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## I'M RIGHT, YOU'RE LEFT, IT'S WRONG a cognitive semantic investigation of the English word RIGHT

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## I'M RIGHT, YOU'RE LEFT, IT'S WRONG a cognitive semantic investigation of the English word RIGHT

The present article analyses numerous meanings of the English word *right* and presents the semantic network created by the word in question. The analysis is based on the cognitive linguistics approach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** językoznawstwo, kognitywizm, polisemia, metafora

**Key words:** linguistic, cognitive linguistic, polysemy, metaphor

The capacity for a sign to have more than one meaning can be observed in many languages. According to cognitive linguistics, if there are many, multiple meanings which are connected with each other, we can talk about polysemy. It is essential here to stress the importance of full sense boundaries which 'delimit the sort of sense units that include those that are the stock-in-trade of traditional dictionaries' (Croft and Cruise, 2004: 110). The word class does not matter, it is the meaning created in our minds that counts.

The way people perceive the surrounding reality is individual but they may find a great deal of similarities in seeing and naming objects and phenomena around them. In everyday life we describe the reality we perceive using metaphors which are 'pervasive (...) not only in language but in thoughts and actions' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 4). Cognitive linguistics states that metaphors are not literary tools but cognitive tools which play a significant role in human cognition. The easiest example can be presented when we take into account the spatial vertical orientation, namely the well-known mappings of the conceptual orientational metaphor GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN<sup>1</sup>. It is interesting how our associations go as far as the horizontal space and mental

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<sup>1</sup> More in M. Johnson (1987): *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

representations of abstract concepts with positive and negative emotional valence go. In the western culture, we can notice that it has always been better to be right than left, or to be right than wrong. The present article is going to touch upon answering questions like: Why is that so? Why is *right* better, not worse? Where did this axiology start<sup>2</sup>? What is there beyond those words? All the examples presented in the article were collected from dictionaries of contemporary British and American English, corpora of the English language and other Internet sources. Meaning explanations are justified with etymology study and comparison to other languages.

Let us first look at the meanings of the words in question in several languages starting with the Latin word *dexter*, which means *right*<sup>3</sup>. An English word: *dexterous* (spelt also *dextrous*) originates from this word. According to Oxford Dictionary online<sup>4</sup>, it means ‘showing or having skill, especially with the hands’, while Longman Dictionary<sup>5</sup> adds the meaning of ‘skillful in using words or your mind’ – these meanings bear definitely positive connotations. A similar word, having its origin in the aforementioned *dexterous*, is an English word *ambidextrous*. It stands for being able to use either hand equally well. However, when we look at the Latin meaning, we may see that literally ambidextrous means ‘being right and skillful on both sides’<sup>6</sup>. The right arm is also thought to be more valuable when we take a look at the idiomatic expression, where we express readiness to exchange something very valuable for the wanted object or person: *I’d give my right arm for a nice cool drink*.

One of the antonymous meaning to *right* is *left*. Let us now look at the Latin word standing for *left*, namely *sinister*. The word comes from the word *sinus*, which means ‘a pocket’ and influenced the meaning of *sinister* since in a traditional Roman toga there was one pocket situated on the left side. That was the place for the hand that did not need to work. The Latin word *sinister* also means ‘a slower or weaker hand’. Thus when we look at the meaning of the English word that comes from Latin, we can see that *sinister*, meaning ‘making you feel that something evil, dangerous, or illegal is happening or will happen’, carries strong negative, even sinister (!) cultural connotations. Looking at the English phrase *to have two left feet*, we can clearly see what connotations are carried here, as the expression indicates that the person who cannot for instance dance, move or play sport gracefully, and therefore is clumsy. Even the idiomatic

<sup>2</sup> More about axiology in Tomasz Krzeszowski’s (1997): *Angels and devils In hell. Elements of axiology in semantics*. Warszawa: Publisher Energeia.

<sup>3</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=dexterity&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=dexterity&allowed_in_frame=0)> 13.03.2012.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dexterous?q=dexterous>> 13.03.2012.

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/dexterous>> 13.03.2012.

