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THE IMPORTANCE OF POLYSEMY AND HOMONYMS IN TEACHING  
AND LEARNING A LANGUAGE

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**Annotation:** This article discusses the concepts of polysemy and homonymy in linguistics, providing definitions and examples of each. It explains how polysemy refers to the phenomenon of a single word having multiple related meanings, and how homonymy refers to the phenomenon of different words that are spelled and pronounced the same but have different meanings. The article also explores the implications of polysemy and homonymy for language understanding and communication. Overall, it offers a comprehensive analysis of these two important linguistic phenomena and their relevance in language processing.

**Key words:** polysemy, homonymy, language processing, semantic ambiguous, disambiguation, interpretation, lexical, multiple, semantic, ambiguous, contextual, same spelling, different meanings, biological classifications, overlapping meanings, semantic shift.

The study of polysemy of a language has often been associated with the study of homonymy because distinction between the two has often not been very clear. In a piece of text, one can come across a set of words, which may appear either homonymous or polysemous. Since both types of word are often similar in surface representation (i.e., spelling and orthography) with no special mark for their distinction, one is easily misled to assume homonyms as polysemy or vice versa. However, there is a need to draw a clear line of distinction between the two, because these forms differ from each other not only in their nature, but also in function and implication. In this paper, an attempt is made to identify the clues and strategies that can be adopted for tracing the differences between the two types of words. Since there is no well-defined process for doing this, one has to use traditional knowledge from



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linguistics, semantics and cognitive science. Making perceptible distinction between the two types of words is a prerequisite for developing tools, systems and resources for natural language processing, language engineering, word sense disambiguation, machine translation, information retrieval, machine learning, cognitive linguistics, and applied linguistics. After identifying the theoretical and practical relevance of the phenomenon in various domains of human knowledge (Section 2), effort is made to understand polysemy (Section 3), identify the factors behind sense variations (Section 4), to explore the nature of homonymy (Section 5), and their conceptual relational interface (Section 6), the lack of which may cripple an investigator in the task of word sense disambiguation.

What is Polysemy? In polysemy a particular word exhibits variations of its sense depending on the context of its use. While studying polysemy in a language it is observed that multiplicity of sense of words is a general characteristic feature of a language. Almost all the natural languages have a set of words that are capable in conveying multiple objects, ideas, and senses—both in their context-bound and context free situations. This particular feature of words allows a user to derive more than one sense that may differ in terms of lexical feature, morphosyntactic feature, sub-categorization feature, semantic feature, lexical selectional feature, idiomatic usage, proverbial usage, and figurative usage. For elucidation, let us consider the following examples obtained from the Bengali text corpus:

- 1) chabiṭā ṭebiler māthāy rākho  
“Keep the picture on the table”
- 2) tomār kathāṭā āmār māthāy āche  
“Your word is in my mind”
- 3) tin diner māthāy tini phire elen

“He returned by the beginning of the 3rd day”. The examples given above show that the word māthā, in Bengali, is multi-semantic in function because it is used in three different senses: in (1), it means ‘top of a table’, in (2), it implies ‘mind of a person’, and in (3), it indicates ‘beginning of a day’. In each case, the actual implied sense of the word is not difficult to retrieve because its immediately preceding and succeeding words help to understand its actual contextual sense. However, since the word māthā is not limited to only three different senses, it has many more senses in the language depending on its contexts of use. The most notable thing is that such multi-semantic words hardly posit any difficulty in day-to-day communication as well as



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sense disambiguation for the native language users but pose hurdles in the works of automatic sense decipherment, sense retrieval, and machine learning.

