

ANTONYMOUS POLYSEMY IN DIACHRONY: CHINESE RǒNG ‘IDLE; BUSY’*

Yueh Hsin Kuo
University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates the notion of antonymous polysemy and its diachronic analysis. First, most purported cases of antonymous polysemy are argued to be more appropriately (near-)antonymous polysemy, as they are only antonymous in a broad sense and on a coarse-grained perspective on meaning. Second, the history of *rǒng* ‘idle; busy’ in Chinese is analyzed and contrasted with Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk’s (1998) analysis of (near-)antonymous polysemy in Cognitive Grammar, which hypothesizes that it results from the mechanism whereby the same fragment of reality can be viewed from alternative perspectives. However, more than one fragment is shown to be involved in the history of *rǒng* and rather than alternative perspectives, gradual meaning extensions and similar, analogy-inducing expressions are crucial. Finally, drawing on *rǒng* and the literature on homophony avoidance, it is hypothesized that genuine cases of antonymous polysemy (related senses that are not only opposites but also minimally different) should be rare diachronically and synchronically, because, like homophony, they are not communicatively efficient.

Keywords: Antonymy, polysemy, homophony, semantic change, Cognitive Grammar

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1. INTRODUCTION

冗 *rǒng* in Chinese has two related senses that are opposites: 閒散 *xiánsǎn* ‘idle’ and 忙 *máng* ‘busy’, according to 古代漢語詞典 *Gǔdài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* (Dictionary of Ancient Chinese) and 教育部重編國語辭典 *Jiàoyùbù Chóngbiān Guóyǔ Cídiǎn* ‘(Taiwan) Ministry of Education Revised Dictionary of Chinese’ (the MoE Dictionary). Both dictionaries illustrate the senses with (1) and (2).

- (1) 三年博士，冗不見治

Sān nián bóshì rǒng bù jiàn zhì
Three year bóshì idle not see accomplishment
‘For three years I have been a *boshi* (a ministerial title); (but) I have been idle and achieved nothing.’

韓愈 *Hán Yù* (768–824)

- (2) 知君束裝冗，不敢折簡致

Zhī jūn shùzhuāng rǒng bù gǎn zhéjiǎn
Know you pack busy not dare short.note
zhì
send

‘I knew you were busy packing; (so) I did not dare to send you even a short note.’

劉宰 *Liú Zǎi* (1167–1240)

Note that a Chinese adjective typically translated into ‘busy’ may describe a person (as ‘engaged in an activity’) or an activity (as ‘attention-demanding; time-consuming’). For example, the MoE Dictionary cites 工作忙 *gōngzuò máng* ‘work is demanding; lit. work busy’. To express the meaning of ‘(someone) is busy (with some activity)’, an adjective like *máng* and its (near-)synonyms may follow two noun phrases, the first of which refers to a human undertaking the activity and the second, the activity. See (3) and (4), both of which are from the Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus and parallel (2).

- (3) 他工作忙
Tā gōngzuò máng
He work busy
'He is busy with work.'
(Present-Day Mandarin)
- (4) 我正連日事忙
Wǒ zhèng liánrì shì máng
I right.now for.days thing/work busy
'I have been busy with things for days.'
水滸傳 *Shuǐhǔzhuàn* (mid 14th c.)

If we take the definitions of (1)–(2) in the lexicographic resources at face value, *rǒng* may have antonymous polysemy. Defined broadly, antonymous senses are opposites (e.g., Cruse 1986; Murphy 2003; Jones et al. 2012). Antonymous polysemy therefore can be defined as diachronically related senses of a lexeme that are opposites. It is also known as ‘antagonymy’, ‘auto-antonymy’, ‘contranymy’, ‘contronymy’ and ‘enantiosemy’. Words with antonymous polysemy are called ‘Janus words’ or ‘self-contradictory words’, to name a few. The literature has focussed on the description of antonymous polysemy, its classification and relevance to lexicography (e.g., Al-Kharabsheh 2008; Karaman 2008; Klégr 2013). Historical investigation, though not absent (e.g., Wang 1993), is comparatively limited in scope and theoretical engagement. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998) is an exception, who proposes an analysis of antonymous polysemy in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1990): it originates from alternative conceptualizations of the same fragment of reality. For example, a container at half of its full capacity is a fragment of reality, which can be conceptualized as ‘half-full’ or ‘half-empty’. That is, antonymous polysemy results from alternative perspectives.

Rather than considering how perspectives motivate antonymous polysemy, this paper employs a different, but not incompatible approach, namely Diachronic Construction Grammar (e.g., Traugott and Trousdale 2013), by paying more attention to both form and meaning, tokens of use and discourse factors than Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk’s (1998) analysis. Key theoretical questions include: what does this approach tell us about

antonymous polysemy? Is there any substance to the intuition that antonymous polysemy is exceedingly rare? Before addressing these questions, we will also look into the diachrony of *rǒng* to assess its polysemy empirically.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the notion of antonymous polysemy. Section 3 discusses the theoretical background. Section 4 describes the history of *rǒng*. Section 5 proposes an analysis of its polysemy. Section 6 addresses the research questions. Section 7 concludes.

2. ANTONYMOUS POLYSEMY

This section defines antonymous polysemy, considers definitional issues and highlights meaning and distributional differences of senses. Defined broadly, antonymous senses are opposites. Defined strictly, they pertain to minimally different senses that share “all of their crucial semantic properties but one” (Murphy 2003:38). More specifically, especially with respect to adjectival senses, antonymous senses (narrowly defined) are on the same gradable scale and contrary (Lyons 1977; Cruse 1986). Two properties are contrary if asserting one entails negating the other (i.e., *they’re tall* denies *they’re short* and vice versa). The senses of *rǒng*, ‘idle’ and ‘busy’, may be a case of antonymy because they are gradable (e.g., *slightly busy* and *very idle*) and contrary (e.g., *they’re busy* means *they’re not idle*). They are also historically related (Sections 4–5). *Rǒng* therefore may exhibit antonymous polysemy, if we assume the dictionary definitions exemplified in (1) and (2). For general issues regarding antonymy, polysemy and their subtypes, see e.g., Cruse (1986); Geeraerts (1993); Tuggy (1993); Jones (2002); Murphy (2003); Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998, 2012); Paradis and Willners (2011); Jones et al. (2012).

Classification schemes of antonymous polysemy will not be reviewed comprehensively (e.g., Karaman 2008; Klégr 2013). Suffice it here to note that a broad definition of antonymous polysemy that includes any opposites is potentially problematic: sometimes the mere non-identity of two senses could be taken to be opposites and hence antonymous. For

example, Karaman (2008:175), citing the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (5th edition), notes that the following senses of *to dust* are opposites: "to put an even layer of a powder over something" (e.g., *dust the cake with icing sugar*) and "to remove dust from something by wiping or brushing, or with a quick light movement of one's hand, a cloth, etc." (e.g., *dust the books*). These senses are not minimally different and thus not strictly antonymous. The former typically concerns adding something desirable when cake-decorating or putting on makeup, while the latter relates to removing something undesirable when cleaning. Therefore, the senses differ in multiple domains ('adding vs. removing'; 'desirable vs. undesirable'; 'cake-decorating vs. cleaning'; etc.). If only one domain were involved, the senses of *to dust* might be clearly opposites, but they are not clearly so when all the domains are considered together. That is, 'adding something desirable (in cake-decorating)' and 'removing something undesirable (in cleaning)' are neither minimally different, nor like clear opposites (thus not strictly antonymous), because alternatives such as 'adding something desirable in cleaning' and 'removing something desirable in cleaning' are what could be minimally different and better opposites. Most, if not all, purported cases of antonymous polysemy are like *to dust*: they only display polysemy that is antonymous in a broad sense. As Murphy (2003:173) points out, regarding most words associated with antonymous polysemy, "their semantic differences are rarely minimal"; they are not strictly antonymous, but simply polysemous. Panther and Thornburg (2012) also make a similar observation. Antonymous polysemy in a broad sense will be labelled as '(near-)antonymous polysemy', by analogy with '(near-)synonymy'.

In what follows, before we review the diachrony of (near-)antonymous polysemy, we will discuss three types of paraphrases that (mis)lead one into thinking that senses are minimally different and thus antonymous. We will consider the concept of 'minimally different' in terms of a fine-grained perspective on meaning, morphosyntactic distribution and usage conditions, following usage-based linguistics (see Section 3). Presumably not all approaches will find room within their theories of meaning to accommodate this expanded notion of 'minimally different' and some, especially non-usage-based ones, may prefer to define it in terms of

strictly semantic parameters. What constitutes (near-)antonymous polysemy, therefore, is theory-dependent.