<sup>6</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=ambidextrous&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=ambidextrous&allowed_in_frame=0)> 13.03.2012.

expression *pay someone a left-handed compliment* means to give someone a false compliment that is really an insult or criticism, so we can see the strongly negative meaning that is beyond this word. In the English language there are many colloquial terms used with reference to left-handed people, for instance: *southpaw*, *goofy* (this usage especially in American English), *cack-handed* (in Australian English) or just *leftie*, which all are potentially offensive.

In French the word *gauche* stands for *left*, and it indicates 'awkwardness or lack of social graces'. The word *adroit* standing for *right* means 'right and justice'. In Polish the word *prawy* (right) also refers to being good, honest and righteous, while *lewy* (left), apart from indicating one of the sides, means awkward, clumsy (about a person) and illegal (fake), shabby (with the reference to a document, etc.), and therefore carries rather negative connotations.

*Right* and *left* standing for something positive or negative can also be seen in some cultures. In Roman fortune telling, birds that appeared on the left side are interpreted as bringing bad luck (this meaning is claimed to come from Greece), while those on the right side are believed to presage good luck. In Arabic culture, when your right eyebrow itches, it means that you will be visited by good friends. If your left eyebrow itches, it means that something bad will happen. Islamic doctrine claims that the left hand should be used for doing dirty jobs, while the right one is used for eating. What is more, one should enter the mosque with their right foot, and the left foot when they enter the toilet (Casasanto 2009). Casasanto also mentions the Ghanaian society where gestures with the use of the left hand are strictly forbidden. Similarly, there are also numerous examples in Polish culture, where superstitions are strongly believed by some people. Most of the superstitions concern the right and left side, betoken something good or bad respectively, but still they may differ regionally. For instance, if we spill the salt it is considered to be bad luck and the spell cast can be removed only when we take a sprinkle of salt and throw it through our left arm, as we can blind the devil who is responsible for the bad luck. A similar superstition exists in the English culture where if your right palm itches, it foretells receiving some money, and when it is left palm that itches, you will lose some money or will have to pay some to others. When we look at the roots of the English language, we can see that also Old English demonstrated superiority of right over left. The Old English word *riht*, which further developed to *right*, used to mean 'to lead straight, to guide, to rule'. The present form of *left* has derived from Old English *lyft*, which meant 'weak or foolish'.<sup>7</sup>

The question whether it is established culturally that left is worse than right has been a subject of many years' debate. People started to wonder when and

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<sup>7</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=left&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=left&allowed_in_frame=0)> 20.03.2012.

how the phenomenon had started and therefore a number of theories have been proposed ever since.

The right hand has always been historically associated with skills. The reason for this was suggested by an assumption that the skillful right hand was the result of warriors wearing shields in order to protect their hearts. However, this approach has met an objection stating that if so, there would be more right-handed men than women and the statistics do not present such figures.

It may also have come out from The Old Testament, where in the Book of Psalms the Lord's right hand 'is full of righteousness', or The New Testament, where in the Book of Matthew we can read: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit in state of this throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherds separate the sheep from the goats and he will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right hand, 'You have my father's blessing; come enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made.' Then he will say to those on his left hand, 'The curse is upon you; go from my sight to the eternal fire that is ready for the devil and his angels.' (Matthew, 25)

Left-handedness is also less popular in the world population than right-handedness. In May 1977, Hardyck Petrinovich wrote in his article that the percentage of the left-handers is about 10% (Hardyck, C., Petrinovich, L.F. 1977)<sup>8</sup>; The aforementioned publication states that nowadays the percentage has risen to about 13%, and according to Scientific American now it is 15%<sup>9</sup>, however, left-handers are still a significant minority (Szaflarski, Binder 2008)<sup>10</sup>. In each society it is majority which rules and has an advantage over the minority. Because of this fact, minorities are always thought of as worse and less important, and those in minority very often feel excluded from the society they live in. Left-handers' position in a society seems to be much better comparing it to the one 15-20 years ago, when left-handedness was treated as something to be corrected and cured. In the 1980s and 1990s there seemed to be a lot of advice for young mothers how to correct the usage of the left hand and convert it into the right one. Children who favoured their left hand were forced to change their habits and use the right hand in their everyday life activities.

