

**APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON OF  
POLYSEMY**

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**Annotation.** The article provides an overview of approaches to understanding the phenomenon of polysemy, and considers the issue of interpretation of the concept of lexical-semantic variant and its relationship with the concept of “meaning”. The possibilities of an invariant approach to organizing the meaning of a word are analyzed.

**Key words:** polysemy, lexico-semantic variant, meaning, invariant.

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Polysemy, which is a linguistic universal, is associated with the structure of human memory. The fact is that a person is not able to retain in his mind the names of all the objects and concepts that he encounters every day.

By calling new concepts with already familiar words, a person not only facilitates the work of his memory, but also carries out an important thought process, finding analogies between objects. In addition, polysemy becomes fertile ground for language play and other means of expressive speech, which means is used by word artists.

Considering the vocabulary of a particular language as lexical-semantic fields, we can say that polysemy is one of the tools involved in their systematization

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Scientists have shown interest in the phenomenon of polysemy since Antiquity. Democritus, in a dispute with Pythagoras about the origin of names (words), proves in four epi-cheirems that names arise not “by nature”, but “by establishment.” As one of the arguments (the first epicheireme), Democritus cites “eponymousness,” i.e. the fact that “different things are called by the same name” [1, p. 345-346]. Calling the first epicheyrema polysemy, Democritus thus introduces the concept of polysemy (from the ancient Greek “numerous” and “meaning”). However, the focus of thinkers’ attention is not the phenomenon of polysemy of a name itself, but the problem of establishing or excluding a natural connection between a word and a thing, which in modern science has been transformed into the problem of the relationship between a word and a concept.

Aristotle in “Poetics” and “Rhetoric” for the first time characterizes polysemy, describing the connections of meanings within “words that have a double meaning” [2, p. 1064-1112], in particular the formation of metaphor. According to Aristotle, “metaphor is the transfer of a word with a changed meaning from genus to species or from species to genus or from species to species or by analogy” [2, p. 1097]. Aristotle illustrates the metaphor as “transfer from genus to species” with the following example: “And my ship is standing there,” indicating that “standing at anchor is a special type of the concept of “standing”” [2, p. 1097]. Another example demonstrates “transfer from species to genus”: “Yes, Odysseus performed tens of thousands of good deeds,” where the poet used the linguistic formula “tens of thousands” instead of the word “many” [2, p. 1097]. Aristotle thereby lays the theoretical foundations for highlighting the figurative meanings of the word.

The ways of forming figurative meanings of words are described in more detail in treatises on the style of the 18th century, and renewed interest in the phenomenon of polysemy was noted already in the 19th century, when the need to identify an independent science of meaning - semantics - was realized. During this period, the internal form of a word was studied (W. von Humboldt, A. Potebnya), the general patterns of the formation and evolution of the meanings of words (A. Darmsteter, G. Paul), and historical lexicology was intensively developing. The achievements of semasiology are generalized and developed in the work of M. Breal “Experience in semantics, the science of meaning”, 1897 [3, p. 382], where semasiology appears as a special branch of the science of language. The term “polysemy”, having appeared in the works of M. Breal, is consolidated in scientific

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circulation and becomes the subject of discussion among linguists. Recognizing the important role of the phenomenon of polysemy in the language system, scientists define the essence of this phenomenon in different ways and from different points of view identify the mechanisms of development of polysemy. In particular, the very fact of the existence of polysemy as a property of language units causes discussion. According to the concept of M. Breal, polysemy is the law of multiplication of meanings, including such semantic processes as specialization, irradiation, distribution, narrowing, expansion of meanings, etc. Word, acquiring new meanings, it gives rise to new units, while “not a single meaning disappears - this is where the contours of the structuring of language are seen” [4].

The point of view that denies the phenomenon of polysemy as such can be traced in the works of A. A. Potebnya. “A word in speech,” writes the scientist, “each time corresponds to one act of thought, that is, each time a word is pronounced or understood, it has no more than one meaning” [5, p. 15].

L.V. Shcherba also believed that we always have “as many words as a given phonetic word has meanings” [6], which is due to the unity of its form and content.

V.V. Vinogradov denies the possibility of expressing each specific idea with a separate word or root element, arguing for this position by the fact that “language is forced to distribute countless meanings under one or another rubric of basic concepts”, the consequence of which is the polysemy of most words in the Russian language. V.V. Vinogradov characterizes polysemy as “synchronous or sequential compatibility of different meanings in the semantic structure of the same word” [7]. The definition of polysemy formulated by V.V. Vinogradov served as the starting point for subsequent studies of the semantic structure of a polysemantic word.

The generally accepted definition of the concept of polysemy can be considered the following: polysemy is the presence of two or more genetically and semantically related meanings in a linguistic sign. In this case, the key characteristic is precisely the presence of a historically determined semantic relationship between the meanings distinguished in the structure of the polysemantic.

Currently, the semantic structure of a polysemantic word is pre materially presented in the works of scientists as “a set of meanings, or lexical-semantic options (LSV)”. The term “lexical-semantic variant” was introduced into scientific use by A.I. Smirnitsky, understanding by it a two-sided linguistic sign that appears in the

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unity of sound and meaning, preserving the invariability of the lexical meaning within the limits of its inherent syntactic connections and paradigm.

The reason for the development of lexical-semantic variants of a word is semantic shifts, the emergence of figurative meanings based on the correlation of one object or phenomenon with another through a common feature. In other words, a secondary nomination occurs. The formation of derived meanings from the original ones without changing the form of the sign is usually called semantic derivation.

In this regard, the study of the phenomenon of polysemy (as a linguistic universal and “the main semasiological law of language development”) from cognitive positions, which represent an intermediate way of describing polysemy, acquires special importance: on the one hand, it is recognized that an invariant is only “some abstract idea associated with a given meaning” [16] and does not cover the entire variety of uses of a linguistic unit, and on the other hand, it is allowed to introduce an invariant meaning into a linguistic description, since an invariant can indeed exist in the mind of a native speaker.

Thus, despite the long history of research into the phenomenon of polysemy, modern science still faces a number of unresolved questions. At the same time, one should agree with the opinion of E. L. Boyarskaya that “the study of the mechanisms of emergence and recognition of polysemy leads not only to understanding the essence of semantic processes, but also to understanding the mechanisms of functioning of the human cognitive system as a whole”.

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