THE COGNITIVE NATURE OF POLYSEMY: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Qurbonova Kamola Abdurahmonovna
2nd year student of the Faculty of Philology,
Namangan State University
ORCID: 0009-0003-5881-4795
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21694506

Annotation: This article examines the cognitive nature of polysemy from a conceptual perspective within cognitive linguistics. The study explores how multiple meanings of a single linguistic unit are organized through conceptual structures, human experience, and cognitive mechanisms. Particular attention is given to prototype theory, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and categorization processes that explain the development of polysemous meanings. The findings demonstrate that polysemy is not an accidental feature of language but a systematic cognitive phenomenon reflecting the flexibility of human conceptualization. The research highlights the importance of cognitive approaches for understanding semantic extension and meaning construction.
Key words: cognitive linguistics, polysemy, conceptualization, prototype theory, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, semantic extension, categorization.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqolada polisemiya hodisasining kognitiv tabiati konseptual yondashuv asosida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda bir leksik birlikning ko‘p ma’noliligi inson tajribasi, konseptual tizim va kognitiv mexanizmlar orqali qanday shakllanishi yoritiladi. Shuningdek, prototip nazariyasi, konseptual metafora, metonimiya va kategoriyalash jarayonlarining polisemantik ma’nolar rivojidagi o‘rni tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar polisemiya tasodifiy hodisa emas, balki inson tafakkurining moslashuvchanligini aks ettiruvchi tizimli kognitiv jarayon ekanligini ko‘rsatadi.
Kalit so‘zlar: kognitiv tilshunoslik, polisemiya, konseptualizatsiya, prototip nazariyasi, konseptual metafora, metonimiya, semantik kengayish, kategoriyalash.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается когнитивная природа полисемии с позиций концептуального подхода в когнитивной лингвистике. Анализируется процесс формирования нескольких значений одной языковой единицы на основе концептуальных структур, человеческого опыта и когнитивных механизмов. Особое внимание уделяется теории прототипов, концептуальной метафоре, метонимии и процессам категоризации, которые объясняют развитие полисемантических значений. Результаты исследования показывают, что полисемия является не случайным явлением, а системным когнитивным процессом, отражающим особенности человеческой концептуализации.
Ключевые слова: когнитивная лингвистика, полисемия, концептуализация, теория прототипов, концептуальная метафора, метонимия, семантическое расширение, категоризация.

Introduction

Polysemy, defined as the ability of a linguistic unit to possess multiple related meanings, has long been a significant issue in semantic studies. Traditional linguistic approaches often considered polysemy as a lexical phenomenon involving the existence of several meanings within a single word. However, cognitive linguistics provides a broader perspective by viewing polysemy as a result of human conceptualization and the dynamic organization of

knowledge (Lakoff, 1987; Evans & Green, 2006). From the cognitive linguistic perspective, meanings are not isolated elements stored separately in the mental lexicon. Instead, they are interconnected through conceptual structures formed by human experience, perception, and cultural knowledge. Therefore, polysemy reflects the cognitive ability of humans to extend existing concepts and apply them to new situations (Langacker, 2008). The development of cognitive theories, including Prototype Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Conceptual Metonymy Theory, has significantly changed the understanding of polysemy. These approaches demonstrate that semantic extension occurs through systematic cognitive processes rather than random changes in language use (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rosch, 1978). This study aims to analyze the cognitive nature of polysemy through a conceptual approach and examine the role of cognitive mechanisms in the formation and interpretation of multiple meanings.

Literature Review

Cognitive approaches to polysemy have become one of the important directions in modern semantic research. Lakoff (1987) argues that lexical categories are organized around prototypes rather than fixed boundaries. This theory explains polysemy as a network of related meanings connected through similarity and conceptual relationships. Rosch's (1978) Prototype Theory demonstrated that human categorization is based on central and peripheral members rather than strict definitions. This idea has influenced cognitive semantic studies by showing that word meanings develop through associations between different conceptual domains. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which explains that metaphorical extension is a fundamental cognitive mechanism responsible for creating new meanings. Similarly, metonymy allows speakers to extend meaning by establishing conceptual relations within the same domain (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Langacker (2008) emphasized that meaning is closely related to conceptualization and cognitive processing. According to Cognitive Grammar, polysemy represents a structured semantic network where different meanings are connected through shared conceptual features. These theoretical approaches demonstrate that polysemy should be analyzed as a cognitive phenomenon rather than merely a lexical irregularity.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on descriptive, analytical, and conceptual methods. The research analyzes theoretical works and scholarly publications related to cognitive linguistics, cognitive semantics, and lexical polysemy. The analysis focuses on major cognitive theories, including Prototype Theory (Rosch, 1978), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2008). The collected theoretical data were examined through conceptual analysis to identify the cognitive mechanisms involved in semantic extension and the formation of polysemous meanings. This methodology allows for investigating polysemy as a dynamic cognitive process connected with human experience, categorization, and conceptual organization.

Results and Discussion

Polysemy is a systematic cognitive phenomenon rather than a simple accumulation of unrelated meanings. The findings show that different meanings of a polysemous word form a conceptual network connected through shared cognitive features and experiential relationships (Langacker, 2008). The study reveals that prototype structures play a significant role in organizing polysemous meanings. A central meaning often serves as a cognitive reference point from which additional meanings develop through processes of similarity and association (Rosch, 1978). This explains why certain meanings are perceived as more basic, while others are understood as extensions. The findings also confirm the importance of metaphor and metonymy in semantic development. Conceptual metaphors allow speakers to transfer knowledge from one conceptual domain to another, creating new

meanings based on human experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metonymic relations, meanwhile, enable meaning extension within the same conceptual domain through associations between related concepts (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Furthermore, the research indicates that cultural and contextual factors influence the interpretation of polysemous expressions. Different languages may organize semantic networks differently because meanings are shaped by cultural experience and conceptual systems. Therefore, cognitive analysis provides a deeper explanation of how words acquire and maintain multiple meanings.

Conclusion

This study examined the cognitive nature of polysemy through a conceptual approach within cognitive linguistics. The findings confirm that polysemy is not an arbitrary lexical phenomenon but a structured cognitive process based on human experience, categorization, and conceptual organization. The Prototype Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Cognitive Grammar provide effective frameworks for explaining how multiple meanings emerge and interact within a semantic network. These approaches reveal that language reflects the flexibility and creativity of human cognition. Future research should further investigate polysemy through cross-cultural studies, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, and artificial intelligence. Such interdisciplinary research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of semantic change and meaning construction.

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