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ON POLYFUNCTIONALITY OF THE ENGLISH CONNECTIVE *AS* **О ПОЛИФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНОСТИ АНГЛИЙСКОГО СОЮЗА *AS***

Abstract

The paper studies the polyfunctionality of the English connective *as*, “connective” being used with reference to a clause linkage device (or conjunction). In Modern English, the item in question functions as a coordinating conjunction and subordinating conjunction of comparison, manner, time, cause, purpose, condition, concession. Thus, the paper aims to bring to light some of the problems connected with the semantic and pragmatic ambiguity of the connective *as* as well as give a brief pragmatic account of the diachronic development of its meanings using the framework of relevance theory, subjectification theory and the invited inference theory of semantic change. The analysis is conducted using the data from modern British fiction and scientific prose as well as from Old, Middle and Early Modern English. Using various tests, the author shows that the aforementioned meanings of *as* are cases of semantic polysemy. There is also evidence suggesting that causal *as* is a pragmatically ambiguous item (the ambiguity exists between the epistemic and speech act domains).

Аннотация

Статья посвящена полифункциональности английского союза *as*. Данная лексическая единица может функционировать как сочинительный и подчинительный союз (сравнения, образа действия, времени, причины, цели, условия, уступки). Цель работы – обозначить некоторые проблемы, связанные с семантической и прагматической неоднозначностью данного союза, а также дать краткую характеристику диachронического развития его значений в свете теорий релевантности, субъективации, а также модели развития значений слов, связанной с когнитивным механизмом инференции. Материалом для анализа послужили тексты современной британской художественной и научно-популярной прозы, а также примеры из древнеанглийского, среднеанглийского и ранненовоанглийского. Используя существующие тесты и методики, автор показывает, что значения союза *as* являются случаем семантической полисемии. *As* в функции союза причины демонстрирует прагматическую полисемию (эпистемические отношения и отношения, объясняющие совершение речевого акта).

Keywords: conjunction *as*, polysemy, semantic and pragmatic ambiguity, subjectification, relevance theory.

Ключевые слова: *as*, полисемия, союз, субъективация, теория релевантности.

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1. Introduction

The paper studies the English connective *as* and its polyfunctional character, polyfunctionality being understood as “the range of meanings and values an item exhibits solely in its function as adverbial subordinator” [Kortman, 1997, p. 89]. The term “connective” is used with reference to a clause linkage device (or conjunction). There have been a number of studies investigating various English connectives, such as *while*, *because*,

since, etc. which focused on their semantic and pragmatic ambiguity (e.g. [Traugott, 1999, 2012; Molencki, 2007; González-Cruz, 2007; Lenker, 2007; Smirnova, 2012; Chen, 2000]). However, the conjunction *as* seems to have been only briefly mentioned in special studies. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to discuss some of the problems concerning semantic and pragmatic ambiguity of the connective, which will be illustrated using examples from modern British fiction and scientific prose. The study has implications for theoretical description of this lexical item, its lexicographic representation, the disambiguation of its meanings in verbal communication and teaching English as a foreign language.

The term “polysemy” was introduced for the first time by Bréal [Bréal, 1924 (1897)] but scholars have always tried to understand why and how meanings are multiplied. For instance, B. Nerlich and D. Clarke write that “there always is and always will be a discrepancy, a fundamental incongruence, between the supply of words and our communicative demands. Even the fact that most words have several meanings from which one can choose does not overcome that problem. There are always occasions when one wants to say something new, interesting, subjective, which has never been said before” [Nerlich, Clarke, 2001, p. 6]. In order to do that there are two main instruments in languages: metaphor and metonymy. Another explanation is that polysemy could be motivated by the “economy of expression” and effort-saving. Nerlich and Clarke also point out and criticize the fact that polysemy is often studied in an isolated way, as a “phenomenon of the dictionary”. However, the most effective way to explore the phenomenon is to consider it as something “alive” or inseparable from communication [Nerlich, Clarke, 2001, p. 3]. This brings us to the question of *how* meanings are multiplied. The most plausible explanation can be found within the framework of pragmatics, in particular, using the invited inference theory of semantic change, relevance theory, and the theory of subjectification, which will be addressed in the following sections.

There is also a commonly held view that communication generally limits all the meanings of a polysemous word to just one. However, there are a lot of examples that challenge this view, and *as* is a very illustrative one. There is a fine line between some of its meanings, even in context, which will also be discussed in this paper.

