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LINGUISTIC AND COGNITIVE FEATURES OF POLYSEMOUS WORDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNERS' LEXICAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This article explores the linguistic and cognitive features of polysemous words and examines their role in the development of learners' lexical competence. Polysemy, as a systematic semantic phenomenon, involves multiple related meanings associated with a single lexical form, which significantly influences vocabulary depth and language use. Drawing on linguistic and cognitive-linguistic frameworks, the study analyzes the semantic organization and contextual realization of selected polysemous words in authentic English discourse. The findings suggest that polysemous meanings are cognitively structured around core senses and extended through metaphorical and contextual mechanisms, enabling learners to interpret meaning variation more effectively. The study highlights that mastery of polysemous words enhances learners' comprehension and productive skills by promoting flexible and context-sensitive vocabulary use. The article emphasizes the importance of cognitively informed and context-based approaches to teaching polysemous vocabulary in language education.

Keywords

polysemy; lexical competence; cognitive linguistics; semantic structure; vocabulary development; context-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary linguistics and language education research, lexical competence is widely recognized as a fundamental component of overall communicative competence. The ability of learners to understand, interpret, and appropriately use lexical units in diverse communicative contexts directly influences their proficiency in both receptive and productive language skills. Within this framework, polysemous words—lexical items that possess multiple related meanings—occupy a particularly significant position, as they represent a substantial proportion of the vocabulary in natural languages, especially in English. From a linguistic perspective, polysemy reflects the dynamic and systematic organization of lexical meaning. Polysemous structures emerge as a result of semantic extension, metaphorical and metonymic shifts, and contextual variation, all of which contribute to the richness and flexibility of language use. However, while polysemy enhances expressive potential, it simultaneously introduces semantic complexity that often poses challenges for language learners. Learners frequently encounter difficulties in distinguishing between related meanings of a single lexical form, particularly when meanings are context-dependent or pragmatically motivated.

Cognitive linguistics provides valuable insights into how polysemous meanings are mentally represented and processed. The organization of polysemous words in the mental lexicon is not random but structured around core meanings, prototypes, and conceptual mappings. Understanding these cognitive mechanisms is crucial for explaining how learners acquire, store, and retrieve multiple meanings of a word during language use. Consequently, examining polysemous words through both linguistic and cognitive lenses allows for a more

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comprehensive understanding of their role in lexical development. In the context of language learning, lexical competence extends beyond mere vocabulary size to include depth of vocabulary knowledge, such as semantic relations, contextual appropriateness, and flexible meaning use. Mastery of polysemous words contributes significantly to this depth, as it enables learners to interpret authentic texts more accurately and to express nuanced meanings in spoken and written communication. Despite this importance, polysemy is often underrepresented or insufficiently systematized in vocabulary instruction, leading to fragmented or superficial lexical knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Polysemy has been extensively studied in lexical semantics as a phenomenon in which a single lexical item carries multiple related meanings. Traditional linguistic approaches describe polysemy as a systematic result of semantic extension and contextual variation rather than random meaning overlap (Lyons, 1977; Cruse, 2000). These studies emphasize the structured nature of polysemous meaning within the lexicon. The cognitive linguistic perspective further explains polysemy through mental representation and conceptual organization. Scholars argue that polysemous meanings are organized around a central or prototypical sense, from which other meanings develop via metaphorical and metonymic processes (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 2008). This approach highlights how learners cognitively process and interpret meaning variation.

Research on the mental lexicon suggests that polysemous words are stored as interconnected semantic networks, enabling flexible meaning access depending on context (Aitchison, 2012). In language learning, learners typically acquire core meanings first and gradually extend their understanding to more abstract senses, which plays a crucial role in lexical development (Nation, 2013). In second language acquisition studies, lexical competence is viewed as a combination of vocabulary breadth and depth. Mastery of polysemous words contributes significantly to vocabulary depth by enhancing learners' ability to interpret and use words appropriately in different contexts (Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2010). However, polysemy often presents challenges for learners due to cross-linguistic differences and limited contextual awareness (Tyler, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design to investigate the linguistic and cognitive features of polysemous words in the development of learners' lexical competence. The analysis is based on semantic and cognitive-linguistic frameworks, focusing on the identification of core and peripheral meanings, metaphorical extensions, and contextual variation of selected polysemous words in English. Authentic language data are drawn from written and spoken corpora, including academic texts and educational materials, to examine how polysemous meanings function in real contexts. Discourse and contextual analysis are employed to interpret meaning differentiation and usage patterns, while theoretical generalization is used to relate linguistic observations to cognitive processes involved in lexical acquisition. This methodological approach enables an in-depth examination of polysemy without reliance on quantitative measures, interviews, or survey-based data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Polysemous words constitute a significant part of the English lexicon and play a crucial role in shaping learners' lexical competence. From a linguistic perspective, polysemy is

