

Polysemy and Context in Literary Works

Ilhama Yusif Khanaliyeva¹

¹*Odlar Yurdu University*

Koroglu Rahimov street, 13, AZ1072, Azerbaijan

DOI: [10.22178/pos.92-7](https://doi.org/10.22178/pos.92-7)

LCC Subject Category: PE1001-1693

Received 28.04.2023

Accepted 28.05.2023

Published online 31.05.2023

Corresponding Author:
ikhaneliyefa@gmail.com

© 2023 The Author. This article
is licensed under a Creative
Commons Attribution 4.0 License



Abstract. Polysemy is an essential linguistic process that occurs intensively in language. It plays a significant role in creating phraseological combinations and generating various semantic changes in the language. Polysemy should be distinguished from eurysemy (lexical broadness) and homonymy. Polysemy and eurythmy in language and speech reveal some common properties; however, they are essentially different linguistic phenomena. In Eurysemy, the word's meaning is realized similarly through the context, but it does not undergo significant changes. One of the structural components of a polysemous word is a lexico-semantic variation or separate meaning, which is essential in the study of polysemy. Elimination of polysemy - actualization of a particular meaning of a word is carried out in context. There are two opposing views regarding the nature of a word's linguistic meaning in linguistics. The word itself has no lexical meaning and acquires it only in context. The lexical meaning initially enters the word and is only expressed and recognized in context. A polysemantic word implemented within a set of fixed indicators has a phraseologically related meaning, and each combination of a given polysemantic word with a specific hand becomes a separate phrase. The article deals with polysemy in language generally and in literary works. It explains its significant role in creating phraseological combinations and generating semantic changes in the language and other linguistic features.

Keywords: polysemy; lexicology; context; homonymy; word meanings.

INTRODUCTION

Polysemy is when a word has several meanings at the same time. This phenomenon results from generalization in human cognition, which leads to the expression of several concepts through a single word in a language. Both intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic factors influence polysemy, which is linked to thinking processes, reasoning, and language use. Objects and events in the world that are similar or have the same indication are often referred to by a common name in language. Meaning expansion, narrowing, transfer, and euphemisms have a unique role in the emergence, shaping and formation of polysemous words, depending on the similarity of the things and events being referred to. In language, words acquire their original meanings first, then symbolic or polysemous meanings emerge. Initially, humans named things they perceived as accurate before establishing metaphorical language and polysemy.

Polysemy is an essential linguistic process that occurs intensively in language. It plays a signifi-

cant role in creating phraseological combinations and generating various semantic changes in the language. The development of polysemy in the language determines the emergence of several semantics around a single semantic centre while organizing the content of denotations. This phenomenon is present to some degree in many languages worldwide, and it involves collecting different lexical-semantic variants around a nucleus in the structure of a linguistic unit, often applying formal similarity and identity. Polysemy is often compared to homonymy, which has separate semantic cores for each linguistic unit, unlike polysemy, where multiple meanings are gathered around a central waist. It is this feature that distinguishes homonymy from polysemy.

Polysemy, or the multi-meaning of words, is common in English, as it is in all world languages. Consequently, a linguistic unit can have more than one meaning, the choice of which depends on the context of the speech act. According to I. V. Arnold, polysemy is inevitable in the essence of the word: polysemy is related to the similarity of

the characteristics of different concepts [3, p. 55]. When the word's meaning is implemented in the context, the semantic link between all possible purposes or signs of debutants remains. To a certain extent, this is due to the asymmetric nature of the linguistic sign, which allows a considerable saving of formal means of expression without losing the ability to convey the semantic volume fully. In addition to saving language resources, M. Nikitin notes that polysemy reflects the associative convergence of expressed ideas. According to the researcher, polysemy is a constitutive feature of natural language. Natural languages unthinkingly develop and collect the meanings of words, and a word cannot have a clearly defined range of purposes. This shows that "the meanings of polysemous words are interconnected based totally on their content material, the full interaction of the meanings of the words is assumed; commonality of form additionally impacts the content material of separate meanings, their onomatological capability and comprehension through feedback; additionally, there is a difference between polysemy and homonymy based on the closeness of meaning, enabling to distinguish between the two" [10, p. 176].

Polysemy has a dual character: on the one hand, the distinction of separate meanings in the semantic paradigm of the word. On the other hand, the relationship and ratio of these values as equal components of the semantics of the word and the system of nominative means of the language. Thus, the lexico-semantic variants of polysemous words have the following characteristics: having different denotative and sometimes connotative meanings, expressed by one language sign, one morpheme combination, belong to the same grammatical category and retaining the overall semantics of the word, but their implementation occurs in distributive conditions. When referring to the term distribution, the complete range of contexts in which a linguistic unit is used should be understood, including its place and properties in speech and its compatibility with other components of this expression.