As has been stated above, the connective *as* is a semantically and pragmatically ambiguous item, therefore we shall finish this section with a brief outline of its meanings and functions as they are presented in popular dictionaries:

1) coordinating conjunction *as well as* (*The organization gives help and support to people in need, as well as raising money for local charities*),

2) subordinating conjunction expressing: comparison (*Helen comes to visit me as often as she can*), manner (*You treat him as if he were your servant*), time (*As she grew older she gained in confidence*), cause (*She may need some help as she's new*), condition (*You can go out to play as long as you stay in the back yard*), concession (*Try as she might, Sue couldn't get the door open*), purpose (*We went early so as to get good seats*), comments or additional information about something (*As I explained on the phone, your request will be considered at the next meeting*).

2. Remarks on the diachronic development: a pragmatic account

Etymological study allows the hypothesis that comparison expressing similarity or equality is the first and basic meaning of the word *as*. It is an amalgamated compound which derives from *ealswa*, where *eal* is the ancestor of *all*, while *swa* is the ancestor of *so*. Hence, the meaning “being altogether alike” [Fónagy, 1978, p. 116; Algeo, 2010, p. 229].

M. Bruce in his book *A Guide to Old English* identifies four main uses of the connective:

1. In indefinite combinations (e.g. in clauses of place *swā wīde swā / as widely as*; in clauses of time: *swā lange swā / as long as*; *sōna swā / as soon as*). It is worth noting that in its spatial and temporal readings the meaning of comparison is evident.

2. With the superlative e.g. *swa hie selest mihton / as well as they could, as best they could*.

3. In clauses of comparison (*swā / as*; *swā swā / as, just as, such as*; *swā ... swā / so... as, as ... so*).

4. Other uses (*swā* + the subjunctive form meaning *as if*; *swā* can also be translated as *because* or *so that*).

Let us illustrate the uses with some examples:

(1) *Hu seo prag gewat, genap under nihthelm, swa heo no wære (95 – 96) / How that time has passed away, dark under the cover of night, as if it had never been!* (The Wanderer) [Bruce, 1992, p. 274].

(2) *Oft he gar forlet, wælspere windan on þa wicingas, swa he on þam folce fyrmest eode, heow and hiende, oðþæt he on hilde gecrang (321 – 324) / Often he let a spear, a deadly spear, fly into the vikings, as he went foremost in the host, hacked and brought down (enemies), until he fell in battle* (The Battle of Maldon) [Diamond, 1970, p. 136–137].

In (2) *swa* can be considered to be a temporal connective (*when* he went foremost...). However, the meaning of degree or proportion is present, which makes it possible to categorize it as a comparison/similarity connective as well [Quirk, 1985, p. 1111]. As M. Bruce notes, “frequently it is a rather characterless connective, shading into concession, result, or manner, as the case may be, and, with the negative, corresponding to Modern English *without, not being*” [Bruce, 1992, p. 84–85]. It is possible to say that the meanings of reason, result, time or concession existed, but were not yet firmly established. In the subsequent centuries, they became more routinely used.

In Middle English *as* was often used to introduce important quotations from the Bible or quotations of famous theologians:

(3) *For as Seynt Austen seyth, befor or Criste was borne, the worlde was full of derknes of dedely synne / For as Saint Augustine says, before Christ was born, the world was full of darkness and deadly sin* [Kohnen, 2007, p. 297].

In (3) the speaker compares what was written or said by somebody with their own words or thoughts and establishes similarity. In this period, it is also possible to find it as a temporal (4) and causal (5) connective:

(4) *Bifil that in that seson on a day, In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage / It happened that in that season on one day, In Southwark at the Tabard Inn as I lay Ready to go on my pilgrimage* (Chaucer).

(5) *And swoor his ooth, as he was trewe knyght, He wolde doon so ferforthly his might Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke / And swore his oath, that as he was true knight, He would put forth so thoroughly his might Against the tyrant Creon* (Chaucer).

By the 17th century, the concessive meaning had been firmly established (6) and by the 18th century – the conditional meaning (7):

(6) *But, wretched as he is, he strives in vain; What he breathes out his breath drinks up again* [Shakespeare, 1966, p. 1103].

(7) *With drinking healths to my niece, I'll drink to her **as long as** there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria* [Shakespeare, 1966, p. 300].

