

{00:00:00}

{Greeting}

{Music}

George: Welcome to Conlangery, the podcast about constructed languages and the people who create them. I'm George Corley with – Zeke, where are you?

Ezekiel: I'm in Philadelphia.

George: Okay. Over in Philly we have Ezekiel Fordsmender.

Ezekiel: Hi, how are you guys doing?

George: Over in Hawaii, we have Margaret Ransdell-Green.

Margaret: Hello.

George: Both of these people are on for the reason that they are both really good with polysemy. Margaret, you did a talk at last year's LCC about it, right? I just recently managed to watch that. For some reason I had not watched it before. But that was interesting. Also, if you look at Zeke's Lexember entries, those are a very good example of how to do very rich dictionary entries with lots of senses.

Ezekiel: You can find Margaret's talk on the Language Creation Society YouTube Channel. My Lexember stuff – I keep all of that on Twitter actually, so my handle is @Fordsmender. That's F-O-R-D-S-M-E-N-D-E-R.

Margaret: Yeah. My Lexember and everything is – I’ve done various things like that at different times. That’s all on Twitter for me as well. My handle is @MintakaGlow – M-I-N-T-A-K-A. Some of my stuff is there – some of which is heavy with polysemy and some of it is not. All my lexicon stuff I tend to put up there.

George: Well, I mean, we’ll talk about that in a minute about how much polysemy do you want to include in a language with {inaudible} {00:02:50}. First of all, before we get into the subject, I have to handle the money stuff. Conlangery is entirely supported by our patrons. Go to patreon.com/conlangery to show your support. We’ve got some rewards there.

A couple things about that. Thanks to our patrons and me working out the numbers, something that we’ve just recently been able to do is start doing transcripts of all episodes. What I have – based on the budget I’ve made for it – is I have somebody doing transcriptions of all new discussion episodes. Then, every month she’s also going to do a past episode.

That will take years to get through the back catalogue, but it is a way to get started on it. Here’s where the Patreon comes in. That takes money. If I can get more money in the Patreon, then I can do something like, “Oh, I can get those transcripts done faster” or the back catalogue.

Other things can be equipment. Just recently, because of the money I had in my account from the Patreon, I got some acoustic foam for my recording booth here. My daughter helped me set it up – “helped,” in

quotes. She's 4. Hopefully, I will sound a little bit less like I am recording in the middle of a bathroom because the storage room – yeah. It needed a little bit of improvement of the acoustics.

{Cut in with less reverb} And as you can hear right there, I had not gotten it totally figured out as to how to use the foam and how to actually get a good sound. {end cut in}

{00:05:02} Right now, I have a reasonably good solution, so hopefully episodes from here on out will sound good. With more money, I could get a better microphone, all kinds of better recording equipment. That's other things.

Ezekiel: Well, that's fantastic news about the transcripts.

Margaret: Yeah. That's good.

George: This is just what I'm telling you guys is the more I can get through the Patreon, the more interesting things I could do for the show. I could do more shows. I can get the transcripts done faster. I could get better equipment to make the experience better for you, the listener. [Patreon.com/conlangery](https://patreon.com/conlangery). There's several different tiers up there.

Now, full disclosure, my two guests today both happen to be pledging the highest tier. I do have to note that is not a way that you can get your way on the show, it's just that they also happen to be very good conlangers that I wanted to talk to. Again, patreon.com – hm?

Ezekiel: I'm thrilled to be the subject of a full disclosure. I imagined myself to be something of a rebel when I was a teenager, and if you went back in

time and told 18-year-old Zeke that he would someday be the subject of a full disclosure on a conlanging podcast, he would just be very tickled.

Margaret: {Inaudible} {00:06:40}

George: Anyway, let's go – so patreon.com/conlangery. Go there. Show your support. Now, let's get into the topic which is polysemy. What is polysemy? It is specifically when one word has multiple meanings, usually multiple related meanings.

Ezekiel: To that I think we could add when one word has multiple, usually related, meanings and then they develop from each other through metaphorical extension, for example. It would be separate from homophony in which, through the process of sound change, two different words come to sound the same but have different semantics.

George: Right. That's a crucial distinction when you're talking about this because we do, in a naturalistic conlang, want both of these things to happen. You want both polysemy and homophony to happen. Now, there are times, also, when homophones can – give me a second. I'm gonna be right back.

Ezekiel: Sounds good.

George: All right. I'm back. I have my book here that I am looking at. Okay. I'm sorry. Let's reel back again. Let's start out – because I want to get the foundation firm. Let's think, what's a concrete example of polysemy? Something like?

- Ezekiel: “Run,” for example. So, “The river runs north,” versus, “I ran a six-minute mile.” I think that’s a pretty clear example.
- George: Right. The connection there is they’re both sort of involving motion. I think the older meaning is like “running a six-minute mile.” It’s “running” as in the action of running with your legs. It’s a particular gait. Then, “a river running” is an extension of that metaphorically to just indicate fast motion.
- Ezekiel: Yeah, along a path.
- George: Yeah. If you look at a dictionary, “run” has tons and tons of different meanings, but that’s a clear illustration. Whereas, a homophone is something like “led.” So, “led” can be the past tense of “lead,” or it can be the element “lead.” That is just coincidental that those happen to sound the same. That’s homophony.
- {00:10:01} To some extent, you are going to end up with both of these in a naturalistic conlang because that’s just how it ends up. Let’s start off with talking about strategies for building polysemous words, and how do each of your approach that? Margaret, maybe we’ll start with you.
- Margaret: The way that I start to build a polysemous word tends to have two directions. This curls back a little bit to something that I mentioned in my presentation at the LCC where I talked about how conlanging can influence conculture as well as the other way around. We normally think of culture influencing language.
- If you are more interested in conlanging, maybe, you may find that over time a lot of your lexicon my influence decisions that you make

about any corresponding culture. That's something that I do a lot just because I find it easy and I find it sort of a natural, fluid way to go. A lot of times I'll come up with a primary word and then think about semantically adjacent concepts to that particular word.

Some examples I have is sort of semantic shifts either in subtle or maybe not-so-subtle directions. A recent word that I had created was one in the Rílin language, which was "tsemé" which means – literally, it's "to make into a rock or stone." The literal meaning associated with that is "to carve something into stone," but also "to harden something," or "calcify," essentially.

