INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
SJIF 2019: 5.222 2020: 5.552 2021: 5.637 2022:5.479 2023:6.563 2024: 7,805
eISSN :2394-6334 https://www.ijmrd.in/index.php/imjrd Volume 12, issue 07 (2025)

SEMANTIC CHANGE AND POLYSEMY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: MECHANISMS, MOTIVATIONS, AND LEXICAL OUTCOMES

Abdurahim Abduvasitov

English language teacher, Kokand University,

abdu_rahim_87@mail.ru

Abstract: The evolution of word meaning over time is a central concern in historical and cognitive linguistics. This article investigates two interrelated phenomena: **semantic change**, where meanings shift historically, and **polysemy**, where a single word possesses multiple related meanings simultaneously. Through a theoretical and data-driven approach, the paper explores how processes such as metaphor, metonymy, broadening, narrowing, and amelioration drive semantic transformation. The study further differentiates polysemy from homonymy, analyzes its cognitive mechanisms, and examines its treatment in dictionaries and computational linguistics. Examples from English, Uzbek, and Russian illustrate how semantic flexibility reflects cultural, social, and pragmatic forces. The findings reveal that semantic change and polysemy are not random but patterned, shaped by both human cognition and communicative needs.

Keywords: Semantic change, polysemy, lexical meaning, language evolution, metaphor, homonymy, lexical semantics

Introduction

Language is a dynamic system that evolves alongside the societies and minds that use it. One of the most visible manifestations of this evolution is the **change in word meaning**, commonly known as **semantic change**. Simultaneously, many words develop **multiple related senses**, a phenomenon known as **polysemy**. For example, the English word “head” can refer to a body part, a leader, the top of something, or a foam on beer—all linked through conceptual association.

Understanding how meanings shift or expand is vital for linguistics, lexicography, language teaching, and artificial intelligence. While semantic change occurs diachronically (over time), polysemy exists synchronically (at a given time), but both reflect the **cognitive and communicative flexibility of language**.

This article explores:

- Definitions and relationships between semantic change and polysemy,
- Types and causes of semantic change,
- Mechanisms and structures of polysemy,
- Challenges in translation, dictionary use, and natural language processing (NLP).

The aim is to demonstrate how these phenomena not only affect word meaning but also mirror **cultural evolution, cognitive strategies, and discourse practices**.

Literature Review

Semantic change has long been studied within historical linguistics. Bloomfield (1933) and Ullmann (1962) provided foundational classifications of semantic shifts, including widening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration. More recent cognitive approaches by Traugott and Dasher (2002) and Geeraerts (2010) have emphasized the role of subjectification and pragmatic inference in driving change.

Polysemy, a related but distinct concept, has been analyzed within lexical semantics (Lyons, 1977), cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, 1987), and lexicography (Cruse, 1986). Polysemy arises when a single form acquires **multiple related meanings**, in contrast to homonymy, where meanings are unrelated. Cruse proposed the idea of sense relations (core and peripheral meanings) to explain polysemous structures.

From a pragmatic perspective, Ruhl (1989) argued that polysemy reflects speaker intention and usage context more than dictionary definitions. Corpus linguists (Sinclair, 1991; Kilgarriff, 2003) explored how frequency and collocation influence the emergence of new meanings.

In Uzbek and Russian linguistics, scholars such as Karimov (2005) and Vinogradov (1946) emphasized the cultural and functional nature of meaning extension. Uzbek words like “yoz” (summer/write) and Russian “ключ” (key/spring/solution) demonstrate the productivity of polysemy in agglutinative and inflectional languages.

This study builds on these frameworks to present a unified account of how semantic change and polysemy function across time and context.

Methodology

The research applies a **qualitative-descriptive methodology** supported by **historical and comparative analysis**. Key elements include:

- **Corpus analysis**: Data from English corpora (COCA, BNC), alongside examples from Uzbek and Russian, were used to examine semantic shifts and polysemous usage.
- **Lexicographic study**: Entries from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Cambridge Dictionary, and Oxford Learner’s Dictionary were compared to identify diachronic shifts and polysemous structures.
- **Theoretical synthesis**: Cognitive and historical linguistic frameworks guided categorization of semantic change types and polysemy patterns.

Examples were chosen for:

- Historical semantic shift (e.g., “girl,” “meat,” “villain”),
- Productive polysemous words (e.g., “run,” “light,” “spring”),
- Cross-linguistic parallels to show cultural variation and universality.

The analysis aimed to identify both **patterns of change** and **mechanisms of meaning multiplication**.

