HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY

Djalilova Aytkul Nurali kizi
Teacher at ChDPU Tourism faculty Linguistics and English language teaching methodology department
ashirbaevaaytkul@gmail.com

Abstract: Lexical ambiguity is a common phenomenon in natural languages, occurring when a single word has more than one meaning. In English, lexical ambiguity is mainly manifested through polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy refers to a single word possessing several related meanings, whereas homonymy involves words that share the same form but have unrelated meanings. This article examines the characteristics of polysemy and homonymy in contemporary English, analyzes their similarities and differences, and discusses their role in communication. The study demonstrates that while both phenomena contribute to the richness and flexibility of the English lexicon, they also present challenges for language learners and may cause misunderstandings when context is insufficient.

Keywords: lexical ambiguity, polysemy, homonymy, semantics, English vocabulary, linguistic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic system in which words often carry multiple meanings. The ability of words to express different meanings contributes to the efficiency and economy of communication. However, this feature may also create ambiguity, making it difficult for speakers and learners to determine the intended meaning without contextual clues.

Lexical ambiguity is one of the most significant topics in semantics, the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning. Two major sources of lexical ambiguity are polysemy and homonymy. Although both involve a relationship between one word form and multiple meanings, they differ in the nature of those meanings. Understanding these phenomena is essential for linguistic research, language teaching, translation studies, and natural language processing. The purpose of this article is to examine the concepts of polysemy and homonymy, identify their distinguishing features, and evaluate their contribution to the English language.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Lexical ambiguity has been widely studied within semantic theory. According to Lyons (1995), ambiguity arises when a linguistic expression has more than one interpretation. Researchers generally classify lexical ambiguity into polysemy and homonymy.

Polysemy derives from the Greek words *poly* (many) and *sema* (sign or meaning). A polysemous word possesses several related meanings that have developed from a common semantic source. For example, the word *head* may refer to the part of the body, the leader of an organization, or the top part of an object. These meanings are connected through the notion of prominence or control.

Homonymy, on the other hand, occurs when two or more words share the same spelling or pronunciation but have unrelated meanings. For example, the word *bank* can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. These meanings have different historical origins and no semantic connection.

Cruse (2004) argues that distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy is not always straightforward because semantic relationships may weaken over time. Nevertheless, etymological evidence and contextual analysis often help linguists determine the correct classification.

POLYSEMY IN ENGLISH

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

Polysemy is one of the most productive features of English vocabulary. It allows speakers to use a limited number of lexical items to express a wide range of meanings.

Consider the word *foot*:

- The foot of a person.
- The foot of a mountain.
- The foot of a page.
- A unit of measurement.

These meanings are semantically related through the concept of a lower or supporting part. As language evolves, speakers extend existing meanings metaphorically or metonymically, leading to the development of additional senses.

Another example is the word *mouth*:

- The mouth of a person.
- The mouth of a river.
- The opening of a cave.

Again, all meanings share the concept of an opening.

Polysemy contributes significantly to language economy because it enables one lexical item to fulfill multiple communicative functions. It also reflects the creativity of language users who continually adapt existing words to new contexts.

HOMONYMY IN ENGLISH

Unlike polysemy, homonymy involves meanings that are entirely unrelated. Homonyms may arise through historical changes in pronunciation or borrowing from different languages.

Examples include:

- *Bat* (a flying mammal) and *bat* (a piece of sports equipment).
- *Match* (a competition) and *match* (a small stick used for making fire).
- *Bear* (an animal) and *bear* (to tolerate or carry).

Although these words share identical forms, their meanings are independent. Consequently, language users rely heavily on context to determine the intended interpretation. Homonymy can occasionally create confusion, particularly for language learners. However, in most communicative situations, contextual information eliminates ambiguity effectively.

COMPARISON OF POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMY

Polysemy and homonymy share several characteristics. Both involve a single linguistic form associated with multiple meanings, and both contribute to lexical ambiguity. However, important differences exist:

Feature	**Polysemy**	**Homonymy**
Relationship of meanings	Related	Unrelated
Origin	Common semantic source	Different origins
Example	Head (body part, leader)	Bank (financial institution, river side)
Semantic connection	Present	Absent

The primary criterion for distinguishing the two phenomena is the presence or absence of semantic relatedness. In polysemy, meanings are linked through conceptual associations, whereas in homonymy they are independent.

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN RESOLVING AMBIGUITY

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

Context plays a crucial role in interpreting ambiguous words. Linguistic context, situational context, and cultural knowledge help speakers identify the intended meaning. For example, in the sentence: *"She deposited money in the bank."*

the word *bank* clearly refers to a financial institution. In contrast: *"The children were playing near the bank of the river."* indicates a completely different meaning. Similarly, polysemous words require contextual interpretation. The sentence: *"The head of the company announced new policies."* uses *head* metaphorically to mean a leader rather than a body part.

Therefore, successful communication depends largely on contextual information that guides interpretation and reduces ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

Lexical ambiguity is an essential feature of the English language and is primarily expressed through polysemy and homonymy. While polysemy involves multiple related meanings of a single word, homonymy refers to words that share the same form but possess unrelated meanings. Both phenomena enrich the English lexicon and contribute to linguistic economy. However, they may also create difficulties for language learners and translators when context is insufficient. Understanding the distinctions between polysemy and homonymy enhances semantic analysis and improves language teaching practices. Future research may investigate how modern digital communication influences the development of new polysemous and homonymous expressions in English.

REFERENCES

1. Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
2. Lyons, J. (1995). *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Palmer, F. R. (1981). *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Yule, G. (2020). *The Study of Language* (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
5. Hurford, J., Heasley, B., & Smith, M. (2007). *Semantics: A Coursebook* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.