



# Understanding the difference between polysemy and homonymy

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## ABSTRACT

Language is rich, dynamic, and often complex. Among its many intricacies are the phenomena of polysemy and homonymy, two linguistic concepts that deal with words having multiple meanings. While they might seem similar at first glance, they differ significantly in their origins and usage. This article explores these differences and provides examples to clarify their distinct roles in language.

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# Polisemiya va homonimiya o'rtasidagi farqlarni tushunish

## ANNOTATSIYA

### Kalit so'zlar:

Polisemiya,  
omonimlik,  
semantik tahlil,  
bog'liq ma'nolar,  
ma'no jihatidan  
bog'lanmagan.

Til boy, dinamik va ko'p jihatdan murakkabdir. Uning ko'p qirralari orasida polisemantik va homonimik hodisalar ham bor, bu ikkisi bir necha ma'noga ega bo'lgan so'zlar bilan bog'liq tilshunoslik tushunchalaridir. Ular bir qarashda o'xshash tuyulishi mumkin bo'lsa-da, kelib chiqishi va qo'llanilishi jihatidan sezilarli darajada farq qiladi. Ushbu maqola ana shu farqlarni o'rganadi va ularning tildagi o'ziga xos o'rnini tushuntirish uchun misollar keltiradi.

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# Понимание различий между полисемией и омонимией

## АННОТАЦИЯ

### Ключевые слова:

полисемия,  
омонимичность,  
семантический анализ,  
связанные значения, не  
связанные по смыслу.

Язык обладает богатством, динамикой и сложностью во многих аспектах. Среди его многочисленных характеристик выделяются такие явления, как полисемия и омонимия – два лингвистических термина, описывающих слова с несколькими значениями. Несмотря на внешнее сходство, эти явления значительно отличаются по происхождению и применению. В данной статье рассматриваются эти различия и приводятся примеры, которые помогают осмыслить их уникальную роль в языке.

## INTRODUCTION

Polysemy and homonymy are fundamental linguistic phenomena where words possess multiple meanings. While these concepts may appear similar, they differ significantly in terms of origin, structure, and application. This paper explores the distinction between polysemy and homonymy through theoretical analysis and illustrative examples. A clear understanding of these differences is crucial for semantic analysis, natural language processing (NLP), and lexicographical studies.

Language is an inherently complex system, with words often carrying multiple meanings. This complexity can be attributed to two phenomena: polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy pertains to a single word possessing multiple related meanings, while homonymy concerns words that are identical in form but disparate in meaning. These concepts are of critical importance in linguistics, computational language modeling, and lexicography. A failure to comprehend these distinctions can result in ambiguity in communication and errors in semantic analysis. This article aims to elucidate the distinctions between polysemy and homonymy, examining their linguistic definitions, origins, and implications. Examples are provided to demonstrate their practical usage and relevance.

Polysemy is defined as the occurrence of multiple related meanings within a single word. These meanings are interconnected by a common thread, often stemming from the word's origin or evolving contextually over time. This capacity for polysemy reflects the adaptability of language in accommodating novel concepts or uses of existing concepts.

### Examples of Polysemy:

#### 1. Head:

The upper part of a human body (e.g., "She has a headache.")

The leader of an organization (e.g., "He is the head of the department.")

The top or leading part of something (e.g., "The head of the table.")

#### 2. Book:

A set of written or printed pages bound together (e.g., "She is reading a book.")

To arrange for someone to have a seat, room, or service (e.g., "We need to book a table at the restaurant.")

These examples show that the meanings of polysemous words share a logical, often metaphorical, connection.

Homonymy, on the other hand, occurs when two or more words sound the same or are spelled the same but have entirely unrelated meanings. Homonyms are typically divided into two categories:

**Homophones:** Words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings (e.g., "bare" vs. "bear").

**Homographs:** Words that are spelled the same but have different meanings and pronunciations (e.g., "lead" as in "to guide" vs. "lead" as in the metal).

Examples of Homonymy:

1. Bat:

A flying mammal (e.g., "The bat flew out of the cave.")