All the examples analyzed above come from different European languages and present negative connotations with the word *left*. However, another way of seeing *right* or *left* can be observed in other, non-European languages, for

<sup>8</sup> C. Hardyck, L. F. Petrinovich (1977): *Left-handedness*. "Psychological Bulletin" No. 3, 385–404.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-causes-some-people-t>> 17.03.2012.

<sup>10</sup> J. P. Szaflarski, J. R. Binder (2002): *Language lateralization in left-handed and ambidextrous people: fMRI*. "Neurology" 59, 238–244 available at: <[http://synapse.princeton.edu/~sam/szaflarski\\_hammeke02\\_neurology\\_language-lateralization-lefthanders-ambidextrous.pdf](http://synapse.princeton.edu/~sam/szaflarski_hammeke02_neurology_language-lateralization-lefthanders-ambidextrous.pdf)>.

instance, in Chinese and Japanese. In these languages there is an expression 'man left, woman right', which confirms the traditional concept that *left* is good, because it depicts the left hand attending to its work. By contrast, *right* depicts the right hand on its way to the mouth, which suggests the act of eating food. In Incas left-handers are called *Iluq'i* and are considered to possess spiritual abilities like magic and healing<sup>11</sup>.

From the above analysis we can draw the conclusion that at least in the western culture and languages the term *right* carries positive connotations, while *left* is marked rather negatively and is often negatively associated. The apparent universality of the GOOD IS RIGHT mapping suggested by linguistic and cultural conventions could be the result of right-handers' predominance in the population worldwide. 'Linguistic and cultural conventions may develop according to the implicit body-specific mental metaphors of the majority.'<sup>12</sup>

Casasanto conducted the analysis in order to establish the fact whether the mappings are universal or body-specific. If the mappings were universal, both right- and left-handers should associate *right* with something good and *left* with something bad. If they were body-specified, right and left-handers should show the opposite associations, assigning good things with their dominant side, and bad things with the non-dominant side. What turned out was that the mappings and the way we perceive the reality is fully dependent on our dominant side<sup>13</sup>. While right-handers place positive factors on their dominant side- right, left-handers construe positive factors on their left. When right-handers were supposed to place elements with negative associations, they chose the left side, and the left-handers chose their right. Casasanto conducted further analysis on the handedness. In one of the latest publications<sup>14</sup>, he investigated the change of the dominant side as an effect of a permanent and non-permanent stroke, when the patients used their side which was not affected by the cerebrovascular accident. The result was quite surprising as it turned out that the change is possible, and, what is more, happens very fast, and this also influences the way the patients perceive their reality. Even though a patient was primarily right-handed, and became paralyzed on the right side of their body, their left hand, although not easily for them, took over the dominance and affected the patient's perception.

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<sup>11</sup> <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-handed>> 14.05.2012.

<sup>12</sup> D. Casasanto (2009): *Embodiment of Abstract Concepts: Good and Bad in Right- and Left-Handers*. Stanford University and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. "Journal of Experimental Psychology": General Vol. 138, No. 3, 351–367.

<sup>13</sup> In J. Gumperz, S. C. Levinson (eds.) (1996): *Rethinking Linguistic relativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) it is stated that the terms *right* and *left* are not universal.

<sup>14</sup> D. Casasanto, E.G. Chrysikou (published online, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2011) *When Left is "Right": Motor fluency Shapes Abstract Concepts*. "Psychological Science" 22(4), 419–422.

As the dominant side decides how we arrange the stimuli from the reality and there are about 90% people whose dominant side is right, it is no wonder that there are so many expressions in languages which favour the right side over the left one.

