

Course N-05.

(The meaning of words 01)

5. Polysemy meaning in linguistics

5.1. Definitions

Polysemy is a linguistic term referring to the phenomenon where a single word or phrase has multiple related meanings. It derives from the Greek words *poly* (meaning 'many') and *sēma* (meaning 'sign'). Polysemy is pervasive in natural language and is an essential aspect of language richness and flexibility. The fact that context can determine the specific meaning of a polysemous word illustrates the dynamic nature of language.

The opposite of **polysemy** is **monosemy**, which is when one word has only one meaning. Polysemy is related to **homonymy** (one word that has multiple meanings but is pronounced and/or spelt the same). Additionally, because polysemous words have more than one meaning, they can cause **lexical ambiguity**. This can happen when someone hears/reads something without the same frame of reference or contextual information as the speaker/writer. For example, 'Let's go to the **bank**!' isn't clear. Does this mean 'a river bank' or 'a financial institution'?

5.2 Examples of polysemy in semantics

Polysemy is commonly encountered in everyday language. For instance:

1. **"Paper"** can refer to a thin material made from cellulose pulp, a newspaper, an academic article, or a set of examination questions.
2. **"Head"** can mean the upper part of the human body, the top or front of something, a person in charge, or the froth on top of a glass of beer.
3. **"Bank"** can signify a financial institution, the land alongside a body of water, or a set in a row (as in a "bank of lights").

Take a look at an in-depth polysemy example in the sentences below. Find one word that they all have in common:

1. He has served his time in prison.
2. The free food is served to homeless people only.
3. This old bike has served me well.
4. The new mall will serve the community well.
5. My mom served in the medical corps.

Carries a different sense of *serve*, they all imply the same meaning of 'giving service':

1. He has served his time in prison → spend some time (in prison).
2. The free food is served for homeless people only → provide.
3. This old bike has served me well → be useful.
4. The new mall will serve the community well → provide.
5. My mom serves in the medical corps → work as.

5.3. What is the difference between polysemy and homonymy?

There is a crucial difference between polysemic words and homonymic expressions. If you read or hear two words that are written or pronounced the same but have different meanings, they are likely to be either an example of polysemy or **homonymy**. Deciding what kind of relationship the two words have can be challenging, but not once you understand the differences between these terms.

***Polysemous words**

- Refers to a word with multiple meanings.
- Are listed under a single dictionary entry.
- Must stem from the same **word class**, eg noun-noun: mouse (an animal - computer device), wings (parts of birds for flying - part of a building), beam (a line of light - a piece of wood).

***Homonymic words**

- Refers to words with different meanings but with the same pronunciation and/or **spelling**.
- Are listed under multiple dictionary entries.
- Can be verb-noun combination: to address - an address, to rock - a rock, to park - a park

<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english/lexis-and-semantics/polysemy/>