

Meaning And Function In The English Word: Polysemy And Polyfunctionality

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Annotation. The following article examines the word as a fundamental unit of language, focusing on the semantic phenomenon of polysemy and its role in shaping meaning and communication. It provides a systematic analysis of polysemy in contrast to homonymy and explores how semantic variation enables lexical economy and contextual flexibility in English. Particular attention is given to the concept of polyfunctionality, which is treated as a grammatical phenomenon dependent on semantic multiplicity and realized through processes such as conversion and adjectivization. Drawing on established linguistic theories and illustrative examples, the article argues that polyfunctionality is possible only on the basis of polysemy, highlighting the interdependence of meaning and grammatical function in the structure of the English lexicon.

Key words: polysemy; homonymy; polyfunctionality; grammatical function; adjectivization; English lexicology

Introduction

The study of word meaning and grammatical behavior occupies a central position in modern linguistic theory, as it reveals how language mediates between human cognition and communicative practice. Among the key phenomena that illustrate the dynamic nature of the lexicon are polysemy and polyfunctionality, both of which demonstrate the capacity of a single word form to operate flexibly across different semantic and grammatical contexts. While polysemy has been extensively examined as a semantic phenomenon involving the coexistence of related meanings within one lexical unit, the issue of polyfunctionality—understood as the ability of a word to perform different grammatical functions—has often been treated separately or inconsistently across linguistic traditions.

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion by examining the relationship between polysemy and polyfunctionality in English, arguing that grammatical multifunctionality is fundamentally grounded in semantic multiplicity. Drawing on established theories in lexical semantics and grammar, the study analyzes how words shift between verbal and adjectival realizations through processes such as conversion and adjectivization. Special attention is paid to participial forms with the suffixes *-ing* and *-ed*, as they provide particularly clear evidence of the interaction between meaning and function. By integrating semantic and grammatical perspectives, the article seeks to clarify the interdependence of polysemy and polyfunctionality and to demonstrate their role in shaping the flexibility of the English lexicon.

Materials And Methods

The present study is based on a qualitative linguistic analysis of lexical and grammatical data drawn from contemporary English usage. The primary material consists of illustrative examples taken from standard English dictionaries, descriptive grammars, and established works in English lexicology and semantics. Particular attention is given to participial constructions and adjectivized forms, which are examined in both attributive and predicative positions in order to identify functional and semantic shifts.

The methodological framework combines elements of semantic analysis, grammatical classification, and contextual interpretation. Polysemy is analyzed through the identification of semantically related meanings within a single lexical unit, while polyfunctionality is examined by tracing the distribution of word forms across different syntactic environments. Comparative analysis is employed to distinguish verbal and adjectival realizations and to assess the impact of factors such as transitivity and collocational context. The study adopts a descriptive and theoretical approach, relying on established linguistic models rather than quantitative corpus methods, with the aim of providing a clear and systematic account of the interaction between meaning and grammatical function.

Results And Discussion

The word is the fundamental unit of language, occupying a central position in both linguistic structure and human communication. From a formal perspective, a word is composed of morphemes—the smallest units that carry meaning—which themselves are built from phonemes, the basic sound units that distinguish one linguistic form from another. Yet the significance of the word extends beyond its structural composition. A word becomes communicatively functional only when it possesses meaning, as meaning enables language to operate as a tool for conveying thought.

Word meaning can be described as the linguistic realization of a mental construct commonly referred to as a concept. Through this process, language connects human cognition with the external world. Meaning allows a word to designate an object, action, or phenomenon in reality, known as its referent. In this sense, words function as mediators between thought and reality, making abstract ideas communicable and shared experience possible.

