

# The interaction of polysemy and complementation: A case study<sup>1</sup>

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The combination of a diachronic and a synchronic approach has proved to be very fruitful in recent linguistic research. Whereas until relatively recently historical studies had been ignored by the most prominent linguistic theories, such as Government and Binding (GB), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG), and Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG), which carried out their analyses from an exclusively synchronic point of view, it is now accepted that only by reference to earlier historical periods can we find an explanation to the present state of the language. Sweetser, Traugott, Hopper and Bybee among others have emphasized the importance of diachronic studies. The need of a historical perspective is especially evident in the study of polysemy, because it can bring to light not only the interrelationship of the different subsenses, which are apparently unrelated from a synchronic point of view, but also the importance of the complementation in determining and disambiguating its main senses.

We will present a case study, the polysemous verb WATCH, and will show that its current meanings are connected in a motivated way and that its complementation can solve the ambiguity produced by its polysemy. The Renaissance was a crucial period in its historical development, since it was in this period that the complementation of the verb began to interact with its semantic features and gave rise to its main current sense. It was also then that the earliest meanings of the verb were lost, so the present meanings of WATCH took shape in this period.

At the end of the Middle English period and beginning of the Modern English period, WATCH still keeps its early, Old English, meanings, 'be or remain awake' and 'be on the alert', 'keep watch', which are intransitive:

For some must *watch*, while some must sleep (W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, ii)

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us *watch* and be sober  
(*Thessalonians*, 005: 006)

*Watch* thou, and wake when others be asleep (W. Shakespeare, *Henry the Sixth*,  
Part II, I, i)

I will *watch* tonight (W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, i)

Constrained to *watch* in darkness, rain, and cold (W. Shakespeare, *Henry the Sixth*, Part I, II, i)

As these examples illustrate, the meanings of WATCH do not have clear boundaries. 'Be or remain awake' is present in the sense 'keep watch'. In fact, if we analyse the semantic development of WATCH, we will become aware that it shows a logical succession of meanings. As we show in a forthcoming paper, a new sense appears when a new semantic component is added to and interacts with the old meaning. 'Remain awake' arises when a new semantic element,

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‘intentionally’, is added to and interacts with the basic sense ‘be awake’. The addition of a new semantic component, ‘attention’, to ‘remain awake intentionally’ gives rise to ‘be on the alert’, ‘keep watch’.

The basic, original meaning of WATCH ‘be awake’ became obsolete in the seventeenth century, and in this sense of ‘wakefulness’ WATCH only survives in Present-day English in special cases: for purposes of devotion:

To fast or *watch* more than the rest is self-will and vain-glory (W. K. L., *Clarke Basil*, vi, 89)

or to sit up beside an ill person to render help or comfort (or a dead body):

He *watched* all night at the bedside of a sick child

I *watched* late with him [a brother on his deathbed] this night (J. Evelyn, *Diary*, 6 Mar. 1670)

At the end of the Middle English period WATCH arises as a transitive verb and, from that moment on, its complementation begins to have importance to conform the successive meanings. When the verb is transitive, its complementation interacts with its semantic features and gives rise to different subsenses, which occur in different structures. The different types of complementation that may follow help to give shape to the new meaning and to disambiguate the resultant polysemy. It is our aim to show that, once WATCH becomes a transitive verb, the different subsenses it acquires occur with a different complementation. The interaction between syntax and semantics thus comes to the foreground.

In the Middle English period WATCH as an activity verb can still be intransitive and appear without complementation, with the meaning ‘keep watch’ to take action at the right moment. However, it can also be transitive and appear with explicit complementation. The object is the focus of attention and within the visual control of the subject. Whereas the meaning of the intransitive verb ‘keep watch’ involves participation of all senses, in the transitive verb sight begins to have prominence over the other senses, since the object is within the visual scope of the subject.