When talking about the mechanisms of realization of the meaning of a polysemantic word, it is necessary to pay attention to the opinions of modern linguists. The latest research claims the traditional content-based approach to studying lexical semantics and proves the advantages of a new cognitive approach. Within the primary, meaningful practice, the semantics of the word is considered an autonomous system in which con-

crete structures are stabilized and "catalogued" independent of human thinking; they remain stable in a person's memory. According to certain communicative conditions and contexts, the necessary option is selected from among them in the realization of speech or the process of perception. The cognitive approach, criticizing the "static" nature of these ideas about language and speech, concentrates on the following points: language does not exist separately but is directly related to the functions of the human body; a person not only repeats ready-made language structures in speech but also creates and participates in the communication process; the actualization of the meaning of the word occurs at the level of consciousness of the speaker or the listener. Therefore, understanding a word's purpose is not simply searching for the correct definition in a pre-existing "catalogue" of meanings. First, it involves identifying the "meaningful core" and then using context to construct the most appropriate meaning based on this core. Ultimately, it is human consciousness that generates the definition of a word.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Polysemy should be distinguished from eurysemy (lexical broadness) and homonymy. Polysemy and eurythmy in language and speech reveal some common properties; however, they are essentially different linguistic phenomena. In Eurysemy, the word's meaning is realized similarly through the context, but it does not undergo significant changes. N. N. Amosofa characterizes broad meaning as "a meaning that contains the maximum degree of generalization shows itself in its pure form only when the word is isolated from speech, and acquires a certain limitation and concretization during the use of this word in speech". While a polysemous word's whole range of meanings is incorporated into its semantic structure, when the term is used in context, all these meanings, except for one broad-sense word, become clear and concrete only by correlating with various objects in the context. In other words, all of the meanings that are realized in the context (referred to by N. Amosofa as "limited variants" or "sub-meanings") are varieties of one single fundamental, general, broad meaning [1, p. 114]. According to Y. Kostyuchenko's definition, grammatical homonymy is "the overlap of dictionary forms of words belonging to separate lexical-grammatical categories and does not take

into account the homonymy of other forms of different paradigmatic series" [9, p. 5]. In homonymy, language units that do not have a shared semantic content coincide only in terms of expression.

Homonyms are of several types. According to the nature of the expression plan, the following are distinguished: homophones—homonyms that overlap in terms of sound but differ in graphic form; homographs, on the other hand, have the same explicit manifestation but a different sound; and absolute homonyms—homonyms that are identical in both sound and graphic form. The degree of relevance of the expression plan can differ depending on the type of homonyms.

Polysemy is classified into two categories by V. Eliseefa. The first is lexical polysemy, where a word defines different objects or events; the second is grammatical polysemy, which pertains to the multiplanarity (diversity) of the word's grammatical form [5, p. 114].

One of the structural components of a polysemous word is a lexico-semantic variation or separate meaning, which is essential in the study of polysemy. Lexical-semantic variants of polysemant words tend to change during the historical development of the language, and therefore they are investigated from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives [11]. Meanings are classified by types, which, in turn, are grouped by functional and qualitative characteristics: semantic relations in the language, frequency of use, functions, variety, conditions of implementation in speech, etc.

The textbook "Lexicology of Modern English" by I. Arnold concisely summarises the various types of lexico-semantic variants of polysemous words from diachronic and synchronic perspectives [3].

Lexical-semantic variants are helpful due to their origin in the diachronic aspect. Primary meaning often occurs with language development and is the basis for derived purposes. Lexico-semantic variants are grouped based on the following criteria: first, the etymological meaning, which is the earliest meaning of those mentioned; second, the archaic sense, which refers to an obsolete definition, nevertheless may still be recognized and used in specific phrases or contexts in later stages of language development; and third, the present or modern meaning.

In the synchronic aspect, lexical-semantic variants of words are distinguished by their semantic

relations in the modern language, style, and sphere of use. Here, let's consider the classification proposed by V. Eliseefa [5]. Regarding the first case, the following are distinguished: direct meaning as a means of defining the object (this includes concrete and abstract, broad, narrow, and widespread) and remains consistent even outside of a particular context; symbolic meaning (which is also metaphorical or metonymic) involves transferring the name of one object or event to another based on similarity. Central and peripheral definitions differ according to nominative and descriptive functions and the frequency of word processing, the distance of the meaning from the general semantic centre, and stylistic qualities.

