

Sugar Makes You Sweet: Polysemy and Cultural Beliefs about Causation (CL 2011, July 20-22, 2011 Birmingham)

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Hypothesis:

Earlier studies showed some word pairs in health discourse being conflated. If some polysemes are not recognized as fully separate senses, is there a pattern of use showing if speakers feel that experiencing one sense creates the occurrence of the second sense?

Method:

Using corpus data, examine the contexts of 7 polysemous terms in lay health discussions to identify wording indicative of causation:

cold, cholesterol, fat, hot, oil, sugar, stress

The Corpus:

Corpus of American Discourses on Health (CADOH). Texts from 1995-2011: Personal blogs, commercial blogs (+comments), listservs and online forums, letters to the editor, TV, movie, and radio transcripts, newspapers and magazines



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Examples from the Corpus:

[Polysemous pairs in blue. Causation predicates in green.]

- 1) "You know, you don't **get a cold** by going out in the **cold weather** after a shower despite what my mother told me." (TV, *CBS Sunday Morning*, 2002)
- 2) "For one thing, how much **cholesterol** you eat doesn't necessarily **determine** how much **[cholesterol]** ends up in your blood. The body, it turns out, also manufactures its own **cholesterol**." (Magazine, *Lemonick, Time*, 2003)
- 3) "When you eat ice cream, the **fat** in the ice cream **becomes fat** in your body. So if you eat a lot of ice cream, you might **become fat**. If you don't, you're gonna stay skinny." (Movie, *Arndt, Little Miss Sunshine*, 2006)
- 4) "They are restless, angry, **hot tempered** and critical. **Hot** spicy foods seem to **engender** those with anger, irritability or even rages." (Webpage, *Card, Anger Management*, 2010)
- 5) "Eating greasy, **oily foods** will eventually **produce oily skin**." (Webpage, *Wildcrafted*, 2011)
- 6a) "how can you be so sweet!?!?! my mom always said that eating a lot of **candy makes you sweet**... but I eat a lot of that and am not super sweet." (Blog, *Bethany, Giving Reading a Chance*, 2008)
- 6b) "Eating too much **sugar causes** our blood **sugars** to go haywire." (Webpage, *Sibal, beautyden.com*, 2011)
- 7) "Sometimes workouts are not as effective at reducing **stress** because we use the time **to think about** all the **stressful** things we have going on." (Magazine, *Reader's Digest*, 2010)

Stress senses

[1]= stressor outside the body

[2]= symptom in the body

[3]= emotional state

Findings:

- * For 1-6, conflation was found, as well as meta-discussions disputing the "myths" based on conflation.
- * For *stress*, 3 meanings appeared, making it unclear which aspect to address when advised to "reduce stress".

Identifying conflated senses reveals that a linguistic aspect can reinforce cultural beliefs about the causes of health and illness. Health care providers may need to spend more time overtly separating the concepts in discussions on preventive health.

References

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