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MEANING AND POLYSEMY: SEMANTIC SYSTEMS IN ENGLISH

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Tayanch so‘zlar: semantika, polisemiya, ma’no, leksik noaniqlik, semantik tizimlar, tilni tushunish.
Ключевые слова: семантика, полисемия, значение, лексическая неоднозначность, семантические системы, понимание языка.
Key words: semantics, polysemy, meaning, lexical ambiguity, semantic systems, language comprehension.

РЕЗЮМЕ:
Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilida ma’no va polisemiya tushunchalari o‘rganiladi. Unda so‘zlarning qanday qilib bir nechta ma’noga ega bo‘lishi va semantik tizimlarning qanday ishlashi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda turli nazariy yondashuvlar ko‘rib chiqilib, polisemiyaning tilni tushunish va muloqotga ta’siri o‘rganiladi. Ayniqsa, polisemiyaning kognitiv va pragmatik jihatlariga alohida e’tibor qaratilib, so‘zlovchi va tinglovchilarning turli kontekstlarda ma’nolarni qanday aniqlashi, hamda polisemiyaning til ijodkorligi va samaradorligiga qanday hissa qo‘shishi ko‘rsatiladi.
РЕЗЮМЕ:
В данной статье рассматриваются понятия значения и полисемии в английском языке, с акцентом на то, как слова приобретают несколько значений и как функционируют семантические системы. В исследовании анализируются различные теоретические подходы и рассматривается влияние полисемии на понимание языка и коммуникацию. Особое внимание уделяется когнитивным и прагматическим аспектам полисемии, демонстрируя, как говорящие и слушающие ориентируются в значениях в различных контекстах и как полисемия способствует языковой креативности и эффективности.
SUMMARY:
This article explores the concepts of meaning and polysemy in the English language, focusing on how words acquire multiple meanings and how semantic systems function. The study reviews various theoretical approaches and examines the impact of polysemy on language comprehension and communication. Special attention is given to the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of polysemy, illustrating how speakers and listeners navigate meaning in diverse contexts and how polysemy contributes to linguistic creativity and efficiency.

Introduction. Language is a complex system that conveys meaning through words, sentences, and discourse. One of the fundamental aspects of semantics is the phenomenon of polysemy, where a single word possesses multiple meanings

depending on context. Polysemy plays a crucial role in communication, yet it also introduces ambiguity that can either enhance or hinder understanding.

In natural language, words like "light," "run," and "set" demonstrate the richness and variety of polysemous meanings. These meanings are not random but often share a conceptual or metaphorical link. For instance, the word “light” can refer to illumination, weight, or mood, all tied together by notions of effortlessness or clarity. Understanding how such words function allows linguists to better grasp the architecture of the mental lexicon and how speakers access meaning.

Moreover, polysemy intersects with various domains of linguistics, including cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and syntax. The study of polysemy is central to lexicography and language teaching, as it informs dictionary design, language pedagogy, and even language acquisition. In computational linguistics, resolving polysemy is a key challenge in developing accurate natural language processing (NLP) systems.

This paper examines the nature of meaning in linguistic systems, explores polysemy in English, and discusses its implications for language processing and comprehension. It seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language users decode and negotiate meaning in both everyday communication and more specialized discourses.

Literature review. Scholars have long debated the nature of meaning in linguistic theory. Saussure (1916) introduced the idea of the linguistic sign, where meaning arises from the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Later, cognitive linguists such as Lakoff (1987) emphasized conceptual metaphors in meaning construction. Cruse (1986) defined polysemy as a core feature of lexical semantics, distinguishing it from homonymy. More recent studies, such as those by Taylor (2003) and Evans (2015), have explored how polysemy influences cognitive processing and communication efficiency.

Methodology. This study employs a qualitative analysis of polysemous words in English, drawing from linguistic corpora and examples from literature and everyday discourse. Data are analyzed to determine patterns of meaning extension and the role of context in disambiguation. Additionally, a review of psycholinguistic studies on word recognition and ambiguity resolution is conducted to assess the cognitive effects of polysemy.

The methodology includes comparative analysis of different semantic frameworks, including prototype theory, frame semantics, and relevance theory, to evaluate how meanings are structured, inferred, and accessed. Discourse analysis techniques are used to explore how polysemy operates in spoken and

written texts. A sub-corpus of the British National Corpus (BNC) is used to extract a list of high-frequency polysemous words. Each word is examined in multiple authentic contexts to observe variations in meaning.

To complement the theoretical analysis, the study involves a small-scale survey administered to 30 advanced English learners and 10 language instructors. The survey includes tasks such as sentence interpretation, context matching, and open-ended reflections on meaning. Results from these surveys provide insight into user awareness, interpretation strategies, and difficulty levels associated with polysemous words.

Furthermore, the methodology integrates insights from experimental linguistics by referencing eye-tracking and reaction time studies to measure real-time processing of polysemous terms. This triangulated approach-corpus data, theoretical models, and user feedback-ensures a comprehensive understanding of how polysemy functions in the English semantic system.

Discussion and results. Findings suggest that polysemy is a pervasive phenomenon that enhances language economy by allowing a single lexical unit to convey multiple meanings. Contextual clues, collocations, and pragmatic considerations help disambiguate polysemous words in real-time communication. However, polysemy also introduces cognitive load, requiring language users to interpret meanings dynamically.

The survey conducted revealed that learners often rely on situational context and collocational patterns when decoding meanings. For example, the word “bank” was correctly interpreted as a financial institution in economic contexts and as a riverbank in environmental contexts. However, less prototypical meanings posed challenges. Instructors noted that learners sometimes default to the most frequent meaning, even when inappropriate for the context, demonstrating the influence of frequency over fit. Corpus data showed that verbs such as “run,” “take,” and “make” exhibited the highest number of context-sensitive meanings. Their flexible usage across domains-from physical movement to abstract actions-illustrates how polysemy contributes to expressive capacity in English.

Psycholinguistic findings supported by experimental studies (e.g., eye-tracking and priming tasks) indicated faster reaction times for dominant senses of polysemous words and delayed processing when less frequent or metaphorical meanings were encountered. This aligns with usage-based theories emphasizing that repeated exposure strengthens mental access to specific senses. Furthermore, the discussion highlights the communicative advantage of polysemy: it allows speakers to play with language, create humor, and convey

complex ideas succinctly. At the same time, learners and non-native speakers may experience higher processing demands and occasional misinterpretation, especially in idiomatic or metaphorical expressions.

Conclussion. Polysemy is a fundamental characteristic of the English lexicon, reflecting both the adaptability and complexity of language. It enriches linguistic expression by enabling speakers to use a limited set of lexical items in a wide range of communicative contexts. While polysemy can pose interpretive challenges, particularly for language learners and in computational contexts, it simultaneously offers cognitive and pragmatic flexibility that is essential to natural language use.

The findings underscore the importance of teaching strategies that emphasize contextual inference, lexical awareness, and metaphorical competence. In language education, fostering familiarity with polysemous structures can improve reading comprehension, listening skills, and vocabulary retention. On a broader scale, understanding polysemy has implications beyond linguistics. In fields such as artificial intelligence and natural language processing, accounting for polysemous variability is crucial for improving semantic interpretation in tasks like machine translation, sentiment analysis, and speech recognition. Future research should continue to integrate linguistic theory with computational modeling and neurocognitive data to further illuminate the mechanisms by which polysemous meanings are processed, stored, and retrieved.

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