One of the most prominent semantic features of natural languages is polysemy—the capacity of a single word to express multiple meanings. Polysemy reflects the economy and adaptability of language, as one form can serve different communicative purposes depending on context. Crucially, the meanings of a polysemic word are not random; they are linked by semantic relations that emerge through processes such as metaphor, metonymy, or generalization. There are multiple views on polysemy. For instance, Cruse defines polysemy as the coexistence of multiple related meanings within a single lexical item. He emphasizes *semantic relatedness* as the key criterion distinguishing polysemy from homonymy. [2] Leech presents polysemy as a natural consequence of language economy and semantic extension, highlighting metaphor and contextual shift as core mechanisms. [3] Lyons defines polysemy as a property of lexical units that have systematically related senses and contrasts it with homonymy from a structuralist perspective. [4]

The English word *field* provides a clear illustration of the phenomenon of polysemy. It may refer to an open area of land, a sports ground, a battlefield, or a sphere of professional or intellectual activity. Despite the diversity of these interpretations, they share a common conceptual foundation related to the notion of space or area. Contextual factors determine which meaning is activated in a given situation, allowing the word to remain both flexible and precise in communication.

Polysemy must be carefully distinguished from homonymy, a phenomenon in which identical word forms correspond to entirely unrelated meanings. Unlike polysemic meanings, homonyms share no semantic connection and represent separate lexical units. For example, *match* in the sense of “a competition” and *match* meaning “to correspond or fit” illustrate homonymy, as the meanings refer to different concepts and cannot be derived from a shared semantic core.

The relationship between polysemy and homonymy remains a subject of scholarly debate. One influential view holds that homonymy may arise as the final stage in the development of polysemy. As a word expands its semantic range over time, some meanings may drift so far apart that their original connection becomes opaque, leading speakers to perceive them as distinct words. An alternative approach attributes homonymy to the accidental convergence of historically independent words that evolve separately but ultimately acquire identical forms. Both perspectives underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of language, highlighting how semantic change shapes the structure of the lexicon over time. Aronold, in particular, explicitly links polyfunctionality to conversion, adjectivization, and verbalization, not to meaning alone. [1]

The phenomenon of polyfunctionality occupies an important place in the study of grammatical and lexical flexibility. Polyfunctionality may be defined as the ability of a word to perform two or more functions within a sentence and within the language system as a whole. These different functions represent distinct realizations of the word in actual speech. As a result, a polyfunctional word is capable of functioning as more than one part of speech, depending on its syntactic position and contextual environment.

A crucial characteristic of polyfunctionality is that a word cannot realize multiple functions simultaneously. At any given moment in speech, only one of the potential functions is activated. The choice of function is determined by collocational and syntactic conditions, such as the word’s position in the sentence, its grammatical surroundings, and its semantic relations with neighboring elements. This contextual dependency highlights the dynamic interaction between form, meaning, and function in language use.

A shift in the function of a polyfunctional word presupposes a process of grammatical transfer from one part of speech to another. This phenomenon had been already addressed by scholars. For instance,

Marchand treats multifunctionality as a result of conversion, a grammatical process distinct from polysemy. [5] In such cases, the word departs from the paradigm of its original grammatical class, loses the categories that are typical of that class, and acquires new grammatical and semantic features. This process demonstrates that parts of speech should not be viewed as rigid and impermeable categories, but rather as flexible and historically evolving classifications. Quirk and colleagues discuss category overlap and functional shift, emphasizing that grammatical multifunctionality is driven by syntactic position besides the meaning itself. [7]

A particularly illustrative example of polyfunctionality can be found in English words containing the suffix *-ing*. These forms exhibit at least two distinct realizations. In their primary verbal realization, *-ing* forms function as verbal word-forms and belong to the paradigm of the verb, where they appear as Participle I. In this role, they retain verbal properties such as the ability to express action and to govern objects or modifiers, as in the sentence: *I see a walking man*.

A second realization occurs when certain *-ing* forms lose their verbal grammatical categories and become independent parts of speech, most commonly adjectives. In such cases, the word no longer denotes an action in progress but rather a stable characteristic of an object, as in: *He usually takes a walking stick with him*. This process is known as adjectivization, that is, the transfer of a verbal word-form into the class of adjectives. The possibility of adjectivization serves as clear evidence of the polyfunctional nature of *-ing* forms.

