

On the Awkward Polysemy of the Verb *risk*

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Introduction.

As one of Karin Aijmer's fields of interest is that of semantics, a discussion of a polysemous word may not come amiss in this context. The difference between homonymy and polysemy is clear enough in principle, if often less clear in actual practice.¹ As the semantic differences are greater, by definition, between homonyms than between different uses of a polysemous word, it might be thought that ambiguity, especially problematic ambiguity, is restricted to the sphere of homonyms. I will try to demonstrate with the help of the English verb *risk* that such is not the case.

The verb *risk* is just one in a family of formally related words: *risk* n., *risk* v., *risky*, *riskiness*, *riskful* and perhaps *risqué*, and also of semantically related ones like *danger*, *hazard*, *venture* and *gamble*, *invest*, *expose*. In their plea for semantic frames, Fillmore and Atkins (1992) show that such relations will all have to be taken into account for an exhaustive description of a word to be possible.² Pustejovsky (2000:77ff.) formalises the main meanings of *risk* by introducing a privative factor that acts as a coercion operator; he thus arrives at an abstract description of the meanings of the verb. My own aim here is much more modest. By studying a few examples of the interplay of two main senses of the verb, I hope to demonstrate ways in which ambiguity can arise and also to suggest some of the devices hearers/readers use to deal with it.

1 There are many problematic cases such as the relationship between *metal*¹ 'solid mineral substance' and *metal*² 'small stones for making roads' (cf. "a metalled road").

2 "by displaying the frame and its categories, describing the manner of introduction of associated concepts within the frame, and adding whatever embellishments a given usage requires." (Fillmore and Atkins 1992:99)

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Polysemous 'risk'.

A person might refer to a very dangerous situation by saying “I might risk my life doing this”, or, equally, by saying “I might risk my own death doing this”. This anomaly points up the semantic duality of the verb *to risk*, a duality that is likely to pass by unnoticed most of the time in conversation and in writing but which is sometimes apt to cause misunderstanding.

The identification of a word as polysemous, and the distinction between its different senses may not always be obvious; Fillmore and Atkins (2000: 101) hold that “even for lexicographers there are no objective criteria for the analysis of a word into senses”. Nor is this only a matter of objective facts. Different semantic theories take different views of the relationship between extralinguistic factors and their linguistic representations, theories that can be ranged along a scale from reductionist, with few semantic entities, to expansionist, with many. The number of polysemous words in the language will therefore vary with the type of semantic theory. To many or most observers, however, the verb *risk* is undoubtedly a polysemous word. Its meaning can be understood as made up of two main components:

- (A) ‘to hazard an act or something pleasant or valuable’ (as in “to risk a guess” or “to risk money”); and
- (B) ‘to possibly expose oneself to something unpleasant’ (as in “to risk bankruptcy”).

In both cases, A and B, the action implicit in *risk* is normally undertaken to achieve something worthwhile, a Goal.³ There is a difference between A and B in that the risk the subjects are running is not made explicit in A but is always explicit in B. If you risk a guess, the risk is that you may be wrong, and if you risk your money, the risk is that you will never see it again, but in either case the possible (unwanted) consequence is not spe-

³ Fillmore and Atkins (1992:81).

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cified. In B sentences, on the other hand, the risk the subject is running (e.g. “bankruptcy”) functions as the object and is always specified.

Speakers can choose to focus either on what is being hazarded (A) or on its unwelcome possible consequences (B). Fillmore and Atkins (1992: 82) use the terms Valued Object/Victim and Harm, respectively. If speakers focus on what is being hazarded, they will say e.g. *risk one's life, money, career*; or *risk a guess, blowing one's nose*, etc., all the time leaving ‘with possibly unwanted consequences’ unexpressed. Here the object of *risk* is the word(s) denoting the act or the valuable or pleasant things. If, on the other hand, they focus on the possible consequences, they might say *risk death, jail, humiliation*, etc., where the object of *risk* is the word(s) denoting the danger or unpleasantness that may materialise. The entity that is being endangered in this perspective (normally a person or persons)⁴ is usually the actor, the subject of the clause.

Corpus evidence.

In order to look a little more closely into the function of the verb *risk* in modern English I have made use of material in the CobuildDirect Corpus.

