

Section 4. Philology and linguistics

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THE DYNAMICS OF LEXICAL MEANING IN ENGLISH: COGNITIVE AND SEMANTIC MECHANISMS OF MEANING CHANGE

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Abstract

This article examines the word as a lexical unit, with particular emphasis placed on lexical meaning, semantic changes, and the processes underlying the formation of polysemy in the English language, including the role of metaphor and metonymy in this process. Based on a semasiological and systemic approach, the study analyzes the functions of words as both nominative and cognitive units, the ways in which their meanings develop under the influence of extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors, as well as the role of phonological convergence in the emergence of homonymy. The research further demonstrates that morphological, syntactic, and contextual mechanisms operate in interaction to eliminate formal ambiguity and maintain effective communication. The findings confirm that the lexicon represents a dynamic and self-regulating system in which semantic differentiation and formal economy coexist in parallel.
Keywords: lexical meaning; semantic change; polysemy; homonymy; metaphorical and metonymic extension

Introduction

Language is not a static phenomenon; rather, it is a constantly evolving system of signs shaped by human cognition, culture, and social interaction. Each lexical unit carries its own unique developmental history, reflecting semantic changes, acquired meanings, and other linguistic phenomena. The English language demonstrates this characteristic particularly clearly due to its global spread, prolonged contact with various languages, and extensive

history of borrowing. These processes have enriched its vocabulary, providing it with both flexibility and diversity, while also introducing a certain degree of semantic ambiguity. Therefore, studying the lexicon of English involves not only examining its vocabulary, but also exploring layers of meaning, semantic development, and diachronic changes.

The word, as the fundamental unit of the lexicon, establishes a connection between language, cognition, and reality. Through

its nominative function, it represents objects, properties, processes, and relations of the extralinguistic world, while its function of generalization enables the classification of objects with similar characteristics under a single conceptual category. From this perspective, the lexical meaning of a word is not merely a reflection of reality; it also embodies the ways in which human consciousness perceives, interprets, and categorizes the surrounding world.

Lexical meaning is formed as a result of human cognitive activity and is based on mental processes such as comparison, generalization, classification, and abstraction. It represents human experience in a conceptualized form; however, during language use, it may adapt to new contexts and acquire additional semantic nuances. Therefore, words are not merely formal linguistic units but dynamic means of communication whose meanings are continuously shaped and renewed through interaction.

Lexical meaning is not limited to denotative content; it also includes connotative components that convey the speaker's attitude, emotions, and evaluation. For example, although *aunt* and *auntie* refer to the same individual, the latter carries an additional emotional connotation. Similarly, while the words *house* and *home* both denote a place of residence, *home* conveys additional emotional associations such as family, comfort, and a sense of belonging. This demonstrates that lexical meaning reflects not only objective reality but also the pragmatic and subjective dimensions of speech.

Semasiology studies the interrelations between the word, the concept, and the referent, as well as the semantic structure of polysemous words and the mechanisms underlying the emergence and development of meanings. Semantic changes often result from transformations in a society's cultural and historical development, which are reflected in the evolution of its conceptual system and language.

For instance, the word *girl* in Old English originally had the general meaning of "child," but over time, through semantic narrowing, it came to denote specifically a female child. Similarly, the word *cloud*, which initially referred exclusively to a natural phenomenon,

underwent metaphorical extension with the advancement of information technology and began to refer to systems for storing and accessing data on remote servers. These examples demonstrate that lexical meaning is continuously renewed alongside changes in human cognition and social development.

The present study focuses on the mechanisms of semantic change, particularly the role of metaphor and metonymy in the development of polysemy and homonymy in English. It aims to examine how these processes contribute to lexical expansion, semantic differentiation, and the dynamic nature of the English vocabulary.

Method

The research employs a theoretical and descriptive approach based on the analysis of linguistic literature and examples from the English lexical system. The study applies principles of semasiology, cognitive linguistics, and historical linguistics to investigate the processes responsible for semantic development.

The analysis is based on the examination of lexical units that demonstrate semantic variation, including cases of polysemy, homonymy, metaphorical extension, and metonymic transfer. Examples such as *get*, *bank*, *foot*, *bridge*, *grasp*, *hand*, and *board* are analyzed in order to identify patterns of semantic expansion and differentiation.