First, paraphrases that oversimplify meanings may give the false impression that two senses are strictly antonymous. *First-degree* may be paraphrased as ‘the most/least serious’, as in *first-degree murder* and *first-degree burn* (Klégr 2013:15). But the senses follow from how *first* is understood in different contexts. In criminal law, *first-degree murder* is motivated by the importance placed on ‘first’ (cf. *prime* and *primary* ‘main; principal’ < Latin *primus* ‘first’). In burn injuries, *first-degree* (‘superficial’) *burns* are injuries where only the outermost (i.e., first) layer of skin is damaged. In Mandarin, 一 *yī* ‘one’ may denote a small or large quantity in a classifier phrase. For example, 一片 *yí piàn* ‘describes a sound in great quantity’ (Ahrens and Huang 2013:194) and 一點 *yì diǎn* denotes a small quantity (Chen 2016). But the sense of ‘large quantity’ likely results from the ‘totality’ reading of ‘one’ as ‘one whole’ (Iljic 1994; Kuo 2020); other relevant examples include 一生 *yì shēng* ‘(one’s) whole life; lit. one life’ and 一路 *yì lù* ‘(the) whole journey; lit. one road’. The sense of ‘small quantity’ likely results from the use of ‘one’ as a minimizer (similar to *not one bit*), such as 一點 *yì diǎn* ‘a bit; lit. one dot’ (Chen 2016). The paraphrases ‘most/least serious’ and ‘small/large quantity’ mask the non-minimal differences. Another related issue is that some studies arbitrarily compare lexical contrasts in one language with the lack thereof in another (e.g., Li 2016) or do not distinguish vagueness and polysemy (e.g., Wang 1993). Under this approach *marry* has antonymous polysemy, as it corresponds to 嫁 *jià* and 娶 *qǔ* in Chinese (Li 2016), where the verbs for ‘marry’ distinguishes between gender roles. *Aunt* is also antonymous, as it could be 姑姑 *gūgū* ‘father’s sister’, 阿姨 *āyí* ‘mother’s sister’ and many other kinship terms lexicalized in Chinese. In fact, these senses of *marry* and *aunt* are better treated as vague (see Tuggy 1993).

Second, paraphrases that disregard morphosyntactic distribution, too, may make one think that senses are strictly antonymous. In fact, different senses of a polysemous items, whether antonymous or not, are likely distributed differently and thus not minimally different: anything from the immediate discourse to co-occurring morphosyntactic markers and lexical items may clarify which of the senses is intended. Therefore, often an

expression only seems antonymous when its morphosyntactic distribution is overlooked. For example, the senses of *to dust* are associated with different complements (*dust a cake* vs. *dust a table*). The noun following *first-degree* (e.g., *murder* and *burn*) specifies the intended senses. So does the classifier following *yi* ‘one’ (Ahrens and Huang 2013). See also Zhou (2018) for 乖 *guāi* ‘deviant; obedient’ and Dubois (2018) for *deceptively* ‘misleadingly; greatly’ for how the senses are distributed differently. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998) notes that *weather* has antonymous polysemy, ‘erode’ and ‘withstand’, but the ‘erode’ sense is intransitive while that of ‘withstand (the effect of something)’ is transitive. The phenomenon that different senses are distributed differently is well-known, whether the relevant relation is polysemy, or even (near-)synonymy (e.g., Janda and Solovyev 2009).

Third, paraphrases devoid of any description of usage conditions. By hypothesis, two seemingly antonymous senses may be subject to inter-individual as well as socio-cultural variation and thus distributed differently in a speech community: one sense may be associated with specific individuals, a particular sub-community or register that does not use the other sense. It is assumed here that such senses are not strictly antonymous, as they are not minimally different. This assumption is predicated on the usage-based idea that meaning is open-ended and emerges from communication and therefore usage conditions such as sociolinguistic context, register and genre may be directly associated with linguistic meaning. For socio-cultural variation, see Iwasaki (2015), Nikiforidou (2021) and references cited therein; for individual variation, especially in language change, see Petré and Anthonissen (2020).

The origins of most cases of (near-)antonymous polysemy are transparent and not much different from polysemy in general. They relate to what people do with language in different contexts. We manipulate dust or powder differently depending on the task and ‘first’ can be ‘of prime importance’ or ‘superficial’ depending on the situation, etc. Pejoration and amelioration, two well-documented processes of change (see Traugott and Dasher 2002 for an overview) may also lead to (near-)antonymous polysemy when the old meaning persists after pejoration or amelioration happened (e.g., *badass* ‘a bad person; an impressive person’). (Near-)antonymous polysemy mediated by pejoration or amelioration is

likely the result of “nonliteral jocular use involving irony, paradox, oxymoron or other witticisms” (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1998:129).

In sum, most (if not all) of what has been labelled as antonymous polysemy is more appropriately (near-)antonymous polysemy: only antonymous in a broad sense, the result of abstracting over non-minimal differences such as fine-grained meaning, morphosyntax and usage conditions. (Near-)antonymous polysemy is not a radically different subtype of polysemy and results from context-sensitive modulations; the senses are distributed differently, according to how they are used in different contexts. The lack of clear-cut distinction between (near-)antonymous polysemy and polysemy in general, as well as the supposed rarity of antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense, arguably results in the scarcity of theoretical interest in the diachrony of antonymous polysemy.

Given (1) and (2), *rǒng* possesses antonymous polysemy, which, if the critique presented in this section is true, should be only broadly antonymous and display non-minimal differences that are masked by the paraphrases, ‘idle’ and ‘busy’. The apparent incompatibility between the critique and how *rǒng* is defined in some lexicographic resources will thus be the focus in Sections 4 and 5, where we aim to answer the questions: to what extent is the polysemy of *rǒng* antonymous? How did it develop? Section 4 will provide the empirical basis by describing the diachrony of *rǒng*, its polysemy and distribution. Section 5 will evaluate the status of its polysemy, which sets the scene for the discussion in Section 6 of the research questions raised in Section 1.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This paper follows the functionalist, usage-based tradition of semantic change in which meaning is open-ended, encyclopaedic and motivated by communication (e.g., Sweetser 1990; Geeraerts 1997; Traugott and Dasher 2002). One prominent approach in this tradition is Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1990), which holds that linguistic expressions reflect how a speaker views or ‘conceptualizes’ the outside world. This paper adopts a different, but not incompatible approach, Diachronic

Construction Grammar (e.g., Traugott and Trousdale 2013) which pays equal attention to both form and meaning and their associations and hypothesizes how change comes about through tokens of use.

The distinction between words and phrases is a central question in linguistics, but will not be discussed here, as semantics is the focus here. See Booij (2010, 2018) for a general discussion and Arcodia and Basciano (2018) for this distinction in Chinese. Most disyllabic forms involving *rǒng* will be treated as compounds and represented as one unit (e.g., *rǒngX*), even though hypothetically they could be coordinated phrases originally (e.g., *rǒng X* ‘*rǒng* (and) *X*’). This decision is motivated by the fact that the forms have limited productivity and idiosyncratic meanings that are recorded in dictionaries, so they are more likely compounds than phrases. Such *rǒng*-compounds are called ‘coordinate’ (or ‘coordinating’) compounds in that their constituents are juxtaposed and structurally parallel to each other. Chinese has many compounds of this type, from verbal to nominal and adjectival ones, e.g., 呼吸 *hūxī* ‘breathe’ (< *hū* ‘exhale’ and *xī* ‘inhale’) and 新銳 *xīnrùi* ‘new (and) sharp’ (< *xīn* ‘new’ and *rùi* ‘sharp’) (Ceccagno and Basciano 2007:212). See Arcodia and Mauri (2020) for an overview.

Words and compounds are ‘constructions’ in the sense that their forms and meanings are arbitrarily associated (Goldberg 1995). There are various constructional formalisms, but a simple one suffices in this study: the phonological shape of an expression is enclosed in brackets and its meaning is spelled out in prose. See Booij (2010) for more. Three levels of constructions are frequently distinguished (e.g., Traugott and Trousdale 2013), each of which represents a different level of abstraction, but only two levels will be here. The lowest one is the ‘micro-construction’ (or in common parlance ‘word/compound’), which abstracts over attested tokens of use. The highest one is the ‘schema’, which represents an abstraction over micro-constructions with shared formal and functional properties. That is, a grouping of similar words and/or compounds.

4. THE HISTORY OF RǒNG

Section 4.1 discusses data sources and methodology. Section 4.2 describes the earliest history of *rǒng* before *Liùcháo* (220–589 CE), when the senses of ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ start emerging. Sections 4.3 focuses on the history of *rǒng* that pertains to ‘idle’ in *Liùcháo* and beyond. Section 4.4 turns to the other side of the story: ‘busy’. Section 4.5 describes their frequency distribution.

4.1 Data Sources, Methodology and a Sketch of *Rǒng*

The primary source of data is the Chinese Center for Linguistics (CCL) Corpus. The CCL Corpus sometimes contains errors and most but not all data are coded in simplified characters. To achieve consistency (and legibility in a few cases), data have been converted into traditional characters and verified against the same passages in databases coded in traditional characters, such as the *Academica Sinica* Corpus, *Scripta Sinica* and the Chinese Text Project. Data in the CCL Corpus may be misattributed or misdated, so the databases have also been used to verify authorships and dates of publication, where possible. Lexicographic resources have also been consulted; See the appendix for the full list.

The CCL Corpus is organized into dynastic periods. This periodization has been retained. The following descriptive account is mostly based on careful examination of all 361 retrieved tokens of 冗 *rǒng* from the (*Xī*) *Zhōu* dynasty (1100–771 BCE) to the *Yuán* dynasty (1271–1368 CE). *Yuán* was chosen as the cut-off point because it immediately follows *Nánsòng* (1127–1279), by when the senses of ‘idle; busy’ have been attested; see (1) and (2). Some descriptions, particularly frequency counts, go beyond *Yuán*.

