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POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY IN ACADEMIC TERMINOLOGY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. This article analyzes the linguistic phenomena of polysemy and homonymy in the academic terminology used in higher education. It explores how a single term can acquire multiple meanings (polysemy) or possess different unrelated meanings (homonymy), affecting the clarity and interpretation of academic discourse. Through examples like *degree*, *course*, and *bank*, the article illustrates the semantic complexity of educational vocabulary. The study emphasizes the importance of context in resolving ambiguity and improving academic communication.

Keywords: polysemy, homonymy, academic terminology, semantics, higher education, context, language ambiguity.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada oliy ta'lim tizimidagi akademik atamalarda uchraydigan polisemiya (ko'pma'nolilik) va homonimiyalik (shakli bir, ma'nosi har xil bo'lgan so'zlar) til hodisalari tahlil qilinadi. "Degree", "course", "bank" kabi misollar orqali akademik lug'atdagi semantik murakkablik ochib beriladi. Maqolada kontekstning ahamiyati va noaniqlikni bartaraf etish orqali samarali akademik mulohazotni ta'minlash yo'llari ko'rsatilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: polisemiya, homonimiyalik, akademik atamalar, semantika, oliy ta'lim, kontekst, til noaniqligi.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются лингвистические явления полисемии и омонимии в академической терминологии, используемой в системе высшего образования. На примерах таких слов, как *degree*, *course*, *bank*, показана семантическая многозначность и сложность профессионального языка. Особое внимание уделяется значению контекста для правильной интерпретации и устранения языковой неоднозначности в научной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: полисемия, омонимия, академическая терминология, семантика, высшее образование, контекст, языковая неоднозначность.

Introduction

In academic language, clarity and precision are crucial for effective communication. However, the complexities of language often result in various phenomena that can confuse both students and educators. Two such linguistic phenomena are polysemy and homonymy, which

are particularly significant in the context of academic terminology. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct linguistic features that can impact the comprehension and use of academic language in higher education (Lyons, 1977; Cruse, 2004).

Polysemy refers to the phenomenon where a single word has multiple meanings that are related by extension. These meanings typically evolve from a core concept but differ in specific contexts. According to Cruse (2004), polysemy is a natural result of semantic extension and conceptual metaphor that enriches vocabulary and communication.

In the realm of higher education, many academic terms exhibit polysemy, creating potential ambiguity but also offering a rich range of meanings depending on the discipline or context. For instance, the word "degree" is a polysemous term. In an academic context, it refers to a qualification awarded upon the completion of a course of study (e.g., a Bachelor's degree or a Master's degree). However, in another context, "degree" can also refer to a measure of angle or temperature, showing how the word takes on different meanings while retaining a common core idea of a "scale" or "level" (Saeed, 2016; Taylor, 2003).

Another example is the word "course". In academia, a "course" can mean a series of lectures or classes offered on a particular subject, but in a more general context, it may refer to the pathway or direction something takes (e.g., the course of a river). As Taylor (2003) notes, this exemplifies how polysemy reflects conceptual structures in human cognition.

The presence of polysemy in academic terminology is not only a linguistic curiosity but also a practical feature that enhances the flexibility of language. However, it requires careful attention to the context to ensure correct interpretation, especially for non-native speakers (Faber & Orozco, 2012).

Homonymy, in contrast to polysemy, involves words that share the same form but have entirely unrelated meanings. These meanings typically do not arise from a shared core concept, and the words may be pronounced the same or even spelled the same. Lyons (1977) emphasizes that homonymy results from historical accident rather than cognitive extension.

For example, the word "bank" can refer to a financial institution or the edge of a river. These meanings are completely unrelated in origin or conceptual structure (Cruse, 2004). Similarly, the term "text" in linguistics refers to written discourse, while in computing, it denotes digital data presented in alphabetic form (Hanks, 2004).

The use of homonyms in academic settings requires clear differentiation through context or additional clarifying terms. In specialized fields like law, medicine, or engineering, the same word might have highly specific meanings that differ greatly from everyday usage, creating additional layers of complexity.

The distinction between polysemy and homonymy lies in the semantic relatedness of meanings. In polysemy, meanings are related through metaphor, extension, or domain shift; in homonymy, meanings are coincidental (Saeed, 2016). For example, "degree" is polysemous because all meanings relate to gradation or level. On the other hand, "bark" (tree covering vs. dog sound) is homonymous due to its etymologically unrelated meanings (Crystal, 2008).

Understanding these differences is vital in academic communication, where clarity and precision are crucial. When encountering a polysemous term, the reader can often infer the correct meaning based on context. However, with homonyms, context must be explicit to avoid ambiguity (Lyons, 1977; Hanks, 2004).

Polysemy and homonymy influence both the teaching and learning of academic discourse. For learners, especially non-native speakers, these phenomena can complicate vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. For educators, it necessitates more explicit teaching of contextual cues and semantic nuance (Faber & Orozco, 2012).

Incorporating corpus-based learning (Hanks, 2004) and emphasizing lexical awareness in curricula can help students navigate ambiguous terminology more effectively. Moreover, field-specific glossaries and visual aids can reduce misinterpretation of homonyms in technical disciplines.

Conclusion

Polysemy and homonymy are significant features of academic language that demand thoughtful consideration, particularly in the context of higher education where clarity and precision are essential. Polysemy, by enabling a single term to express multiple related meanings, adds richness and adaptability to academic discourse. It reflects the dynamic nature of language and the cognitive processes through which concepts are extended and metaphorically restructured. This linguistic flexibility is invaluable in interdisciplinary settings, where terms often acquire new, nuanced meanings tailored to specific academic domains.

In contrast, homonymy presents a greater risk of misunderstanding, as the meanings of homonymous terms are entirely unrelated and often arise from distinct etymological origins. Without explicit contextual cues, these terms can cause serious ambiguity in written texts, lectures, and assessments. For example, a term like *bank* may generate confusion in fields ranging from economics to environmental science, unless its intended meaning is clearly signposted.

Understanding and distinguishing these phenomena are not merely theoretical exercises—they have direct implications for academic communication, curriculum design, and language instruction. Learners, particularly those from multilingual or non-native backgrounds, often struggle to infer meaning when confronted with ambiguous terminology. Thus, teaching strategies that emphasize the role of context, the development of semantic awareness, and the integration of field-specific vocabulary instruction are crucial.

Moreover, integrating corpus-based examples, glossaries, semantic maps, and real-world academic texts into the learning process can equip students with the tools needed to navigate these complexities independently. Educators should also model explicit clarification of such terms during lectures and in written materials, helping to cultivate a metalinguistic awareness that empowers students to approach academic texts with greater confidence and precision.

Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of polysemy and homonymy, supported by effective pedagogical frameworks, not only enhances individual learner competence but also

contributes to more coherent and inclusive academic communication. By recognizing the semantic challenges posed by these linguistic features and proactively addressing them, educators and institutions can foster an environment where meaning is accurately conveyed and effectively understood across disciplines.

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