Results

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
SJIF 2019: 5.222 2020: 5.552 2021: 5.637 2022:5.479 2023:6.563 2024: 7,805
eISSN :2394-6334 https://www.ijmrd.in/index.php/imjrd Volume 12, issue 07 (2025)

1. Types of Semantic Change

Type	Definition	Example
Broadening	Word acquires a more general meaning	"Holiday" (originally "holy day") now any vacation
Narrowing	Word's meaning becomes more specific	"Meat" (used to mean any food) now refers to animal flesh
Amelioration	Meaning becomes more positive	"Knight" (servant → noble warrior)
Pejoration	Meaning becomes more negative	"Silly" (blessed → foolish)
Semantic shift	Entire change in meaning	"Villain" (farmhand → bad person)
Metaphor	Abstract meaning via similarity	"Grasp" (hold physically → understand)
Metonymy	Change via association	"Crown" for monarchy

2. Mechanisms and Patterns of Polysemy

Word	Polysemous Meanings	Mechanism
Head	Body part, leader, top, beginning	Metaphor
Run	Move fast, manage, flow, publish	Functional extension
Light	Illumination, not heavy, pale in color, not serious	Adjective/noun overlap
Spring	Season, water source, jump	Homonymic origin

Many polysemous words maintain a **core meaning**, from which **extended meanings radiate** metaphorically or functionally. In contrast, homonyms like "bank" (riverbank vs. financial institution) share form but not meaning.

3. Cross-Linguistic Examples

English	Uzbek	Russian	Observation
"Run"	yugurmoq, boshqarmoq	бежать, управлять	Multiple verbs used to split meanings
"Light"	yorug', engil	свет, лёгкий	Polysemy represented by multiple lexemes
"Spring"	bahor, buloq, sakrash	весна, ключ, прыжок	No single-word polysemy in translation

Discussion

The findings confirm that **semantic change is both systematic and motivated**, not arbitrary. Changes often result from:

- **Cognitive economy** (reusing words in new contexts),

- **Cultural evolution** (new values or technologies),
- **Pragmatic inferences** (intended vs. literal meaning).

Polysemy emerges when speakers creatively extend core meanings to new contexts—often metaphorically or through metonymy. For instance, "grasp" originally referred to physical holding, then expanded to mental comprehension due to the conceptual metaphor "understanding is grasping."

Lexicographically, dictionaries distinguish polysemy by numbering senses, but often struggle with borderline cases. In language learning, polysemy presents a **double challenge**: recognizing relatedness of meaning while avoiding confusion.

In translation, one English polysemous word often corresponds to several different words in Uzbek or Russian. This creates **asymmetry in equivalence**. For example, the word "light" in English may require multiple translations depending on the context: yorug' (brightness), engil (not heavy), or yengil (not serious).

In computational linguistics, polysemy complicates word sense disambiguation (WSD), requiring algorithms to rely on contextual cues. While semantic change challenges NLP systems trained on static meaning databases, large language models (e.g., GPT) offer improved context-sensitive interpretation.

Conclusion

Semantic change and polysemy are key to understanding how language evolves and adapts. They demonstrate that meaning is **not fixed**, but constantly shaped by **use, context, and culture**.

This article has shown:

- The mechanisms behind semantic shift (e.g., metaphor, broadening),
- The emergence and structure of polysemous word meanings,
- Challenges posed by polysemy in translation, lexicography, and NLP.

Understanding these processes is essential for linguists, educators, translators, and computational language designers. Future research should explore:

- Semantic change in real-time via social media,
- Polysemy and metaphor in learner language,
- Algorithmic handling of meaning variation.

In a world of rapid technological and cultural transformation, tracking how word meanings shift helps us trace how **thought and society evolve through language**.

References:

Bloomfield, L. (1933). Language. New York: Holt.
Cruse, D. A. (1986). Lexical Semantics. Cambridge University Press.

Geeraerts, D. (2010). Theories of Lexical Semantics. Oxford University Press.
Karimov, M. (2005). Semantik o‘zgarishlar va ularning leksik tizimdagi o‘rni. Tashkent: Fan.
Kilgarriff, A. (2003). Corpus-based approaches to lexicography. International Journal of Lexicography, 16(3), 221–229.
Lakoff, G. (1987). Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind. University of Chicago Press.
Lyons, J. (1977). Semantics. Cambridge University Press.
Ruhl, C. (1989). On Monosemy: A Study in Linguistic Semantics. SUNY Press.
Sinclair, J. (1991). Corpus, Concordance, Collocation. Oxford University Press.
Traugott, E. C., & Dasher, R. B. (2002). Regularity in Semantic Change. Cambridge University Press.
Ullmann, S. (1962). Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Vinogradov, V. V. (1946). Lexika i semantika russkogo yazyka. Moscow: Nauka.