And they *watched* the gates day and night to kill him (*Acts*, 009: 024)

Before the Middle English period, WATCH is intransitive and used in the sense of being alert for a real or hypothetical danger, and the subject is ready to take action. In ME the presence of the object may cause a shift of intention in the subject, which could then be attack or guard. At the beginning of the Modern English period it can also be used with the particle ‘over’, and, as the following examples show, we can have both senses in the same sentence:

Like I have *watched over* them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, to destroy, and to afflict; so I will *watch over* them to build and to plant, saith the Lord (*Jeremiah*, 031: 028)

I will *watch over* them for evil, and not for good (*Jeremiah*, 044: 027)

Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall *watch over* their cities (*Jeremiah*, 005: 006)

As heerdmen ever *watchynge over* the flocke of our lorde Jesus (W. de W., *The Pilgrimage of Perfection*, 247b)

Therefore, the subject can have two different intentions with respect to the object: either do harm (negative attitude):

Hauing once this iuyce Ile *watch* Titania, when she is asleepe, And drop the liquor of it in her eyes (W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II, i)

Saul also sent messengers unto David’s house, to *watch* him, and to slay him in the morning (*Samuel*, 019: 011)

or prevent harm (positive attitude):

But who would *watch* her with a mother's tenderness (M. Wollstonecraft, *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*, Ch I)

This ambiguity, which is still present in the current meanings of WATCH, can only be solved by the extralinguistic context. The addressee's pragmatic knowledge of the real world will determine whether the verb is used in the sense of protection or surveillance in order to attack or do harm. For example, when we hear 'There is a policeman watching outside the house', we understand that he is looking for someone who is suspicious. But in the sentence 'She can't free herself of the idea that someone's watching her all the time', WATCH conveys the idea of danger or attack.

As we have just said, there is a point in the evolution of WATCH when the grammatical object is within the scope of vision of the subject and sight becomes more and more prominent. At the same time there may be weakening of the meaning 'keep watch', that is to say, 'surveillance'. At first, in early Modern English, the two semantic elements 'vision' and 'surveillance' are both present and closely linked, involving continuous control, as the following example shows. There is great ambiguity in the sense of WATCH.

And they *watched* him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him (*Mark*, 003: 002)

Gradually the element 'surveillance' will disappear in the new subsense, 'keep in sight', 'keep somebody or something in view to observe any actions, movements or changes that may occur' (OED). The subject's intention is not to attack, or protect, but to know what is going on. In this sense WATCH is a verb of perception, and it is always transitive, since a grammatical object, either implicit or explicit, is required. This meaning, which is the last one to appear, is the core one in Present Day English:

I *watch* thee from the quiet shore;

Thy spirit up to mine can reach (A. Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, lxxxv)

In this example, the meaning 'keep under surveillance' has completely disappeared.

In a parallel way to the rise of the sense 'keep in sight' there is also a shift in the type of object. When the meaning of WATCH is 'keep watch, keep under surveillance', the object is a Noun Phrase which refers to an individual, a person or thing:

Than he *watched* your Chambre bryght,

With men of armes hardy and wyght (*The Squyr of lowe Degree*, 997)

However, when WATCH arises as a verb of perception, its complementation corresponds to what Dik (1991: 317) classifies as 'immediate perception of state of affairs' by an individual, that is to say, the subject perceives not the individual itself, but what is going on, something that the individual is doing or something that is happening, i.e. a state of affairs. For this reason, we generally have animate objects, or NP implying processes:

These two girls had been above an hour in the place, happily employed in visiting an opposite milliner, *watching* the sentinel on guard, and dressing a salad and cucumber (J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Ch 39)

Thus long have we stood to *watch* the fearefull bending of thy knee (W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, III, iii)

Gazing at the moon, and *watching* its motion (M. Wollstonecraft, *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*, Ch II)

Therefore, WATCH cannot be used in the sense 'look at' with an inanimate object when there is no movement or expectation of state of affairs. This explains the ungrammaticality of sentences such as "Watch the pencil" or "He's watching the chair".