Risk (A). Examples of what will here be called *risk* A are usually easy to distinguish from the rest. What is being endangered is a valuable or pleasant thing, so noun phrases with a positive semantic prosody abound: *her good looks, her job, her life, his freedom, his reputation, your money, my career, our most precious asset, peace and prosperity, their capital*, etc. Note that the A noun is typically preceded by a possessive; it is something that belongs to you or that you have influence over that you may put at risk. The risk is implied but, as we saw, not specified. What is hazarded can also be an act (a “deed” in Fillmore and Atkins 1992: 94ff). Some typical A cases are the following:

⁴ There are exceptions, such as “And as with any compromise it [=the plan] risks satisfying no-one.” (Corpus: bbc/06. Text: S1000900915.) Sentence (4), below, is not really an exception: “a chopper” stands for “a chopper/helicopter crew”.

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- (1) I also risk a pound a week on the lottery [...] (Corpus: today/11. Text: N6000941205.)
- (2) A friend of Kevin said: "It was typical of him to risk his own life to help a child in his care." (Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980626.)

In such cases it is obvious that something valuable is being put at risk in order to achieve some goal. A few examples of acts, "deeds", with possibly unwanted consequences are these:

- (3) Not only that, his employees lived in constant fear of him. They wouldn't risk drinking behind his back. (Corpus: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000001320.)
- (4) Even a chopper wouldn't risk flying over the area. (Corpus: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000001320.)

Again we are not told what might befall the subjects, even if we could guess.

Risk (B). B examples are those where the risk is specified as the object of *risk* and the subject is what/who is being exposed to it. Some examples are:

- (5) Mobile phone users risk bad health after a mere two minutes of use. (Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980517.)
- (6) Thieves don't want to risk being seen. (Corpus: ukephem/02. Text: E0000001244.)

With both the A and the B perspective the object of *risk* could be an act expressed as a gerund (but see below). Again, the difference between them is that in the A perspective the act is seen as possibly having undesirable consequences, but in the B perspective it is the act itself that represents those consequences. Cf. (7) and (8):

- (7) One should not confine one's actions merely to what is possible but should try, dare and risk doing as much good as possible. (Corpus: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000001257) - (A)

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- (8) [A cricketer speaking:] When you have a finger injury you risk doing something else because you take the ball differently. (Corpus: oznews/01. Text: N5000950419.) - (B)

In (7) the possible unpleasant consequences of doing good are not spelled out, but in (8) the possible unpleasant consequences are precisely “doing something else” (than you should have done).

Formal characteristics.

Certain characteristics of the A and B categories are striking. It was suggested above that nominal objects of *risk* with the A sense are typically preceded by a possessive adjective. This is overwhelmingly the case: out of 95 nominal objects with a possessive in the material, 90 have the A sense and 5 the B one. Another a little less pronounced tendency is that if the object of *risk* is a gerund, *risk* will be B in more than three cases out of four (168 out of 220). Although there are no very obvious formal or syntactic dividing lines between the two types of *risk*, it is not unlikely that they will be more clearly differentiated in the future. As Carey Benom says⁵:

Semantic differentiation occurs, diachronically, prior to syntactic differentiation, as well as motivating it. Initially the semantics begin to diverge, and only later are the conceptual differences reflected structurally. However, when there are syntactic differences, there is stronger evidence for distinct senses, as we are not dependent on the linguist's intuition.

Ambiguity and context analysis.

With two related but different meanings in the same word there are interpretational dangers arising out of ambiguity, “multiple meanings at the

⁵ <http://cerebro.psych.cornell.edu/emcl/longabs/cb.pdf>
(date of access, April 2006)

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level of more complex syntactic structures”.⁶ Let us follow the road into increasing ambiguity. As often happens, what is ambiguous in isolation can be quickly resolved by the textual or situational context. For instance, in (9):

- (9) Blinder, of course, is an inflation dove, a Clinton-appointed Fed board member who would risk a bit of inflation to stimulate growth. (Corpus: times/10. Text: N2000951104.)

“A bit of inflation” would normally suggest an undesirable phenomenon that may occur if certain measures are taken or neglected, thus a B interpretation, but as a Fed board member Blinder is obviously in a position to bring on inflation, in order to achieve the higher targets expressed in “to stimulate growth”. “Risk a bit of inflation” thus means ‘decide on creating a bit of inflation, risky as it may be’, an A interpretation.

In other cases, it is less evident whether the object refers to what is being put at risk or to the unwished-for consequences, and the context will have to be analysed fairly closely for the ambiguity to disappear:

- (10) I thought I was going nowhere then but before the start of last season Huddersfield came in and I was totally sold on the place. It took courage for them to risk a transfer tribunal, which eventually put me around <KPD> 60,000, and I'll always be grateful to them. Corpus: sunnow/17. Text: N9119980403.

The speaker, presumably a footballer, could mean either that the club were courageous in deciding to appear before a transfer tribunal despite the unspecified uncertain outcome, which would be an A case, or that they were courageous in taking certain unspecified steps that might result in a tribunal; the danger that might materialise would thus be the tribunal itself, a B case. Given the seemingly bad repute of transfer tribunals,⁷ a B interpretation may seem marginally more likely.