Rǒng is not particularly frequent between (*Xī*) *Zhōu* and *Yuán*, occurring once every 164,815.7 characters (59,498,473/361) on average. Its early history is mostly confined to texts characteristic of the written language. None occurs in early Buddhist texts (which tend to be more colloquial) from *Dōnghàn* (25 BCE–220 CE) to *Liùcháo* (220–589 CE), or the early vernacular text *世說新語* *Shìshuō Xīnyǔ* (5th century CE). However, it starts appearing in Buddhist texts in *Táng* (618–907 CE) and

drama scripts in *Nánsòng* (1127–1279 CE), which are generally more colloquial.

4.2 Precursors of *Rǒng* ‘Idle; Busy’

According to 康熙字典 *Kāngxī Zìdiǎn* ‘*Kāngxī* dictionary’ (1710 CE), the dictionary 增韻 *Zēngyùn* (ca. 13th c. CE) defines *rǒng* as 雜 *zá* ‘disparate’, 剩 *shèng* ‘superfluous’ and 忙 *méng* ‘busy’. The first two senses predate ‘busy’ and ‘superfluous’ is likely the earliest sense. This is because the first attested instance of *rǒng* is most likely related to ‘superfluous’, which is found in the disyllabic word *rǒngshí* in the *Zhànguó* section (475–221 BCE) of the corpus, as in (5).¹ All dictionaries consulted also list no instance earlier than (5). The MoE Dictionary defines *rǒngshí* as “to be provided food for in ancient times when working shifts at the imperial court”. In later periods, according to *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese*, this meaning is generalized to “to be provided food for by the government”; see (8).

- (5) 掌共外內朝冗食者之食

Zhǎng	gòng	wài	nèi	cháo	rǒngshí
Handle	provide	outer	inner	court	rǒngshí
zhě	zhī	shí			
person	poss	food			

‘They manage and provide food for those who *rǒngshí* (eat) at the inner and outer courts.’

周禮 *Zhōulǐ* (2nd c. BCE)

The meaning of *rǒngshí* is likely derived from *rǒng* ‘superfluous’ in that those who *rǒngshí* are not part of the imperial household (i.e., those who reside and eat daily at court); instead, they are the ‘additional, superfluous’ personnel that needs catering for on an *ad hoc* basis. (6), from *Xīhàn* (202 BCE–9 CE), also illustrates the ‘superfluous’ sense of *rǒng*.²

¹ The earliest five sections contain 16 instances of 冗 *rǒng*, 9 of which are orthographic variants of an unrelated morpheme or conversion errors and therefore are not discussed here.

² It could mean ‘disparate’ in (6), which may be an inference: what has superfluous parts

- (6) 若簟簾篠，纏錦經冗，似數而疏
Ruò diàn qúchú chán jīn jīng rǒng
Like mat rough.mat winding pattern warp superfluous
sì shù ér shū
resemble many but sparse
'Like a bamboo mat, the rough kind, its winding patterns have
excessive threads; they look dense but are sparse.'
淮南子 *Huánánzǐ* (ca. 139 BCE)

A new compound occurs in the *Dōnghàn* section (25 BCE–220 CE):
流冗 *liúrǒng* (< *liú* 'flow') which means 轉徙 *zhuǎn xǐ* 'homeless; being
a vagrant; having no permanent home' (*The Dictionary of Ancient
Chinese*). *Liúrǒng* might be an extension of 'flow' and 'superfluous', in
that under the assumption that everyone should have a permanent home,
vagrants are an 'overflow' that cannot be accommodated by pre-existing
socio-economic resources.

- (7) 關東流冗者眾
Guāndōng liúrǒng zhě zhòng
Guāndōng vagrant person many
'There are many vagrants in Guāndōng.'
漢書 *Hànshū* (111 CE)

Alternatively, *liúrǒng* might be a blend of two compounds: 流散 *liúsǎn*
'homeless; dispersed; lit. flow and scatter' and 冗食 *rǒngshí*, as in (8).

- (8) 流散冗食，餓死於道
Liúsǎn rǒngshí wèi sǐ yú dào
homeless rǒngshí starve die in road
'People were homeless and reliant on the government for
subsistence.'
漢書 *Hànshū* (111 CE)

has different parts.

4.3 Compounds Relevant to Rǒng ‘Idle’: Liùcháo and Beyond

The *Kāngxī* Dictionary notes that in ancient times ancillary ministerial officers are called 冗員 *rǒngyuán* (< *yuán* ‘employee; personnel’). *Liùcháo* (220–589 CE) and onwards see many similar formulations that refer to ancillary positions or people in such positions, e.g., 冗吏 *rǒnglì* (< *lì* ‘minor official’), 冗官 *rǒngguān* (< *guān* ‘official’) and 冗職 *rǒngzhí* (< *zhí* ‘position’). Originally, *rǒng* in this context is not negative, tending towards ‘extra; non-essential’, which likely derives from the sense of ‘superfluous’. 冗從 *rǒngzòng* (< *zòng* ‘attendant; servant’) is defined as 散從 *sǎnzòng* ‘retinue’ in the *Kāngxī* Dictionary, and by Hucker (1988:274) as “a term attached to a normal title, either as prefix or suffix, granted to a member of the imperial family”. Its non-negativity is also evident in the official job title 冗從僕射 *rǒngzòng púyè*, “a title awarded [to] distinguished military officers” (Hucker 1988:274). Nevertheless, as *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese* notes, in later periods, *rǒngguān* and *rǒngyuán* have come to mean 閒散人員 *xiánsǎn rényuán* ‘idle personnel’, the connotation of which tends to be negative, i.e., ‘redundant; unnecessary’. 中華語文大辭典 *Zhōnghuá Yǔwén Dàcídiǎn* ‘the Great Dictionary of Chinese Language’ also defines *rǒngyuán* as “superfluous and idle personnel”. *Rǒngguān* is clearly undesirable in (9), attributed to 蘇軾 *Sū shì* (1037–1101) by the *Kāngxī* Dictionary, as it is one of the three *rǒng* ‘redundancies’ to remove.

- (9) 為政在去三冗，曰冗官，冗兵，冗費
 Wéi zhèng zài qù sān rǒng yuē
 do politics in remove three rǒng say
 rǒng guān rǒng bīng rǒng fèi
 rǒng official rǒng soldier rǒng expense
 ‘To govern is to remove three redundancies: redundant officials,
 soldiers and expenses.’

Liùcháo sees many other compounds. One is 冗散 *rǒngsǎn*, which by hypothesis could be a coordinated phrase originally, meaning ‘superfluous (and) idle’ (< *sǎn* ‘idle; loose’). *Rǒngsǎn* is defined as 閒散 *xiánsǎn* ‘idle’;

賦閒 *fùxián* ‘unemployed; leisurely’ in *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese* and similarly so in the MoE Dictionary. Its earliest occurrence in the corpus, (10), has multiple interpretations: ‘idle; unemployed’ and ‘exiled; dismissed (from a position); demoted (to a position of less significance and responsibility)’.

- (10) 或納讒而誅之，或放之乎冗散
Huò nà chán ér zhū zhī huò fàng
Or receive slander and kill them or release
zhī hū rǒngsǎn
them to rǒngsǎn
‘Emperors either believed others’ slanders (against their subjects_i)
and killed them_i or let them_i be *rǒngsǎn*.’
抱朴子 *Bàopǔzǐ* (317–318 CE)

(10) describes what emperors are wont to do to their subjects that they do not find agreeable. As banishment, dismissal and demotion are all common tactics in ancient China, it is possible that ‘idle; unemployed’ is an extension from ‘exiled; dismissed; demoted’ (or indeed the other way around). Nevertheless, both senses are likely motivated by associations with the sense of ‘homeless; vagrant’ in *liúróng* (Section 4.2): a vagrant typically has no permanent employment (hence ‘idle’) or residence (hence ‘exiled; removed from one’s previous position’). In later texts, e.g., (11), *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ occurs without any implication of ‘exiled; dismissed; demoted’.

- (11) 立自荊州與龐統並見知，而性傲侮，後更冗散，怨望，故致黜廢
 Lì zì jīngzhōu yǔ pángtǒng bìng jiànzhī
 Lì from jīngzhōu with pángtǒng share renown
 ér xìng ào wǔ hòu gèng rǒngsǎn
 but character arrogant later even idle
 yuàn wàng gù zhì chù fèi
 resentful consequently lead.to demote
 ‘Li was as famous as Pángtǒng in Jīngzhōu, but he was arrogant and
 became even idle and resentful over time, which consequently led to
 his demotion.’

華陽國志 *Huáyáng guózhì* (348–354)

The earliest attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle’ is (1) in the *Táng* Dynasty (618–907), provided by the MoE Dictionary and *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese*. It is likely derived from *rǒngyuán* ‘ancillary/idle personnel’ and *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’.

Note that *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ predates *rǒng* ‘idle’ and *sǎn* has multiple senses, one of which is ‘idle’. This type of compounds where the constituent(s) of a compound may have an etymological meaning similar to the meaning of the compound is not uncommon in Chinese. Sampson (2015:685) mentions 疲乏 *pífá* ‘tired; etymologically tired tired’, 放棄 *fàngqì* ‘give up; etymologically loosen abandon’ and 朋友 *péngyǒu* ‘friend; etymologically friend friend’.³ After the attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle’, *rǒngsǎn* therefore may resemble a compound of (near-)synonyms that means literally ‘idle idle’. Similar compounds of (near-)synonyms follow: 閒冗 *xiánrǒng* and 散冗 *sǎnrǒng* (reversal of *rǒngsǎn*), as in (12) and (13).

