

THE CONCEPT OF POLYSEMY: LINGUISTIC NATURE AND CRITERIA FOR DIFFERENTIATING MEANINGS

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Abstract: *This thesis examines the phenomenon of polysemy, emphasizing its linguistic nature, semantic structure, and criteria for differentiating meanings. Polysemy is defined as the coexistence of several related meanings within a single lexical item, distinguished by semantic relatedness, contextual substitutability, and etymological continuity. The study highlights that polysemy serves as a core mechanism of linguistic creativity and cognitive categorization, demonstrating how language evolves to meet communicative needs. The concept of polysemy is characterized as the existence of several meanings within a single lexical unit. Polysemy is one of the most essential semantic characteristics of the language. The research examines the linguistic nature of polysemy, its cognitive and communicative roles, and the primary criteria employed to differentiate between associated meanings. Focus is given to the distinction between polysemy and other semantic occurrences such as homonymy and metaphorical extension. The conversation further emphasizes the significance of contextual and historical elements in the development and comprehension of polysemous meanings*

Keywords: *Polysemy, semantics, lexical meaning, linguistic nature, semantic development, differentiation criteria, homonymy, context, cognitive linguistics.*

Polysemy is one of the central phenomena in lexical semantics, reflecting the ability of a single lexical item to develop and maintain several related meanings. The term derives from the Greek ‘poly’ (many) and ‘sema’ (sign), meaning ‘many meanings’. According to Lyons (1995, p. 125), polysemy demonstrates the systematic organization of related senses within a single lexical unit, serving as an indicator of the semantic richness and flexibility of language. Cruse (1986, p. 81) defines polysemy as a phenomenon where “a single word has multiple related meanings derived through semantic extension.” This semantic relatedness may arise through metaphor (‘the mouth of a river’), metonymy (‘the White House’ meaning the U.S. government), or functional similarity (‘paper’ as both a material and a written work). The shared conceptual core of these senses distinguishes polysemy from homonymy, where meanings are unrelated and historically independent. Polysemy reflects the cognitive and communicative adaptability of language. As Leech (1981, p. 100) observes, the meaning of a polysemous word often shifts with its contextual use. For instance, in ‘a bright child’ the adjective ‘bright’ denotes intelligence, while in ‘a bright light’ it conveys intensity of illumination. Despite the difference in application, both share the

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conceptual element of ‘clarity’ or ‘vividness’, confirming the internal relatedness of meaning.

The ‘linguistic nature’ of polysemy can be analyzed through three major dimensions: semantic, functional, and cognitive. Semantically, polysemy represents an internal network of meanings bound by logical or metaphorical associations. Functionally, it increases the expressive potential of vocabulary, allowing speakers to use familiar words in novel contexts. Cognitively, polysemy demonstrates how the human mind organizes and categorizes meaning through analogical reasoning (Ullmann, 1962, p. 148).

Criteria for Differentiating Meanings

According to Cruse (1986, p. 81), polysemy is characterized by a “systematic relationship among senses belonging to one lexical unit.” For instance, the word light may denote illumination (“turn on the light”), something not heavy (“a light suitcase”), or a pale color (“light blue”). These meanings share a core semantic feature — the concept of reduced density or intensity. Similarly, the word mouth can refer to a part of the human body, the entrance of a cave, or the opening of a river, all unified by the underlying notion of an opening through which something passes. The second criterion is ‘contextual substitutability’. If two senses can substitute for one another in similar contexts without producing semantic absurdity, they are polysemous rather than homonymous (Palmer, 1981, p. 60). The third criterion is ‘etymological continuity’, which traces meanings to a common historical origin. Polysemous senses share a single etymological root, while homonyms arise from historically separate sources.

Polysemy also interacts with metaphor and metonymy in the process of meaning expansion. Metaphorical extension allows words to broaden their meanings based on perceived similarity (‘the leg of a table’), while metonymy operates through association (‘drink a glass’ meaning ‘drink the contents’). These mechanisms are essential for understanding how language evolves and adapts to new communicative needs. Polysemy is not merely a lexical irregularity but a structural and cognitive feature of language. It enables efficiency, creativity, and nuance in communication. Understanding the linguistic nature of polysemy and the criteria for differentiating meanings contributes to broader insights into semantic theory, lexicography, and cognitive linguistics. As Cruse (1986, p. 84) remarks, “polysemy reflects the human capacity to generalize and transfer meaning across conceptual domains.”

Resources:

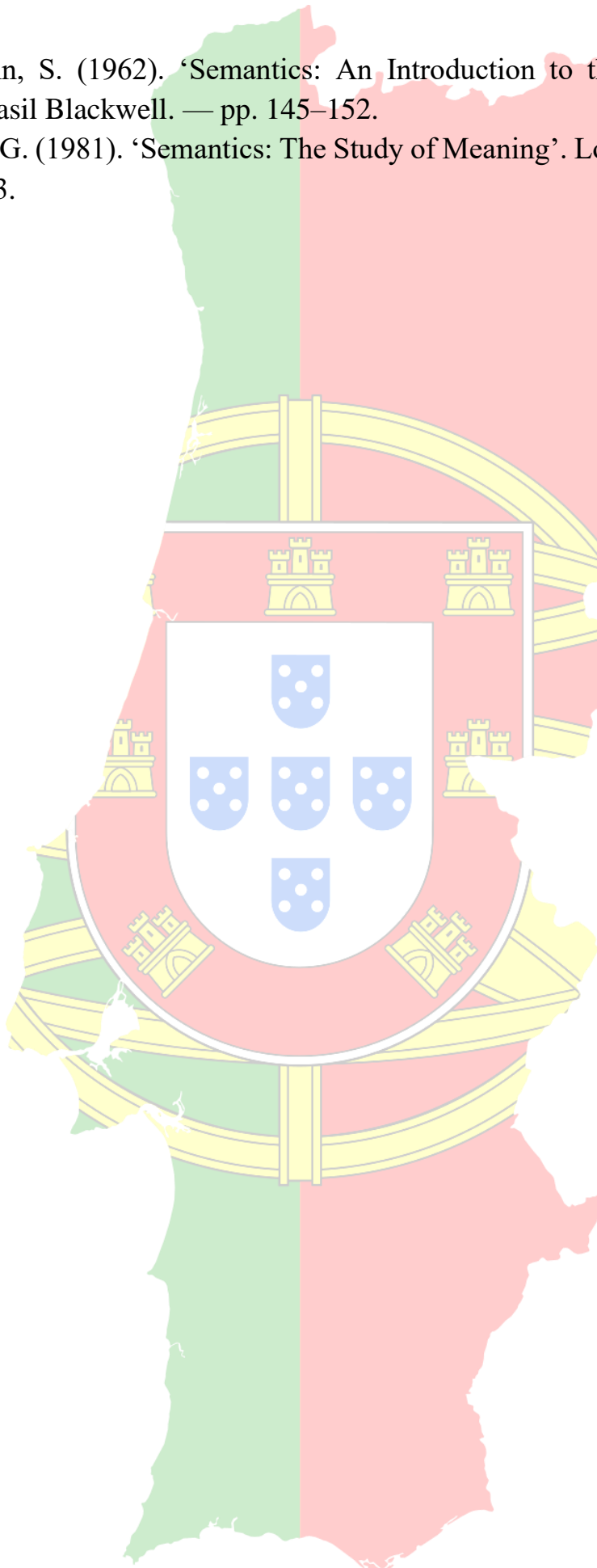
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