From a semantic perspective, adjectivized *-ing* forms are often marked by a noticeable connotative coloring. Unlike their verbal counterparts, these adjectival realizations tend to express figurative, evaluative, or stylistically expressive meanings. Examples such as *an absorbing novel* (meaning “interesting”) or *shining memories* (meaning “impressive” or “memorable”) illustrate how the shift in function is accompanied by a shift in semantic emphasis, moving from objective description to subjective interpretation.

Another important group of polyfunctional words in English includes forms with the suffix *-ed*. In their verbal realization, these forms function as Participle II and remain within the verbal paradigm. In this case, the primary focus lies on the fact or result of an action rather than on a descriptive quality of a noun. For example, in the sentence *The old TV, bruised by many years, still looked pretty*, the *-ed* form retains a clear connection to the verbal notion of an action performed over time.

However, *-ed* forms may also undergo adjectivization. When such words appear in post-positive positions or in predicative constructions, they gradually lose their verbal characteristics and acquire adjectival properties. This transition involves both quantitative and qualitative changes, as the word becomes less dependent on verbal categories such as tense or voice. In the sentence *He stared at him, completely astonished*, the *-ed* form functions as an adjective describing a psychological state rather than an action.

In many cases, adjectivized *-ed* forms become part of a nominal predicate, where verbal and nominal elements are combined to express a complex predicative meaning. Such constructions further demonstrate the fluid boundaries between parts of speech and confirm that polyfunctionality is a fundamental mechanism contributing to the expressive and structural richness of language.

The process of adjectivization is influenced not only by contextual and grammatical factors, but also by the transitivity of the verb from which the adjectival form is derived. Transitivity plays a significant role in determining the degree to which a verbal form acquires adjectival characteristics. Adjectives derived from transitive verbs tend to display a more pronounced adjectival nature, as the underlying action is directed toward an object and results in a clear, stable property. For example, in the collocation *deserted city*, the adjective originates from the transitive verb *to desert* and denotes a permanent or characteristic state of the noun, rather than an action in progress.

By contrast, adjectives derived from intransitive verbs generally exhibit weaker adjectival features. Since intransitive verbs do not imply an object affected by the action, the resulting adjectival forms often retain traces of verbal semantics. This can be observed in expressions such as *a returned man*, where the adjective preserves a strong connection to the action itself and appears less detached from its verbal origin. Thus, transitivity contributes to the degree of semantic independence that an adjectivized form can achieve.

The relationship between polysemy and polyfunctionality becomes especially evident in this context. Polyfunctionality is directly dependent on polysemy, as the ability of a word to perform different grammatical functions presupposes the existence of multiple meanings. In other words, a word can only function in more

than one grammatical role if it possesses a semantic structure rich enough to support such variation. Without semantic differentiation, functional differentiation is impossible.

Different realizations of a polyfunctional word—such as verbal and adjectivized forms—not only fulfill different syntactic roles as parts of speech, but also express different semantic meanings. This semantic divergence is a crucial aspect of polyfunctionality. When a word shifts from one realization to another, it undergoes not merely a grammatical transformation, but a semantic reconfiguration as well. The change in function is accompanied by a change in conceptual content, which results in the emergence of distinct but related meanings.

This interaction between grammatical function and meaning can be clearly illustrated by the following examples. In the phrase *burning leaves*, the word *burning* functions as Participle I and retains its verbal realization, denoting an ongoing action—something that is actively burning. In contrast, in the phrase *burning wish*, the same form functions as an adjective and acquires a figurative meaning, expressing intensity or emotional strength rather than a literal action. These two realizations differ both grammatically and semantically, yet they remain connected through a shared conceptual basis.

Unlike polysemy, which concerns the multiplicity of meanings within one lexical unit, polyfunctionality refers to the multiplicity of grammatical functions realized by the same word form in different syntactic contexts. [6]

Consequently, the different realizations of a polyfunctional word should be regarded as polysemic rather than identical in meaning. Each realization represents a distinct semantic variant that corresponds to a specific grammatical function. This observation leads to an important conclusion: a word can be polyfunctional only if it is polysemic. Polysemy provides the semantic foundation that enables a word to shift between grammatical categories and to develop multiple realizations. In the absence of polysemy, there can be no functional variation, no realizations, and therefore no polyfunctionality.

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