- (12) 閒冗官本非虛置
 Xiánrǒng guān běn fēi xū zhì
 Idle officer originally not emptily install
 ‘Those idle positions (or officials) were not originally created for
 nothing.’

通典 *Tōngdiǎn* (801)

³ Ceccagno and Basciano (2007) label such compounds as “redundant coordinate compounds”, and Arcodia and Mauri (2020), “synonymic (coordinating) compounds”.

(13) 外示榮之，實處散冗

Wài shì róng zhī shí chǔ sànrǒng
 Outside show glorify them fact situate idle
 ‘The appearance suggests that people glorify them, but they are in fact do nothings.’

太平廣記 *Tàipíng Guǎngjì* (978)

Xiánrǒng and *sǎnrǒng* are similar in meaning to *rǒng(sǎn)* ‘idle’, even though *sǎnrǒng* may mean ‘ordinary; mediocre’, as in (14). This sense is also possible in (13).

(14) 穎士見其散冗，頗肆凌侮

Yǐngshì jiàn qí sǎnrǒng pō sì língwǔ
 Yǐngshì see he mediocre rather unrestrained insult
 ‘Yǐngshì, seeing that he is rather mediocre, insulted him voraciously.’

王定保 *Wáng Dìngbǎo* (870–954)

So far the overall distinctions between senses have been largely based on definitions listed in the lexicographic resources consulted. However, upon close inspection, what has been described as ‘idle’ or ‘ordinary; mediocre’ is typically embedded in the context of the imperial bureaucracy of China, where it describes pejoratively people who serve in (what is perceived to be) insignificant positions with little authority.⁴ Possible in (12) and (13), this reading is the most prominent in (14), as the narrative indicates that *Yǐngshì* deeply regrets his actions after the person he insulted is revealed to be a high-ranking official. Note, however, this reading is not possible in (11), as the context shows that *Lì* became idle by himself. It is highly likely that this meaning of ‘(an official who is) lowly, with little authority’, along with other pejorative meanings associated with other *rǒng*-compounds, derives from ‘idle’ and/or ‘superfluous’. While we need not adhere closely to distinctions in lexicographic resources (as meaning is encyclopedic in usage-based linguistics), if we do, the meaning of ‘lowly, with little authority’ is probably only a pragmatically enriched sense of ‘idle’ and cancellable. As the focus is on the senses of ‘idle’ and

⁴ I am grateful to one reviewer for this perceptive observation.

‘busy’, this meaning and other pejorative compounds are beyond the scope.⁵

In sum, before the attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle’, *rǒng* occurred in various compounds such as *rǒngyuán* ‘ancillary, or idle personnel’ and *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’. *Rǒngyuán* is likely derived from the sense of ‘superfluous’ in *rǒng*, while *rǒngsǎn* from the sense of ‘vagrant’ in *liúrǒng*, which is ultimately an extension of ‘superfluous’ (Section 4.2). *Rǒngsǎn* is likely a compound of (near-)synonyms, after the attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle’. Similar compounds of (near-)synonyms that mean literally ‘idle idle’ are also attested.

4.4 Compounds Relevant to *Rǒng* ‘Busy’: *Liùcháo* and Beyond

Liùcháo (220–589 CE) also sees *rǒng*-compounds that are by hypothesis coordinated phrases originally, such as 繁冗 *fán rǒng* and 冗煩 *rǒng fán* (*fán* ‘numerous’; 繁 and 煩 are orthographic variants, according to the MoE Dictionary and *the Great Dictionary of Chinese Language*). As coordinated phrases, they may mean ‘superfluous (and) numerous’ or ‘numerous (and) superfluous’. In *Liùcháo* they all describe the length of writing, equivalent to ‘verbose’ and are thus likely compounds whose form-meaning associations are not directly derived from coordinated phrases.⁶

(15) 傅玄譏後漢之冗煩

Fùxuán jī hòuhàn zhī rǒngfán

Fùxuán ridicule hòuhàn poss rǒngfán

‘Fùxuán ridiculed the book *Hòuhàn* for its verbosity.’

劉勰 *Liú Xié* (ca. 465–532)

⁵ Some pejorative compounds include 冗贅 *rǒngzhuì* ‘redundant; cumbersome’ (< *zhuì* ‘redundant; useless’), 冗末 *rǒngmò* ‘(one’s character) inferior’ (< *mò* ‘end; bottom’) and 卑冗 *bēirǒng* ‘(one’s position) lowly; unworthy’ (< *bēi* ‘lowly’).

⁶ A similar compound is 冗長, which, according to the MoE Dictionary, may be *rǒngcháng* ‘verbose’ (< *cháng* ‘long’) or *rǒngzhàng* ‘superfluous’ (< *zhàng* ‘superfluous, non-essential’; cf. 長物 *zhàngwù* ‘things other than bare necessities of life’). Although no distinction is made orthographically, they may be distinguished, as far as *rǒngcháng* specifically pertains to language.

- (16) 辭趣過誕，意旨迂闊，推理陳跡，恨為繁冗
 Cíqù guò dàn yìzhǐ yūkuò
 wordplay surpass preposterous intention nonsensical
 tuīlǐ chénjì hèn wéi fánrǒng
 reasoning past.event regret be verbose
 ‘The wordplay is preposterous; the intention, nonsensical; the reasoning, clichéd. It is regrettably verbose.’
 蕭綺 *Xiāo Qǐ* (ca. 502–557)

Fánrǒng and *rǒngfán* are semantically similar in *Liùcháo*, but in *Táng* (618–907), some instances of *fánrǒng* show a generalized meaning: ‘complicated’. The negative prosody from ‘verbose’ persists. In (17), it refers to the domain of writing, but in terms of calligraphy, but not content. In (18), it describes something as complicated.⁷

- (17) 乃須簡略為尚，不貴繁冗
 Nǎi xū jiǎnlüè wéi shàng bù guì fánrǒng
 And must concise be priority not value complicated
 ‘And simplicity (in calligraphy) must be prioritized; complexity is not to be desired.’
 蔡希綜 *Cài Xīzōng* (mid 8th c.)

- (18) 以煩冗卻停
 Yǐ fánrǒng què tíng
 On.account.of complicated decline stop
 ‘On account of how complicated it is, he declined to progress further.’
 杜佑 *Dù Yòu* (735–812)

In *Běisòng* (960–1127), even though *fánrǒng* may still mean ‘complicated’, some instances could be taken to describe some activity as ‘attention-demanding; time-consuming’.

- (19) 不必過務虛儀，事涉繁冗

⁷ *Fánrǒng* and *rǒngfán* are likely where *rǒng* may take on the meaning of ‘disparate’ (see Footnote 2): what is complex tends to have different parts.

Bù	bì	guò	wù	xū	yí
Not	must	overdo	business	empty	etiquette
shì		shè	fánrǒng		
thing/work		engage	complicated		

‘Do not attend to matters more than necessary, follow meaningless etiquette rules, or engage in complicated/demanding tasks.’
冊府元龜 *Cèfǔ Yuánguī* (1013)

Sometimes the sense of ‘(activity) complicated; attention-demanding’ shades into that of ‘(person) busy (with activity)’ in contexts where a human is obviously undertaking the activity; see (20) and (21). Recall that adjectives such as *máng(lù)* ‘busy’ may describe a person or an activity (Section 1). *The Great Dictionary of Chinese Language* lists two definitions for *fánrǒng*, ‘verbose’ and 煩雜忙碌 *fánzá mánglù* (*fánzá* ‘complicated; disorderly’; *mánglù* ‘busy; of a person or activity’).

- (20) 度從之，奉事甚謹。及為相，機務繁冗，乃致遺忘
Dù cóng zhī fèng shì shèn
Dù follow it attend thing/work very
jǐn jí wéi xiàng jī
cautious when.it.came.time do xiàng important
wù fánrǒng nǎi zhì yíwàng
affair demanding/busy therefore end.up forget
‘Dù followed the instruction and diligently attended to it. When he was serving as *xiàng* (a minister), there being complicated (or demanding) work (or him being busy with work) he ended up forgetting it.’

太平廣記 *Tàipíng Guǎngjì* (978)

- (21) 老夫著軍務煩冗，紊亂心懷，一時忘卻
 Lǎofū (zhèng)zháo jūn wù fánrǒng
 I chance.upon military affair demanding/busy
 wěnlùn xīnhuái yìshí wàngquè
 disorderly bosom momentarily forget
 ‘I happened to be engaged in military affairs that were demanding
 (or I happened to be busy with military affairs) and my mind was
 all over the place; I therefore momentarily forgot.’
 封神演義 *Fēngshén Yǎnyì* (ca. 1570)

Nánsòng (1127–1279) sees the example of *rǒng* ‘busy; attention-demanding’ recorded in the MoE Dictionary and *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese*, as in (2), the earliest of its kind. It might have descended from the similar instance of *fánrǒng* in (19). Other examples of *rǒng* ‘busy; attention-demanding’ include (22) and (23).

