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The Role of L1 in EFL Learners' Meaning Construal of Polysemous Nouns



ALT 8

Sashka Jovanovska, PhD,

Assistant professor at the Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Philology, Goce Delcev University, Stip, Republic of North
Macedonia, e-mail: saska.jovanovska@ugd.edu.mk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3965-8697>

The Role of L1 in EFL Learners' Meaning Construal of Polysemous Nouns

Mastering vocabulary is a major challenge for learners of foreign languages, especially for those aiming for near-native proficiency in English. One difficult aspect is understanding polysemous nouns—words with multiple related meanings. This presentation explores the role of Macedonian as the learners' first language (L1) in shaping their comprehension of polysemous nouns in English as a foreign language (EFL).

The study investigates how learners may transfer meanings from their L1 and whether they differentiate between metonymical and metaphorical meanings, which can influence vocabulary acquisition.



Theoretical Background on Polysemy and Homonymy

Polysemy

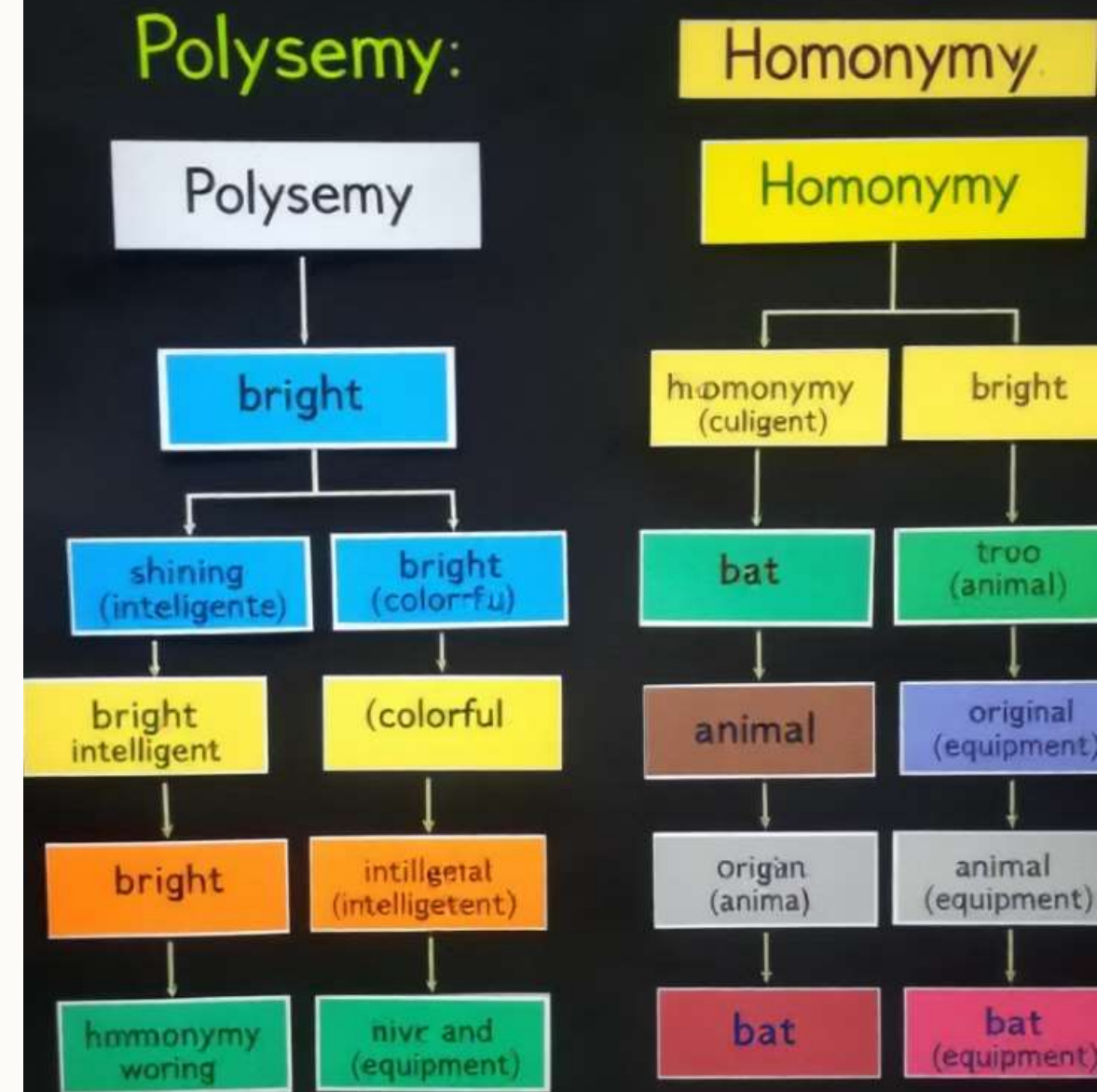
Refers to a single lexical item having multiple related meanings. Example: “head” meaning a body part or a leader.