⁶ Ravin and Leacock (2000: v).

⁷Cf. “fearful of what might happen at a transfer tribunal”, “a bitter wrangle at a transfer tribunal” (Cobuild Corpus).

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The difference between the two types of interpretation can thus be slight or elusive, but it is important enough in the context of power politics:

- (11) Although the Hungarians immediately appealed to the United Nations for support, the Soviets moved in quickly with troops and tanks. For once, John Foster Dulles was not willing to risk a confrontation, and the non-Communist world stood by as the Hungarians were brutally forced back into the Soviet camp. (Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001429.)

(A): 'The American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was not willing to stage a confrontation, which might have disastrous consequences.'

(B): 'Dulles was not willing to take steps that might result in a disastrous confrontation.'

- (12) But it is clear that Mr Assad is unwilling to risk meeting Shimon Peres, the Israeli Prime Minister, before a deal on ending the state of war between Israel and Syria. (Corpus: times/10. Text: N2000960312.)

(A): 'Assad is afraid his meeting Peres before the deal would have harmful consequences.'

(B): 'Assad is afraid he might happen to meet Peres before the deal.'

- (13) Lloyd George, unwilling to risk another fight with the military, reluctantly relented. (Corpus: ukbooks/08. Text: B0000000551.)

(A): 'LG, unwilling to provoke another fight with possibly dangerous consequences..'

(B): 'LG, who would not accept the unwished-for possibility of a fight ...'

As we move into more and more palpable ambiguity we have to depend more and more on context for our interpretation. "Context" here means more than the immediate linguistic environment; it also comprises "general knowledge of the world, more specific knowledge that is shared between participants in a conversation, information that was introduced earlier in the discourse, and the specific circumstances in which a discourse or conversation takes place" (Tanenhaus 1992: 288-289). In the great majority of cases, what is ambiguous in a narrow perspective ceases to cause any problems when more contextual elements are taken

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into account. The general reader would presumably hesitate between an A and a B reading of (11) - (13), and it is easy to think of situations where an unintended reading could cause confusion or harm. However, an observer with a more intimate knowledge of the characters and individual histories of the protagonists of (11) - (13) might not therefore find the sentences ambiguous at all.

Distinguished and undistinguished senses.

As we have seen, there is a clear distinction between senses A and B of *risk*, and most of the time there can be no discussion as to which sense is being meant. We have also seen that there are ambiguous cases where the speaker/writer intends either A or B but where the hearer/reader's choice between them is not obvious and where the outcome of the choice, which will significantly affect the final interpretation, is ultimately dependent on sometimes peripheral contextual information. But there is also a third case. The polysemy of *risk* can be awkward, simply because the perspective of the speaker/writer is not always obvious even to himself/herself. If what you risk is something valuable on the A reading ("risk life") but something undesirable on the B reading ("risk death"), neutral phrases like "risk a lot", "risk more", "risk a situation", "risk a very great deal", "risk anything", "much to risk" tend to blur the line between an A and a B interpretation. Consider sentence (14):

- (14) Prayers are sometimes answered by the experience of more struggle, by our being plunged into situations where we must risk more than we ever dared before. (Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000001453.)

(A): 'We have to hazard more, put more at risk' (*more* suggests something valuable)

(B): 'We have to expose ourselves to the possibility of more harm (damage, dangers, losses, etc.)' (*more* suggests something unpleasant)

In such cases readers or listeners can follow one of several interpretational avenues. The first is that of resorting to a default reading. One of the two possible readings will seem to be a generally more likely one, which in case of doubt readers will automatically prefer to the alternative reading. The default will in that case probably be the more frequent of

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the two. To find out which of them, if so, is the default reading, all the cases of the verb form *risk* in the Cobuild Corpus were analysed and classified as A or B occurrences. In the cases where an A classification seemed just as likely as a B one, the examples were classified as AB, and in the cases where either an A or a B classification seemed likely but less than certain a ? was added. The result of the analysis is this:

Table 1. *Distribution of the verb risk over semantic classes*

	A	A?	B	B?	AB	?	Total
Raw fig.s	254	2	360	33	14	2	665
Per cent	38.2	0.3	54.1	5.0	2.1	0.3	100.0

It seems, then, that if either of the two interpretations is to function as default, it is the B one, with 59.1% as against 38.5% for A. Intuitively it may also seem more natural that you should risk something unpleasant or dangerous than something valuable.