However, not all expressions consisting of the word *right* or *left* carry the connotations. Let us look at the prototypical meanings of the word *right*. It is defined by a number of dictionaries of contemporary English as ‘situated on the body on the side which is away from the heart’ e.g. *He had a knife in his right hand.* or *There was a scar on the right side of her face.* Human body then is divided by an axis of symmetry into two parts which denote the location of human organs. It is crucial here to take into consideration the point of view of the observer – especially when we talk about the images reflected by a mirror. When looking into a mirror our right hand becomes our left one and our left leg becomes the right one. What is interesting is the fact that our brain is looking for similarities to what it usually encounters – namely it sees the reflected body as the body of someone else as the matter of the fact that we much more often see someone else’s body than we see our reflection in a mirror. The perspective is also important when talking about the side of the road on which the traffic flows – it always depends on the driver’s perspective. Similarly, the two banks of a river carry the names with *right* or *left*. The *right bank* of a river is located on the side of the body to the east when facing north. However, if the river is not located with the source in the north and the mouth in the north, there arose a need to name the banks according to the float of a river. Therefore the expression *right bank* refers to the right side of the river, relative to an observer facing downstream. In the frame of theatre, *right* is always the right side according to what an actor sees, not the audience. In the frame of sport, the sides are determined by what a goalkeeper can see. In this very frame metonymy can be observed quite frequently, e.g. *Daniel Sturridge is consistently putting in performances on Chelsea’s right wing.* Here, *right wing* stands for the position of a player from a goalkeeper’s perspective. In box, e.g. *He caught Wormald with a perfectly timed right hook to the chin.*, the punch is determined from the punching boxer’s perspective. The meaning of *right* goes behind the grammatical category. In the example: *He took a turn to the right.* it is not an adjective but a noun which denotes the right turn. Here, and also in e.g. *If you have inserted a frame into your document when you select it and right click on the mouse you access the Modify Frame Layout dialog box.*, we can see metonymy – the noun allows us to understand the meaning without the word turn and *the right click* stands for the click on the right button of a computer mouse. It works exactly the same the other way around.

There are many metaphorical uses of the word in question. *Right* as ‘true, correct, free from mistake’ is mentioned here first, e.g. *Your calculation is right.* *You are dead right!* or *I think the Prime Minister is only half right.* Interestingly,

the absolute adjective *dead* here is to emphasize that someone is absolutely correct. The extent cannot be higher, one cannot be more correct. The above examples are based on GOOD IS RIGHT metaphor. As it has been already mentioned, it was either the etymology of the word in question or its universality that created this metaphor, as throughout the world and languages *right* stands very often for something good. The above example with calculation presents the meaning that is objective. In mathematics and science *right* is determined by the physics and the decision of correctness is not dependent on the speaker. Other uses, presenting the speaker's point of view are subjective. It can be also seen in: *I know they're numbered but they're not in the right order, Whether it was pointing the right way to capture who planted the bomb, we are still checking.* The idioms *to be on the right track* or *to be on the right lines* do not certainly mean literally walking or standing on the right side of a road, thus it is also a metaphorical usage. The antonymic expression will not use the word *left* but *wrong*, e.g. *I think you're wrong. You're doing it wrong.*

Because of the fact that the meaning of *right* as 'correct' creates quite a broad category, thus the meanings and uses have been here narrowed down to several other subcategories. One of them is *right* as 'morally correct'. The meaning has its roots in aforementioned Latin *riht*, which stood for 'just, good, fair, proper, fitting, straight'. Morality is concerned with identifying what is proper or improper, and obeying the rules. As determined by social rules and regulations, this meaning is socially objective. However, it also applies to individuals who can judge themselves if an act is morally correct or improper. It is right to obey the rules, and wrong to disobey them. The moral correctness depends on whether or to what extent the act conforms to the widely accepted rules. Humans seem to have an innate sense of morality, yet the moral rules differ from culture to culture. Let us look at the examples: *We judged it to be right to tell you the truth., Right shades into wrong.* Here, the first sentence presents the act of informing someone about what the truth is and the judgement of making this decisions is assessed as the correct, proper one. In the other example we can see that the boundaries between the good and evil are unclear, blurred and we may actually have problems with assessing something as good or bad (right or wrong). In the English language in some daily expressions the speaker states they think that someone was justly paid back for their behavior, in their own coin. We then believe that the fate is just, and being just is morally correct, e.g.

