyab  
 bag-gen mouth close  
 'Close the mouth of the bag.'

The senses in examples 2 to 4 above are metaphorically extended within the physical domain to refer to some concrete objects 'mouth of a container', 'brim or the edge of the mouth of the container' and 'mouth of a bag' respectively. These different senses are yielded by the occurrence of the nouns *hayang* 'vessel', *dkaryol* 'cup' and *khugma* 'bag' in examples 2 to 4 respectively.

### **Metonymical Transfer of *kha* (in Conceptual Domain)**

It has become popular in Cognitive Linguistics to use the cognitive strategy 'metonymy' to explain the links between polysemous meanings of a lexeme. According to Lakoff, Metonymy is "one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is extremely common for people to take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect or part of it (Lakoff 1987: 77)".

The "stand-for" relationship is simply the result of the domain-internal nature of metonymic mapping; that is, the false impression that metonymies obligatorily require a "stand-for" relationship derives from the fact that metonymies are constructed on the basis of a single conceptual domain, in such a way that one of the domains is already part of the other. Consider the following examples:

5. *kha* as 'verbal abuse' (Additional)  
 kha-ngan smas-na sdigpa sak  
 mouth-bad tell-cond sin collect  
 'If (you) abuse, (you) will collect sin.'

In example 5 above, the word *ngan* 'bad' is used with *kha* to refer to 'verbal abuse' in conceptual domain. The extended sense is yielded because of the word *ngan* attached to the noun *kha* 'mouth'. Here 'the mouth' stands metonymically for 'verbal-abuse'. This sense is closely related to, but distinct from, the prototypical instance in terms of conceptual metonymy which cannot be physically seen.

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### Abbreviations

pst	past tense
loc	location case
agen	agentive
gen	genitive
neg	negative
ben	beneficial
inf	infinitive
v	verb
orig	originative
cond	conditional
TED	Tibetan English Dictionary
SCD	Sarat Chandra Das

