International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org
21ˢᵗ June 2023

FOR THE MATTER OF POLYSEMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Ekaterine Nakhutsrishvili

Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University (Georgia)

Doctor of Educational Sciences

Elene Dzamiashvili

Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University (Georgia)

Doctor of Educational Sciences

Abstract

Polysemy is a linguistic term referring to the phenomenon where a single word or phrase has multiple related meanings. The multiple meanings are listed under one entry in a dictionary. If one word expressed only one meaning, the dictionary would be extremely large. Polysemy derives from the Greek words 'poly' (meaning 'many') and 'sēma' (meaning 'sign'). Some words have more than one meaning. Because of this, we say that polysemy makes the language more diverse and interesting. The multiple meaning of the word, first of all, makes us think about the context, promotes figurative and symbolic thinking, creates a fertile ground for understanding. Polysemy is highly developed in English language. Most English words are polysemantic. It is quite a difficult problem to distinguish polysemantic words from homonyms. Unlike a polysemantic word, which either has one central (primary) meaning and includes other meanings, or a component common to all meanings is singled out, homonyms are completely random, their meanings have nothing to do with each other. Polysemy illustrates a single word with many related meanings (one dictionary entry), e.g., get - receive, bring, travel / move. Homonymy is about words that have different meanings and multiple dictionary entries but are spelled and/or pronounced the same, e.g. rose - a flower & increased.

Key words: polysemy, linguistic, phenomenon, homonymy, ambiguity, understanding, language economy, multiple meanings, relationship, polysemantic.

Language – it is a purposefully organized, harmonious and economical means of human interaction. Under the phrase "economical means" we refer to polysemy – a very interesting phenomenon in language. Polysemy is a linguistic term concerning the phenomenon where a single word or phrase has multiple related meanings. The multiple meanings are listed under one entry in a dictionary. If one word expressed only one meaning, the dictionary would be extremely large.

A widely accepted definition of polysemy is that it is "the form of ambiguity where more than two related senses are associated with the same word" (Gries, 2015, p. 472).

International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org
21ˢᵗ June 2023

Polysemy derives from the Greek words **poly** (meaning **'many'**) and **sēma** (meaning **'sign'**). Some words have more than one meaning. Because of this, we say that polysemy makes the language more

diverse and interesting. The multiple meaning of the word, first of all, makes us think about the context, promotes figurative and symbolic thinking, creates a fertile ground for understanding.

Polysemy is pervasive in natural language and is an essential aspect of language richness and flexibility. The fact that context can determine the specific meaning of a polysemous word illustrates the dynamic nature of language.

Polysemous words are therefore words that have multiple, related meanings. These meanings often share a core concept but differ in specific applications. For example, the word "light" can refer to a physical source of illumination, a color shade, a state of not being heavy, or an aspect of being non-serious in nature. In each case the word "light" retains a common thread of meaning while being applicable in different contexts. Polysemous words make conversation easier for memorizing huge vocabulary.

Research into polysemy is said to have begun in the late 19th century (Nerlich, 2003), and it blossomed in the 1980s. Metaphor we live by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which was published during this period, became a standard text for researchers who were interested in cognitive semantics. Since metaphor comprehension and polysemy were deeply related, this period was regarded as the full-fledged time to study polysemy (Tremblay, Macoir, Langlois, & Monetta, 2014). The problem is that polysemy is tough to define. Some literature has said that a clear distinction between polysemy and homonymy is vital to understand polysemy. If polysemy is not properly defined, people may be confused due to homonymy. Distinction between polysemy and ambiguity can be another factor in understanding what polysemy is (Sennet, 2016).

Now, let us focus more on lexical polysemy. One of the features of polysemy is the relationship between it and some core meanings. Lakoff (1987, p. 316) discussed this: ''Polysemy occurs when a single word has more than one meaning and when those meanings are systematically related. A systematic relationship is crucial here. The two meanings of bank – a place where you put your money or the edge of a river – are not systematically related. Such cases are called homonyms. Cases of polysemy are cases like warm, which refers both to the temperature and to clothing that makes you feel warm. Gries (2015, p. 472) also provided the same idea as Lakoff. He mentioned that polysemy is a form of ambiguity because a word includes at least two meanings, and they are related to each other. He continued to give example sentences for ambiguity, as follows:

1.   I emptied the glass ('container').
2.   I drank a glass ('contents of the container').

In the first sentence, glass is a container; in the second sentence, glass refers to contents. They are totally different things. Though they reflect a high degree of ambiguity, they are polysemous. Nobody is confused by such ambiguity or different senses.

Polysemy is used in everyday language. Examples of polysemy can be found in different languages. In our case, we emphasize polysemy in English. As a sample, we present some examples typical for English language:

"Band ":

1.   A small group of musicians who play popular music together;
2.   A group of people who do something together or who have the same ideas;
3.   A thin flat strip or circle of any material that is put around things, to hold them together or to strengthen them;
4.   A range of numbers, ages, process, etc. within which people or things are counted or measured.