- (22) 事冗不曾討得
 Shì rǒng bù céng tǎo
 Thing/work busy/demanding not ever ask.for
 dé
 obtain
 ‘I have been so busy that I have not obtained it.’
 三國演義 *Sānguó Yǎnyì* (1522)

- (23) 小庵事冗，不及款話
 Xiǎo ān shì rǒng bù
 Small temple thing/work busy/demanding not
 jí kuǎnhuà
 reach converse
 ‘We are busy at the temple (so) I am not able to converse with you.’
 警世通言 *Jǐngshì Tōngyán* (1624)

Note that the sense of ‘busy’ in *rǒng* is only found in highly specific contexts where a human can be understood to be engaged in some

demanding activity. The primary sense of *rǒng* therefore is ‘attention-demanding’: it describes what keeps someone busy, rather than the person. The sense of ‘busy’ is never found describing a human without some noun signalling the activity, e.g., *shì* ‘thing; work’ in (22)–(23) and *shùzhuāng* ‘packing’ in (2).

Section 4.3 notes that after the attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle’ came other *rǒng*-compounds of (near-)synonyms that mean literally ‘idle idle’. Similarly, after the attestation of *rǒng* ‘attention-demanding; busy’, came other compounds of (near-)synonyms: 忙冗 *mángrǒng* and 冗忙 *rǒngmáng* (< *máng* ‘attention-demanding; busy’), as in (24)–(25). Unlike *rǒng*, *mángrǒng* may describe a human, as in (25).

(24) 老師辭別甚急，想是連日佛事冗忙...

Lǎoshī	cǐbié	shèn	jí	xiǎng	shì
Teacher	bid.farewell	very	impatient	think	be
liánrì	fó	shì		rǒngmáng	
day.after.day	Buddha	thing/work		busy	

‘You (the teacher) seems impatient to leave; I am afraid it might be because you have been so busy with the Buddhist rituals...’

西遊記 *Xīyóujì* (1592)

(25) 家父經歲忙冗

Jiāfù	jīngsùì	fángǒng
Father	for.years	busy

‘My father is busy, year in and year out.’

綠野仙蹤 *Lǜyě Xiānzōng* (1762)

In sum, before the attestation of *rǒng* ‘attention-demanding; busy’, *rǒng* occurred in compounds such as *fánrǒng* and *rǒngfán* ‘verbose’, which is likely an extension from *rǒng* ‘superfluous’ coordinated with *fán* ‘numerous’. Of these compounds, *fánrǒng* shifted to ‘complicated’, ‘attention-demanding’ and then in very specific contexts, ‘busy’. After the attestation of *rǒng* ‘attention-demanding; busy’, *fánrǒng* is likely a compound of (near-)synonyms and other similar compounds are also attested.

4.5 A Quantitative Look at *Rǒng*

Frequency counts were undertaken to determine the distribution of *rǒng*-compounds, unbound *rǒng* (i.e., *rǒng* that is not part of a compound) and its senses from *Nánsòng* (1127–1279) to *Qīng* (1636–1912) in the CCL Corpus. *Nánsòng* was chosen as the starting point as the relevant polysemy of *rǒng* had just been attested. Of all 210 tokens examined, 170 were *rǒng*-compounds and 40 were unbound *rǒng*, summarized in Table 1.⁸

Table 1. Distribution of *rǒng*-compounds and unbound *rǒng*

	<i>Nánsòng</i>	<i>Yuán</i>	<i>Míng</i>	<i>Qīng</i>	
compounds	18	5	50	97	170
unbound	9	1	14	16	40
total	27	6	64	113	210

Table 2 describes the sense distribution of unbound *rǒng*.

Table 2. Sense distribution of unbound *rǒng*

	<i>Nánsòng</i>	<i>Yuán</i>	<i>Míng</i>	<i>Qīng</i>
‘idle’	0	0	1	0
‘‘Attention-demanding; busy’	1	1	10	10
other senses	8	0	3	6
total	9	1	14	16

Table 2 shows that unbound *rǒng* predominantly conveys ‘attention-demanding; busy’, e.g., (26)–(27). Most instances are like (22) and (23): they are predicative adjectives with subject nouns such as 事 *shì* ‘thing; work’ (13 instances), 公 *gōng* ‘official (work)’ (2 instances) and 務 *wù* ‘affair’ (1 instance) and topic phrases referring to either humans, as in

⁸ *Rǒng* was categorized as bound if it was an instance or extension of any of the compounds described in Section 4 and the footnotes, as well as the following expressions and their extensions: 撥冗 *bōrǒng* ‘take time out of one’s busy schedule’ < *bō* ‘lit. put aside’; 冗冗 *rǒngrǒng* ‘many’. Conversion errors and unrelated uses (e.g., onomatopoeia) were removed. The corpus contains two versions of 朱子語類 *Zhūzǐ Yǔlèi* (1270), (mis)attributed to *Běisòng*. Here, it is treated as a single *Nánsòng* text.

(26)–(27), or places metonymically referencing humans, e.g., 庵 *ān* ‘temple’ in (23).

- (26) 但恐兄長事冗，不能出去一會
Dàn kǒng xiōngzhǎng shì rǒng
But afraid older.brother thing/work demanding/busy
bù néng chūqù yí huì
not can go.out one meet
‘But I am afraid that you might be busy and unable to go out for a meeting with him.’

隋唐演義 *Suítáng Yǎnyì* (1675)

- (27) 老世兄公冗，也不敢來驚動
Lǎo shìxiōng gōng rǒng yě bù gǎn
Old friend official demanding/busy also not dare
lái jīngdòng
come disturb
‘He was busy with work and dare not come to cause any inconvenience.’

野叟曝言 *Yěsǒu Pùnyán* (1779)

Sometimes it expresses meanings such as ‘verbose’ or ‘superfluous; redundant’.

- (28) 將前代許多官一齊盡置得偏官，如何不冗？
Jiāng qián dài xǔduō guān
Take previous generation many officer
yìqí jìn zhì dé piānguān rúhé
together completely install get junior.officer how
bù rǒng
not redundant
‘If you take the numerous official positions from previous generations to create, out of every single one of them, corresponding junior positions, how would it not be redundant?’

朱子語類 *Zhūzǐ Yǔlèi* (1270)

(29) 以此傳本太冗

Yǐ cǐ chuánběn tài rǒng
Take this edition too verbose
'This edition is too verbose.'

二十二史劄記 Èrshí'èr Shǐ Zhājì (1795)

Only one instance, (30), approaches the sense of 'idle', the only instance of unbound *rǒng* in *Wànlì Yěhuòbiān*, but it might very well mean pejoratively 'lowly'.

(30) 古來校尉，未有如此之冗而賤者

Gǔ lái jiàowèi wèi yǒu rúcǐ zhī
Antiquity come jiàowèi never there.is so poss
rǒng ér jiàn zhě
idle and despicable person

'Since antiquity, there has not been any *jiàowèi* (a military position) as idle and despicable as these.'

萬曆野獲編 Wànlì Yěhuòbiān (1606)

Only in compounds such as *rǒngsǎn* 'idle' and *rǒngyuán* 'ancillary, idle personnel' is unbound *rǒng* consistently close in meaning to 'idle'.

The preceding discussion shows that unbound *rǒng* 'idle' is rare and does not co-occur with unbound *rǒng* 'busy' in the same text, while unbound *rǒng* 'busy' occurs in contexts where *rǒng* follows specific nouns. Interestingly, adjectival *rǒng*-compounds also have a skewed distribution. Table 3 describes the distribution of 'idle' and 'busy' *rǒng*-compounds from *Běisòng* (960–1127) to *Qīng* (1636–1912). *Běisòng* was chosen as the starting point as no 'busy' compound predates *Běisòng*. The compounds queried for included *rǒngsǎn*, *sǎnrǒng* and *xiánrǒng* (the 'idle' type) and *rǒngmáng*, *mángrǒng*, *rǒngfán* and *fánrǒng* (the 'busy' type).

Table 3. Distribution of ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ compounds⁹

	<i>Běisòng</i>	<i>Nánsòng</i>	<i>Yuán</i>	<i>Míng</i>	<i>Qīng</i>
‘idle’					
<i>rǒngsǎn</i>	18	0	0	5	3
<i>sǎnrǒng</i>	4	0	0	0	0
<i>xiánrǒng</i>	3	0	0	0	0
‘busy’					
<i>rǒngmáng</i>	0	0	0	1	1
<i>mángǒng</i>	0	1	0	3	5
<i>rǒngfán</i>	0	0	0	0	5
<i>fánrǒng</i>	8	3	1	6	15

Table 3 shows that *rǒngsǎn* is by far the most consistently attested ‘idle’ compound and after *Běisòng* the ‘busy’ compounds are the more frequent type. What Table 3 does not show is that, after *Běisòng*, *rǒngsǎn* is concentrated in two texts (萬曆野獲編 *Wànlì Yěhuòbiān* in *Míng* and 宋論 *Sùn Lùn* in *Qīng*) and the ‘busy’ compounds are distributed more widely: three texts in *Nánsòng*, one in *Yuán*, six in *Míng* and thirteen in *Qīng*. Only three texts contain both compound types: 太平廣記 *Tàipíng Guǎngjì* (978) and 冊府元龜 *Cèfǔ Yuánguī* (1013) in *Běisòng* and *Wànlì Yěhuòbiān* (1606) in *Míng*. Table 4 describes the distribution of the compounds in these texts.