According to style and scope of use, stylistically neutral and colourful (terminological, slang, and poetic) meanings are distinguished, according to I. Galperin, the subject-logical purpose includes a general concept of an object or event created based on a specific sign and stabilized at a particular stage of language development. This value tends to change if the concept itself changes. In addition, it also serves as the basis for derivative meanings [6, p. 123].

CONCLUSIONS

The nominative meaning pertains to words that identify a single object, event, personal, or geographical concept and differentiate it from similar entities.

Bally, in his "Treatise on French Stylistics", also highlights the emotional meaning [4, p. 29]: the subjective-evaluative attitude of the speaker, his emotions and feelings to the subject or event in question, which are realized in the context of the speech act, are expressed.

V. Vinogradof describes two types of word meanings based on the conditions of their implementation in speech. Free meanings correspond to the direct and nominative senses of a word. Typically, it arises in the minds of most native speakers as an association with a specific sonographic complex. This meaning is realized in any combination, regardless of form, composition, or context. In contrast, related meanings depend on the context and structures in which the polysemous word is included [13, p. 89].

According to V. Eliseefa, the grammatically related meaning is determined by the grammatical

structure of which the given the word is a part; the lexically related meaning is determined by the lexico-semantic group to which the term belongs; and the phraseological meaning depends only on the units realized in a particular environment that make up a stable combination [5, p. 31].

Elimination of polysemy - actualization of a particular meaning of a word is carried out in context. There are two opposing views regarding the nature of a word's linguistic meaning in linguistics. The word itself has no lexical meaning and acquires it only in context. The linguistic meaning initially enters the word and is only expressed and recognized in context.

S. Ullmann characterizes a word as a pure form, a conditional combination of sounds with a particular meaning in speech depending on their specific conditions. However, the scientist then claims that a whole system of semantic potentials is connected to each word, and contextual or situational indicators allow one to be realized [12, p. 34]. It should be noted that this approach represents two polar points. In this work, an attempt is made to determine the lexical meaning of a word, and based on this, a whole system of semantic potentials is established for each word, one of which is realized with contextual or situational indicators.

Understanding the mechanism of realization of word meanings in speech requires understanding context. Context is an integral part of written or oral language (text), clarifying the general meaning and the meanings of individual words and sentences within the composition. It is often possible to understand the true meaning of a sentence or even a single word when considering only a conversation or a meaningful part of a text. Otherwise, a whole other meaning of the word can be understood.

The word "context" comes from Latin and means a strong connection. It means a completed part of a text that includes individual words or phrases to determine their meaning.

In general, when determining the characteristics of a word's lexical meaning, researchers pay attention to how the linguistic meaning is demonstrated in the context of the sentence, that is, the context of communication. Outside of a sentence, most words can have not just one but multiple meanings, or vice versa, only one meaning. When becoming a sentence component, a comment can

acquire new meanings. The main reason is related to the new shades and content that the context provides for the word.

The lexical meaning in the context indicates the connection of a word with a particular subject or current event and the assessment, the expressive form of the word, and also shows the speaker's position. Each word's meaning is surrounded by a specific atmosphere that changes based on the context. The term is simultaneously a sign of the speaker's way of thinking and all the other mental experiences that enter into the task and intention of the message. This highlighted aspect of the word's lexical meaning is essential because, while communicating, it's necessary to indicate attitudes towards processes, events, and things in addition to naming objects, signs, and actions. Besides the sentence structure, intonation, etc., the expressive meaning and vibrant colour of the word included in the sentence that serves these purposes is obtained precisely due to the context.

G. Kolshansky defines the context as "a set of formal stable conditions under which the content of any language unit is unambiguously revealed" [8, p. 46].

According to N. Amosofa's definition, the context is a combination of primary and interrelated indicators, where the core is the polysemous word itself, and the hands are the minimum index of the environment that determines the realization of meaning [2].

There are two types of context based on the characteristics of these indicators. Extralinguistic context is a speech situation where the conditions of the speech act as indicators. It encompasses the "state of life" created by extralinguistic conditions or paralinguistic means: gestures, facial expressions, intonations; "thematic (plot) situation" - here the topic, the entire content of the text acts as an indicator; and "descriptive situation" wherein the speech environment is described as an indicator.

If the speaker intentionally changes the state of speech, then a calambour - a pun ensues. The linguistic context implies the presence of indicators in the text itself. These include various lexical units and grammatical models. Accordingly, there are different types of context: the type of linguistic context in which the meaning of lexical semantic units depends on the lexical meaning of indicator words and the type of grammatical context in which some grammatical function acts as

an indicator. Additionally, there is a mixed, lexical-grammatical context type. In this case, lexical semantic units are conditioned by indicators' lexical and grammatical functions.

