

POLYSEMY IN ENGLISH: A FUNCTIONAL AND COGNITIVE APPROACH TO SEMANTIC MULTIPLICITY.

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Abstract. Words with multiple yet related meanings—known as polysemous words—are fundamental to the structure and flexibility of language. This paper provides an in-depth exploration of how polysemy shapes English semantics and supports communicative efficiency. Through a qualitative analysis of frequent English vocabulary, the study reveals how context guides meaning interpretation, why polysemy emerges naturally in language evolution, and what challenges it poses for both language learners and computational models.

Introduction. Language is not just a collection of words—it is a living system where meaning constantly adapts and expands. One of the most fascinating ways this happens is through polysemy, the phenomenon where a single word carries several related meanings. Unlike homonyms, whose meanings are unrelated, polysemous words reflect semantic shifts that remain connected through metaphor, function, or context. For example, the word "branch" can describe a tree limb, a part of an organization, or a section of knowledge—all suggesting an extension from a central point. The aim of this paper is to highlight how polysemy contributes to both expressive depth and communicative efficiency in English. The research further discusses how speakers naturally disambiguate these meanings in real time and what implications this has for second language education and technology-assisted language tools.

Methods. This study is based on a selection of high-frequency English words drawn from modern language usage examples. Real-life contexts were reviewed from sample corpora and digital resources such as dictionaries and language databases.

Words were chosen if they had at least three different senses that were semantically linked. Each sense was analyzed within its sentence context to determine how users understand and distinguish between meanings.

A descriptive linguistic approach was applied. The focus was on observing how grammar, lexical collocations, and situational knowledge contribute to interpreting the intended sense of a word. Thematic analysis was used to categorize patterns in how meanings evolve and are perceived.

Results. The analysis found that many of the most frequently used English words are polysemous. Words such as run, light, and set are used in dozens of ways depending on the context. For example:

Run: a physical action (run fast), manage something (run a business), or function (the engine runs well).

Light: refers to brightness (natural light) or weight (a light bag).

In almost every case, the actual meaning of a polysemous word became clear based on its context in the sentence. Language users unconsciously rely on cues like nearby words, sentence structure, and real-world knowledge to figure out the correct interpretation.

Rather than causing confusion, polysemous words appear to activate cognitive associations that help the brain efficiently process multiple senses. This supports the idea that meaning in language is fluid, not fixed, and often depends on how we interact with the world.

Discussion. Polysemy allows speakers to use familiar words in new ways without expanding vocabulary unnecessarily. It reflects the creativity of human communication and contributes to the richness of expression.

Many polysemous meanings arise through human interaction with physical space and abstract ideas. For instance, grasp can mean holding an object or understanding a concept—both implying control or possession.

For language learners, encountering words with several meanings can be confusing. However, with enough exposure to real contexts and diverse usage, learners gradually develop a natural ability to distinguish meanings with ease.

In computer systems that process human language, polysemy remains a challenge. While modern AI models can often predict meaning using patterns, they still struggle in ambiguous or idiomatic scenarios without clear context.

Conclusion. Polysemy is a natural feature of language that enhances both communication and cognitive flexibility. Far from being a source of confusion, it reflects how humans organize and adapt meaning. As language continues to evolve, understanding polysemy will remain crucial for linguists, educators, and language technology developers alike.

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