Table 4. Distribution of compounds in texts with both ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ compounds

	<i>Tàipíng Guǎngjì</i>	<i>Cèfǔ Yuánguī</i>	<i>Wànlì Yěhuòbiān</i>
‘idle’			
<i>rǒngsǎn</i>	0	17	5
<i>sǎnrǒng</i>	2	2	0
<i>xiánrǒng</i>	0	3	0
‘busy’			
<i>fánrǒng</i>	1	5	1

⁹ Each section differs in size; see

http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/CCL_Corpus_statistics.pdf

Tàipíng Guǎngjì and *Cěfǔ Yuánguī* are 類書 *Lèishū* ‘category book’, anthologies that sometimes contain verbatim copies of previous works. Each of the books was edited by more than a dozen editors, so linguistic patterns in them likely reflect multiple individuals’ usages. Therefore, in the window investigated (roughly 1,000 years from *Běisòng* to *Qīng*), we are confident that the author of *Wànlì Yěhuòbiān* produced both compound types (although he produced only one instance of *fánrǒng*), but we are not as confident that there was any other similar author.

In sum, the sense of ‘idle’ is rare, except in compounds. The sense of ‘busy’ associated with unbound *rǒng* is restricted to highly specific contexts. Most adjectival *rǒng*-compounds are the ‘busy’ type, not the ‘idle’ one. The senses of ‘idle’ and ‘busy’, whether in unbound or bound *rǒng*, do not tend to be produced by the same author.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE POLYSEMY OF *Rǒng*

This section addresses the questions in Section 2: to what extent is the polysemy of *rǒng* antonymous? How did it develop? Lexicographic resources might give the impression that unbound *rǒng* exhibits antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense, but actual data suggest otherwise. The sense of ‘busy’ is highly specific to contexts where the sense of ‘attention-demanding’ is more prominent and occurs in morphosyntactic contexts involving specific nouns with non-human referents such as *shì* ‘thing; work’. Only if *rǒng* described someone as ‘busy’ without implicating something as ‘attention-demanding’ and occurred in more general morphosyntactic contexts would the polysemy be narrowly antonymous. Even if we consider adjectival *rǒng*-compounds, which are more narrowly antonymous (e.g., *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ and *fánrǒng* ‘busy’), they are distributed so differently that hardly any author produces both compound types. That is, the seemingly antonymous senses are typically produced in different compounds, at different times and by different authors. The senses are thus far from being minimally different: there are semantic, morphosyntactic and individual differences.¹⁰ *Rǒng*

¹⁰ One reviewer suggested that the senses belong to two registers: written and colloquial, with ‘busy’ being more colloquial. The observed individual variation therefore could be

only exhibits (near-)antonymous polysemy, defined very broadly: while historically attested, it is only antonymous when we abstract over detailed meanings and morphosyntax, as well as individual differences. This indicates that *rǒng* resembles most cases of (near-)antonymous polysemy identified so far (Section 2): on a fine-grained perspective, not antonymous. Therefore, we may still account for the development of its (near-)antonymous polysemy, as will be done in this section and contrasted with the Cognitive Grammar analysis in Section 6.

In what follows, we will first examine the stages immediately before the creations of *rǒng* ‘idle; busy’ and then consider the ultimate source meaning, ‘superfluous’. The sense of ‘idle’ may be derived from *rǒng* in the context of titles and positions, which, originally meaning ‘ancillary’, has become more pejorative (i.e., ‘idle; unnecessary’), as in (9). In constructional terms, a nominal schema can be proposed, [*rǒng*X], where X is typically a title or position. The schema has the older referential meaning of ‘ancillary X (personnel)’ (especially the official title *rǒngzōng*) and the newer one of ‘idle X (personnel)’. This schema licenses micro-constructions such as *rǒngyuán* and *rǒngzòng*. After *Liùcháo*, some speakers have generalized [*rǒng*X] to include *fèi* ‘expense’; see (9).

Two more adjectival schemas may be proposed to account for *rǒng*-compounds that are relevant to the development of the (near-)antonymous polysemy. One is the ‘idle’ schema that licenses micro-constructions with the modificational meaning of ‘idle’, such as *rǒngsǎn* and *xiánrǒng*. The other is the ‘(attention-demanding;) busy’ schema that licenses micro-constructions such as *fánrǒng* and *mángrǒng*. The formal and functional similarities of these micro-constructions justify positing the schemas: all involve *rǒng* and mean ‘idle’ or ‘busy’. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the schemas are generalizations: each micro-construction is also subtly different. Some are polysemous (e.g., *sǎnrǒng* ‘mediocre’ and *fánrǒng* ‘verbose; complicated’) and others likely have fine-grained differences in genre, style and register. In this study, what is particularly

reflective of a more general socio-cultural variation (e.g., register, genre and/or style). A thorough investigation into the role of socio-cultural variation would require statistical analysis as well as a larger balanced sample, but the reviewer’s suggestion and the meaning of ‘lowly, with little authority’, which is associated with ‘idle’, further accentuate the non-minimal differences.

relevant is the roles of *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ and *fǎnrǒng* ‘busy’: they are the earliest and most frequent micro-constructions of their respective schemas (Table 3) and predate their unbound counterparts (i.e., *rǒng* ‘idle; busy’). These compounds likely give rise to *rǒng* ‘idle’ and ‘busy’, respectively, through the semanticization of invited inferences (Traugott & Dasher 2002) and the morphological process of ‘clipping’. The former relates to the idea that an expression may take on the semantics of the context where it is used (i.e., *rǒng* acquiring ‘idle’ from *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’). The latter derives a shortened form from a longer one (i.e., *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ > *rǒng* ‘idle’). Note that, independently of the compounds, *sǎn* and *fán* mean ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ respectively. Therefore, inferences that *rǒng* means ‘idle’ or ‘busy’ may arise from not only the whole compound, but also the neighboring constituent. The analysis is thus: the meanings of ‘idle; busy’ originate via inferences from compounds where *rǒng* is interpreted as a (near-)synonym for the whole compounds and the other constituents (*sǎn* and *fán*). The historical process whereby a morpheme acquires a new meaning from the compound(s) that it is part of is “likely a major source of morphological productivity and development in the history of the Chinese language” (Packard 2000:276). See also Ceccagno and Basciano (2007) and Arcodia and Basciano (2018). The expansion of the ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ schemas after the attestation of *rǒng* ‘idle; busy’ is also supporting evidence that *rǒngsǎn* and *fǎnrǒng* might be perceived as compounds of (near-)synonyms, which motivated similar micro-constructions.

Additionally, the development of ‘idle’ could be analogically motivated by a similar compound, 閒散 *xiánsǎn* (whose orthographic variants include 閑散 and 閑散), attested as early as *Liùcháo*. *Xiánsǎn* resembles *rǒngsǎn* and is a compound of (near-)synonyms: *xiánsǎn* < *xián* ‘idle; leisurely’ and *sǎn* ‘idle; loose’. *Rǒng* may thus derive the sense of ‘idle’ from *rǒngsǎn*, by analogy with *xián* in *xiánsǎn*, as *xián* and *xiánsǎn* mean ‘idle’ (*xiánsǎn* is the definitions of *rǒng* and *rǒngsǎn* in the MoE dictionary and *The Dictionary of Ancient Chinese*; Sections 1 and 4.3). That is, *rǒngsǎn* may be perceived as a compound of (near-)synonyms, too. The analogical process is represented in (31), understood as: *xiánsǎn* ‘idle’ to *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ is equal to *xián* ‘idle’ to *rǒng*. It hypothetically describes the process that gave rise to *rǒng* ‘idle’.

- (31) *xiánsǎn* ‘idle’ : *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’
 xián ‘idle’ : *rǒng* ‘idle’

In analogical change, usually the less frequent pattern becomes more like the more frequent one (e.g., Bybee 2010:Ch. 4), which is also the case with (31): *xián* occurs 1346 times before (and including) *Táng*, when *rǒng* ‘idle’ is attested. However, this analogical account actually lacks empirical support if we consider the raw frequencies of *xiánsǎn* (1 in *Liùcháo* and 2 in *Táng*) and *rǒngsǎn* (2 in *Liùcháo* and 4 in *Táng*). A similar process of analogy could be proposed between *fánmáng* ‘busy’ (< *máng* ‘busy’) and *fánrǒng*, but it lacks even more evidence: *fánmáng* is attested only once in *Běisòng* and unattested in *Nánsòng*, when unbound *rǒng* ‘busy’ is attested. To substantiate either analogical account requires more frequency evidence from a larger corpus. As far as the CCL Corpus is considered, both accounts are thus inconclusive. Regardless, the main analysis stands: the meanings of ‘idle; busy’ originate from compounds where *rǒng* is interpreted as a (near-)synonym for the compounds and its neighboring constituents.