*Ant: Oh no!*

*Marlon: What's the matter?*

*Ant: I've split my jeans!*

*Marlon: (Bursting into laughter) Serves you right, you bighead!*

*Ant: Get me something to cover it up.*



Another example, ‘Might makes right’ shows an American phrase, although it has a similar form in British, American Australian English, namely ‘might is right’. It means that the strongest will rule above others and will have the power to establish the set of rules, to determine what is right and wrong. In the English language it is most often used in negative assessments of expressions of power. The phrase is used with reference to history and it says that the strongest who won battles and wars were the ones who wrote down their history and passed it on to the next generations, so the historical truth is very subjective as they could write anything they wanted to gain people’s approval. The phrase is said to be the credo of totalitarian regimes and was the title of one of crucial American books *Might Is Right or Survival of the Fittest*<sup>15</sup>. The idiom ‘to straighten up and fly right’ is used only in American English: *Young Gramm was held back from several grades, and was eventually sent to military school, to straighten up and fly right. He did. He went to the University of Georgia, earning a B.A. and then staying there for a Ph.D. in economics.* While the Corpus of Contemporary American English gives 41 results, the British National Corpus offers no results at all. The whole expression means to behave well after having behaved badly, to come back on the right track. Also in this example, we can see that *right* is ‘morally correct’. In the example: *All right-minded people will support us, right-minded* means holding opinions, principles or standards of behavior that are in accordance either with what the speaker thinks is right or with what is acceptable in general. The same meaning can be observed in the following examples: *No woman in her right mind would choose to be a single parent and the tiny minority who set out to be are, in my view, incredibly selfish, unimaginative and cruel.* or *Faith, obedience and the Bible True faith is not simply about thinking the right thoughts - although right thinking plays a part in our faith.* The right mind is sane, one that thinks clearly. Right thinking is logical, rational and clear. Right thinking is said to create right results. Right thinking, though, may differ from one person or group to another, as it is the matter of a subjective perspective. The right thinking of, for instance, one political group may be correct from their perspective but from the perspective of another political camp it may be unacceptable, wrong. The meaning then is closer to our personal morality than to a widely accepted morality.

The derivative form of *right* displays close resemblance to the ‘morally correct’ meaning. *Righteous* means virtuous, noble, acting as an example for

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<sup>15</sup> The book was written by Ragnar Redbeard (pseudonym) and published in 1896. The book questions ideas of human and natural rights, and persuades that moral right can be established only through the use of physical strength. It became the main source and part for one of the chapters of the Satanic Bible. (Article Hypocrisy, Plagiarism and LaVey by John Smith, 2011, available at: <[http://www.dpjs.co.uk/criticism/smith.html#\\_ftn140](http://www.dpjs.co.uk/criticism/smith.html#_ftn140)> 15.05.2013.

others, e.g. *Whatever it is. Yes. God has made you righteous. And you can do what is right in his sight.* –the word *righteous* is quite common in the Holy Bible and refers to those who act with accordance to what God expects. The suffix *self-* added to this adjective alters the meaning and carries some negative connotations, namely, the person who is self-righteous is proudly sure and too confident about their opinions, e.g. *You think you're so clever! You're so damned self-righteous you make me sick!* *Right* is also used in titles, in parliament or in addressing someone on envelopes, to show respect to this person. The person that is called *Right* has earned a social well-respected, honourable and worthy position in the society, e.g. *the Right Reverend Felix Bush*. This meaning gave birth to the term standing for all the qualities (as adherence to duty or obedience to lawful authority) that constitute the ideal of moral propriety or merit moral approval. In Old Irish *reht* meant *law*. The term is here used in a form of a noun, either in singular or plural, e.g. *By rights, it should belong to me., The European Court of Human Rights has left this general question to be dealt with by local law, and the matter is, therefore, one for the discretion of British trial judges., It arrived two days after the election, reassuring me that the Labour Party was committed to improving gay rights., All rights reserved. Rights* in the last example here are, as Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online defines: 'the property interest possessed under law or custom and agreement in an intangible thing especially of a literary and artistic nature'<sup>16</sup>. It is the common intellectual property law under which the owners, authors and inventors are granted certain assets, depending on what they have created. An idiom 'catch someone dead to rights' in *I was driving way above the speed limit and the police radar caught me dead to rights* means to have enough proof to show that someone has done something wrong. People who are caught *dead to rights* are easy to prove wrong in court. When we look at idioms, there is a motivation behind the meanings of words that are used in idiomatic expressions. Kövesces (2010: 243–246) questions traditional approach to idioms which claims that the meaning is in a large extent arbitrary. He states that idioms are not completely predictable and there are at least three cognitive mechanisms that influence the meaning of idioms, and there are: metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge.