There's the literal meanings of the very physical transformation of carving something into stone or making something hard like stone, but then it also has metaphorical extensions like, "to solidify." You can solidify your plans, or you can solidify your ideology, or anything like that. Then, another extension beyond that was "to complete" or "to fill." It's like a dot-dot picture where you start off with a primary, usually concrete, meaning and then branch out from there.

Sometimes, you have to take things like culture into consideration. But sometimes it's just more cognitive, conceptual stuff. That's one of the techniques that I use. Then, the reverse of that is to use parts of the conculture that I already know about, that I've already decided on, and integrate those into a polysemous word. There's another word in Rílin, which is "ríka" ['zika] {00:13:11}, which means, "seasoned," or "spiced." It originally meant with a particular spice that was an important spice, and then it became generalized to just mean "seasoned" as a food, generally.

There was another extended meaning of something that is altered, something that's been altered from its natural state. From there you get the even farther meanings of "unusual," or "strange," or even "unnatural." My thought was that, "Well, maybe this is because native Rílin foods are not necessarily heavily spiced with this particular substance and it is a mark of something that is foreign in some way." Those are two basic techniques I use to creatively expand on a word's meaning and make it a little bit semantically richer.

George: That's really interesting the way that you do that. There was one, I believe, where you had a word for maritime things. This is in your presentation. And because the sea goddess was, I think, associated with peace, is it?

Margaret: Yeah.

George: Then, it got extended into following her religion and also being peaceful or tranquil and that led to interesting associations. What that made me think of is real-world word histories that are similar in certain ways. This is breaking away from polysemy and thinking more about etymology, which is related.

{00:15:03} Like, you could use the same techniques for both. But the word "cynic" – let me double check this, what "cynic" – Wiktionary – right. It's derived from an Ancient Greek word meaning, "doglike," right?

Margaret: Right. Yeah.

George: That doesn't make a whole lot of sense in English. Like, why did this thing that means 'dog'" – but if you follow the chain of events of this,

1.) the philosopher was called a “dog” – this one Ancient Greek philosopher was called a “dog” as an epithet, or pejoratively, because of his behavior. Then, his line of philosophy became called “cynicism,” which “cynic” can still mean a follower of that in particular, but because of aspects of that philosophy it also means a totally different thing – someone who’s seeing all the negatives in society and is apathetic about it.

That chain of events where each word has a story is a very interesting thing. Zeke, I’m gonna move to you for a second. What kind of techniques do you do? Because I look at your dictionary entries and you have 10 or 20 meanings sometimes in a word. I’m just like, “Where did this start? And how is it going?”

Ezekiel:

I have to take a lot of notes, so I don’t forget where I am while I’m working on it. It was very interesting to hear Margaret’s LCC presentation because she talked about her bi-directional approach from conculture into conlang and from conlang into conculture. Before I heard that, I wasn’t thinking about it in those terms. It’s always interesting when you hear somebody else discussing something similar to what you’re doing and you have this context outside of yourself to think about your own work.

I am definitely a conlang into conworld person. All of my work on the culture behind my projects exists within my projects and all the conworlding happens within the lexicon, essentially. So, I don’t know the people as well as some other conlangers or some other conworlders would because I’m just discovering them as I go along.

My process is fairly hands-on. I like to create my words by hand. I don't really use a word-generator like Awkwords, for example. I do stuff on notebook paper. It helps me remember vocabulary too. Once I have a word, I try to live with it and try to imagine how I would use it if I were a native speaker of this language and how it might begin to shift and change over time.

As an example, a couple of years ago I was thinking about – so my primary project is an a priori language called Karyoł. Karyoł, I felt, was becoming very relex-y. So, I decided to blow up the vocabulary and just take all of these words that I felt were too close to English and to cut them apart and look at the individual senses. I started doing this with words for breaking and cutting.

I realized that you can take senses for breaking and cutting and you can, essentially, put them in two different categories. There's manner-based verbs and result-based verbs. A manner-based verb of cutting or breaking would be like, "cut with a knife" or "chop with an ax." Whereas, a result-based verb would be like, "cut into little pieces" or "tear apart."

Karyoł itself is really fastidious about tracking transitivity. I imagine that this would probably exist in the semantics of the language too. So, I kind of shunted all of the manner verbs – all the verbs whose semantics were concerned with how an object was cut or broken.

{00:20:05}

I put those aside and I started focusing on the result ones. I came up with these two different verbs. Both mean "snap." They're both not concerned with how an object is snapped – if I step on it or if I break it

over my knee or if I crack it between my teeth. They differ in the resulting pieces.

So, “āre,” for example, means “to break with frayed edges,” and “huhba” [hu'pa:] {00:20:37}, is “to break with clean edges.” Once you have these two words, then – I’m in my apartment, I’m in my kitchen, and I’m thinking, “If I’m cooking, which one of these words would I use?” If you’re tearing apart, say, an orange or you’re breaking apart meat with your hands, you have an instance of breaking something with frayed edges.

Once you’re there, you can begin to think about maybe this verb could also be used for whittling wood. From there, something a little bit less concrete like needling someone or wearing someone down, leaving them with frayed edges. The same thing happens with your verb “to snap with clean edges.” I remember, I was in the kitchen and I was breaking off this little square of chocolate from a bar and thinking about how the two resulting pieces were intact and how that would probably be important to the semantics of the word huhba.

So, from “to break with clean edges,” that word evolved into a verb that means “to separate two people having an argument.” It’s also the word for “to give birth” as, afterwards, both parties are intact. These words, they don’t evolve from within conculture. They honestly could exist in any language. But they do exist in Karyoł because of some peculiarities of Karyoł syntax.

George: Okay. That was very interesting. That whole thing, to me, was a very interesting – I am just now realizing that you guys both have a bunch of notes in my doc that I had not seen before now. That’s a very

interesting point there is that one thing that you're doing there that I really like – well, I covered this on a short earlier – is you think about the lexicon as a whole system in the first place where you are thinking about these breaking and cutting verbs, which I believe we've cited a paper about that earlier. I might be able to find that.

You built in the system of how those are put together and distinguished in the language. Then, that led to further sub-senses of some of those. That's a very interesting thing to keep in mind is you start with something that's working with your language system and then moving out from that.