"Acute ":

5.   Very serious or severe;
6.   Very sensitive and well developed;
7.   Intelligent and quick to notice and understand things;
8.   An angle less than 900 C.

"Act ":

1.   A particular thing that sb does;
2.   A law that has been passed by a parliament;
3.   One of the main divisions of a play, an opera;

"Paper ":

1.   A thin material made from cellulose pulp;
2.   A newspaper;
3.   An academic article;
4.   A set of examination questions.

"Head ":

1.   The upper part of the human body;
2.   The top or front of something;
3.   A person in charge;
4.   The froth on top of a glass of beer.

"Bank":

1.   A financial institution;
2.   The land alongside a body of water;
3.   A set in a row.

"Dish":

1.   A kind of plate;

International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org
21ˢᵗ June 2023

2.   A meal.

"Wing":

1.   A part of a bird for flying;

2.   A new part of a building.

(Hornby A. S., 2004). Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

The definitions of each bold word are different but the polysemous words are still related to each other.

It should also be mentioned, that Polysemy is highly developed in English language. Most English words are polysemantic. The analysis of the semantic structure of a polysemantic word can be based on two main levels of analysis: At the first level, polysemantic word structure is studied as a meaning system. This is when one main meaning is singled out (called the "main meaning") and the rest of them are related to it. For example, let's take the English word **family**, its scheme of meaning can be presented in the following form:

FAMILY

I
A basic social unit consisting of parents and their children

II	III	IV	V
The spouse and children of one person e.g. We're taking the family in Italy next week.	Descendants of a common ancestor e.g. The house has been owned by the same family for 300 years.	Language family a group of related things (languages, plants, animals, etc.) e.g.: cabbage family, lion family, etc.	A local organizational unit of the Mafia or other large criminal group.

As we can see, the first meaning includes ("covers") all other "relative" ones. All other meanings are related to the first meaning and derive from it. The majority of polysemantic words belong to this type (when one main meaning dominates the other meanings).

But this is not always the case, and some polysemantic words do not have such a central, i.e. basic, meaning in their structure. For example, let's take the word **"smart "**:

1. clean, tidy, and well dressed (person) (e.g. you look very smart)

2. clever, skillful (smart answer, smart officer)

3. fashionable (e.g. clothes)

International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org
21ˢᵗ June 2023

4. quick, brisk (e.g. go for a smart walk)

5. severe (e.g. smart punishment). (O'Grady, 2000, pg. 102).

As we see here, we cannot identify the dominant meaning to which the rest of the meanings are directed, but instead, we clearly see that something common emerges, which can unite all these meanings, and the common is a component of the intensity of something, not the lack of something: ("A person should be well and cleanly dressed", "Clothes should be fashionable and graceful"; "Moving quickly"; "Punishment should be severe"). In such case, what binds together the meanings of the word is a component common to all its meanings. (Tevdoradze, 2016. pp. 81-83).

Take a look at an in-depth polysemy example in the sentences below and find one word that they all have in common:

1.   He has **served** his time in prison.

2.   The free food is **served** to homeless people only.

3.   This old bike has **served** me well.

4.   The new mall will **serve** the community well.

5.   My mom **served** in the medical corps.

All five sentences use the same verb **"serve"**. Although each sentence carries a different sense of serve, they all imply the same meaning of **'giving service'** :

1.   He has served his time in prison → spend some time (in prison).

2.   The free food is served for homeless people only → provide.

3.   This old bike has served me well → be useful.

4.   The new mall will serve the community well → provide.

5.   My mom serves in the medical corps → work as.

Accordingly, **"serve"** is a very good example of polysemous words.

It is quite a difficult problem to distinguish **polysemantic** words from **homonyms**. Unlike a polysemantic word, which either has one central (primary) meaning and includes other meanings, or a component common to all meanings is singled out, homonyms are completely random, their meanings have nothing to do with each other. Additionally, because polysemous words have more than one meaning, they can cause lexical ambiguity.

There is a great difference between polysemic words and homonymic expressions. If you read or hear two words that are written or pronounced the same but have different meanings, they are likely to be either an example of polysemy or homonymy. Deciding what kind of relationship the two words have can be challenging, but not once you understand the differences between these terms. Pay attention to the following things given below:

Polysemous words:

•   Refer to a word with multiple meanings.

•   Are listed under a single dictionary entry.

International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org   **21ˢᵗ June 2023**

- Must stem from the same word class, e.g. noun-noun: mouse (an animal - computer device), wings (parts of birds for flying - part of a building), beam (a line of light - a piece of wood).

Homonymic words:

- Refer to words with different meanings but with the same pronunciation and/or spelling.
- Are listed under multiple dictionary entries.
- Can be verb-noun combination: to address - an address, to rock - a rock, to park - a park. For better consideration let's take the word **"address".** First, analyse the multiple meanings and word class. **"Address"** has two meanings and two different word classes: 1. to speak to (verb) and, a location (noun). Second, if the words have multiple forms (multiple entries in a dictionary), e.g. a verb and noun, they are homonyms. If the two words stem from a single form (one entry in a dictionary), e.g. a verb or noun, they are polysemies. The word **"address"** has two word forms: a verb and a noun. This proves that it is a homonym. Third, check if the different meanings are related. The two meanings of **"address"** ('to speak to' and 'a location') are not related. This further proves that it is a homonym.

