

Polysemy and Homonymy

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Monosemantic words

- - words having only one meaning are comparatively few in number in English. Terms (synonym, molecule, bronchites), some pronouns (this, my, both), numerals.
- Most of the words in English are polysemantic, they possess more than one meaning. The more common the word is, the more meanings it has.

- Different meanings of a polysemantic word may come together due to the proximity of notions which they express.
- E.g. the word “blanket” has the following meanings:
 - 1) a woolen covering used on beds
 - 2) a covering keeping a horse warm
 - 3) a covering of any kind (a blanket of snow)

- Polysemantic words should be studied synchronically and diachronically.
- Polysemy in diachronic terms implies that a word may retain its previous meaning or meanings and at the same time acquire one or several new ones.
- Synchronically we understand polysemy as coexistence of various meanings of the same word at the certain historical period of the development of English language.

Types of meaning

- Polysemantic words have:
- 1) primary meaning;
- 2) derived or secondary meaning.
- Some of the old meanings can become obsolete or even disappear, but the bulk of English words tend to an increase in number of meanings.
- The concept of *central (basic)* and *marginal (minor)* meanings may be interpreted in terms of their relative frequency in speech. The meaning having the highest frequency is synchronically its central (basic) meaning.

Two processes of the semantic development of a word

- 1) radiation (radial);
- 2) concatenation (chain).



In the case of radiation primary meaning stands in the center and the secondary meanings proceed out of it like rays. Each secondary meaning can be traced to the primary meaning.

- In case of concatenation secondary meaning of a word develop like a chain. In such cases it is difficult to trace some secondary meanings to the primary one.

board → board of directors

crust → bread crust → hard part of anything
(a pie, a cake)

→ harder layer over a soft snow → a sullen gloomy person

→ impudence

- The last meanings have nothing to do with the primary ones. In such cases homonyms appear in the language. It is called the split of polysemy which sometimes leads to homonymy.

Homonymy and homonyms

- Homonyms (Greek *homoios* - identical and *onoma* – name) are words which are identical in sound and spelling, or at least in one of these aspects, but different in their meaning.
- Bank, n. – a shore (of anglo-saxon origin)
- Bank, n. – an institution for receiving, lending and exchanging money (was adopted from Italian).

- English is rich in homonyms due to its monosyllabic character. The identical form of homonyms is mostly accidental (they coincide due to the phonetic change in the course of their development).
- lead, v. and lead, n.
- Tear, n. and tear (apart), v.

Full and partial homonyms

- There is the case of full and partial homonyms. It is connected with the concept of paradigms.
- Full homonyms belong to the same part of the speech, they share a paradigm (coincide in all their forms). *To blow* (to send out a strong current of air) and *to blow* (to produce flowers) – blow, blows, blowing, blew, blown.
- “Match” and “ball” are also the examples of full homonymy. They coincide in spelling, sounding and part of the speech.

Partial homonyms

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graph TD; A[Partial homonyms] --> B[homophones]; A --> C[homographs];
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homophones

tale and tail
waste and waist
flew, flu, flue
bight, bite, byte

homographs

bow and bow
polish and
Polish

- Not only notional words can demonstrate homonymy but functional words as well.
- E.g. for and four

Classification of homonyms according to the type of meaning

- **Lexical**
- *Seal* (an animal) and *seal* (a stamp). The part of the speech meaning and grammatical meaning of all the forms are identical. The difference lies in only lexical meaning.
- **Lexico-grammatical.** Different in both lexical and grammatical aspects. *To find* (*found, found*) and *found* (*founded, founded*).
- **Grammatical.** Homonymy of different word-forms of one and the same word. *Brought* – *brought*; *brothers* – *brother's*.

Sources of homonymy

1. Phonetic changes words undergo during the historical development.

knight (O.E. *kniht*) and *night* (O.E. *niht*).

to write (O.E. *writan*) and *right* (O.E. *reht, riht*)

2. Borrowings (can in the final stage of its phonetic adaptation duplicate either a native word or another borrowing).

fair (a *fair deal*) – native (of anglo-saxon origin)

fair (a *gathering of buyers and sellers*) – French borrowing.

3. Word-building (conversion) – transferring from one part of the speech to another.

comb, n. – to comb, v.

4. Shortening.

fan from fanatic and *fan* – ventilator

rep – reputation or representative

For modern linguists it is hard to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. In case of concatenation the last meaning can drop out of the polysemantic structure of a word.

References

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