Comparison as the first and basic meaning must have given rise to such uses as a manner connective, a commenting device and a temporal connective. The latter seems to have led to the development of the so called C-readings (cause, condition, concession, contrast). As Kortmann suggests, adverbial subordinators generally acquire C-senses later than locative, modal, or temporal ones [Kortmann, 1997, p. 347]. The chronological order presented here is supported by data from several etymological dictionaries and textbooks [Online Etymology Dictionary ; Ilyish, 1973 ; Bruce, 1992 ; Kohnen, 2007]. The processes and mechanisms that underlie these developments can be explained using a pragmatic approach. Let us start with quoting P. Grice: “it may not be impossible for what starts life, so to speak, as a conversational implicature to become conventionalized” [Grice, 1989, p. 39]. This idea was further developed in E. Traugott’s works. She argues that semantic changes described above are the result of the conventionalization of pragmatic inferences. In the course of time, a pragmatic inference may conventionalize and become part of the semantics of an item. Thus, communication is similar to mind-reading: the hearer needs to uncover the intention of the speaker by an inferential process. Consequently, what is considered to be a merely pragmatic “shade” of meaning at some point in time may become firmly established as its independent semantic value later. Traugott also writes that subjectification and intersubjectification can accompany the developments, which means that senses generally develop from more concrete toward more abstract, from meanings “based in the sociophysical world” to meanings “based in the speaker’s mental attitude” [Traugott, 1989, p. 46]. As a result, ambiguity that exists in the language “injects” it with subjectivity and helps “to reappropriate the language we use as a shared, inter-subjective system” [Nerlich, Clarke, 2001, p. 14].

The process of constructing inferences and hypotheses about speaker-intended meanings can be studied with reference to the relevance theory. According to D. Sperber and D. Wilson, the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition. The utterance is “relevant to the individual when it connects to background information to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression. According to the relevance theory, an input is relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect. A positive cognitive effect is a worthwhile difference to the individual’s representation of the world: a true conclusion, for example. False conclusions are not worth having; they are cognitive effects, but not positive ones.” It is stated that the greater the required processing effort, the less relevant the input. On the contrary, the less processing effort required, the more relevant the utterance [Wilson, Sperber, 2006 p. 608–609]. Thus, in some situations of communication certain inferences may be quite relevant and they are perceived as intended meanings of the interlocutor. The search for relevance is also connected with activating different mental schemas and encyclopedic knowledge of the world [Blochowiak et al., 2016, p. 4–5]. For instance, we all have mental schemas about causes and results, causes and consequences, we know that what happened earlier in time can be interpreted as the cause for something that happened later. This inference or hypothesis about causality may prove to be quite relevant for a particular situation, which then leads to the causal reading being conventionalized. Let us consider the following example from Modern English:

(8) ***As** their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres, the fibres became tougher and so were less prone to fracture, but did not lose their strength* [Nature, 2013, p. 284].

The reader can make an assumption or infer that the reason for the fibres becoming tougher and less prone to fracture (which probably happened earlier in time) is that their diameters narrowed.

Another set of examples can illustrate the mechanism of inferencing and conventionalization in the history of English. The expression *swa lange swa* (*so / as long as*) was used in Old English solely in its temporal sense:

(9) *wring þurh linenne clað on þæt eage swa lange swa him ðearf sy / squeeze (the medication) through a linen cloth into the eye as long as he needs* (Lacnunga) [Traugott, 2012, p. 555–556].

The reader is advised to squeeze the medicine as long as it is needed. Obviously, it is implied that you should use this treatment only if there is such a necessity. In this case, the speaker is encouraging the hearer to infer the meaning of condition. In the course of time, the conditional reading became more prominent, but ambiguity was still present as in (10). In the 18th century the conditional reading became fully conventionalized, which means that it was the only possible reading (11):

(10) *With drinking healths to my niece, I'll drink to her as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria* [Shakespeare, 1966, p. 300].

(11) *I heard Ann Wright say ... Chapman had stole Davis's watch; she asked Davis to go and see for it; Davis answered, he did not mind the watch, so long as he escaped with his life* (Trial of William Chapman) [Traugott, 2012, p. 556].

C. Breul writes about “false hypothesis” during the process of pragmatic inferencing. He believes that it is children (language users who have not yet completed language acquisition) who are responsible for “the diachronic detachment of a formerly implicated meaning from the linguistically encoded meaning”. They do not have yet fixed denotations for clausal connectives in their mental lexicon. If an implicated meaning is more relevant in a particular situation for a child, then the child may falsely hypothesize that the implied meaning is the denotational one and it may then be fixed in the language [Breul, 2007, p. 178–179].

