

Dust: A Case Study on Conronymy

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1. Introduction

Although many words are polysemous in natural language, it is common to employ different lexical items to describe different senses, in particular those senses which are so different that they even contradict or are opposite to each other. For instance, the English verb *remove* describes an act “to take something away from something,” whereas its antonym, *attach* describes another act “to add something to something,” which is opposite to “to take something away from something” in the direction of movements. However, there are extreme examples in which one single word is so polysemous that it can signify two different senses that are opposite to or contradict each other. The unique linguistic phenomenon can be observed in examples (1) and (2): *out* in (1) means “visible” while *out* in (2) means “invisible.” The similar phenomenon can be seen in examples (3) and (4) as well, *off* in (3) being “not operational” and *off* in (4) being “operational.”

- (1) Stars are out tonight.
- (2) The lights in that house are always out.

(Retrieved on May 22nd, 2020 from <https://eow.alc.co.jp/>)

- (3) He turned the lights off.
- (4) When the window broke the alarm went off.

(Karaman, 2008, p. 173)

This research aims to explore the phenomenon as mentioned earlier, termed “conronymy” in this study, from various perspectives through a case study of the verb *dust*, which is a notable example of conronymy. Following the Introduction, Part Two provides a summary of related previous studies on conronymy up to the present with our comments. A thorough analysis of the conronym *dust* is conducted from a diachronic perspective in Part Three, and then from semantic and syntactic perspectives in Part Four with a particular emphasis placed on the relationship between the semantic and syntactic features of the conronym. When the opposite senses of a conronym are used in the same syntactic construction, we propose a

contextual viewpoint in Part Five in order to avoid potential misunderstanding or vagueness. Finally, the paper draws a tentative conclusion in Part Six based on the analyses in the previous parts.

2. Literature Review

According to Karaman (2008, p. 173), Carl Abel is presumably the first to realize that “lexical items can be subject to opposite senses at the micro-level¹” while studying Egyptian hieroglyphics and named it “Gegensinn.”² Since then, many scholars have researched “Gegensinn” in different languages from various aspects, yet there remain some unsolved issues such as lack of a widely accepted term of the linguistic phenomenon. Based on some of the representative studies in the field, a long list of terms proposed for sense opposition begins with “auto-antonym” (Zhou, 2018), “contronym,” “contranym,” “antagonym,” and “antilogy” (Karaman, 2008, p. 174). Researchers continue the list with more synonymous terms of sense contradiction, such as “amphibolous word,” “enantiodromic word,” “enantiodrome,” “enantiodronomy,” “fence-sitter,” “Janus word,” “opposonym,” “pseudo-opposite,” “self-antonym,” “self-contradicting word” (Karaman, 2008, p. 174), “pseudo-contronym,” “charactonym,” “ambivalent word” (Zhang, 2013, p. 17), “Janus-faced word” (Eijiro on the Web), “enantiosem,” “enantionymy,” and “autoantonym” (Wikipedia). In this study, in order to avoid possible confusion and misunderstanding, we adopt the terms “contronym” to indicate a lexical item that has at least two senses that contradict each other and “contronymy” to refer to the linguistic fact or phenomenon that a lexeme has two senses that are opposite to each other.³

2.1 Polysemy

The English word *bank* can mean both “an organization that provides various financial services” and “the side of a river.”⁴ According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the former sense of *bank* was originally “from either Old Italian *banca* or Middle French *banque* (itself from the Italian word), both meaning ‘table’” while the latter sense originated from “a Scandinavian source such as Old Norse *banki*, Old Danish *banke* meaning ‘sandbank.’”⁵ In this study, we classify *bank* as homonymy since etymologically the two senses are of different origins, and the corresponding lexical items for these two senses happen to be the same in spelling and pronunciation. Unlike homonyms, the multiple senses of a polysemy “share conceptually related meanings” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 77), such as *can* in the following sentences (5) and (6). *Can* in (5), meaning “mental ability,” and *can* in (6), meaning “physical ability,” share a common semantic core of a person’s ability to do something. We take the position that contronyms are not an example of homonymy, but an extreme example of

Polysemy in English. A linguistic item having two or more contradictory meanings, such as the verb *dust*, which can mean, “to remove dust from something” in (7) and “to cover something with powder” in (8), is called “contronym” in this research.⁶

- (5) I can read German. (mental ability)
- (6) I can swim a mile. (physical ability)

(Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 77)

- (7) His desk was dusted clean, revealing reflections on the varnished wooden surface.
- (8) Lightly dust bronzing powder on your forehead, cheeks and browbone, anywhere the sun would hit.

