THE COMPARATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONCEPTS OF POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the comparative analysis of polysemy and homonymy as two interrelated yet conceptually distinct linguistic phenomena. While both are characterized by the coexistence of multiple meanings within the identical or phonetically similar lexical units, their semantic nature, origin, and functional characteristics differ significantly. The study emphasizes the main criteria used to differentiate polysemy from homonymy, including semantic relatedness, etymology, and contextual usage. The clear analysis in linguistics, lexicography, and language learning is directly based on understanding the distinctions between the concepts of homonymy and polysemy. According to Lyons (1995, p. 123), A nuanced comprehension of these phenomena contributes to a deeper understanding of lexical evolution, semantic change, and interpretative accuracy in both native and foreign language contexts.*

Keywords*: Polysemy, homonymy, semantics, lexical meaning, etymology, semantic relation, linguistic differentiation, lexicology, context.*

Polysemy and homonymy are two phenomena that reflect the complexity and richness of the lexical system of a language. At first glance, both involve words that have more than one meaning; however, the relationship between those meanings distinguishes one from the other.

In polysemy, all meanings originate from a common conceptual source and are semantically interconnected. For example, the English word ‘head’ can refer to the upper part of the human body, the leader of an organization, or the top of an object. Despite their different contextual applications, these meanings share a central semantic feature — the notion of being ‘upper’ or ‘controlling’. Similarly, the word foot may denote a part of the body, the bottom of a mountain, or the base of a page, again demonstrating a network of related meanings derived from a single conceptual core.
Homonymy, on the other hand, involves words that are identical in form but divergent in meaning and origin. For instance, the word bank can signify a financial institution or the side of a river. These meanings are entirely unrelated and have distinct etymological roots — one derived from the Italian banca (‘bench’), and the other from Old Norse bank (“ridge of earth”). Likewise, *bat* may refer to *a flying mammal* or *a piece of sports equipment used in baseball,* showing complete semantic independence between the two senses (Ullmann, 1962, p. 148).

The principal criteria for distinguishing polysemy from homonymy include semantic relatedness, etymological origin, and the possibility of substitution in context. In cases of polysemy, meanings are systematically connected and often transition smoothly from one to another through metaphorical or metonymic extension. In contrast, homonymous meanings exist separately and cannot substitute for one another without altering the communicative intent or causing ambiguity.

Lyons (1995, p. 128) emphasizes that Understanding the distinction between polysemy and homonymy is of considerable theoretical and practical significance. It aids in accurate lexicographical description, semantic analysis, and language learning. From a lexicographic standpoint, polysemous words are typically recorded under a single dictionary entry with submeanings, while homonyms are listed as separate entries. From a cognitive perspective, recognizing these phenomena contributes to an understanding of how the human mind organizes and interprets lexical meaning, revealing the dynamic and evolving nature of language itself.

The main criteria used to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy include:

1. Semantic relatedness – Polysemous meanings are conceptually linked, while homonymous meanings are not.
2. Etymology – Polysemous meanings share a common origin; homonyms come from distinct historical roots.
3. Contextual behavior – Polysemous words allow smooth meaning transitions depending on context; homonyms cause ambiguity and require clarification.

The distinction between polysemy and homonymy is not always clear-cut. Some linguists argue that the boundary is gradual rather than absolute. For example, Cruse (1986) and Lyons (1977) highlight that the perception of relatedness often depends on speakers' cognitive interpretation and cultural background. Every branch of linguistics relies on the researches related to polysemy and homonymy:

Linguistics and lexicography: The distinction is fundamental for analyzing the structure and history of language. Lexicographers use this to decide how to organize dictionaries, creating a single entry for a polysemous word and separate entries for homonyms.

Language comprehension: Distinguishing between them is crucial for understanding how context works and how speakers disambiguate meaning. For learners, understanding this difference can lead to better comprehension and correct usage.

Language learning and translation: For foreign language learners and translators, understanding the difference is vital for accurate expression and translation, as it clarifies how words develop multiple meanings or have multiple, unrelated meanings.

Cognitive science: Research has shown that the brain processes polysemous words and homonyms differently, with potential effects on processing speed, which supports the need for a clear distinction (Ullmann, 1962, p. 150).

Historical and etymological analysis: Polysemy is a result of a word's meaning branching out from a common origin, often through metaphor, while homonymy arises from unrelated words converging in form over time due to historical changes. This distinction highlights different processes of language evolution.

In general, polysemy enriches language by providing expressive and metaphorical depth, whereas homonymy adds ambiguity and humor but may complicate communication. Recognizing their differences and interrelations is essential for linguistic theory, lexicography, and language teaching (Palmer, 1981, p. 61).

Resources:

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