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# POLYSEMY AND SEMANTIC CHANGE IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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**Abstract**

This study examines polysemy in the Arabic language, focusing on its forms, mechanisms of semantic change, and comparison with Uzbek. Polysemy is understood as the coexistence of several semantically related meanings within a single lexical form, with secondary meanings developing from an underlying core meaning. The article considers the prevalence of polysemy in Arabic and contrasts it with the comparatively limited occurrence of monosemy. It also discusses the historical and conceptual explanations of this phenomenon, including the relationship between the limited inventory of linguistic forms and the unlimited range of meanings. Particular attention is given to semantic narrowing and broadening, illustrated by Arabic lexical items whose meanings have changed in religious, social, and everyday contexts. The study further addresses semantic influence resulting from contact with other languages and the adoption of foreign phraseological models. These examples demonstrate how historical experience, culture, and intercultural contact contribute to lexical-semantic development.

Keywords: Polysemy, monosemy, Arabic language, lexical semantics, semantic change, semantic narrowing, semantic broadening, linguistic borrowing.

## Introduction

Polysemous words refer to objects and phenomena that are either unrelated or only loosely associated with one another. However, their common feature lies in the semantic proximity of their meanings, as the various meanings of a polysemous word are motivated by a shared semantic basis; in other words, they derive from a single primary meaning. Such words express meanings that are

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semantically interrelated and hierarchically dependent on one another. Although the meaning of a polysemous word may change, the identity of its lexical form remains unaffected. As noted, "Polysemy arises not only from the relationships between objects, phenomena, and concepts in reality, but also from the interconnections that exist between meanings themselves." [9, 64] The subordination of certain lexical meanings to one another influences both the function and the development of polysemous words.

## Methods and Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the phenomenon of polysemy in the Arabic language, focusing on its linguistic characteristics, semantic development, and historical and cultural determinants. The research is based on descriptive, comparative, semantic, and contextual analysis methods. Particular attention is given to the study of lexical meanings, including semantic narrowing, semantic broadening, and figurative meaning المَجَازُ(al-majāz). Examples of Arabic polysemous words are examined through lexical and semantic analysis to identify the relationships between their original and derived meanings. Furthermore, the study considers the influence of Islamic terminology, historical developments, and interlinguistic contact on changes in Arabic lexical semantics. The findings are interpreted through a comparative examination of Arabic lexical expressions and their corresponding meanings in other languages, drawing on Arabic linguistic literature and relevant lexicographical sources.

Polysemy is a widespread phenomenon in the Arabic language, whereas monosemy (the existence of a single meaning) is relatively uncommon. It should also be emphasized that polysemy is particularly characteristic of words frequently used by Arabic speakers.

Historically, polysemy has been regarded as a linguistic phenomenon arising from the imbalance between the limited number of linguistic signs (words) available in a language and the unlimited number of meanings that need to be expressed. In essence, "each meaning should ideally have a separate linguistic form of its own; however, making this possible is not feasible.". [9, 65] Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and his followers explained the phenomenon of polysemy in words as follows:

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"Each meaning cannot be expressed by a separate word, since the number of meanings that can be conceived is potentially unlimited. However, because words are composed of letters and the number of letters is finite, the number of possible words is also limited." [9, 65] A word formed from a limited number of elements is itself limited in quantity. However, something limited in number cannot express an unlimited range of things; otherwise, the number of things being expressed would also have to be restricted. This is precisely why polysemous words became necessary in language.

In Arabic, polysemous words are referred to as الأسماء المشتركة(al-asmāʾ al-mushtaraka). The different meanings expressed by polysemous words are known as أَلْعَيْنُ، أَلْجَوْنُ، وَأَللَّوْنُ.

The emergence of new meanings in words may result from the transfer of a word as a name to another object, or from a change in the conceptual content associated with an object or concept when a word, traditionally used to refer to one object or phenomenon, is applied to another. Furthermore, when a word is used as a technical term, its designation is transferred to a specific object. Similarly, the meanings of verbal derivatives (such as maṣdars (verbal nouns), participles, and other derivatives) may shift from abstract or general meanings to the semantic designation of specific objects.