The next meaning subcategory is *right* meaning 'most suitable'. All examples presented in this section are based on RIGHT IS GOOD metaphor: *He's the right man for her*. The example presents the most suitable man for a woman. In the expression *She's waiting for Mr. Right*. the word can be understood both ways – either literally about a lady waiting for a gentleman whose surname is Right or metaphorically about a lady who is waiting for

<sup>16</sup> <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/right>> 20.04.2013.

a perfect candidate for a husband. We can see a similar meaning in: *He was the right man to lead the country*. The example is the title of the book about the presidency of American President George W. Bush<sup>17</sup>. This perfectness does not only have to apply to a person: *Looking back on it, I think I made the right decision*. The decision was right, and here the correctness of it is subjective as it is the speaker who judges the situation and expresses his view. This meaning is somehow similar to aforementioned ‘right as correct’ meaning which just proves that we are dealing with polysemy. *Right* meaning ‘suitable’ can be observed also in the following examples: *You’ve timed your visit just right!* or *Is Thursday all right for the meeting?* or *You were right about the hotel being too crowded. but Mr. Clinton was the right man in the right place at the right time*. In the examples the visit is perfectly timed, which means that one arrived at perfect time for the host. In the next example the meaning stays the same as ‘suitable’ and it shows *all right* – a derivative form of *right*, which is commonly used by the speakers of English. Actually the word has three different spellings, under each it means the same, though. It is *all right*, *alright*, whose spelling is rather rare in print, however, it has existed since 1893<sup>18</sup>, and *aright*, which is the most formal of all<sup>19</sup>. The last of the mentioned examples presents an idiom which means being at a particular place and time, where particular here is most suitable, where and when there is an opportunity to fix something, obtain something or do whatever can be a merit for us. *He isn’t a good judge of other people, but his heart is in the right place*. is another example in which we can see a metonymy HEART FOR EMOTIONS INSIDE THE HEART, as the person has good intentions. Heart stands here for the centre of our moral decisions. *Right* as ‘suitable’ can also be discussed in a semantic frame of work, e.g. *He’s got the right caliber of mind for the job.*, where interestingly MIND IS A WEAPON metaphor additionally stresses the suitability for the job. Other examples are: *He’s the right profile for this job.*, *She’s got the right qualifications for the job*. There is also one common metaphor that can be seen in the examples: *She’s my right hand*. or *John is Bill’s right-hand man and has*

<sup>17</sup> D. Frum (2003): *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*. Random House.

<sup>18</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=alright&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=alright&allowed_in_frame=0)> 21.05.1012

<sup>19</sup> An interesting usage note is added to the entry in [thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com) ‘Despite the appearance of the form *alright* in works of such well-known writers as Langston Hughes and James Joyce, the single word spelling has never been accepted as standard. This is peculiar, since similar fusions such as *already* and *altogether* have never raised any objections. The difference may lie in the fact that *already* and *altogether* became single words back in the Middle Ages, whereas *alright* has only been around for a little more than a century and was called out by language critics as a misspelling. Consequently, one who uses *alright*, especially in formal writing, runs the risk that readers may view it as an error or as the willful breaking of convention.’ <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/all+right>> 30.05.2013

*put a lot of time into the team.* The *right-hand man* or just *the right hand* is the person that supports and helps us a lot in what we do. This metaphorical usage is based on similarity, as we also depend on the hand we use most often, and as the statistics show, generally it is the right hand. In other words, it is a person that we choose from a particular group that is the most suitable for playing the role of our assistant. Of a great importance is the usage of the definite article *the* which emphasizes the uniqueness of the noun. As Hewings states, we use the definite article *the*, when we say that something is unique, 'there is only one or that is the only one of its kind' (Hewings 2002: 114).