Let's actually move into this. I'm very glad that you guys have done some work here. But let's actually say – let's back up here and say – okay. We have some notes here about why do polysemy? I mentioned up at the top, natural languages have polysemy. It's realistic to have them. Let's keep on moving through here.

Realism and hyperrealism – what's hyperreal about that?

Ezekiel: Sure. Hyperrealism is, I would say, the ideal aesthetic that I'm trying to accomplish in my own projects, which is very difficult to do as one person working on a conlang. Hyperrealism, I would say, involves complex loanword strategies, borrowings and re-borrowings, doublets, complex polysemy and homophony, in-depth historical language work.

{00:24:56} Realism, I would say, is the best approximation you can achieve in a realistic amount of time. In order to avoid having to come up with two dozen sketchlangs to borrow words into to build up your vocabulary,

you can focus on your native vocabulary and accomplish an amount of realism by using polysemy, for example, and introducing some homophony.

Beyond that, I'd say it's a necessary part of conlanging because it does keep you from relexing your own language. I do think they're probably about as many reasons to participate in this hobby as there are people doing it, but I think that we all agree that one of the tremendous benefits of conlanging and learning about language is it really opens your eyes to the beauty of your own native language.

And one of the ways you can really involve yourself in that is by consciously not relexing it and being very aware of how meanings in your own language have developed over time. I do know that there is a contingent within the conlanging community – and I know this personally because I used to be one of these guys – who feel that syntax is where the real work is done in that there's something second-rate to people who fiddle around with their vocabularies.

But I think that if you're interested in doing grammaticalization, you're already working with polysemy. I have this note here, "I love the English word 'to get,'" because it's such a simple, commonplace word. It's not as agentless as "receive" is but it doesn't have the gusto that "attain" or "acquire" do. It's generic. It's somewhere in between.

"Get" has developed one of my favorite grammaticalization tendencies. Its past tense has become a verb of possession. So, we can say, "I got some money on me," meaning, "I have some money on me." I think that's a really beautiful metaphor. "I have already received it. I have it."

From there, in contemporary English, it's beginning to replace "have" in auxiliary constructions which I think is really pretty cool and it speaks to this universal tendency for verbs of possession to be used in these constructions. It's also used in that passive construction. "He got punched," for example.

It's interesting, too, the "He got punched" construction, there's something a little bit different about that than "He was punched." There's just some very subtle semantics there. We should talk later on about synonyms and how synonyms are kind of a fallacy and how they don't really exist, maybe, or maybe they do. When two words begin to approach each other, it seems that the human mind really wants to keep them as separate as possible.

Margaret: I was just thinking about that the other day.

Ezekiel: Yeah. I mean, I couldn't tell you what the difference between "He got punched" and "He was punched" is. But there is a difference there. Maybe when he got punched, he was looking for it in some way.

George: I think that "got" passives, not always but sometimes, do actually involve some sort of intentionality on the patient, which is a weird thing because the whole thing about passives is they're promoting the patient, right? But "got" passives are promoting the patient even more, like the patient is already an instrumental now.

Just getting back from that, talking about "get," do not overlook polysemy in your – first of all, in your constructions, which we have talked about that when we talked about constructed grammar, when we

talked about constructions specifically and how they can be polysemous themselves.

{00:30:04}

But also, your small words, if you are making a dictionary that is thorough to the degree of real dictionaries, they will have page-long entries with lots of different senses. I read a book a while ago, *Word by Word* by Kory Stamper, and she has a whole chapter about how she got the word “take” to review. I believe it was “take.”

It was a small, simple word, and she thought it’d be easy. But she started reading the senses and realized that this was going to take a very long time because there’re a ton of different senses that she had to verify. It was at a time when she was still using index cards to handle things. She had here entire desk – she started out with just sorting out nouns and verbs, and then it ended up with her entire desk, on the floor, like spreading out of her cubicle were stacks of index cards covering all of the senses of “take,” trying to verify and see if she needed to split or merge senses. Those little words get complicated, like “get.”

But “get” is particularly hard to pin down. Non-native speakers have a lot of trouble with what “get” means. Translators have trouble translating it into other languages because it’s like, “I have to know exactly what the whole sentence means before I know what verb to use there.”

Actually, throwing it Margaret. Do you talk about the cultural terms, which are usually larger content words, but do you do the same level of polysemy on small words like that?

Margaret: Yeah. A lot of the basic common verbs, or what you would call “small words,” I think have some of the highest potential for polysemy because, because of their frequency and flexibility, they take on many different shades of meaning and many different usages. Because of that, I think that it’s a really great place to go with polysemy. A lot of my I guess what you would call “common verbs” in some of my languages do have many primary senses and it’s hard to really tease apart which is the primary meaning for a lot of these.

It’s one of the things that when I was thinking about polysemy, it also made me think about the lexicography that I’ve done for real-world languages and the challenge behind how to design a dictionary, and how to include senses of individual words, and how to decide which comes first in the ordering – which is considered a primary sense or a secondary sense and so on.

I think that sometimes when you’re creating those collections or clusters of senses, it’s really easy to realize that there are actually sub-branches of senses. There may be a primary, secondary, and tertiary sense, and then off of each of those, it starts to have a branching structure or bifurcated structure, in some cases.

George: That’s a really good note. One thing that you can do in terms of – I say, “small words,” just as a catch-all. It’s not really a technical term. One thing that can get really polysemous is functional words. There, I think a really good thing to do is to actually just translate stuff and, as you are finding that you need some sort of a functional relationship here, try to use stuff that you already have.

Margaret: Yeah. Exactly.

George: With Istatikii, I have a small list of prepositions. I have two different classes of inflecting prepositions and then non-inflecting. When I was doing this text test, I was running into things where I kinda wanna use a preposition here.

{00:35:02} I want to use on of the ones I already have. Which one will work? I had an issue of I was trying to make a derivative construction like, “We have lived here for so long time,” and I didn’t wanna use anything new, so I just make up new stuff. I just like, “Okay. I have this preposition, mahok. It is generally for the source of something and also for inalienable possession. Maybe I could throw that in as also meaning ‘during’?”

