



# POLYSEMY IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE SEMANTIC FIELD: A PROTOTYPE-BASED ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT “MOTHER”

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19217248>

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 20<sup>th</sup> March 2026

Accepted: 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2026

Online: 24<sup>th</sup> March 2026

## KEYWORDS

*polysemy, semantic field,  
prototype theory, radial  
category, chain polysemy,  
concept “mother”, cognitive  
linguistics*

## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines polysemy as one of the fundamental semantic relations within the structure of the semantic field from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. The study focuses on radial and chain models of polysemy as described in the works of Yu. D. Apresyan and I. M. Kobozeva. Special attention is given to George Lakoff's prototype theory and his interpretation of the concept “mother” as a radial category. The paper also considers Anna Wierzbicka's critical approach, emphasizing the existence of a universal semantic core. The analysis demonstrates that polysemy should be interpreted through an integrated model combining both prototype-based and hierarchical principles.*

## Introduction

In contemporary linguistics, the study of meaning is increasingly associated with cognitive processes that underlie language use and structure. One of the most significant phenomena reflecting this interaction is polysemy — the ability of a lexical unit to possess multiple interconnected meanings. Polysemy is not only a linguistic property but also a manifestation of conceptual organization and categorization of human experience.

According to L. A. Novikov, polysemy can be defined as the ability of a word to have several interconnected meanings (sememes), allowing a single lexical unit to refer to different classes of objects, phenomena, actions, processes, qualities, and relations that together form a unified semantic structure [4, p.190]. These meanings are context-dependent, and their interpretation requires taking into account the specific communicative environment. Without context, it is impossible to determine which meaning is actualized in a given utterance.

Thus, polysemy plays a crucial role in the organization of the semantic field, serving as a mechanism that reflects both linguistic structure and cognitive processes.

## Main Part

From a structural perspective, polysemy can be organized in different ways. I. M. Kobozeva distinguishes between two principal types of polysemy: radial and chain, developing the ideas of Yu. D. Apresyan [as cited in 2, p. 169].

Radial polysemy is characterized by the presence of a central (core) meaning from which all other meanings derive. These meanings are directly connected to the core but may not be directly related to each other. In contrast, chain polysemy involves a sequential

relationship in which each meaning is linked only to the previous one, resulting in a gradual semantic shift and possible weakening of the connection to the original meaning.

From the standpoint of prototype theory, these two types of polysemy reflect different cognitive mechanisms of meaning extension. Chain polysemy illustrates a step-by-step departure from the initial prototype, whereas radial polysemy maintains a strong connection between peripheral meanings and a central prototype.

This interpretation corresponds to George Lakoff's theory of radial categories, which challenges the classical model of categorization based on necessary and sufficient features [3, p.128]. Lakoff argues that categories are structured around prototypes — the most representative members — rather than rigid definitional boundaries.

As an illustrative example, Lakoff analyzes the concept of "mother," demonstrating that it cannot be defined through a single set of essential features. Instead, it encompasses multiple cognitive models, including the biological model (birth giver), the genetic model, the nurturing model, and social or cultural models [3, pp.107-110]. These models may overlap or conflict, resulting in a category with blurred boundaries and a radial structure.

However, this approach has been critically examined by Anna Wierzbicka, who argues that Lakoff's model overlooks important semantic distinctions [1, p 208]. According to Wierzbicka, the unmarked use of the word "mother" universally refers to the biological mother, while other meanings require explicit specification. Therefore, the biological meaning constitutes the semantic core, and all other meanings are derived and peripheral.

Wierzbicka also highlights the semantic difference between expressions such as "my real mother" and "she is like a mother to me," demonstrating that not all meanings have equal status within the category. This observation suggests the existence of a hierarchical semantic structure.

A cognitive-semantic analysis supports this perspective. The concept of "mother" is fundamentally rooted in the biological act of childbirth and the primary emotional and physical bond between mother and child. This bond is formed at the earliest stages of human experience and serves as a basis for further conceptual extensions.

Although metaphorical and cultural meanings exist, they do not replace the core meaning but develop around it. Thus, the semantic structure of the concept "mother" combines both radial (prototype-based) and hierarchical features.

### **Conclusion**

Polysemy represents a complex interaction between linguistic structure and cognitive processes. The analysis of the concept "mother" demonstrates that polysemous categories can exhibit both radial and hierarchical organization.

While prototype theory successfully explains the flexibility and variability of meanings, it does not fully account for the presence of a universal semantic core. The biological meaning of "mother" functions as this core, whereas other meanings represent peripheral extensions.

Therefore, an adequate description of polysemy requires an integrative approach that combines cognitive and structural principles. Such a perspective allows for a more precise understanding of semantic organization within the language system.

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