3. Semantic polysemy vs. pragmatic polysemy

The problem that the author will address in this section is whether we should regard the aforementioned meanings as “independent” (semantic polysemy) or as instances of pragmatic polysemy. Kortmann proposes two major criteria that help to identify cases of semantic polysemy: 1) divergent syntactic constraints 2) “semantic uniqueness” or “one meaning to the exclusion of any other” (in a particular context only one reading is possible) [Kortmann, 1997, p. 90–91]. According to the criteria, *as* does not fully qualify for the case of semantic polysemy because it does not display various syntactic options; we can only note that in its concessive reading it can be placed immediately after a fronted nominal or adjectival complement of the clause (*Happy as they were, there was still something missing*). As for semantic uniqueness, there are a lot of ambiguous examples that can be treated in various ways:

1. Causal and temporal: *Now, standing at the railing as the town came into clearer view, she began to understand the point of travel* [Nicholls, 2009] (She began to understand the point of travel, *because* the town came into clearer view or *when* the town came into clearer view?).

2. Causal and conditional: *As long as we are here, why don't we discuss our plans?* (*Since* we are here... or *If* we are here...).

3. Similarity and manner: *And while you're there, in deepest black, you don't behave as you usually would* [Hawkins, 2015] (You don't behave in the similar way as you usually would).

In these cases “cause” or “condition” or other meanings can be treated as enrichments or extra shades that may seem stronger for some speakers, while for others just one sense may be completely sufficient. These “shades” are not usually listed in dictionaries as separate entries.

For instance, the connective *after* which has its basic meaning of anteriority, in some examples may amount to cause (*After we read your novel we felt greatly inspired*), which depends on the subjective interpretation of the speaker. The only meaning of *after* that is listed in dictionaries is the temporal one, which also supports the idea of purely pragmatic ambiguity (the term pragmatic ambiguity is taken from L. Horn (1985)) [Kortmann, 1997, p. 91]. The case of *as* is not quite the same because most popular dictionaries list the range of its meanings mentioned in the introduction, thus allowing to say that they are cases of semantic polysemy.

Nevertheless, pragmatic ambiguity could be present within an independent semantic meaning. The hypothesis was brought about by Sweetser's research [Sweetser, 1990] exploring such connectives as *because* and *although* and establishing three domains in the usage of these causal and concessive connectives: content, epistemic and conversational or speech act. The content domain has to do with real-world causalities, the epistemic domain concerns the speaker's grounds for making the assertion in the main clause, the speech-act domain gives the cause (motivation) of the speech act embodied in the main clause [Sweetser, 1990, p. 76–77]. Some scholars argue that epistemic and speech act uses behave in very similar ways and that is why the distinction is made only between truth-conditional meaning and use-conditional one [Kroeger, 2018, p. 334]. R. Quirk distinguishes between direct and indirect reason. In the former case, there is a direct reason relationship between the reason clause and the matrix clause. In the latter case, the reason is not related to the situation in the matrix clause but is a motivation for the implicit speech act of the utterance [Quirk, 1985, p. 1104].

The hypothesis of this paper is that the same interpretation can be applied to the causal *as*. On the one hand, it seems possible to find examples that fit this distinction. The following examples can be used to illustrate that.

The content domain:

(12) *As their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres, the fibres became tougher and so were less prone to fracture, but did not lose their strength* [Nature, 2013, p. 284].

(13) *Roxster and I were able, unusually, to have breakfast together today, as Chloe the nanny was taking them to school* [Fielding, 2013].

The epistemic domain (these sentences often contain such modal verbs of deduction as *must/may/might*, etc or such adverbs as *clearly, obviously, apparently*, etc):

(14) *Was trying to park car. This is impossible in our street as is narrow, curved and cars park on both sides* [Fielding, 2013] (The fact that the street is narrow and *curves* causes my conclusion that it is impossible to park my car).

(15) *The clown was clearly bored as Mabel and Billy were the only grandchildren under the age of thirty-five, apart from a couple of great-grandchildren, who were babies* [Fielding, 2013] (The fact that Mabel and Billy were the only grandchildren under the age of thirty-five, apart from a couple of great-grandchildren, who were babies caused my conclusion that the clown was bored).