And that seemed to work for me. So, I ended up with that. I think I used another, different pseudo-genitive preposition to mean like – apok, I think, can be used for “at a specific moment in time.” I’m not sure. I’d have to go back and actually look it up again.

So, that’s a part of what real languages do and a part of what you can do is, as you – try to start out with the functional words and whatever cases, whatever TAM marking, you want. Then, as you come up with situations where you need something, try to see if your existing material can be applied to that in an interesting way.

Margaret: That’s definitely a really good point. Also, what I’ve found myself doing – just looking at my own lexicon while you were talking about a word for “for X period of time” – the word in Rílin that I use for “for” and “during” and “while” is all the same word because I just didn’t wanna make extra material that I didn’t need.

Ezekiel: Margaret, may I ask you? I'm the only one out of the three of us who's not trained as a linguist, so I've got a pen out. I'm taking notes on this here. When you are working with a nat lang professionally, and you are drafting a lexicon, what is the best practice for determining which sense goes first? Is it the oldest sense or is it the most common sense that you list first?

Margaret: It really depends on a lot of factors – a lot of real-world factors – that actually aren't so relevant for conlanging since you are potentially the user of your dictionary. A lot of what we consider in lexicography, at least from what I do with work on endangered and indigenous languages, is to consider who's gonna be using the dictionary and what will probably be the most useful.

What I do in terms of conlangs, because there's no reference that I need – I don't have to be like, "Well, I gotta look at a corpus," because there isn't one besides what I determine. I usually try to do what is the primary sense and what is the most common use for this word in my mind. If I were to just say, "What does this word mean?" what would somebody respond with?

That may or may not be chronologically the first meaning because a lot of my words, actually, their primary meaning – their primary contemporary meaning – is not the one that it started out with. There's a word that originally meant a food that was roasted termites, and it changed to mean – it sort of semantically broadened to mean – any small finger food that you could eat, like nuts or anything. It wouldn't matter specifically what it was. It was more just how you ate it.

Now, I would definitely say that in Rílin, that word, it's primary sense now is basically "finger food," and its primary sense is no longer its chronologically original sense because they don't really do termites as much anymore as a food source.

George: I think a way to break this down for listeners – I'm not in lexicography. I was a phonetician, so I don't really do this. But I think a way to break this down for our listeners is, are you writing the Oxford English Dictionary or are you writing Merriam-Webster's?

{00:40:07} The reason I give those examples is the Oxford English Dictionary is a historical dictionary. They list them in chronological order based on the earliest citation. That's how you lay out an etymological or historical dictionary. Merriam-Webster's is an everyday reference dictionary for people who are writing or looking up a word that they read. That is the way that you described, Margaret, is they're trying to identify the most common sense and put it first.

It's gonna depend. And I feel that for conlangers, probably you're writing Merriam-Webster's or even more like you're writing – really what you're writing is a bilingual dictionary, honestly. You have to think about it also in terms of when you, yourself, are looking up words, what do you want to have in your mind first as what the translation of that word is because that's gonna be the core meaning and, also, I think that's actually a sort of sub-nugget of this is like, since you guys both do all this work to work out different senses, how much are you thinking about the amount of detail you add to each sense?

Because if it's mainly a reference for yourself – but both of you guys do present yourself publicly. I'm always thinking about if I'm writing an entry as like, "Am I just writing the gloss of this or am I writing enough information that I know how to use this word correctly and not end up using it as a relex of whatever English gloss I've listed?"

Ezekiel:

Again, I try to present as much detail as I possibly can to keep everything fresh in my mind so that I can remember the process that led me – actually, I've got an example right here. This is from this year's Lexember, and this is a fairly {audio cuts out} {00:42:40} of a word with a fairly long trail of senses behind it. The word is "pööndsjuo" and it means, primarily, "to play," but it has 19 senses. The first is – and I'll try to keep this from sounding like I'm reading from the phonebook, but I'll just read what I have here.

Sense 1 is "to play, to recreate, to pass one's time amusing oneself for no other purpose than for entertainment, to hang out, to have a good time." 2.) "To play as children do, to run around and make believe." 3.) "To play a sport or a game." 4.) "To play a keyboard, stringed, or percussion instrument." 5.) "To toy with, to trifle with, to be frivolous with, to be flippant with someone or something in an otherwise serious situation." 6.) "To fiddle with, to fidget, not to know what to do with one's hands." 7.) "To amuse oneself or others, to humor, or to indulge." 8.) "To adjust or to adapt to." 9.) "To be nimble, to be clever with one's hands." 10.) "To compromise, to negotiate." 11.) "To be acceptable, to be okay, to be an option." 12.) "To frustrate, to vex, or to thwart." 13.) "To blast or blight" – of the weather, or disease of plants, for example. 14.) "To outwit, to outsmart, to outfox, to beat by correctly anticipating one's opponent's next moves." 15.) "To tease, to poke fun at." 16.) "To provoke or to annoy." 17.) "To scold, reprove,

or rebuke.” I like this one. 18.) “To grill, to sweat information out of someone.” And 19.) “To draw milk from a cow or a reindeer.”

So, the semantics develop as follows. The earliest sense is “to press.” Now, this is an a posteriori language that I’m working with. It developed from Proto-Germanic root and that’s [p.r̥ənganə] {00:44:57}, which meant “to press.”

{00:45:00}

Your earliest senses here are going to be “to adjust,” “to press into corners,” or “to adapt to,” but also “to grill,” or “to scold” – those are gonna be your earlier senses. Then, “press,” developed into a sense to “to set in order” or “to arrange.” From “set into order,” it developed into a sense “to be crafty.” So, at that point, the sense is about amusement but also “to frustrate,” “to vex,” “to tease,” “to poke fun at” or “annoy” – that’s when those develop. From “to be crafty” – “to be mischievous. That’s when the senses of “play” begin to develop. Then, finally, from “to play as a game” – “to play as an instrument. That’s the final sense there.

Margaret:

Wow. Yeah. That’s really interesting, especially taking into consideration that it is a posteriori and so you had to work within historical context. It’s interesting to see the etymology of the word “play” in English and the different meanings that its forebears have had throughout the different proto-languages and in Old English and stuff. It’s really interesting to compare how you’ve made that semantic pathway and to kind of look at it in context of the semantic pathway that “play” in English has gotten over the years and over its predecessor’s years.