Homonymy

Involves two distinct meanings sharing the same form but unrelated semantically, such as “bat” the animal and “bat” the sports equipment.

Importance in Language Learning

Understanding polysemy challenges learners to grasp core and extended senses of words rather than treating them as separate units.



Metonymical vs. Metaphorical Extensions

Metonymical Meanings

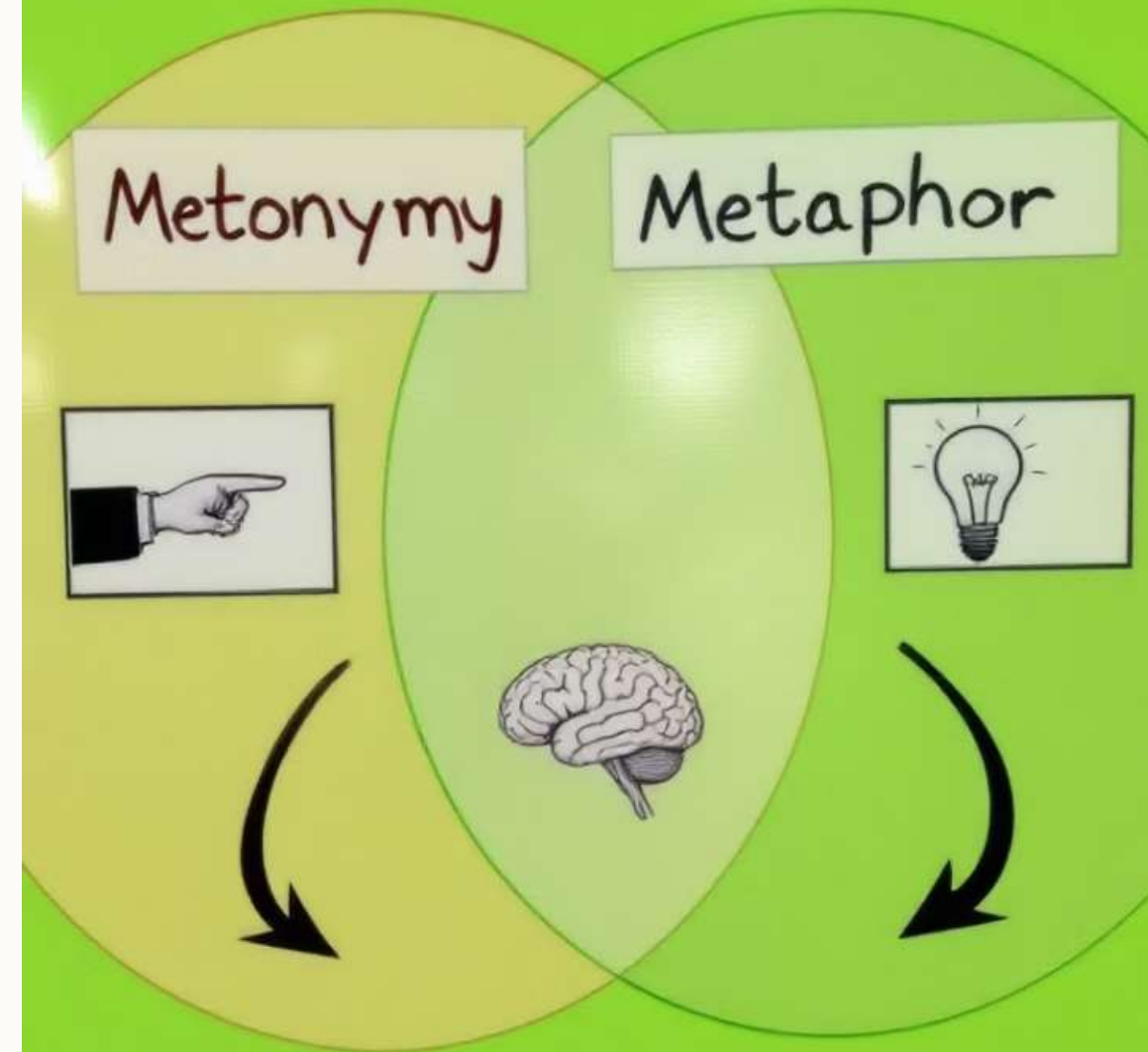
Derived through association or contiguity, e.g., "the White House" referring to the US government.