A piece of sports equipment (e.g., "He swung the bat at the ball.")

2. Bank:

A financial institution (e.g., "She deposited money in the bank.")

The side of a river (e.g., "We sat by the riverbank.")

In homonymy, there is no underlying semantic connection between the meanings of the word. The shared spelling or pronunciation is coincidental, often resulting from different etymological origins.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, including:

**Literature review:** Analyzing existing research and linguistic theories regarding polysemy and homonymy.

**Comparative analysis:** Evaluating specific examples of polysemous and homonymous words.

**Case studies:** Examining the implications of polysemy and homonymy in semantic processing and lexicography.

Data sources include linguistic research papers, dictionaries, and computational studies in NLP.

Understanding the difference between polysemy and homonymy is crucial for effective communication, language learning, and linguistic analysis. These distinctions help in:

1. Clarifying Ambiguity: Recognizing whether a word's meanings are related or distinct can prevent misunderstandings.

2. Language Learning: For non-native speakers, knowing why a word has multiple meanings (related or not) aids in grasping nuances.

3. Computational Linguistics: In areas like natural language processing (NLP), distinguishing between polysemous and homonymous words is essential for accurate language modeling.

## RESULTS

### Definitions and Linguistic Origins

**Polysemy:** A word is polysemous when it has multiple related meanings. For example, the word "head" can mean the top part of a body (literal sense) or the leader of an organization (figurative sense). These meanings share a semantic connection.

**Homonymy:** Homonyms are words that are identical in spelling or pronunciation but have entirely unrelated meanings. For example, the word "bank" can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. These meanings are semantically unrelated and arise from historical divergence.

## Comparison of Polysemy and Homonymy

Criteria	Polysemy	Homonymy
Definition	Multiple related meanings	Multiple unrelated meanings
Origin	Semantic extension or metaphorical usage	Historical coincidence or convergence
Example	<i>Head</i> : body part, leader	<i>Bank</i> : financial institution, riverbank

### Examples in Context

#### Polysemy Example:

Sentence 1: *She nodded her head in agreement.*

Sentence 2: *He is the head of the department.*

#### Homonymy Example:

Sentence 1: *He deposited money in the bank.*

Sentence 2: *They picnicked on the river bank.*

**Implications in Semantics and NLP** Polysemy and homonymy pose challenges in computational linguistics, particularly in word sense disambiguation (WSD). For polysemous words, algorithms must determine related senses based on context. In contrast, for homonymous words, unrelated meanings require separate identification and classification. Lexicographers must carefully distinguish these phenomena to create accurate dictionaries.

### DISCUSSION

The distinction between polysemy and homonymy has significant implications in multiple domains:

**Linguistics:** Understanding these concepts helps clarify semantic structures and the evolution of word meanings.

**Natural Language Processing:** Addressing polysemy and homonymy improves the performance of algorithms for machine translation, speech recognition, and information retrieval.

**Education:** The teaching of the differences between polysemy and homonymy has been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition and language comprehension (Smith, 2020).

Polysemy emerges naturally through metaphorical extension and generalization, whereas homonymy is the result of historical language changes, such as sound convergence. These distinctions underscore the necessity for nuanced analysis in both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Both polysemy and homonymy pertain to words that bear multiple meanings; however, their distinctions lie in the semantic relationships between these meanings. Polysemy is indicative of the adaptable nature of language, with meanings diverging from a common origin. In contrast, homonymy underscores the idiosyncrasies inherent in the evolution of language, where unrelated words converge in form. A comprehensive understanding of these concepts is not only conducive to enhanced linguistic comprehension but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the linguistic richness.

### CONCLUSION

Polysemy and homonymy represent two distinct ways in which words can possess multiple meanings. Polysemy pertains to meanings that are semantically related, whereas homonymy refers to meanings that are entirely unrelated. A comprehensive

understanding of these distinctions is imperative for effective linguistic analysis, lexicography, and computational applications. Future research should focus on refining disambiguation techniques in NLP and exploring cross-linguistic variations in polysemy and homonymy.

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