Ezekiel: It's interesting. Words for breaking and cutting, those are fairly easy to work out because they have fairly concrete semantics. But words for recreation, those are a little bit more difficult. I find that it's a little bit trickier to do those convincingly.

Margaret: Yeah. Because sometimes there's one thing they get –

Ezekiel: Without calquing.

Margaret: Yeah. Without calquing. Exactly. Sometimes, there's one aspect of a more complex action like that that gets emphasized. Like, I looked here because in Old English it says that in "plegan" it was also used to mean, "move rapidly," or "to occupy or busy oneself," "to exercise, frolic, make sport of or mock." It's interesting how this idea of moving rapidly has coalesced with playing or performing music.

George: That is an interesting thing to come at. So, where your word starts can end up indicating what happens to it later. Do you guys also think about – and this is partly do have to do with polysemy but also have to do with language development – do you think about cases where one word has pushed another out of its semantics in a certain way?

Ezekiel: Yeah. Actually, the word that I just brought up, "pööndsjuo," has done that up to a point. Let's talk maybe about synonym avoidance right here. I've got a good quote here from the linguist Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy. I've got one of his books in front of me. That's *The Evolution of Morphology*. He's discussing synonym avoidance, and he does that throughout the book.

I'm on Page 62 right now. He says, "As regards 'rancid' and 'addled,' the fact that they are regularly collocated with butter and eggs, respectively, shows that they are not interchangeable. The phrases 'rancid eggs' and 'addled water' are ill-formed. One can imagine a variety of English that has just one word applicable to food with the meaning, 'gone bad through having been kept too long.' However, actual English is unnecessarily complicated, one might say. It has a variety of words meaning 'gone bad' – 'rancid,' 'addled,' 'sour,' 'rotten,' 'stale.' But each is limited in the foods that it can be applied to."

So, bearing that in mind, I've done that a little bit with "pööndsjuo." If – I think it's Sense 3 or 4. Let's see –

George: I just wanna say that example seems like it has aged because "rancid butter" is fine for me. The words –

Ezekiel: "Rancid butter" is the correct one. "Rancid eggs" is the one he says is ill-formed.

{00:50:00}

Margaret: I always would apply "rancid" to anything with oil in it. Even oil-based is "rancid," but I wouldn't say anything else – anything that's not explicitly oil-based, I would never use "rancid," personally.

Ezekiel: Neither would I. He's also writing from New Zealand, so his intuitions might be {audio cuts out} {00:50:20} our own. In the case of the word I just quoted, Number 4 – since Number 4 is "to play a keyboard, stringed, or percussion instrument," not a brass instrument, that's

because there's an older word, which is veisuo [vɛizuo] {00:50:38}, which means "to play an instrument." It's polysemous with the word, "to sing," "to make an instrument sing." That has been retained only for wind instruments, but it's been displaced by this other word, "pööndsjuo," for string, keyboard, and percussion instruments.

George: Yes. Okay. I wish I could find my Isatikii dictionary because I have something similar in that I have "to play a stringed or percussion instrument," I believe, is tinsüdaa, which is like, "to hit music." It's an incorporated word. It's "to strike music." Playing a woodwind instrument, I believe, is actually related to the word for "to sing." So, I had a similar thing where I broke up playing instruments in that way. Again, I wish I could find my old dictionary, but it is actually lost, and I will have to reconstruct it if I continue working on Istatikii. Anyway

—

Ezekiel: That's very naturalistic. Tocharian, which was a part of my inspiration for this "pööndsjuo," does the same thing. It's "strike music," "sing music," depending upon the instrument. There's one more thing I should've mentioned when we were talking about small words, actually, that's just occurred to me and that's, in addition to small words, bound morphemes can be polysemous too.

If you think about inflection – inflection can be either a case of homophony through paradigmatic leveling. Two dissimilar forms that have different etymologies come to look the same. It can also be a matter of one inflectional affix coming to overtake the function of another and, in that sense, developing polysemy.

If you're doing some nonwestern-centric languages, if you're working with polysynthesis, for example, bound lexical affixes can often be polysemous. I have an example from the Lushootseed language. I love this one. I think this is a beautiful little collection of senses. They have this word *alus* [əlus] {00:53:36}, which means, "eye," as in the organ of sight, or "color," or "bright."

It's a bound morpheme. Where are my examples? You can use it in the sense of "the color of the leaves," or "the bright of the sky," or "to have sore eyes," that's the third example. And I'll spare you my trying to pronounce Lushootseed because there're very few vowels and I dunno exactly how to do it. So, I think that's something interesting and that might not necessarily occur to somebody who is first setting out to play with things in their lexicon that the affixes themselves will also have further meanings. It's important to think about those things.

In R. M. W. Dixon's *The Australian Languages*, he has a nice little diagram of the etymological relationships between different noun inflection morphemes in the Australian languages, which is really interesting to see that the ergative affix will develop from locative or the instrumental and will often be identical in form to these other affixes still.

{00:55:13}

George:

That's very interesting. Another thing I want to bring up is sometimes words can end up dragging other things with them. This is from – I'm slowly making my way through this – *Theories of Lexical Semantics* by, I believe the name is, Dirk Geeraerts. This is a really interesting

book for conlangers. It's a theory book definitely, but it goes through the history of lexical semantics.

I'm only a little bit through, but one thing that pops up is, he has an example from French of – now let me just get this. There's "chat," meaning "cat," and "chas" meaning "glue with a base of starch." If I'm mispronouncing those, I will hear it from Christophe. They're spelled differently. One ends with a T and one end with an S, but they're close to homophones.

Because of this, there's a word, maroufle, which means like "a big Tom cat," but then acquired the meaning of "starch" because of this association. That's actually just homophony in terms of "cat" and the "glue." That homophony conditioned that word to take on a secondary meaning because of the relationship of these other two words.

Margaret: Wow! That's amazing. I feel like –

Ezekiel: Yeah. That makes we wanna go out and do that now.

Margaret: I feel like there's some example of that in English of that that I came across once, but I don't remember what it would've been. That's so interesting.

George: That's kind of rare. I mean, you'll find a lot of examples in here of all kinds of things because he's trying to use the examples that people gave in their own theories. This is what I was going to bring up in the beginning is don't just make your homophones or let them occur by chance and not think a little bit about that because homophones do have an effect on how the rest of the language system develops.

