Empirical Approaches to Polysemy and Synonymy
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This theme session addresses usage-based methodology in the cognitive approaches to the polysemy and synonymy. Within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, no distinction is held between linguistic and pragmatic semantics or between lexis and syntax. Therefore, in more precise terms, the study of polysemy and synonymy can be described as the study of semantic variation and semantic relation of lexemes, morphemes, and syntactic constructions. Specifically, the theme session focuses on the analytical methods that adhere to the principles of usage-based investigation, such as corpus-driven research, elicitation, and psycholinguistic experimentation. All three methods produce results that can be treated quantitatively, and so the use of this kind of data treatment is also emphasised.

Within the cognitive tradition, both the study of polysemy and synonymy have rich traditions. Brugman (1983) and Vandeloise (1984) began the study of sense variation in spatial prepositions that evolved into the radial network model applied to a wide range of linguistic forms, especially grammatical cases and spatial prepositions (Janda 1993, Cuyckens 1995). A similar history of near-synonymy began with Lehrer (1982) and Dirven & al. (1982) leading to a tradtion of lexical investigation (Schmid 1993, Geeraerts & al. 1994).

Despite the success of this research, studies such as Sandra & Rice (1995) and Tyler & Evans (2001) identified serious shortcomings. In light of this, empirical cognitive approaches to semantic structure do not question the validity of the radial network model, but seek to develop methods for testing proposed semantic variation and relation.

Cognitive Linguistics, like many fields of linguistic research, is witnessing growth in the awareness of the importance of methodology. The usage-based models of cognitive and functional linguistics are perfectly placed to adopt the new empirical techniques. This new drive for empirical research stands as one of the main fronts of modern language science. Recent theoretical studies on the state of the art, such as such as Geeraerts (2005, 2006), Tummers & al. (2005), Heylen & al. (in press), emphasise this point.

The application of empirical techniques to the study of synonymy has been led by Grondelaers & Geeraerts (2003), Stefanowitsch (2003), Newman & Rice (2004), Divjak (2006) and Divjak & Gries (2006). In polysemy research, this movement is best represented by Cuyckens & al. (1997), Sandra & Cuyckens (1999), Raukko (2003), Gries (2006), Wulff (2006), Glynn (in press). Testimony to the importance of this field is the swathe of anthologies on empirical techniques in Cognitive Semantics, such as Gries & Stefanowitsch (2006), Stefanowitsch & Gries (2006), Glynn & Fischer (to appear), Newman & Rice (to appear), and Andor & Pelyvas (to appear).

Our theme session is designed to bring together research interested in applying these usage-based methods to the study of polysemy and synonymy. The premise is that empirical methods are necessary to produce testable hypotheses and permit result replicability. The theme session focuses on the quantitative treatment of elicited and found data.