When WATCH is used as a perception verb, (but this is not the case when it is used with the meaning 'keep watch') there gradually appears an X Complement in the complementation (bare infinitive / present participle):

Mary *watched* the boatman leave the house (Mrs. Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, xxxi)

Lying upon my back, I *watched* the clouds forming (J. Tyndall, *The Glaciers of the Alps*, I. xxv)

The X Complement corresponds to Dik's 'state of affairs', and indicates what is going on (*the boatman leave the house, the clouds forming*). In this linguistic context WATCH is an object control verb since 'the boatman', which is the Subject of the X Complement, 'leave the house' in the first example is also the Object of the main verb. This construction with an object-controlled verb complement implies time overlap with the verb of perception. The states of affairs referred to in the complementation (*the boatman leave the house, the clouds forming*) have to be simultaneous with the activity *watch*, otherwise the X Complement cannot be used.

When WATCH has arisen as a verb of perception, and this is the only case when it can appear with an X Complement, it is followed by a bare infinitive, not the *to*-infinitive. When in the Middle English period the *to*-infinitive became the most frequent form, the verbs of perception, *see, feel, hear*, and even those borrowed from French, continued to appear with the bare infinitive, even though with most other verbs the bare infinitive clearly lost ground to the *to*-infinitive. According to Fischer (1992: 317), from Middle English on, the bare infinitive is found when the matrix verb is grammaticalised, that is to say, has little semantic content - the case of the modals, for example, and with verbs of perception. The verbs of perception keep their lexical meaning but normally take the bare infinitive. Fischer explains this exception to the general rule saying that this is because the actions expressed by the perception verb and the infinitive are simultaneous, there is identity of the tense domain. There must be time overlap between the observation of the event and the action that is observed.

After having become a verb of visual perception, the meaning of WATCH was metaphorically extended to that of mental perception. In this case, the meaning is then, not keep something physically in sight, but keep something in mental view:

He *watched* th'ideas rising in her mind (A. Pope, *Rape of the Lock*, III)

This metaphorical extension is frequent with verbs of vision. *See*, for example, is another verb of physical perception whose meaning has been metaphorically extended to mental activity. Consider, too, the abstract sense that we find in verbs such as *look down on, look up to, look forward to, oversee* or *foresee*. The basis for this metaphorical extension is probably the close relationship between the sense of sight and knowledge, that is to say, mental, intellectual vision is considered very similar to physical vision. There is also the fact that data are normally obtained through sight.

As a conclusion, we would like to lay emphasis on two things:

1. The core meaning of present-day WATCH, keep in sight, arose in the early Modern English period, (when a grammatical object was already present) with the interaction of new semantic components with the ones inherited from the Middle English period.
2. There has been a gradual change in the complementation as well as in the meaning of this verb, and these changes have been parallel and interconnected.

Originally, in Old English, WATCH, which had the meanings 'be, remain awake' and 'keep watch', was intransitive. At the end of the Middle English period, however, WATCH with the sense 'keep watch', 'keep a lookout' began to appear with an NP, which was the object of surveillance or protection, and consequently became a transitive verb. At the beginning of the ModE period, the original meaning 'be awake' became obsolete, except in highly restricted contexts: for purposes of devotion or beside a sick or dead person. On the other hand, in the transitive WATCH the semantic element 'surveillance' gradually disappears in a new submeaning, and at the same time the sense of sight begins to have predominance over the other senses. The resulting meanings of WATCH, which we could paraphrase as 'keep a lookout' and 'keep looking at', are both transitive, but have a different type of NP as grammatical object. In the case of 'keep

in sight', 'keep looking at', the object must refer to a state of affairs and can be followed by an X Complement specifying this state of affairs. The grammatical object of WATCH with the meaning 'keep a lookout' can be an individual (person or thing) and cannot be followed by an X Complement. The historical development of WATCH has thus shown the fuzziness of word meanings and the close links between syntax and semantics.

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