There's that where that's probably a rare thing for a homophone to drag a semantically related word into a new sense. Something that happens a lot is stuff like homophone-avoidance. An example that he has is, in Gascon, the Latin "gallus" and "gatos" merged to – I'm not sure, is this [gat] {00:58:48} or [xat] {00:58:49}? I think Gascon has [xat]. But anyway, they merged to one form in certain dialects. In those areas where that merger occurred, other things were brought in to mean "chicken" because "gallus" means "rooster." Other things got brought in to mean "rooster" because "rooster" and "cat" being homophones is kind of detrimental, especially in a farming society.

So, "gallus" and "gatos" merging was not good, so they brought in words meaning "pheasant," and there's one that means "curate" that got pinched to mean "rooster."

Ezekiel: "Curate"?

George: I don't know. But the point is there was this merger and people didn't want to use the same word for both of them, so that left a void that led other words into that space.

{01:00:02} That could be a source of polysemy or it could be just a source of etymological changes.

Ezekiel: This is adjacent to what we're talking about, but what you've just mentioned really makes me think of avoidance registers in Australian languages. In these avoidance registers – so there're certain taboo family members and you're not allowed to use certain vocabulary around them, and so you have to use another word. There are ritually

prescribed words that you use. The origins of these words are really interesting. Sometimes, they're borrowed from neighboring languages. Sometimes, it seems that they're invented, that they are conwords, that they are like nonsense words. Sometimes, they're alterations through affixation, etc., of other vocabulary words.

In societies where there are such avoidance registers and there are taboo words, sometimes the vocabulary will consciously shift. For example, there's an important person whose name is a commonly used enough word, and this person dies, it's not unheard of in certain societies for people to avoid that word and have to substitute it with another one.

George:

That is another thing. But I mean, again, the lexicon is a system. Those words have to come from somewhere so either they're going to shed their own meaning and leave a void, or they're going to become polysemous and start referring to the other thing. You shouldn't be afraid of overlapping senses either because in real languages, the meaning of a word is not really what's in the dictionary. The meaning in people's heads is like they develop a prototype and things that are surrounding that prototype that are similar enough end up being called that word.

The boundaries of words are fuzzy. Let's think – oh, think about a knife and a sword, right? What exactly is the distinction between a knife and a sword? It's like there are swords that have single blades so it's not that, even though knives usually only have a single edge. There're single-edged swords too. Length? Well, a machete is about as some very short swords.

Margaret: If it's not necessarily length, is it purpose, perhaps? Or is it breadth? Maybe "knife" is a broader category than "sword," and "sword" is a, usually, big knife that you use to probably hurt people with.

George: Yeah. Well, swords are always specialized weapons.

Margaret: You don't really use swords for normal cutting – usually.

George: Some knives are just tools, some are actually specialized weapons, but that's where the fuzziness comes in. Another thing is, I think about this in the supermarket now because I go to buy animal crackers and I'm like, "Is our animal crackers a cookie or a cracker?"

Margaret: That's a problem. Well, the knife thing reminds me of something I did in Karkin, which is one of my other languages. I have a word for it that's usually translated "knife," but it always "knife" in the context of "knife" being a weapon because its etymology is related to the word for "blood." Essentially, it could be something like "a bleeder" – something that makes someone bleed. You can't use it to mean, "Oh, hand me that knife. I'm gonna cut the bread," because if you did, it would be really sinister.

So, I was thinking about the purposes of the different tools rather than their shape or form, exactly. I was like, "I'm gonna make words based on intention and purpose of a tool rather than how they just look or are." That was one of the results of that. Then, the word for a knife as a tool, as a non-violent tool, is something else. You never have to worry about that. But English, you don't know, right?

{01:05:01}

George: Looking at different languages will help you out with this too because I just thought of this because the knife and sword thing just popped out. In Chinese, the distinction is mainly just double-edged versus single-edged. “Jiàn 劍” is specifically a double-edged sword – a straight, doubled-edged sword. And “dāo 刀” can mean a knife or it can mean a single-edged sword. There’s even compounds of “dāo.” “Jiǎndāo” means “scissors.” It’s like – I forget what “jiǎn” is – but they’re like a specific type of “knife,” quote-unquote, but the individual blades are single-edged.

Margaret: That’s interesting. It’s similar for the word for “scissors” in Rílin being “twin knife.” That’s basically connected so.

George: That’s sort of another thing. Where you’re putting boundaries between words can end up affecting where they end up in other places with the polysemy. We had started talking about polysemy, but we’re kind of talking about lexicon building in general.

Ezekiel: Well, it is all related. You do have to draw from other sources because there’s no book that you can buy on how to build a polysemous lexicon. You have to feel it out for yourself as you go along.

Margaret: A lot of things can help you with that. There’s a lot of different resources that are not about that specifically but all work toward this general goal of – like these books on semantics and the book you mentioned earlier – or I guess you mention it in the notes of the – what is it? Women, Fire and Other Dangerous things?

Ezekiel: Yeah.

Margaret: That's a good one.

Ezekiel: Would you like to talk about inspiration, and how to get started doing this, and how to train yourself in this? Would this be a good time for that?

George: Yeah. You have a list here – Zeke, I guess you put it – is bilingual dictionaries – that's great – Wiktionary – Wiktionary's always part of my process; I might go over that in a minute – William's paper – so "A Conlanger's Thesaurus" – and "World lexicon of grammaticalization." I would add to that CLICS3.

Ezekiel: Yes. I use CLICS3 in a very specific way in my process. I use CLICS3 essentially to double check the work that I've already done. I wanna make sure that if I've come up with a constellation of senses, that they're not too specific to one existent nat language family. I don't wanna create something that feels like it's from South East Asia necessarily. I don't wanna create something that feels like it's from Sub-Saharan Africa. I want my polysemies to be cross-linguistically sound, idiosyncratic in their own way, but I want them to feel like they belong to the other vocabulary in the language and not to some other part of the world.

And CLICS3 is great for that because CLICS3 is very general. You're not gonna get some in-depth reading and food for thought from CLICS3. CLICS3 will point you in different directions – let you know if something you're thinking about is done by nat langs or not, but it's not like Wiktionary, for example, where it'll give you fairly idiosyncratic lists of meanings.