Context can also be variable or fixed. In a variable context, variations in the minimum index do not affect the semantic outcome of the realized polysemous word.

The variability of the lexical and syntactic context is determined primarily by replacing words that belong to the minimum index of either of these types. In this case, the variability of the linguistic composition of the minimum index is preserved.

Variable context can be lexical: the minimum index causes the elimination of polysemy; thus, variations are possible in the syntactic relationships of index words with certain polysemous words too.

In a variable syntactic context, the index is the syntactic function of the construction, regardless of the lexical meanings of the words included in it or the syntactic function of the word itself, the semantically realized word in the sentence. In a fixed context, however, the indexical minimum and the realizable polysemous word are semantically tightly bound and interact with each other's semantics, excluding or highly constraining any variation within the same semantic result.

An expression cannot be accessible in a fixed context. A polysemantic word implemented within a set of selected indicators has a phraseologically related meaning, and each combination of a given polysemantic word with a specific hand becomes a separate phrase.

The concept of an attributive phrase is characteristic: a semantically realized word can formally overlap in various separate phrases. In such a fixed context unit, a certain word can be given a

completely distinctive qualitative characteristic with the same definition.

Let's look into the position of polysemous words in context:

Jack: as far as I can tell, the poachers are the only people who make anything out of it [Wilde O. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1994].

In this part, the modelling of the polysemous lexical unit is based on the processing of the following meanings of the verb make out. In the first case, it is "to understand something, especially why something has happened". The second is "to succeed or progress in a particular way". Let's analyze another example:

LADY CAROLINE. *This is the first English country house you have stayed at, Miss Worsley.*

HESTER. *Yes, Lady Caroline.*

LADY CAROLINE. *You have no country houses, I am told, in America?*

HESTER. *We have few.*

LADY CAROLINE. *Have you any country? What should we call country?*

HESTER. *[Smiling.] We have the largest country in the world, Lady Caroline [Wilde O. *A Woman of No Importance*].*

Within this fragment, the author uses the noun country in different meanings:

1. Land outside towns and cities, including land used for farming.
2. An area of land controlled by its government, president, king etc.

In the first case, the lexeme "land that is outside towns and cities, including land used for farming" is used the meaning: (village, mansion). In the second case – "an area of land controlled by its government, president, king etc." (country, state).

REFERENCES

1. Amosofa, N. (1963). *Osnovy anglijskoj frazeologii* [Fundamentals of English phraseology]. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo LGU (in Russian).
2. Amosofa, N. (1968). *Anglijskaya kontekstologiya* [English contextology]. Leningrad: n. d. (in Russian).
3. Arnold, I. (2012). *Leksikologiya sovremennogo anglijskogo yazyka* [Lexycology of modern English language]. Moscow: Nauka (in Russian).
4. Bally, Ch. (1951). *Traité de stylistique française*. Paris: n. d.
5. Elissefa, V. (1959). *Lexycology of modern English language*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo literatury na inostrannyh yazykah (in Russian).

6. Galperin, I. R. (1958). *Ocherki po stilistike anglijskogo yazyka* [Essays on the style of the English language]. Moscow: Izdatelstvo literatury na inostrannyh yazykah (in Russian).
7. Jafarof, S. (1982). *Müasir Azərbaycan dilinin leksikası* [Lexicon of modern Azerbaijani language]. Bakı: Maarif (in Azerbaijani).
8. Kolshanskiy, G. (1959). O prirode konteksta [On the nature of context]. *Voprosy yazykoznaniya*, 4 (in Russian).
9. Kostyuchenko, Y. (1954). *Kolichestvo i mesto omonimov v sovremennom anglijskom yazyke* [The number and place of homonyms in modern English] (Doctoral dissertation). Kharkov (in Russian).
10. Nikitin, M. (2007). *Kurs lingvisticheskoy semantiki* [Linguistic Semantics Course]. N. d. : Nauchnyj centr problem dialoga (in Russian).
11. Seydaliyef, N. (2022). Çoxmənalı sözlər. Müasir Azərbaycan dili. Leksikologiya [Modern Azerbaijani language. Leksikologiya]. Bakı: Zərdabi (in Azerbaijani).
12. Ullmann, S., & Berne, A. (1952). *Précis de sémantique française*. N. d.: Presses universitaires de France.
13. Vinogradoff, V. (1953). Osnovnye tipy leksicheskix znachenij slova [The main types of lexical meanings of the word]. *Voprosy yazykoznaniya*, 5 (in Russian).