Another subcategory and meaning of the word in question is *right* as 'in good order (condition), good (well) and in the frame of health and either physical or emotional well-being – healthy'. Let us look at the following example: *The engine is not quite right.* Here, *right* relates to the state of an object – an engine, signifying that there is some problem with it, it is not in a good condition and cannot function properly. *Right* is often used to express one's mood. Let us now look at a few fixed expressions: *She's in a very good mood today.* *She must have got out of bed on the right side.* is used when someone is in a good mood because they started their day in a positive way. Here, *right* means good, and does not relate to the side of the body as the antonymic expression shows, the opposite meaning it is not *left*, but *wrong*: *What's the matter with you? Did you get out of bed on the wrong side or something?* The expression means not to be in the good mood and to be easily annoyed all day. A similar phenomenon can be observed in: *This time, I want to get off on the right foot with him.* where the speaker wants to get on well with another person and the phrase itself means to begin doing something in a way that is likely to succeed. Again, *right* is associated positively. *If you have your head screwed on right, you don't complain when you have to work overtime.* means to be wise, sensible and to have good judgment. In the next example, *I'm telling you, man, she's all right.* the speaker is expressing the approval of a lady or a girl they are talking about. Although the next phrase *She's a bit of all right.* may seem that the person is liked a bit less than in the previous example, it is just the opposite – it means that someone to whom the reference is made is sexually attractive. Let us now look at an example of a dialog:

A: *Is she OK now?*

B: *It seems about right.*

The first speaker is concerned with a girl's or a woman's health, and the other provides the interlocutor with information about the aforementioned girl's or the woman's state. From the answer we can see that the girl is not very well, probably recovering, but what is sure is that she is not entirely healthy. The

meaning of *right* referring to health can be seen in the next phrase: *Few days in bed will soon put you right.* where we can see an example of TIME IS A MEDICINE metaphor and here it is the period of time that will put one into the right, healthy state of mind or healthy physical condition. Another phrase *He's not right in the head.* implies that the person the speaker is referring to is mentally ill. It is an ontological metaphor illustrating our head as a container for our thoughts.

P: *My son's getting married in June and everything, and I feel this way in June.*

D: *Oh you'll be, be as right as rain by that time.*

P: *You think so?*

D: *Yes.*

In this short conversation between a patient (marked P) and a doctor (marked D) we can see an idiomatic expression 'as right as rain' which means that they are in a perfect condition, they are healthy. When with reference to an object, it means that the one functions well and is in good condition. The question is: Why is it as right as *rain* then? The answer lies in the historical associations with the word *rain* which, according to Etymology Dictionary, stood for other things that fall from the sky for instance blessings and in this sense it has been used since the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>. Another idiom *He is as right as a trivet.* is a rather old-fashioned phrase to describe someone who is in perfect shape. It is probably because of the most crucial function of a trivet which is stability, just as the condition of one's health should be stable.

The last part of the article presents other meanings among which *right* as *upright* and *straight* will be focused on. The derivations will have their roots in the word in question, and before we take a look at the examples, it is essential to analyze the origins of the meaning first. The first focus will be the analysis of the word *upright*. *Upright* from Greek *orectos* means 'stretched out, upright', but also in its figurative meaning 'morally correct, good honest' which were first recorded in the 1520s. Noun meaning *something that is standing erect* is has existed since 1742<sup>21</sup>. *He was a good honest upright man.* *Upright* means 'noble, honest and morally good'. Here, interestingly Etymology Dictionary provides the information about using the word with reference to something immoral. Let us look at the entry taken from *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* from 1811: *THREE-PENNY UPRIGHT A retailer of love, who, for the sum mentioned, dispenses her favours standing against a wall.* It was probably used here in the meaning of something erect, as she was standing against the wall, but still connotations are juxtaposed. The origin of the word can easily justify the

<sup>20</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=rain&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=rain&allowed_in_frame=0)> 30.05.2013

<sup>21</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=upright&searchmode=None](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=upright&searchmode=None)> 20.05.2012.

meaning of *right* which is MORALLY CORRECT. All that is supposed to be erected should be brought back to the upright position, and that goes with the meaning of *right* functioning as a verb. *To right* means not only to put something back into its upright position and to put something back to a situation it should be in. *He seems to think he can right all the wrongs of the world.* Here the verb means to prevent a bad situation from continuing, which can be connected to the metaphor MORALLY CORRECT IS RIGHT, as it is morally correct to prevent a bad situation from happening.