George: I do things differently from you. I will go into that in a minute. But first thing I want to say is I get what you are talking about there with not wanting to be too specific because – this is totally unrelated to the lexicon – but when I was working with Istatikii and I was wanting to do a direct inverse agreement system, I did not really settle on actually doing that until I found a paper that was comparing the Algonquian languages, which I'd already heard of, and – I'm not sure how to pronounce it – "rGyarung" or something.

{01:10:02} It's a Sino-Tibetan subfamily. Because of that, since I had it attested in multiple language families and I could look at how it worked in different language families, then I was able to make my own system that hopefully is more unique and not ripping off Ojibway. But back to the tools – Margaret, do you use any particular tools or resources when you're trying to work on polysemy or lexicon building?

Margaret: No. It hadn't really occurred to me to use any particular sources, but I kinda just got inspired and would remember things that I had read about different languages or in my own daily work with languages and whatever I'm doing – not just conlanging but linguistics and whatever. I would do some things and think like, "Oh, that's a really good point" or "Man, yeah. I guess" – I would have a word in a language and feel like it was too relex-y, and I would start to play with it creatively and be like, "Okay. Let's see where this can go."

But now that you guys mention it, it's a really good idea to check up on some of these resources for new ideas and to kind of just check yourself and make sure you're not relexing somebody else's semantic web or whatever because that's something that I try to avoid in

conlanging – in a priori conlanging especially – I don't wanna copy anything from anybody, really. It supposed to be a synthesis of what I know as a person.

That's a really good point that you make. These resources are actually really good ideas. So, I haven't really used anything in particular myself. I kinda just go for it. But these – yeah. I'll probably start to do a little more in-depth, directed research now that you've mentioned these sources because they look like really good ideas.

George: Well, I do wanna say, you actually do fieldwork, so you have access and inspiration that a lot of conlangers don't necessarily have.

Margaret: That's true. I think that a lot of my inspiration just comes from all sorts of sources all over the place. I don't even know exactly what they are.

George: That's totally understandable. My process – when I was doing Lexember, actually, I was doing this – is – and there I was doing etymology, but etymology and polysemy are basically cousins. So, it's not that far away. I would look at CLICS3 first, actually, because for me CLICS3 was a place to get inspiration and say, "Okay. I want this word" –

I was doing etymology, so I wanna see what this word could possibly come from. Knowing what links there are in the CLICS3 are good. CLICS3 doesn't have everything. It's just very high-frequency concepts. Sometimes, it just doesn't show me anything. Other times, it shows me a map and I'm not satisfied.

Another thing that I used for inspiration was STEDT, which is the Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary. That's specific to one language family, but it still is pretty good just to get a sense of realistic changes. You kinda have to wade through it because a whole lot of the time, you'll look up a word and everybody just derived it from something that meant that word way back in some higher branch in the Sino-Tibetan family. I don't know if that's an artifact of the reconstruction or an actual fact that a lot of words just didn't change.

That's another part of that. Then, I would go to Wiktionary and – I don't know if this is what you do, Zeke – but my thing with Wiktionary is I'll go there, I'll read the English etymology, maybe I'll click back through to Proto-Indo-European, and I will go down and find the sense of the word in the translations that I want and click through to the different languages. It's very spotty. Highly studied languages you get more information than less-studied languages.

{01:14:56}

But I often will get languages from several different families that have different ranges of polysemy and different etymologies for these words that are satisfying for me to try to brainstorm ideas. And Wiktionary has everything.

Ezekiel:

It does. Wiktionary is very hit or miss. There are a couple of translations of English Wiktionary collections that I think are far better than others. The Arabic one is pretty good. Latvian is very good. I use Latvian a lot for Hemackle, which is my Germanic a posteriori project, because it's spoken in the extreme north of Europe. Latvian is very good. Scottish Gaelic is very good. The Wiktionary is very good.

George: When you look at Chinese or anything that uses Chinese script, you have to be careful how you read it because sometimes it has both the character etymology and the spoken etymology – the actual language etymology. Sometimes, it's like one or the other and it's not always 100% clear which one you're referring to, so you have to be a little careful. But still, that's like double information when you get both of those. It's really cool.

Ezekiel: Absolutely.

George: But you're right, it's spotty. You'll get one language that has a lot of information and one that doesn't. But it's a lot easier than trying to – I think I have a seven-language multilingual dictionary, but I never use that because it's a paper dictionary and I just don't want to page through everything.

Ezekiel: I have my Karyoł library sitting here next to me. There are five bilingual dictionaries that I've used for inspiration with Karyoł. I can really recommend some of them if somebody wants to add a little bit of Sub-Saharan African feel to one of their conlang projects. Dent & Nyembezi's Scholar's Zulu Dictionary is incredibly good. So is the Comprehensive Oromo-English Dictionary by Tilahun Gamta.

These I actually got – well, I can say this. If anybody is in the New York City area, I really heartily recommend East Village Books. It's this tiny little place. It's on St. Mark's Place. It's a tiny little basement shop. It's the size of my living room. It's not a very nice place. They have unfinished hardwood floors. But it's just so charming and old New York, and they have a linguistics section. The Strand doesn't

even have a linguistics section, but this tiny little basement shop has a linguistics section.

You can buy some pretty interesting esoterica in there for under \$10.00. It's all used. My copy of the Scholar's Zulu Dictionary, I got for \$6.50. I looked it up on Amazon today. On Amazon Marketplace it's going for like \$25.00. My copy of Tilahun Gamta's dictionary – \$13.00. It's like \$600.00 on Amazon right now. It's a rare book. If you're looking for bilingual dictionaries – used bookstores, that's the way to go. Absolutely.

Margaret: Nice! That's really great to hear.

George: Okay. Now, I just am seeing that we are getting very long on time, so I think it's time to start wrapping things up. But, yeah, Zeke, if you can list all those resources in the doc, I can put them in the show notes.

Ezekiel: Absolutely. I'm gonna update it now.

Margaret: That would be great.

George: Here's what I want to be a takeaway of – I think there's two angles that you want to be looking from that are coming out of this. One is the lexicon as a system, which is going to help you define where words need to be and where things can end up expanding out. The other is the story of individual words. We haven't touched on everything.