(Retrieved on March 5th, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)⁷

2.2 Reasons for the Occurrence of Contronyms

From a perspective of semantics, i.e. “the organization of meaning,” Dixon (2005, p. 6) states that a word has a “reference to the world” and “determines its semantic relation to other words.” No words can be isolated from the effect of their equivalent in the physical world and their interaction with other words in the linguistic world. The effect brings out semantic change of lexemes; consequently, it is the semantic change of lexemes that leads to polysemy and ultimately to contronymy, an extreme example of polysemy. Broadly speaking, “language change is one important reason for the occurrence of contronymy in natural language” (Karaman, 2008, p. 175). Specifically speaking, the reasons for the occurrence of contronyms are summarized by Zhang (2013) as follows.

- (9) The reasons for the occurrence of contronyms (summarized by Zhang 2013, pp. 18-19)
 - a. a coincidence of history
 - b. semantic elevation and degradation
 - c. new meanings
 - d. different regions
 - e. different parts of speech
 - f. whole thinking pattern

Under the mechanisms of reanalysis and analogy (Hopper & Traugott, 2003) over time, the reasons for the occurrence of contronyms are so complicated and diverse from language to language that it is nearly impossible to depict the whole process of semantic change with every detail. Thus, a case study on *dust* in this paper is to

provide more details of the semantic change of a particular lexeme and supplement the holistic study on contronymy.

3. *Dust*: From a Diachronic Perspective

The first known use of *dust* as a noun came into being before the 12th century, meaning “fine particles of matter (as of earth)” in Merriam-Webster online, or more specifically appeared around 825 in OED (Second Edition) with a definition as in (10) below. However, the first known use of *dust* as a verb came later than the noun use. In Merriam-Webster online, *dust* first came to mean, “To make dusty” in 1530 and in OED the verb use of *dust* first appeared around 1225. Despite a big difference in the time between the two dictionaries, it is almost definite that the verb use of *dust* came into being roughly between 1225 and 1530, later than its first noun use between 825 and the 12th century as illustrated in Fig. 1 below.

- (10) Earth or other solid matter in a minute and fine state of subdivision, so that the particles are small and light enough to be easily raised and carried in a cloud by the wind; any substance comminuted or pulverized; powder.

(OED, CD-ROM, Second Edition, 1989)

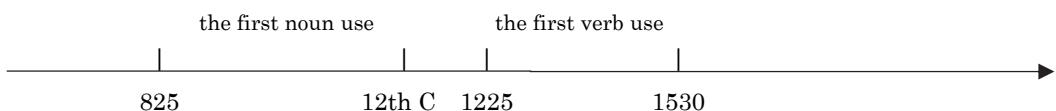


Fig. 1 The First Noun and Verb Uses of *Dust*

3.1 The Origin of *Dust*

We posit that the lexeme *dust* has followed a similar path of semantic change as those lexical items that are etymologically relevant to *dust*. The primary notion of *dust* is “vapor⁸” from German *Dunst*, “mist, vapor” (Online Etymology Dictionary). We claim that semantically related or synonymous words tend to evolve similarly over time, although not entirely in the same manner. OED shows that the first use of *vapor* as a verb came into being around 1412-20, which is proximately contemporary with the first use of *vapor* as a noun around 1374⁹. *Mist*, according to OED, recorded its first uses as a noun and as a verb both in about 1000. Without further elaboration of time when the first uses of *dust* as a noun and as a verb appeared, it is difficult to determine which word, *dust*, *mist*, or *vapor*, first established a semantic expansion model (11) as follows. It is hypothesized that the change in parts of speech is one of the triggers for the semantic expansion or change of a lexeme.

- (11) [Noun] > [Verb]

3.2 The Primary Senses of *Dust*

As a result of semantic expansion and change over time, the verbs *mist* and *vapor* have more senses than ever, respectively, three senses and seven senses¹⁰ in OED (Second Edition). A closer inspection of these senses shows their primary senses can be grouped as in (12) and (13). In (12), the primary senses of the verb *mist* are of Become Type and Cover Type. In addition to Become Type and Cover Type, the primary senses of the verb *vapor* further include Move Type and Remove Type as in (13). In this study, Become Type senses illustrate change in the form of something, Cover Type senses movement towards something, and Remove Type senses movement away from something. The verb *dust*, of the same origin as *mist* and *vapor*, features its primary senses in a similar way as in the following (14). Remove Type and Cover Type in (14), which contradict each other in the direction that dust or powder moves,¹¹ are deemed etymologically relevant to Remove Type in (13) and Cover Type in (12) respectively.