Another avenue of interpretation becomes relevant when again either A or B can apply and it is likely that neither speaker/writer nor hearer/reader bothers to make a distinction between them. Consider (15):

- (15) But when a person's drug has potentially negative consequences and he continues using it anyway, we must conclude that he is deriving deeper, unacknowledged payoffs from it - secondary gains for which he is willing to risk a lot. Corpus: usbooks/09. Text: B9000000440.

(A): gains for which he is willing to hazard many things he values

(B): gains for which he is prepared to endure many hardships

The sentence is unproblematic as it stands because we don't feel called upon to distinguish between the two senses of *risk*. Both may apply at the same time. This is a case of vagueness or indeterminacy, discussed for instance by Geeraerts (1993). What happens here, I would suggest, is that hearers/readers, and probably also speakers/writers, desist from making the usual distinctions relevant to the word in question and rely on a more

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general or abstract meaning common to the two alternatives.⁸ As Ravin and Leacock put it in a different context (2000:22), the two meanings “are not disjoint but rather components of a single word sense”. In this case that meaning might be ‘accept the possibility of negative consequences in order to gain something valuable’. This raises what seems at first to be an awkward question about the status of our verb. According to a common definitional test of polysemy, “[a] word is polysemous if more than a single definition is needed to account for its meaning. In classical terms, a word is polysemous if a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions cannot be defined to cover all the concepts expressed by the word” (Ravin and Leacock 2000:3). If, therefore, the definition of *risk* just given should be necessary and sufficient, the word would not be polysemous, according to the definitional test. However, precisely because the suggested definition is abstract and general, it is under-specified and therefore generally not sufficient. It will serve the hearer/reader who is only interested in a broad understanding of the subject-matter in question, and it will act as a kind of temporary measure to tide the hearer/reader who wants to understand the subject-matter in detail over a potential quirk in the written or spoken communication, but more information will be needed for the different senses expressed by *risk* to become clear. This may be said to illustrate the point raised earlier, viz. that the status of a word in a monosemous - polysemous dimension is not given once and for all. It will vary not only for theoretical reasons depending on which semantic theory is being applied, but also for practical reasons, because individual speakers will differ over semantic nuances in a word.

The different possible types of relationship between senses A and B could perhaps be as illustrated as in Figure 1, where A/B is intended to represent the default method with either A or B as the preferred option, and where A+B represents the more abstract amalgamation of the two senses.

⁸ Cf. Kjellmer (1993).

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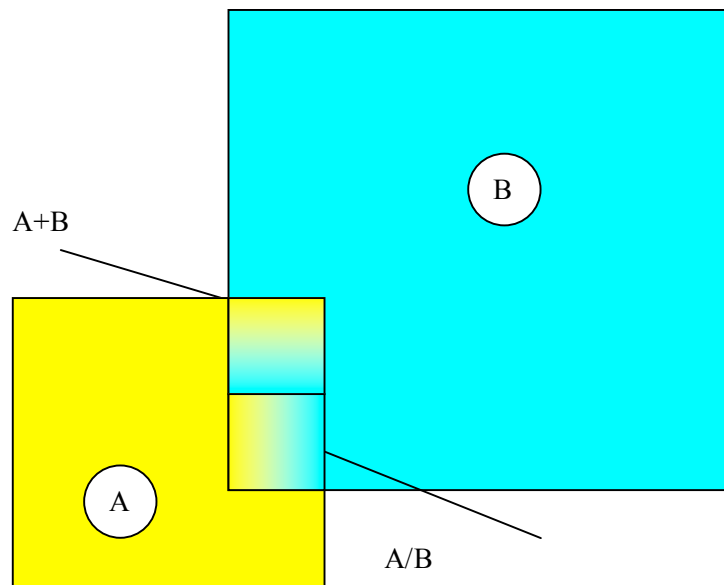


Figure 1. *Relations between senses A and B*

Conclusion.

A conclusion that one may draw after considering a polysemous verb like *risk* is that polysemy is in fact quite likely to give rise to ambiguity. In most cases, however, the potential awkwardness of ambiguity can be handled satisfactorily by hearers and readers, thanks to contextual information. If the context is not sufficiently informative and the ambiguity is therefore not resolved instantly, they will resort either to a default interpretation or to a general, less specific interpretation. In the business world of today, particularly in financial institutions such as insurance companies, specialists in finance devote themselves to “risk analysis” and “risk management”, terms that are frequent and often well defined. It is now obvious that competent users of English, i.e. specialists in lan-

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guage use, will also have to engage in both “*risk* analysis” and “*risk* management” in a linguistic sense, an activity that will assume a different kind of specialist knowledge, but one which is no less demanding and chiefly applied on the subconscious level. Language is a highly sophisticated system.

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