In contrast, the word **"bright"** ('shining' and 'intelligent') is an example of polysemy because it only has one form (adjective) and both meanings are related. Take a look at the diagram below[1].
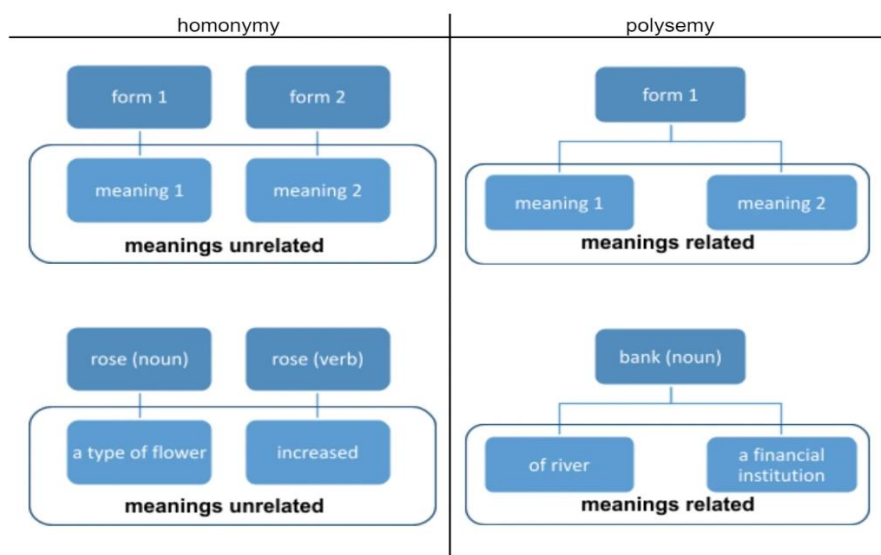
So far, polysemy seems to be described intricately, but Kovács (2011) presented a positive remark about it. He said that polysemy is a concept that reflects the economy of language. He mentioned that polysemy is "a necessary means of language economy" (p.3). Ullmann (1959) also stated that polysemy is an essential resource of language economy. Ravin and Leacock (2000) remarked that FL learners can choose appropriate senses of polysemous words without

International Conference on Developments in Education
Hosted from Toronto, Canada
https: econferencezone.org   **21ˢᵗ June 2023**

difficulty. Some literature has mentioned that polysemy is not a problem in real communication (Falkum, 2009, 2011,2015; Kovács, 2011).

From our standpoint, we consider English as a "poor" language for having words with quite a lot of different meanings. But this fact has its own advantage too. If one word expressed only one meaning, the dictionary would be enormous. Hence, we agree with Ullmann's opinion and admit that polysemy is an essential resource of language economy.

_____

[1] https://www.studysmarter.us/explanations/english/lexis-and-semantics/polysemy/

References:

1.   Falkum, I. L. (2009). A pragmatic solution to the polysemy paradox. UCL working papers in
linguistics, 21, 27-54.
2.   Gries, S. Th. (2015). Polysemy. In E. Dabrowska & D. Divjak (Eds.), Handbook of cognitive linguistics (pp. 472-490). Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Mouton.
3.   Hornby A S. (2004). Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. New York: Oxford University Press.
4.   Kovács, É. (2011). Polysemy in traditional vs. cognitive linguistics. Eger Journal of English Studies, 11, 3-19.
5.   Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors we live by. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago
Press.
6.   Nerlich, B. (2003). Polysemy: Past and present. In B. Nerlich, Z. Todd, V. Herman, & D. D. Clarke (Eds.), Polysemy: Flexible patterns of meaning in mind and language (pp. 49-76). Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Mouton. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110895698.49
7.   O'Grady, W.(2000). Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction, Bedford/St. Martin's.
8.   Polysemy and Context. Types of Context. (n.d.). Retrieved from
https://thelib.info/tehnologii/3050276-polysemyand-context-types-of-context/
9.   Ravin, Y., & Leacock, C. (2000). Polysemy: Overview. In Y. Ravin & C. Leacock (Eds.),
Polysemy: Theoretical and computational approaches (pp. 1-29). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
10.   Sennet, A. (2016). Polysemy. Oxford Handbooks Online.
https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935314.013.32
11.   Tevdoradze, N. (2016). Introduction to Linguistics, Tbilisi, Ilia State University Publishing House.

12.   Tremblay, C., Macoir, J., Langlois, M., & Monetta, L. (2014). The role of polysemy on metaphor comprehension processing: The example of Parkinson's disease. Journal of Neurolinguistics, 30, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneuroling.2014.02.002

13.   Ullmann, S. (1959). The principles of semantics: A linguistic approach to meaning. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.