Early Arab linguists also pointed out that the use of words in figurative senses (majāz) leads to semantic change.

In Arabic, the use of words in their original and literal meanings is referred to as أَلْحَقِيقَةُ(al-ḥaqīqah). Ibn Jinni defined this concept as "the use of words in accordance with their primary meanings." [9, 66] The use of a word in a figurative or metaphorical sense is referred to in Arabic as المَجَازُ(al-majāz).

Semantic Narrowing and Broadening in the Arabic Language

Many Islamic religious terms have also emerged through the process of semantic narrowing. In this process, the lexical meaning that a word originally possessed before the advent of Islam became more restricted following the spread of Islam and the subsequent changes in social life, eventually acquiring a specialized meaning associated with a particular concept. For example:

- حَجَّ– Originally used in the sense of "to set out for somewhere" or "to depart", the meaning of this word became narrower after the advent of Islam and came to refer exclusively to performing the Hajj pilgrimage.

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- مُؤْمِنٌ– Originally denoted “a person who believes in something”. Today, however, it is used in the specific religious sense of “a believer” or “a person who has embraced the Islamic faith”.

In contrast, semantic broadening represents the opposite process. In this phenomenon, the semantic scope of a word expands, shifting from a narrow, specific meaning to a broader one. For example:

- سُفْرَةٌ– Formerly used exclusively in reference to food served to travellers, this word is now used more generally to mean a “dining table” or “table laid for a meal”. [7, 12]
- سَجَّادَةٌ– Originally meaning a “prayer mat” or “small carpet intended for performing religious worship”, this word has undergone semantic broadening and is now also used to refer to carpets in general.
- مَوْرِدٌ– Previously used specifically in reference to a source of water, this word now conveys the broader meaning of a “source” or “resource”.
- زَيْتٌ– Originally used to denote olive oil, this word is now applied to different types of oil in general.
- زَمِيلٌ– Initially referred to “a person travelling on the same camel with someone else” or “a person working alongside another”. Over time, its meaning broadened, and it is now commonly used in the senses of “colleague” and “fellow student”. [8, 89]
- مُخْضَرَمٌ– Originally applied to a poet who had lived both before and during the advent of Islam, the term subsequently acquired a broader meaning and came to describe anyone who had lived through two different historical periods.

The Influence of other languages on semantic change.

Furthermore, changes in word meanings may also occur under the direct influence of other languages. Such changes involve the semantic convergence of an Arabic word with a foreign-language expression that denotes an equivalent concept. In addition, Arabic words whose semantic structures share points of correspondence with other languages may partially or entirely reproduce the meanings of foreign expressions.

For example, the following expressions represent literal translations or semantic calques of foreign-language expressions:

- كَلِمَةٌ مُتَقَاطِعَةٌ– “crossword”, modelled on the English expression crossword.

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• رَوْضَةُ الأَطْفَالِ– “kindergarten”, corresponding to the French expression jardin d’enfants.
• حَقِيقَةٌ عَارِيَةٌ– “the naked truth”, meaning an undisguised or absolute truth.
• مَنْظَارٌ وَرْدِيٌّ– “rose-coloured glasses”, referring figuratively to a way of viewing everything in an overly optimistic or favourable light.

Such expressions demonstrate how foreign-language semantic structures and figurative meanings can be reproduced through literal translation in Arabic.

## Conclusion

Polysemy is a widespread linguistic phenomenon in Arabic. The majority of words in this language are polysemous, whereas monosemous words constitute a comparatively smaller proportion. This can readily be observed by consulting almost any Arabic dictionary.

The polysemy of Arabic words and the semantic changes they undergo are closely connected with the historical development of the Arab people. The formation of polysemous words and the transition of lexical meanings from one sense to another have been directly influenced by the social environment, worldview, cultural development, and traditions that characterized different periods of Arab history. At the same time, the influence of other languages has also played a significant role in this process.

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