{01:20:00} There's much more to this than even that. Words can be influenced by foreign words that are coming in and causing the semantics of a native word to change to conform to it. There are all kinds of things that can

happen. A change in environment, or the speakers can be a big thing we haven't touched on. But the main thing is each individual word has a story and then the whole lexicon fits together as a system.

If you can balance those two things and think creatively about where your words can go, then you can do good examples of polysemy.

Margaret:

I think to kind of wrap up what you had said earlier, I think that it's important to remember that none of your lexemes exist in a void. Even though you can make an individual lexeme – an individual word – and say, “Okay. That's that word. On to the next,” as we've seen, they can influence each other. They're all in there together. In the minds of the speaker, they're not just a series of single words, but there's this whole web of connections.

Sometimes, when you pull one string, it can affect something else. I think that using stuff like etymology, polysemy, lexicography – all this stuff can be really interrelated because the lexemes themselves are really interrelated just by their nature.

Ezekiel:

I was thinking, on a parting note, I think insofar as the nuts and bolts, the craft, of actually putting these things together is concerned, a word of caution – you can go too far. You wanna practice naturalism in this, and so you wanna keep your collection of senses to be fairly tight. As an example, in preparing for this talk I was flipping through my copy of *Women, Fire, and Dangerous things*. There's a discussion on Dyirbal noun class in there, which has a lot of overlap with polysemy because it's about prototypes and metaphorical extension and stuff like that.

I was thinking about there's – in the Dyirbal system of grammatical gender, cigarettes are assigned to one gender. I was trying to come up with as many different possible reasons why this could be. I thought, "Okay. So, it's possible that" – it's because if you open up a bag of flour, often dust will come out. Cigarettes give off smoke. And I imagined if that is the primary sense and that if it's dust or smoke, and if Dyirbal were a conlang, where could you develop it from there?

I immediately thought of fog. It's very foggy here, especially in the mornings this time of year. I would feel that a constellation of meaning surrounding flour, fog, and smoke – I feel like that would be a good polysemy. But my mind continued to go along this path and, if I pushed it any farther, I think I'd be going too far.

For an example, after "fog," I thought, "What does fog do?" It impairs visibility when you're on the road, for example. Perhaps, an extension from fog would be "blindness." "Deafness" relates to "blindness" because they're both privation of senses. They're both in the same domain of experience. So, it would be possible from "blindness" to develop into "deafness." That all makes sense. It makes sense on paper. But I don't feel like you would ever find that in a nat lang underneath one –

George:

Yeah. I think that's where your free-associating and developing out this word story ends up butting up against the lexicon as a system and what is the lexicon doing. Your extent to blindness, that's starting to get weird but not that bad. But then extending from "blindness" to "deafness" – I can see that happening on its own, but it's really a bit of a stretch for it to still have the meaning of "fog," and "smoke," and "flour," and then extend to "blindness" and to "deafness."

{01:25:02} Because people are gonna want to have those distinct. And also all the rest of the constellation of meanings seem to be more “blindness” being on the outside because all of these things can impair vision, right?

Margaret: I think it’s okay to make, sometimes, these big leaps, but I think that to make several big leaps in one lexeme is pushing it a little bit occasionally – not that you couldn’t do it if you liked it. I mean, if you like that, obviously go for it. But in terms of natural language, I mean, I think it starts to just – my suspension of disbelief is just destroyed briefly by that.

I think some of that – if you were to take those types of leaps and separate them into two different parts of the lexicon and show me at separate times, I would be fine with it, but sometimes – yeah.

George: I think for most purposes of conlangers, whether it is a naturalistic conlang, even things like an auxlang or an engelang, unless you’re just like, “This is a personal language. I’m gonna do whatever I want,” there’s a sense of people have to speak this language. At some point, you’re making so many logical leaps that either you got to lose some of the earlier senses and make it like a chain semantic shift or you’re gonna have to stop spreading it out.

That’s a nice little word of warning at the end here, after we’ve got people excited about making big, long dictionary entries. So, have fun. Go on out there. Do some reading and some work and figure out – maybe go through your existing dictionary entries and say, “Can this have a couple more senses?” That’s one thing I’ve done before and it’s

very interesting to work on. Or as you're making words, think about where can this word go.

Hopefully, we've given people some ideas.

Ezekiel: And I would say a final final final final thought is that if you're somebody, especially for younger conlangers, if you're trying to get your friends engaged in what you're doing and they're not particularly interested – I remember making languages myself in high school and my friends being excited for me that I was excited about this but unenthusiastic themselves – your vocabulary is a great way to get people involved in what you're doing.

At the Philadelphia Conlang Salon, one of the guys who we would meet there with, Jon Martin, said, "After all, people publish all these popular linguistics books about kooky words in the world's languages, but we will be hard pressed to find on a shelf in a bookstore a popular language book about some kooky syntactic structure." If you wanna talk to your friends about what you're doing, vocabulary is a great way to get them hooked too.

Margaret: Yeah. I definitely agree on that. People love to hear about strange meanings of words that they don't know.

George: That's great. Share it with your friends too. All right. Thank you, Margaret and Zeke, for being on the show!

Margaret: Thank you for having me.

Zeke: Thank you.

George: Hope you guys have a nice night. To our listeners, I'm hoping that you guys have some new inspiration for your conlangs and for polysemy and lexicon building in general. With all of that said, I'm gonna say, Happy Conlanging!

{Music}

George: Thank you for listening to Conlangery. You can find our archives and show notes at conlangery.com. Follow us on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter by searching for "Conlangery." Conlangery is entirely supported by our patrons at Patreon. To become a patron, go to patreon.com/conlangery and pledge your monthly amount. As little as a dollar will help us out. A special thanks to Ezekiel Fordsmender, Margaret Ransdell-Green, Graham Hill, and all of those who have chosen to support us.

Conlangery is under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-commercial – Share-Alike license. You may use Conlangery episodes or any noncommercial work as long as credit is provided to us, and you release your work under the same license. Conlangery's website is created by Bianca Richards, our theme music is by Null Device, and transcriptions of our episodes have been provided by Sarah Dopierala. Kasaral.

{Music}

{01:30:53}