The speech act domain:

(16) *As you're in charge, where are the files on the new project?* [Quirk, 1985, p. 1104] (I am asking you where the files are and the reason for my asking is that you are in charge).

(17) *How could I possibly handle Mum, Una and the kids, with no help as Chloe was going on a t'ai chi retreat to Goa with Graham?* [Fielding, 2013] (I am asking how I could handle Mum, Una and the kids, and the reason for my asking is that Chloe was going on a t'ai chi retreat to Goa with Graham and I would be left with no help).

A survey of literature on the subject showed controversy as to the issue whether the lexical item in question can be used in the content domain or not. For example, U. Lenker points out that in Modern English *because* may be employed in all three functions, while other conjunctions are more restricted in their use: *since* and *as* are internal “explanation causals”, which means that distinction can be made only between epistemic and speech act uses [Lenker, 2007, p. 198]. However, other researchers state that *as* can be used to express a direct / real reason relationship between the clauses of a sentence [Petrenko, 2000, p. 114].

There are tests or criteria that could help to distinguish between the content domain on the one hand and the epistemic and speech act domains on the other hand [Quirk, 1985, p. 1070–1071; Kroeger, 2018, p. 333–338]:

1. The presence of pause or “comma intonation” between the two clauses (the pause is optional when we deal with content domain uses, but obligatory with other uses; if the pause is omitted, the sentences can only be interpreted as expressing real-world causality).

2. Questionability (the use of yes-no questions or Why-questions): when content domain uses occur as part of a yes / no question, the causal relationship itself is part of what is being questioned; with other uses, the causal relationship is not questioned; the interrogative force is restricted to the main clause; why-questions can be applied only to the content domain uses).

3. Capacity for being negated (if we speak about the content use, then negation takes scope over the whole sentence and it is restricted to the main one in the case of epistemic and speech act uses).

4. Capacity for being embedded within conditional clauses (content domain uses can be embedded within conditional clauses, and this is impossible with epistemic or speech act uses).

5. Capacity for being used as the focus of a cleft sentence (it is possible only with the content domain uses).

6. Capacity for being focused using subjuncts like *only*, *just*, *simply*, and *mainly* (it is valid only for content domain uses).

If we apply the tests suggested above, we get sentences that sound bizarre and are not possible in Modern English, e.g.:

* *It is as their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres that the fibres became tougher and so were less prone to fracture, but did not lose their strength.*

* *Did the fibres become tougher and so were less prone to fracture as their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres or as some other factors played their role? (English does not allow a sentence like that, however, it is the causal relationship which is being questioned here).*

* *The fibres became tougher and so were less prone to fracture, but did not lose their strength only as their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres.*

* *Why did the fibres become tougher and so were less prone to fracture? As their diameters narrowed to below 250 nanometres.*

All in all, there is evidence suggesting that causal *as* is pragmatically ambiguous but the ambiguity exists between the epistemic and speech act domains. These peculiarities of use

and restrictions of use are not reflected in dictionaries. The majority of definitions read: “used to state the reason for something”, “used for giving the reason for something”, “used to state why a particular situation exists or why someone does something” or “because, since”. It implies that lexicographers should probably adopt a more detailed and use-oriented approach to connectives in general.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a brief outline of some of the problems connected with the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the polysemous connective *as*: the disambiguation of its senses, the borderline between semantic and pragmatic ambiguity, the development of new meanings within the framework of inference-based approach. First, it was found that as early as the Old English period the connective *as* displayed a high degree of polyfunctionality, although comparison (expressing similarity or equality) can be considered its first and basic meaning. It must have given rise to such uses as a manner connective, a commenting device and a temporal conjunction. The latter seems to have led to the development of the so called C-readings (cause, condition, concession, contrast). Another finding was connected with the mechanisms that underlie these developments, namely, the conventionalization of pragmatic inferences which may have relevance in certain situations of communication and later become part of the semantics of lexical items. The development of new meanings is also accompanied by the process of subjectification (from more concrete toward more abstract, from meanings based in the real world to meanings based in the speaker’s mind). Finally, the various senses of *as* are more likely to be cases of semantic polysemy rather than pragmatic ambiguity, although pragmatic ambiguity may exist within an independent semantic meaning (e.g. causal *as*). Further research can be focused on giving a more detailed diachronic account of sense development and exploring frequency of its use in different functions (including the preposition *as*) in Modern English using corpus data.

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