Finally, if we zoom out of the stages immediately leading up to ‘idle; busy’, we may notice that the source meaning ‘superfluous’ underlies subsequent stages to varying degrees. For example, were it not for the evidence of [*rǒng*X] ‘ancillary X (personnel)’, we could probably hypothesize ‘superfluous’ as the only immediate source of ‘idle (personnel)’: if there is a superfluous number of officials, they may be taken to be idle. Similarly, as the sense of ‘attention-demanding; busy’ typically describes an activity, we could imagine it as derived immediately from ‘superfluous’, if we did not consider the shifts from ‘verbose’ to ‘complicated’ and ‘attention-demanding; busy’: an excessive number of tasks may demand much of one’s attention and keep one busy. Likewise, a superfluous number of words would make a piece of writing or its author ‘verbose’ and something with superfluous parts might come across as ‘complicated’. Furthermore, Section 4 notes that the relevant *rǒng*-compounds are by hypothesis coordinated phrases originally, with the source meaning being one of the conjuncts: ‘superfluous (and) idle/busy’. That is, the source meaning motivates the formations of the compounds. The foregoing discussion highlights that both the source meaning and the

compounds *rǒngsǎn* ‘idle’ and *fǎnrǒng* ‘busy’ contribute to the developments of the senses.

In sum, despite what one might suppose based on dictionary definitions, *rǒng* is only antonymous in a very broad sense, as the senses have various non-minimal differences. There are two ways of summarizing the history of *rǒng*: the first one focuses on successive stages, while the second on the ultimate source. One does not necessarily take precedence over the other, as language change may have multiple sources (e.g., De Smet et al. 2013). From the perspective of stages, the sense of ‘idle’ has two trajectories, one involving mostly nominal compounds and the other adjectival ones: ‘superfluous’ > ‘ancillary personnel’ > ‘idle personnel’ and ‘superfluous’ > ‘homeless; vagrant’ > ‘exiled; demoted; dismissed’ > ‘idle’. Both reach the point of ‘idle’ by *Táng* (618–907). The sense of ‘attention-demanding; busy’ has one trajectory that involves adjectival compounds and culminates at *Nánsòng* (1127–1279): ‘superfluous’ > ‘verbose’ > ‘complicated’ > ‘attention-demanding; busy’. Crucial to the stages immediately before the endpoints are compounds in which *rǒng* takes on the meanings of ‘idle’ and ‘busy’. While the trajectories are represented as clines, which downplays the fact that a stage may motivate a non-adjacent one, the source meaning ‘superfluous’ actually plays a prominent role throughout both trajectories, as by hypothesis the compounds are originally coordinated phrases where ‘superfluous’ is one of the conjuncts and ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ could even be derived from ‘superfluous’ directly. Turning our attention to the source meaning, we may represent the developments as: *rǒng* ‘superfluous’ > *rǒngX* ‘superfluous (and) idle’ > *rǒngX* ‘idle’ > *rǒng* ‘idle’ and *rǒng* ‘superfluous’ > *Xrǒng* ‘superfluous (and) busy’ > *Xrǒng* ‘busy’ > *rǒng* ‘busy’ (*rǒng*-compounds that mean ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ are presented as *rǒngX* and *Xrǒng* respectively for illustrative purposes; the precise position of *rǒng* is variable).

6. DISCUSSION

This section addresses the questions in Section 1: what does our approach, rather than Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk’s (1998), tell us about

the diachrony of (near-)antonymous polysemy? Why do genuine cases of antonymous polysemy seem rare?

The critical reader at this point may wonder if we should just propose that antonymous polysemy is non-existent and even abandon the notion of (near-)antonymous polysemy since most purported cases could be described simply as polysemous. However, a more moderate and probabilistic view is assumed here, similar to Panther and Thornburg's (2012): antonymous polysemy is not completely implausible, just exceedingly rare and dependent on one's approach to meaning (e.g., a coarse-grained one masks non-minimal differences). Therefore, '(near-)antonymous polysemy' is a valid theoretical notion as well as a descriptive tool: it does not signify any commitment to the existence of antonymous polysemy in its strict sense and yet shares connections with previous research on antonymous polysemy, thereby facilitating future research in this tradition. It then follows that previous analyses such as that of Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998) are still worth critiquing, even though her analysis foregrounds the idea that antonymous polysemy is strictly antonymous.

6.1 Diachrony of Antonymous Polysemy

Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998:121–122) proposes that (near-)antonymous polysemy originates from “an alternative conceptualization of the same fragment of the outside reality” and “is conditioned by changing cognitive optics towards the same object or phenomenon”. As noted in Section 1, this resembles how a container at half of its full capacity can be viewed as half-full or half-empty. This may be true of the expressions she analyzes (e.g., *weather* ‘erode; withstand’; she notes the senses are distributed differently, therefore, as far as the position established in Section 2 is considered, not strictly-speaking antonymous). However, the history of *rǒng* is not amenable to a similar Cognitive Grammar account, for two reasons.

First, by focusing on conceptual structure, the rest of the language is downplayed. As Section 5 suggests, construction-internal contexts matter: The context-absorption happens within constructions like *rǒngsǎn* and *fǎnrǒng*. Construction-external contexts are also important: the fact that

sǎn and *fán* mean ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ respectively is established on the basis of their properties not only within *rǒngsǎn* and *fánrǒng*, but also elsewhere. If we are willing to consider extremely low frequencies as evidence for analogy, construction-external contexts would seem even more important: cross-constructional analogical associations with *xiánsǎn* and *fánmáng* might motivate *rǒngsǎn* and *fánrǒng* to be analyzed as compounds of (near-)synonyms.

Second, more than two perspectives were involved and more than one ‘fragment of reality’ gave rise to ‘idle’ and ‘attention-demanding; busy’. These senses arose from different pathways, within which multiple alternative perspectives further enabled meaning shifts. For example, ‘superfluous’ led to ‘ancillary (personnel)’, which on a different perspective, came to mean ‘idle (personnel)’. ‘Verbose’ turned into ‘complicated’: a perspective on language shifted to a perspective on things in general. Throughout the pathways, the source meaning of ‘superfluous’ likely played a role: ‘idle’ could be motivated by both ‘ancillary’ and ‘superfluous’, while ‘attention-demanding; busy’ by ‘complicated’ and ‘superfluous, many (tasks)’. However, this source meaning did not pertain to one fixed fragment of reality amenable to only two alternative conceptualizations of ‘idle’ and ‘attention-demanding; busy’. The sense of *rǒng* was actually extended in various ways to create multiple fragments of reality and such extensions may be independent of each other. This is reflected in the variety of meanings (‘fragments of reality’) associated with *rǒng* (e.g., ‘vagrant’, ‘demoted; dismissed’, ‘verbose’ and ‘complicated’) and in the fact that, for example, the extension from ‘ancillary’ to ‘idle’ was independent of the one from ‘verbose’ to ‘complicated’ and ‘attention-demanding; busy’. To account for (near-)antonymous polysemy, at least in the case of *rǒng*, it is therefore insufficient to propose two alternative conceptualizations on the basis of a simple and stable association between an expression and a kind of reality. Rather, it should be recognized that language is so fluid that contexts of use constantly reflect and even create new associations with kinds of reality.

Similar critical remarks have also been made regarding some Cognitive Grammar accounts of change, particularly subjectification (e.g., Traugott and Dasher 2002:98). No simple association can be made

between an expression and a meaning property or relation (be it subjectivity, antonymy or polysemy) without considering in detail actual tokens of use and their histories; see also Narrog (2012:Ch. 2). Note also that many Cognitive Grammar accounts have a more dynamic view on language and reality than Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk's (1998) analysis seems to suggest. Tyler and Evans (2003:22) remark: "meaning is fundamentally mental in nature, referencing conceptual structures rather than directly referencing entities inhering in an objectively verifiable and mind-independent world." See also Paradis and Willners (2011) and Jones et al. (2012:Ch. 7) for a dynamic perspective on antonymy in Cognitive Grammar.

The preceding discussion has the following implications. While antonymous polysemy may seem highly unusual, each stage of its development is not extraordinary and precedes like polysemy in general. Therefore, the development of antonymous polysemy (narrowly or broadly defined) from one stage to another is probably not unlike that of polysemy in general: the original sense is extended in different contexts. If true, diachronic accounts of antonymous polysemy should be as diverse as those of polysemy. This is consistent with how antonymous polysemy is characterized synchronically (Section 2): qualitatively antonymous polysemy is just like polysemy. However, while stages leading up to it may be in keeping with what we know about polysemy, antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense does seem much rarer, if not impossible. This raises the question: why?

6.2 Rarity of Antonymous Polysemy as Communicatively Motivated

Hypothetically, the more strictly antonymous it is, the more seriously a pattern of polysemy hampers communication and consequently the less likely it is to arise. This is because the more strictly antonymous it is, the fewer semantic features, morphosyntactic contexts and usage conditions (e.g., registers) there are that may help clarify which sense is intended. While no empirical research has established the interaction between how strictly antonymous a pattern is, its degree of communicative efficiency and its likelihood of occurrence, supporting evidence can be deduced from research on homophony avoidance, which hypothesizes that phonological

mergers tend to be blocked when the resultant lexical items would be homophonous with pre-existing ones (Martinet 1952; Hockett 1967), especially when they are also similar in other respects, e.g., syntax and semantics (cf. Dautriche et al. 2018).¹¹ Ample evidence has been produced in support of homophony avoidance (Silverman 2010; Kaplan 2011; Wedel, Kaplan, and Jackson 2013; Wedel, Jackson, and Kaplan 2013; Kaplan and Muratani 2015). The typical explanation is that users tend to maintain distinctiveness to ensure communicative success. Antonymous polysemy and homophony are similar in their lack of distinctiveness: in both, one form is associated with multiple distinct senses. What distinguishes antonymous polysemy and homophony is that in the former the senses are diachronically related and strictly-speaking gradable and contrary (Section 2), while in the latter they are not related or necessarily gradable and contrary. But users typically do not possess knowledge of etymology.¹² Whether senses have the same etymon (as in polysemy) or distinct ones (as in homophony) does not matter to users generally. From a user's perspective, antonymous polysemy is thus not unlike homophony in being not particularly conducive to communicative success.