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characterized by the presence of multiple related meanings associated with a single lexical form. These meanings are not randomly distributed but are organized through systematic semantic relationships such as extension, generalization, and specialization. In authentic language use, contextual factors determine which meaning of a polysemous word is activated, requiring learners to rely on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic cues. For instance, the word "head" may denote a body part, a leader, or the top of an object, with each meaning being contextually motivated. Such examples illustrate how polysemy increases semantic density and demands higher levels of lexical awareness from learners. From a cognitive perspective, the processing of polysemous words reflects the organization of meaning in the mental lexicon. Cognitive linguistics suggests that learners store polysemous meanings around a core or prototypical sense, from which extended meanings emerge through metaphorical and metonymic associations. This cognitive structure allows learners to infer unfamiliar meanings based on conceptual similarity rather than memorizing isolated definitions. However, in the absence of sufficient exposure or contextualized input, learners often rely on the most frequent meaning, which may result in misinterpretation or restricted usage. For example, learners may associate the verb "run" primarily with physical movement, overlooking its abstract meanings in expressions such as "run a business" or "run out of time."

The development of lexical competence is closely linked to learners' ability to recognize and manipulate such meaning variation. Lexical competence involves not only knowledge of word forms but also an understanding of semantic relations, collocations, and contextual appropriateness. Mastery of polysemous words contributes to vocabulary depth by enabling learners to interpret texts more accurately and to express nuanced meanings in communication. Reading comprehension, in particular, benefits from the ability to disambiguate polysemous meanings, as many academic and authentic texts rely heavily on lexical items with multiple related senses.

Cognitive processing of polysemy also influences productive language skills. In speaking and writing, learners with limited awareness of polysemous structures may avoid using complex vocabulary or rely on simplified expressions, which restricts communicative effectiveness. In contrast, learners who develop sensitivity to contextual meaning variation demonstrate greater lexical flexibility and precision. This suggests that the acquisition of polysemous words supports not only comprehension but also the strategic use of vocabulary in different discourse contexts.

Moreover, exposure to authentic language input plays a decisive role in facilitating the acquisition of polysemous meanings. Context-rich environments, such as academic texts, media discourse, and instructional materials, provide learners with repeated encounters of the same lexical item across different contexts. These encounters strengthen cognitive associations between meanings and promote deeper lexical integration. Linguistic analysis of such data reveals that meaning differentiation is often signaled by collocational patterns and syntactic structures, which learners gradually internalize through experience.

Overall, the interaction between linguistic structure and cognitive processing underscores the importance of polysemous words in lexical development. Understanding how meanings are organized and activated allows learners to move beyond surface-level vocabulary knowledge toward a more dynamic and context-sensitive lexical competence. This integrative perspective demonstrates that polysemy is not merely a source of difficulty in language learning but a key mechanism through which lexical competence evolves.

CONCLUSION

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This study has examined the linguistic and cognitive features of polysemous words and their role in the development of learners' lexical competence. The analysis demonstrates that polysemy is a systematic linguistic phenomenon in which multiple related meanings are organized through semantic extension and contextual usage. From a cognitive perspective, polysemous meanings are structured around core senses and conceptual associations, enabling learners to process and infer meaning variation rather than relying on isolated memorization. The findings highlight that mastery of polysemous words contributes significantly to vocabulary depth, enhances reading comprehension, and supports more flexible and accurate language production. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of contextualized exposure and cognitively informed instruction in facilitating the acquisition of multiple meanings. Overall, polysemy should be viewed not merely as a source of lexical difficulty but as a key element in the progressive development of learners' lexical competence, with important implications for both linguistic theory and language pedagogy.

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