The other word that will be focused on is *straight*. *Straight*, as the Online Etymology Dictionary provides, has origins in and is closely connected to the meaning of *right*. It arose from Old English *reht* into *streht*. The meaning of *straight* as 'true, direct, honest' was first recorded in the 1520s<sup>22</sup>. As the dictionary says, *right* in Proto-Indo-European languages meant a straight line. When we look at the roots of *right* in Latin, we may observe that it comes from *rectus* which apart from *right* meant literally *straight*. The name of the angle that equals 90 degrees is *right angle*, and that is, as we can see, the exact calque from Latin. This is why some of the meanings of *right* will be closely related to *straight* and create a source of adverbial usages of the word in question. In all the examples below we can see the adverbial usage of *right* and its meanings. Their connection with *straight* is proven by the etymology as the word displays calque meanings to what the word means in Latin. This way we may say that Latin has influenced the meaning of *right* as 'exactly, in a straight way or just on time'. *The bus brings me right to my door., Your voice must carry right to the back of the auditorium. Something had driven the name right out of his head.* The last example here shows HEAD IS A CONTAINER metaphor, as something can be driven out of head. If it was driven *right*, it means that the information evaporated very fast and as it took little time, and if we imagine its trajectory, it might have taken a straight line. Let us now look at *right* meaning 'exactly'. *This country right in the heart of Africa has the potential for changing the entire region of Africa. The police walked in, right on cue. Your guess is right on the beam. I'll call you right after 6. I'll be right behind you. I could tell right off that something was wrong. Right in the heart* of a place means in the exact center of a place. Both expressions *right on cue, right on the bottom* mean 'just on time, exactly on time'. *Right on the beam* means to guess something correctly, meeting the core of the guess. *Right* can also mean *immediately* and it is also connected to the aforementioned *straight*. Online Etymology Dictionary provides that the phrase *right off the bat* and *hot off the bat* was first used in 1888, and suggests that it might be a baseball metaphor coming originally from cricket.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=straight&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=straight&searchmode=none)> 20.05.2012.

<sup>23</sup> <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=right&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=right&allowed_in_frame=0)> 20.05.2012.

The article shows that the English word *right* displays a polysemous character and it creates a semantic network – the meanings, although not all, are related with one another. All the meanings of the word *right* derive from its prototypical meaning which functions as an adjective standing for or referring to the side of the body which is away from the heart. The word's different extensions also take the form of different parts of speech, e.g. verb – *to right*, an adverb – *right* or a noun – *the right*, however, regardless to grammatical category the meanings are either the same or closely related to each other. As the study shows, speakers of the English language conceptualize goodness metaphorically in terms of rightward space. At first, literal meanings do not seem to carry any connotations. They give rise to the metaphorical usages which are marked with a positive or negative charge. As the analysis presents, *right* always carries positive connotations, while *left*, its literal antonym, is clearly negatively marked. As there is a metaphor based on the vertical dimension, namely GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN, there is a metaphor which is built up on the horizontal plane, namely GOOD IS RIGHT which is universal within and across the western cultures and languages. The metaphor GOOD IS LEFT does not exist as a mental metaphor. Although, as Casasanto's (2009) study suggests, left-handers associate *left* with *good*, the number of both the right-handed people, and the idioms and expressions that present *left* as 'bad' in the English language, significantly outnumbers the chances of the metaphor's existence. The reason for universality of the GOOD IS RIGHT metaphor lies in the number of right handed people who use their dominant side of the body for most of their everyday activities. They associate this side with something that is good, morally correct, correct or healthy and in good order or condition. The antonyms to the vast majority of the non-literal meanings of *right* is *wrong*, which often displays correspondence to *left*, as the dichotomy requires the other side and since one is associated with good, the other has to be seen as something bad and evil.

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#### Summary

The aim of the present article was to present the English word *right* as an example of radial category and to show the polysemious nature of the word. Polysemy is the phenomenon when a word has more than one meaning and the meanings can be brought to the main one – named prototype. On the basis of numerous examples collected from dictionaries of contemporary English language and language corpora of both, British and American, and etymological and historical analysis, the polysemious nature of the adjective *right* has been described. The article was written based on the assumptions of cognitive linguistics, and special attention was paid to the phenomenon of metaphor, which, as shown in the above analysis, often occurs in the uses of the word *right*.