The research also applies a diachronic perspective to trace how meanings develop over time and how initially connected meanings may become independent semantic units. Particular attention is given to cognitive mechanisms involved in meaning formation, including conceptual association, similarity, and contiguity.

Through comparative semantic analysis, the study investigates the relationship between metaphor, metonymy, polysemy, and homonymy, demonstrating how these phenomena interact within the English lexical system.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that lexical meaning is a dynamic structure influenced by cognitive processes, cultural development, and historical change. Words function not only as linguistic signs but also as representations of human conceptualization and experience.

The study confirms that lexical ambiguity is an inherent characteristic of natural language and appears mainly in two forms: polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy develops when one lexical unit acquires several interconnected meanings. For example, the verb *get* demonstrates multiple related meanings, including “obtain,” “become,” and “understand.” These meanings form a semantic network based on historical and cognitive associations.

Homonymy differs from polysemy because it involves formally identical words with unrelated meanings. Examples such as *bank* (financial institution/river edge) and *pen* (writing instrument/animal enclosure) illustrate cases where identical forms represent separate semantic units.

The research also reveals that ambiguity does not prevent successful communication because language possesses compensatory mechanisms. Morphological and syntactic structures provide important interpretative signals. For example, in *I bought a book* and *Please book a room*, the grammatical function of *book* determines whether it functions as a noun or a verb.

Context and pragmatic information also play a significant role in meaning interpretation. Although multiple meanings may initially become activated during comprehension, contextual information allows speakers to select the appropriate interpretation. For example, the meaning of *bank* is determined by whether it appears in a financial context or a geographical context.

The analysis further demonstrates that metaphor is one of the main mechanisms responsible for semantic extension. Metaphorical transfer allows words to move from one conceptual domain to another based on similarity. Examples such as *foot* (body part → base of a mountain/page), *bridge* (physical structure → connection between ideas or people), and *grasp* (physical holding → understanding) illustrate how metaphor contributes to the development of polysemy. The verb *grasp* originally denoted the physical action of “holding” or “seizing,” but through metaphorical extension, it developed the meaning of “understanding” or “comprehending.” This semantic expansion is based on the conceptual relationship established between physical control and mental control,

and similar patterns of development can be observed across different languages. Comparable semantic extensions are evident in the use of the verb *see* in the sense of “understand” and the verb *rise* in the sense of “increase.” Each such metaphorical extension does not eliminate the original meaning; rather, it adds new and related semantic features to it (Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M., 2003).

Metonymy also plays a significant role in semantic development by creating associations based on conceptual proximity. Examples such as *the White House* (building → administration), *Hollywood* (place → film industry), and *the crown* (object → monarchy) demonstrate how meanings expand through associative relationships.

The findings indicate that metaphor and metonymy primarily contribute to the formation of polysemy; however, prolonged semantic development may weaken the relationship between original and derived meanings, eventually contributing to semantic separation and the emergence of homonymy.

Discussion

The findings confirm that semantic change is a complex process resulting from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and social factors. The English lexicon develops through continuous adaptation, allowing words to acquire new meanings while preserving connections with earlier semantic structures.

Polysemy should not be considered a weakness or deficiency of language. Instead, it represents an essential feature of linguistic flexibility and efficiency. The ability of a single lexical unit to express multiple related meanings allows speakers to communicate complex ideas using a limited number of linguistic forms.

Metaphor and metonymy are particularly important because they demonstrate the cognitive foundations of semantic development. Metaphor expands meaning through perceived similarity between conceptual domains, while metonymy develops meaning through associations within the same conceptual framework. Both mechanisms reveal the relationship between human cognition and language organization.

Although metaphor and metonymy usually produce related meanings, historical

development may gradually reduce the transparency of these connections. When speakers no longer perceive the relationship between meanings, separate semantic units may emerge, contributing to homonymy. Therefore, homonymy can sometimes be viewed as the result of long-term semantic evolution rather than an entirely independent phenomenon. Metonymy develops meaning through associations within the same conceptual framework, including relations between objects, actions, institutions, and their representatives (Evans, V., 2019).

The study of polysemy and homonymy provides deeper insight into the organization

of the English lexical system. Words represent not only external reality but also human perception, cultural experience, and communicative intentions. Their changing meanings reflect the continuous interaction between language and society.

The analysis shows that, semantic development demonstrates the balance between stability and innovation in language. Through mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy, the English lexicon constantly expands and adapts, reflecting the creativity and cognitive abilities of language users.

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