Polysemy of an English posture verb:
A case study of non-literal meaning

INTRODUCTION The semantic coverage of many expressions includes both literal and non-literal senses. Although there exists many studies with an empirical focus, they tend to describe only the conceptual ideas of polysemous words, e.g., *run* (Gries, 2006), *eat/drink* (Newman, 2009), and posture verbs cross-linguistically (Newman, 2002; Lemmens, 2002); formal accounts are lacking (a notable exception outside cognitive linguistics: Spalek 2014). This talk supplements the cognitive descriptions of posture verbs, presenting data from an independent corpus study and proposing a formal analysis. The in-depth investigation of one English posture verb, *sit*, yields an empirical generalization that contributes to the discussion on context-dependency and underspecification surrounding polysemous meaning.

POLYSEMOUS SIT (1) presents three senses of *sit*: the literal use is possible with animate subjects (mostly humans) when they are in a seated position for the relevant interval (1a). Non-literal uses include extended metaphorical senses, which have no spatial configuration restrictions (1b) and (1c). According to Maienborn (1996), when the location is omitted from a posture verb construction, the subject's posture is then salient. Based on the pattern in (2), I argue that this omissibility is one contextual criteria for disambiguating literal *sit*.

(1) *Three senses of* sit
   a. The man is sitting on the bench.
   b. **The cup is sitting in the sink.**
   c. Microsoft is sitting on a fortune.

(2) (*Non-*)*omissibility of location*
   a. The man is sitting.
   b. #The cup is sitting.
   c. #Microsoft is sitting.

Only the man in (2a) is capable of being in a seated position; inanimate objects like cups and companies like Microsoft are unable to do so (2b,c). As such, only (2a) is felicitous. (That each sense has a different subject type is merely for exemplary purposes: the only restriction is that inanimate subjects are blocked from the literal use.) Additionally, (1c) differentiates itself from (1a,b), in that it is the only one non-compositional sense. In other words, the PP of (1a) and (1b) encodes the eventuality's location, while the PP object in a construction like (1c) only describes what is possessed(/hidden) by the subject. Following Levin and Rappaport-Hovav (1995), I propose that (1a) has an argument structure like (3a), with an optional locative PP and (1b) has a structure like (3b), with an obligatory PP.

(3) *Argument structure of literal and non-literal* sit
   a. **Literal** = [x [IDLE-BE & POSTURE **(**[AT z]**)**]]
   b. **Non-literal, locational** = [x [IDLE-BE [AT z]]] (*preliminary*)

CORPUS STUDY This talk presents the findings of a corpus study, the goals of which were (i) to test the intuition of a speaker evaluation concerning the idle state and (ii) to examine to what extent non-literal, locational *sit* (1b; henceforth NonLit *sit*) might be context-dependent; both goals were inspired by sentences like in (4), where the progressive morphology is the only (surface-level) difference between a felicitous and non-felicitous sequence.

(4) a. The dishes **were sitting** in the sink. I hope you took care of them.
   b. #The dishes **sat** in the sink. I hope you took care of them.

From the Corpus of Contemporary American English, I extracted 275 NonLit *sit* constructions (omitting the dynamic *down/up* and the evaluative *around*, cf. Newman and Rice 2004) in simple past and past progressive, to avoid the complications of habitual/historical present. I annotated whether an evaluation was present, as well as any context (e.g., adverbials).

To answer (i): Yes, there is an evaluation that accompanies NonLit *sit* in the majority of the sample (60%); sometimes the provided context was inadequate for a clear judgement. Those sentences marked as "neutral" only had entities that could be temporarily located somewhere; that is, no buildings or naturally-occurring entities (e.g., lakes) were in a neutral sitting-eventuality, only in situations that were evaluated as being undesired/unexpected.

To answer (ii): Interestingly, there were 34 (12%) sentences without a locative PP—but all included an evaluation and had either a secondary predicate (here: depictive predicates and temporal *for*-phrases) following [sit]; both past forms were represented in this subset. Additionally, 60% of all the simple past sentences, and 94% of simple past marked as "evaluative", included contextual help in the form of a secondary predicate; comparatively, only 17% of the *-ing* sentences had this help, suggesting aspect is essential to using NonLit *sit*.

Analysis The data indicates that NonLit *sit* can be used when an idle state is evaluated as 'undesired'/'unexpected' (e.g., dishes in sink, ugly building on street). It is unsurprising that the progressive is important to NonLit *sit*'s availability, because the English progressive can coerce states into a dynamic eventuality, thereby describing a contingent, temporary situation (Comrie, 1976). The corpus study also showed that secondary predicates provide the linguistic support in non-progressive sentences. As secondary predicates spatially and temporally contextualise the main event (Rothstein, 2000), they also delimit the idle state.

In this talk, I claim that, in order for NonLit *sit* to be used felicitously, it must be combined with the progressive aspect or a secondary predicate. I propose a PROG operator for stative eventualities. For the transiency, I take inspiration from aspectual particles such as German *schon* 'already', which is similar to NonLit *sit* in being phasal: it is presupposed that a proposition p is not true in a phase before the reference time (Löbner, 1989). Additionally, my $\text{PROG}_{\text{stative}}$ includes a modal component, to account for a future state desired by an EVALUATOR, where the situation at the reference time is no longer true. A parallel secondary predicate operator is also defined, combining a temporal PART-OF relation (cf. Rothstein 2000) with the phasal aspects, both presupposed and modal, of $\text{PROG}_{\text{stative}}$.

Conclusion Obligatory location and transiency of an idle state is key to the availability of NonLit *sit*. Without these, only the literal sense would be possible and an inanimate subject, not able to assume the posture, would be infelicitous. Progressive aspect and secondary predicates can encode the transiency, and the latter can even block *sit*'s literal sense when no locative argument is present. This case study on polysemy provides an example of how predicates can resolve underspecification through contextual enrichment.

Selected References **Gries**, S. (2006). Corpus-based methods and cognitive semantics: The many senses of *to run*. In Gries, S. and Stefanowitsch, A., eds, *Corpora in Cognitive Linguistics: Corpus-based approaches to syntax and lexis*, 57–99. de Gruyter. **Newman**, J. (2002). A cross-linguistic overview of the posture verbs 'sit', 'stand' and 'lie'. In Newman, J., ed., *The Linguistics of Sitting, Standing, and Lying*, 1–24. John Benjamins. **Rothstein**, S. (2000). Secondary predication and aspectual structure. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 17, 741–763. **Spalek**, A. (2014). Verb Meaning and Combinatory Semantics: A Corpus-Based Study of Spanish Change of State Verbs. PhD thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona.