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POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY IN MODERN ENGLISH: ESSENCE, TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONAL ROLE

Sadridinova Musavvarkhon Sherzodovna
Student of SamSIFL
Scientific supervisor: **Shamuradova Naima Muxtarovna**

Abstract. The article examines the mechanisms of formation, semantic nature, and functional role of polysemy and homonymy in modern English. It explores the causes of semantic expansion, typological characteristics, cognitive and historical factors of language development, as well as the main principles of distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy. Special attention is paid to the role of context and communicative conditions. The material is based on modern lexicology, corpus linguistics, and the comparative-historical approach.

Keywords: polysemy, homonymy, lexical semantics, semantic evolution, cognitive linguistics, etymology, contextual meaning, modern English.

Modern English is characterized by high dynamism, which is reflected in the continuous expansion of word meanings and changes in their usage. Within the lexical system, phenomena such as polysemy and homonymy are particularly important, as they reveal essential processes of semantic evolution. Both phenomena involve the coexistence of different meanings under the same linguistic form, yet their nature differs.

Polysemy represents the coexistence of several semantically related meanings within one lexical unit. Homonymy, by contrast, denotes the formal coincidence of words that have diverged semantically and etymologically. Studying these phenomena has both scientific and practical value, particularly in the fields of English language teaching, translation studies, and lexicography.

1. Polysemy: Essence, Development, and Cognitive Nature

Polysemy is the property of a lexical unit to have several interconnected meanings. New meanings arise through metaphorical, metonymic, pragmatic, and historical processes.

Main mechanisms of polysemy formation

Metaphorical transfer:

Cold — “low in temperature” → cold look — “unfriendly look”.

Metonymic transfer:

The White House → “the U.S. administration”.

Generalization of meaning:

Device — originally “mechanical tool”, later “method, way”.

Specialization of meaning:

Mouse — “a rodent”, later “computer mouse”.

Pragmatic development:

Viral — “relating to a virus”, later “popular on the Internet”.

Cognitive nature of polysemy

Cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, Johnson) explains polysemy through conceptual structures. One word is organized around a prototype that links all its meanings.For example, head combines: a body part, a leader, the front of a line, and the top of an object. All these meanings are connected to universal concepts of “top,” “control,” and “beginning.

Types of polysemy

1. Radial polysemy: meanings radiate from a central sense.
2. Chain polysemy: each new meaning is based on the previous one.
3. Metaphorical polysemy — figurative extensions of meaning.
4. Metonymic polysemy — based on contiguity or functional relations.
3. Homonymy: Nature and Sources of Emergence

Homonymy refers to the coincidence of form in two or more words that have no semantic or etymological connection.

Main sources of homonymy in English

1. Phonetic changes:

Knight and night became homophones after the loss of the initial k.

2. Borrowings from different languages:

Fair (“market”) — Germanic origin;
Fair (“honest”) — French origin.

3. Split of polysemy:

Meanings diverge so strongly that the semantic link disappears.

4. Accidental coincidence:

Bow — “weapon” and bow — “to bend”.

Types of homonyms

Homophones: same pronunciation
(write — right, son — sun).
Homographs: same spelling
(lead — metal; lead — “to guide”).
Full homonyms: identical in both sound and spelling, but unrelated in meaning
(bat — an animal; bat — sports bat).

5. Distinguishing Polysemy and Homonymy

The main criterion is the presence of a semantic connection:
Polysemy: meanings are semantically related.Homonymy: meanings are unrelated, with different origins.

Examples:
Paper — “material,” “newspaper,” “academic article” → polysemy.
Seal — “seal” (animal) and seal (stamp) → homonymy.

6. Context and Communicative Significance

Correct interpretation of meaning depends on:
Syntactic structure,
Nearest collocations,
Thematic field,
Intonation and facial expressions (in spoken language),
Cultural and sociolinguistic background.

For example, charge can mean: “accusation,” “electrical charge,” “price,” “attack,” or “responsibility,” depending on the context.

6. Practical Recommendations for Working with Polysemy

1. Always consider the content of the text.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Use synonyms or paraphrases for clarification.
4. Rely on fixed expressions to select the correct meaning.
5. Account for differences between English, Russian, Uzbek, and Korean.

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Polysemy and homonymy are key components of the semantic structure of English. Polysemy reflects lexical flexibility and adaptability, whereas homonymy results from historical development and language interaction. Accurate distinction between these phenomena is essential for lexicography, translation, language teaching, and discourse analysis.

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