- (12) The primary senses of the verb *mist*

- a. Become Type: “To be or become misty” “appear in the form of a mist”
- b. Cover Type: “To cover or obscure with or as with mist”

(OED, CD-ROM, Second Edition, 1989)

- (13) The primary senses of the verb *vapor*

- a. Move Type: “To rise or ascend, to be emitted or diffused, in the form of vapour”
- b. Remove Type: “To pass away, to be dissipated, in the form of vapour”
- c. Become Type: “To convert into vapour”
- d. Cover Type: To make dim or obscure with vapour.

(OED, CD-ROM, Second Edition, 1989)

- (14) The primary senses of the verb *dust*¹²

- a. Move Type: “to rise as dust”
- b. Remove Type: “To free from dust; to wipe or brush off the dust from.”
- c. Become Type: “To reduce to dust, or to small particles like dust”
- d. Cover Type: To sprinkle with dust or powder.

(OED, CD-ROM, Second Edition, 1989)

4. *Dust*: From Semantic and Syntactic Perspectives

4.1 *Dust* of Remove Type

Despite their contradictory relation in the semantics of the verb *dust*, the senses of Remove Type and Cover Type coexist in the present-day English. We believe the different syntactic features of the verb are critical to the correct understanding of the

verb in semantics. *Dust* of Remove Type follows the syntactic pattern of “dust + noun 1 + off + noun 2” as in (15), in which noun 1 refers what is removed, i.e. dust or dirt, and noun 2 refers to what is cleaned, i.e. the target of the act of dusting. Example (16), a standard example of *dust* of Remove Type, includes both arguments of the verb *dust* and other examples are variants of the pattern (15), example (17) following the pattern of “dust + noun 2¹³” and (18) following the pattern of “dust + off + noun 2.”

- (15) *dust* + noun 1 + *off* + noun 2

(16) She got up slowly, dusting the specks of dirt off her pants, and walked towards the door.

(17) Removing dead leaves and flowers as well as wiping or dusting the leaves of your plants will keep them happy and healthy and keep your indoor garden looking gorgeous.

(Retrieved on March 5th, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)

- (18) One copilot who flew with him recalled how Burlingame would carry a set of small paint brushes to dust off the instruments. (COCA)

4.2 *Dust* of Cover Type

On the other hand, the verb *dust* of Cover Type syntactically includes two arguments as in the pattern of “dust noun 2 with noun 1” in (19) below, and semantically indicates that “noun 2 is covered with noun 1” as a result of the act of dusting. Example (20) is a standard one with both arguments, and (21) is a variant with only one argument in the pattern of “dust + noun 2.”

- (19) *dust* + noun 2 + *with* + noun 1

(20) Lightly dust the work surface with flour and roll the dough out into a 35 cm square.

(21) Mix the flour with salt and pepper, and lightly dust the John Dory fillets, shaking off the excess flour.

(Retrieved on March 5th, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)

4.3 Another Conronym: *Skin*

Another conronym *skin* is very similar to *dust* in semantic opposition as the primary senses of *skin* can be of Remove Type and Cover Type shown in (22). However, both types of *skin* behave almost the same syntactically since both of them follow the

pattern of “skin + noun.” Examples (23) to (25) below all adopt the “*skin + noun*” pattern syntactically despite their semantic differences, with (23) and (24) being Remove Type and (25) being Cover Type. How to distinguish Remove Type from Cover Type mainly depends on their respective contexts, which is to be discussed in Part Five.

- (22) The primary senses of the verb *skin*

- a. Cover Type: “To furnish or cover with skin”
- b. Remove Type: “To strip or deprive of the skin”

(OED, CD-ROM, Second Edition, 1989)

- (23) He skinned the large creature and tossed the large pieces of skin and fur in a pile to the side.

(Retrieved on May 31st, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)

- (24) In addition, hunting animals provides you with valuable leather that can be fashioned into a trendy pouch to allow you to carry more items. Again, Dennis is some teacher... skin an animal and make a bag out of it, surely that would take at least a week to learn? (COCA)

- (25) The wound was skinned, but the strength of his thigh was not restored.¹⁴

(Retrieved on May 31st, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)

5. *Dust*: From a Contextual Perspective

As variants of (15) and (19) above, examples (17) and (21), being opposite to each other in meaning, adopt the same syntactic pattern of “dust + noun 2.” The syntactic feature does not distinguish senses of Remove Type from those of Cover Type employed in this pattern. In such cases, the context plays a crucial role in telling the difference between Remove Type and Cover Type. In (17) “removing... as well as” and “wiping or dusting” in the context imply that “dusting,” differing from “removing” and resembling “wiping,” is thus of Remove Type. Similarly, from the context in (21), “dust the John Dory fillets” is an abbreviated version of “dust the John Dory fillets with flour.”