By analogy with homophony avoidance, we may therefore propose 'antonymous polysemy avoidance': antonymous polysemy, being not user-friendly, tends to be blocked and the likelihood of avoidance is positively correlated with how strictly antonymous it is. Panther and Thornburg's (2012:170) "Principle of Avoidance of Conventionalized Auto-antonymy" is a similar proposal, but does not consider the likelihood of avoidance or the degree of canonicity in antonymy. Rather than a principle, homophony avoidance is a statistical tendency, as emphasized by Kaplan (2013, 2015). Just as we do find homophonous items, we may still find those with antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense. However, despite their similarity, it is likely that antonymous polysemy is rarer than homophony. Homophones may have senses with distinct semantic

¹¹ Homophony avoidance has been understood as part of the 'functional yield hypothesis'. See Sampson (2013, 2015) and Kaplan (2015).

¹² Indeed, even etymological resources may omit relevant details (see 'lowly, with little authority' in Section 4.3) or fail to record relevant properties (e.g., that *rǒng* 'attention-demanding; busy' occurs after specific nouns).

features (and indeed most homophonous pairs are distinct semantically and syntactically; Dautriche et al. 2018), but items with antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense, by definition, share “all of their crucial semantic properties but one” (Murphy 2003:38). This means that antonymous polysemy could be even less efficient than homophony and by hypothesis, diachronically rarer, being less easy to use, acquire and pass on to users. If it indeed arises, it should be unstable. To test this hypothesis requires a large sample. However, as Section 4.5 shows, the diachrony of *rǒng* seems to support the idea that antonymous polysemy is rare. By *Míng* (1368–1644) and *Qīng* (1636–1912), only one instance of unbound *rǒng* has the sense of ‘idle’. Even the ‘idle’ and the ‘busy’ *rǒng*-compounds are not typically produced by the same author, despite the fact that hypothetically they should be so more frequently than unbound *rǒng*, because they are more user-friendly, being more differentiated than *rǒng* in that the other constituents clarify which senses are intended.¹³

7. CONCLUSION

What has been labelled as antonymous polysemy in the literature is not strictly antonymous. It is typically the result of abstracting over fine-grained details, from meaning to morphosyntax. Therefore, purported cases have at best (near-)antonymous polysemy. The diachronic investigation into the polysemy of *rǒng* also reveals that it is only antonymous in a broad sense, despite what lexicographic resources might suggest. The Cognitive Grammar analysis by Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998) proposes that (near-)antonymous polysemy originates from alternative conceptualizations of the same fragment of reality. The more context-oriented account presented here, however, shows that complex relationships between meaning and form in the diachrony of *rǒng* do not justify positing a straightforward connection between conceptualization

¹³ It is not absolutely clear which distinction(s) users supposedly avoid collapsing, as the ‘idle’ and ‘busy’ senses are non-minimally different in multiple ways. That is, users might avoid using both because they try to maintain the semantic, morphosyntactic and/or usage distinction(s). In controlled experiments, it is easier to infer the relevant distinction (e.g., phonology in homophony avoidance), but it is much more difficult in historical texts.

and reality. Rather, construction-internal contexts (e.g., specific *rǒng* compounds), external ones (e.g., what the other constituents of *rǒng* compounds mean elsewhere) and multiple sense extensions are involved, each of which reflects a change in conceptualization and its corresponding reality.

The developments are visualized in Figures 1 and 2, where solid lines indicate successive stages of extensions, with their arrows pointing at the directions of change. Dotted lines symbolize the fact that the source meaning also motivates the extensions. Approximate dates of attestation are placed to the right of each figure for the intermediate stages and at the top and bottom for the source and ultimate outcome, respectively.

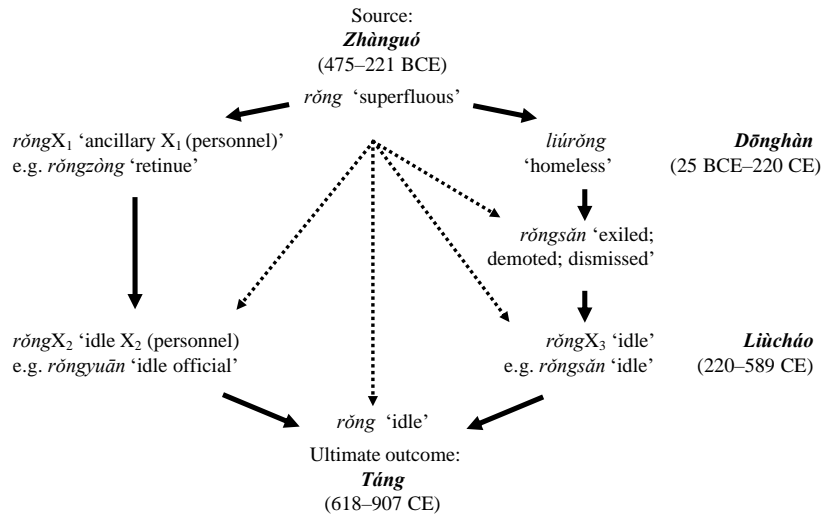


Figure 1. Development to 'idle'

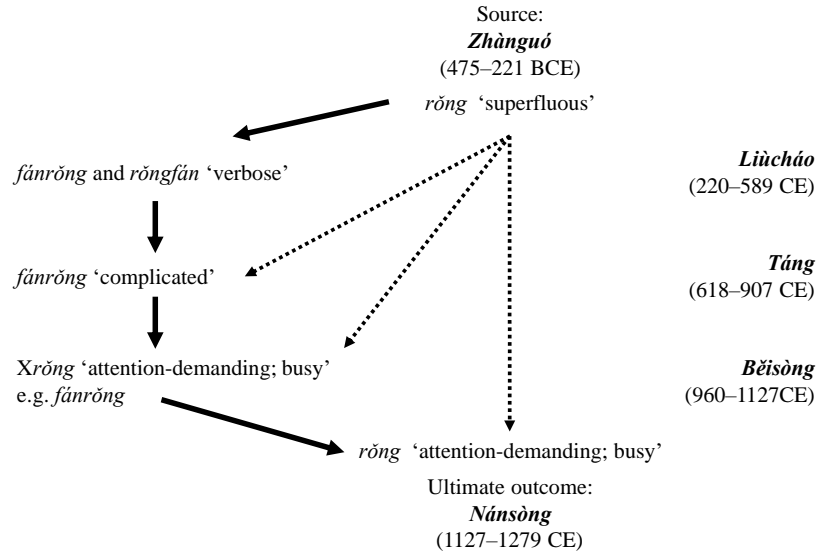


Figure 2. Development to ‘attention-demanding; busy’

Furthermore, it is proposed that the developmental process of (near-)antonymous polysemy is not different from that of polysemy in general and that the former may arise in as diverse ways as the latter (thus, in some cases, the Cognitive Grammar analysis may be appropriate). However, few sense extension processes seem to lead to antonymous polysemy in the narrow sense, even though polysemy in general is ubiquitous. To account for its rarity, the tendency of ‘antonymous polysemy avoidance’ is proposed, inspired by ‘homophony avoidance’. From a user’s perspective, antonymous polysemy and homophony are similar in that one form is associated with multiple distinct senses. Therefore, just as homophony tends to be avoided because it reduces communicative efficiency, antonymous polysemy should also tend to be avoided.

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Antonymous polysemy in diachrony

Yueh Hsin Kuo
Linguistics and English Language
School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, United Kingdom, EH8 9AD
ykuo@ed.ac.uk

APPENDIX

Academia Sinica Tagged Corpus of Old Chinese:

<http://lingcorpus.iis.sinica.edu.tw/ancient/>

Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus:

http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus

Chinese Text Project:

<https://ctext.org>

Scripta Sinica:

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反義同詞的歷時發展：
冗“閒散、繁忙”

郭岳鑫
愛丁堡大學

本文旨在評判「反義同詞」此一概念以及其歷時分析。本文首先指出，多數反義同詞應為「（近）反義同詞」，因為其反義皆為廣義上的反義。其次，本文以「冗」（閒散、繁忙之意）的歷史發展為基礎，評判 Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1998) 的認知語法分析。該分析指出，反義同詞始於觀看的認知機制：同一個現實的片段能從相反的角度觀看。然而，「冗」的歷史牽涉到多個現實的片段，而且漸進的語義延伸、誘發類推的相似詞彙，才是其發展的關鍵。最後，本文根據「冗」的歷史分析，加以對「同音異義迴避」假說的討論，提出狹義的反義同詞（亦即，一詞彙具有同源且相反的意義，且彼此的差異微乎其微），不管是歷時還是共時，應為罕見，因為正如同音異義詞，兩者的溝通效率皆不高。

關鍵字：反義詞、多義詞、同音詞、語意變化、認知語法