What is homonym? In case of homonymy, different unrelated senses or meanings are shared under same surface form of words. Such words often exhibit identical spelling or orthographic forms but are different in meaning. A quick reference to respective meanings and etymology of the forms helps to identify homonyms quite easily in a text. Homonymy, in general is expressed in two broad ways: (a) Homography: identical spelling and different meanings (e.g. māl, jin, kapi, kalam, etc.) and (b) Homophony: different spelling and similar pronunciation (e.g., dīn 'poor' and din 'day', śab 'dead body' and sab 'all', etc.). Like polysemous words, homonymous words are also considered ambiguous because of the two reasons mentioned above. To understand the nature of homonymy, let us look at the examples given below where the words māl and jin are used as homonymy in Bengali. Polysemy is used in language because it allows for greater flexibility and creativity in communication. It enables the use of a single word to convey multiple meanings and nuances, allowing speakers and writers to express themselves in more varied and nuanced ways. Homonyms are used in language for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they can add a layer of complexity and richness to the language. They can create wordplay, puns, and double meanings, which can add humor, depth, and creativity to communication. Secondly, homonyms can also serve as a way to distinguish between different meanings of a word. Although it can sometimes lead to confusion, context typically helps to disambiguate the intended meaning. Overall, while homonyms can sometimes create ambiguity, they are an important aspect of language that allows for creativity and flexibility in communication. Homonymy is a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when two or more words have the same pronunciation or spelling but different meanings. Homonymy serves several purposes in language and communication:

1. Efficiency: Homonyms allow for more efficient and concise communication. They enable us to convey different meanings using the same word form, reducing the need for unique words for every concept.

2. Creativity: Homonyms can be used for wordplay, puns, and creative expression in literature, poetry, and humor.

3. Cognitive economy: Homonyms streamline mental processes by allowing us to assign multiple meanings to the same word form, reducing the cognitive load of learning and recalling distinct words for related concepts.



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4. Flexibility: Homonyms contribute to the flexibility and adaptability of language, as they enable words to take on multiple meanings and adapt to different contexts.

Overall, homonymy adds richness and complexity to language, facilitating nuanced communication, creativity, and cognitive efficiency.

Polysemy also reflects the rich and dynamic nature of language, allowing words to evolve and adapt to different contexts and meanings over time. In addition, it can make language more efficient by allowing for the expression of multiple ideas with a single word. Overall, polysemy enhances the expressive power of language and contributes to its richness and complexity. Polysemy is used in language for several reasons:

1. Efficiency: Polysemy allows for multiple meanings to be expressed using the same word, reducing the need for a large vocabulary and making communication more efficient.

2. Expressiveness: Polysemy adds layers of meaning and nuance to language, allowing for more expressive and nuanced communication.

3. Flexibility: Polysemy allows words to adapt to different contexts and be used in a variety of ways, making language more flexible and adaptable to different situations

, 4. Creativity: Polysemy allows for creativity in language use, as speakers can play with and manipulate the multiple meanings of a word to convey their intended message in a unique and imaginative way.

5. Cultural and contextual relevance: Polysemy allows for language to reflect cultural and contextual nuances, as words can take on different meanings in different cultural and situational contexts.

Overall, polysemy enriches language and enhances communication by allowing for a diverse range of meanings to be conveyed using a relatively limited set of words.

The most important part of polysemy and homonym is understanding their differences and how they impact language and communication. Polysemy refers to words that have multiple related meanings, while homonyms are words that are spelled and pronounced the same but have different meanings. It is important to be aware of these linguistic phenomena in order to accurately interpret and use language. Understanding polysemy and homonyms can also help in avoiding misunderstandings and ambiguity in communication. Their impact on language should not be



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underestimated, as they shape the way we interpret and express meaning in our everyday interactions.

In conclusion, polysemy and homonymy are crucial concepts in linguistic analysis. Polysemy refers to the multiple meanings of a single word, influenced by context and usage, while homonymy involves words that are spelled or sound alike but have different meanings. Each phenomenon plays a significant role in communication, language interpretation, and translation, highlighting the complexity and richness of language. Awareness of these concepts is essential for effective language usage and understanding in both spoken and written communication.

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