



THE HISTORICAL MECHANISMS OF THE FORMATION OF POLYSEMANTIC MEANINGS IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical mechanisms responsible for the formation of polysemantic meanings in the Russian language from the perspective of lexical semantics and historical linguistics. The study analyzes how multiple related meanings arise and develop within a single lexical unit as a result of long-term linguistic evolution. The article explores the principal mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of polysemantic structures, including metaphorical and metonymic transfer, semantic generalization and specialization, functional transfer, and contextual reinterpretation. The analysis shows that polysemy in Russian is not a случайное накопление значений but a structured semantic system in which primary meanings generate secondary ones through systematic semantic relations. Ultimately, the historical development of polysemantic meanings reflects the adaptive nature of language and its capacity to encode evolving human experience.

The historical mechanisms responsible for the formation of polysemantic meanings in the Russian language represent an important field of research within lexical semantics and historical linguistics. Polysemy, defined as the coexistence of several interconnected meanings within a single lexical unit, reflects the dynamic evolution of the lexical system and the interaction between language, culture, and cognition. The Russian language, characterized by its rich literary tradition and long historical development, provides a particularly productive environment for the emergence and development of polysemantic structures. Consequently, the analysis of historical mechanisms that lead to the formation of multiple meanings in Russian words contributes not only to understanding semantic evolution but also to revealing the cultural and conceptual worldview embedded in the language.

Many scholars have emphasized that polysemy is a natural and inevitable result of linguistic development. In Russian linguistic tradition, significant contributions to the study of semantic change and polysemy were made by scholars such as V. V. Vinogradov, A. A. Potebnya, and D. N. Shmelev. For example, A. A. Potebnya argued that the development of multiple meanings in words is closely connected with the psychological processes of human thinking and perception. According to Potebnya, a word initially emerges with a concrete meaning, yet gradually expands its semantic scope through associative connections and

metaphorical reinterpretations [4]. Furthermore, D. N. Shmelev considered polysemy to be one of the central characteristics of the lexical system, noting that the semantic structure of a word forms a complex hierarchy in which primary and secondary meanings are historically interconnected [5, 4-17].

One of the most significant historical mechanisms in the formation of polysemantic meanings in Russian is metaphorical transfer. Metaphor involves the extension of meaning from one conceptual domain to another based on perceived similarity. In the Russian language, metaphorical processes have played a crucial role in the semantic development of many lexical units. For instance, the word “корень” (root) originally referred to the underground part of a plant. However, through metaphorical extension it acquired additional meanings such as the root of a word in linguistics or the root of a problem in abstract discourse. In this case, the physical concept of the root as the fundamental part of a plant becomes associated with the idea of origin or foundation in more abstract contexts. Over time, these metaphorical meanings become conventionalized and integrated into the lexical system as stable semantic components.

Closely related to metaphor is the mechanism of metonymic transfer, which also plays an essential role in the development of polysemy in Russian. Metonymy operates on the basis of association or contiguity between objects or concepts within the same conceptual field. For example, the Russian word “язык” possesses several meanings, including “tongue,” “language,” and “speech.” Historically, the physical organ of speech became associated with the abstract concept of language itself. As a result, the same lexical unit came to represent both the anatomical object and the system of communication. Such semantic shifts arise because speakers tend to link closely related phenomena in their cognitive and communicative experience.

Another important historical mechanism contributing to polysemy in Russian is semantic generalization, also known as widening of meaning. This process occurs when a word expands its semantic scope to include a broader range of referents. For example, the word “товарищ” originally referred to a companion in trade or partnership, yet over time its meaning broadened to include any companion, friend, or associate. During the Soviet period, the word acquired an additional political meaning as a universal form of address among citizens. This example demonstrates how historical and sociopolitical contexts can significantly influence the semantic expansion of words.

Conversely, semantic specialization or narrowing also contributes to the formation of polysemy. In this process, a word that originally possessed a broader meaning gradually develops a more specific sense. For instance, the word “пища” historically referred to any form of nourishment but later became associated with more formal or literary contexts. During intermediate stages of such semantic change, the coexistence of both broad and specialized meanings within the same lexical unit creates polysemantic structures.

Furthermore, functional transfer represents another important mechanism in the historical development of polysemy in Russian. As new technologies, institutions, and social practices emerge, existing lexical units are frequently adapted to designate new phenomena. For example, the word “окно” traditionally referred to an opening in a wall designed to allow light and air into a building. However, with the development of computer technology, the

same word began to denote a graphical interface element on a computer screen. This semantic extension reflects the adaptability of language and the tendency to reuse familiar lexical items in new contexts.

In addition to these mechanisms, contextual reinterpretation and elliptical usage also contribute to the development of polysemy. Words often acquire new meanings through repeated use in specific contexts where certain elements of a phrase are omitted. Over time, speakers begin to interpret the remaining word as an independent lexical meaning. This process illustrates how syntactic reduction and pragmatic inference can gradually produce new semantic interpretations.

Moreover, cultural and literary traditions have historically played a significant role in the expansion of polysemy in Russian. The rich heritage of Russian literature, including the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, has contributed to the figurative and expressive development of many words. Literary language frequently introduces metaphorical and symbolic meanings that later become integrated into everyday speech. Consequently, the interaction between literary creativity and linguistic usage serves as a powerful catalyst for semantic innovation [2, 172-207].

Another important factor influencing polysemy is the interaction between different functional styles of the Russian language. Scientific discourse, political language, colloquial speech, and artistic expression each contribute to the emergence of specialized meanings. For example, the word “поле” originally referred to an open area of land, yet in scientific contexts it developed meanings such as “магнитное поле” (magnetic field) or “поле исследования” (field of study). These new meanings arise through metaphorical abstraction and conceptual extension.

From a cognitive perspective, polysemy in Russian can be viewed as a network of interconnected meanings organized around a central semantic core. The primary meaning of a word typically emerges earlier in the history of the language and serves as the foundation for subsequent semantic extensions. Secondary meanings develop gradually through metaphorical, metonymic, or contextual mechanisms while remaining conceptually related to the original sense. This network structure allows speakers to interpret multiple meanings depending on the communicative context.

Thus, the historical formation of polysemantic meanings in Russian demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of the lexical system. Rather than representing ambiguity or disorder, polysemy reflects the ability of language to respond to changing communicative needs and cultural realities. Through processes such as metaphor, metonymy, semantic generalization, specialization, functional transfer, and contextual reinterpretation, the Russian language continuously expands its semantic resources while preserving connections between older and newer meanings.

In conclusion, the emergence of polysemy in the Russian language results from a complex interaction of historical, cognitive, cultural, and communicative factors. Theoretical insights from Russian linguists demonstrate that polysemy represents a systematic and historically motivated phenomenon rather than an accidental accumulation of meanings. Consequently, the study of historical mechanisms of polysemantic development provides

valuable insights into the evolution of the Russian lexical system and the conceptual processes underlying human language..

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