Both uses of *skin* in (23) and (24) fall into Remove Type semantically and are supported by “tossed the large pieces of skin” in (23) and “make a big bag out of it” in (24). The same analysis is correct in the Cover Type use of *skin* in (25). In addition to the contronyms *dust* and *skin*, we can also analyze another contronym *sanction*, which adopts the same pattern of “sanction + noun” despite its meaning opposition. Readers can eliminate the possible misunderstanding with the help of “penalties” in (26) and “punished” in (27) in their respective contexts.

- (26) As a result, more and more medical societies have begun to sanction members

with penalties like suspension or revocation of their society membership.

- (27) They had to be punished or sanctioned, so this is the sanction that the judge came up with.

(Retrieved on March 8th, 2020, from <https://www.lexico.com/>)

6. Conclusion

The puzzle of contronymy has attracted many experts' interests, yet some of it remains unsolved. This paper has briefly reviewed the relevant previous studies, pointing out that contronymy is an extreme example of polysemy and is a result of the semantic change of a lexeme in Part Two. We have explored contronymy via a case study of *dust*, with emphasis on the origin in Part Three, semantic and syntactic features in Part Four, and contextual analysis in Part Five. The discussions indicate that the origin of a contronym plays a significant role in clarifying the reasons for the occurrence of contronyms. The discussions also suggest that the syntactic features of a contronym correspond to the semantic difference or opposition of the contronym, with least possibility of miscommunication. In case the syntactic features of a contronym mentioned earlier do not function, the possible misunderstanding of contronymy can also be solved by the contexts.

Notes

¹ In Karaman (2008, p. 189), “micro-level is the content-level of a linguistic item as opposed to macro-level which is concerned with the relations between individual words, such as lexical fields, associations, collocations, etc.”

² In Karaman (2008, p. 173), “Gegensinn’ represents oppositeness of senses as part of a lexeme’s polysemous character.”

³ We adopt the same term “contronym” as in Karaman (2008), but limit it to a lexical item that has two opposite senses. The relationship between two lexemes that contradict in meaning is not discussed in this paper.

⁴ Refer to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary online for more details.
(<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>).

⁵ Refer to the Online Etymology Dictionary for further information.
(<https://www.etymonline.com/>)

⁶ In Karaman (2008, p. 175), “Contronymy is a form of polysemy that can be defined as sense opposition at the micro-level. This occurs when a minimum of two senses of a polysemous lexical item contradict each other.”

⁷ Lexico is a collaboration with Oxford Dictionary hosted by Dictionary.com offering definitions, meanings, and grammar in both English and Spanish. It is characterized by a large number of example sentences. (<https://www.lexico.com/>)

- ⁸ See Youth Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary (2004) for more information.
- ⁹ *Vaporize*, first appeared in 1634 or 1630s according to OED and the Online Etymology Dictionary has a much shorter history than the verb *vapor* and has become more common than the verb *vapor* in the present-day English.
- ¹⁰ The number of senses is OED-based (Second Edition, 1989).
- ¹¹ Karaman (2008, pp. 178-85) outlines the types of sense opposition as follows: (1) incompatibility, (2) antonymy, (3) complementarity, (4) conversivity, and (5) reversivity. Karaman further elaborates that reversivity “involves movement in opposite directions.” The contronym *dust* in this research is of reversivity type.
- ¹² The primary senses of the verbs *mist*, *vapor*, and *dust* in (12), (13), and (14) are not chronologically ordered.
- ¹³ Details about the “dust + noun 2” construction are discussed in Part Five.
- ¹⁴ This use of the contronym *skin*, “cover with skin” is labeled as archaic in LEXICO.

References

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Data and Resources

- COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English)
[\(https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/\)](https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/)
- Eijiro on the Web (<https://www.alc.co.jp/>)
- LEXICO (<https://www.lexico.com/>)
- Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>)
- Online Etymology Dictionary (<https://www.etymonline.com/>)
- Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition, 1989)
- Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries online (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>)
- Youth Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary (2004)
- Wikipedia (<https://www.wikipedia.org/>)