Impact on Acquisition

Learners may find metonymical meanings easier to grasp due to direct associations, while metaphorical senses require more abstract thinking.

Metaphorical Meanings

Based on conceptual similarity or analogy, such as "time is money".



Theories of language transfer

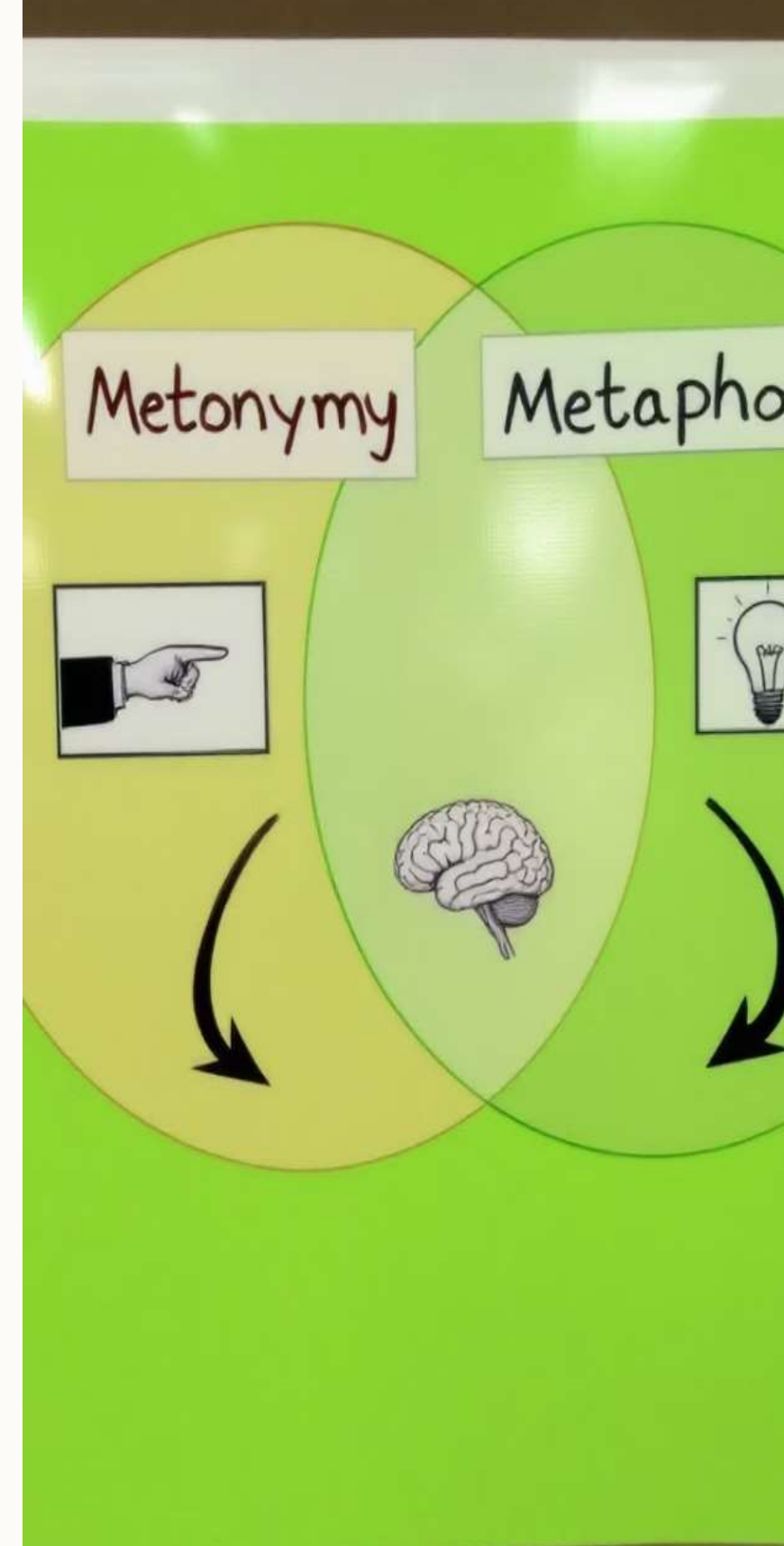
Contrastive Analysis Theory (CAT) refers to comparing the native and target languages. Some of the main viewpoints of this theory are that

- 1) the similar learning content of two languages leads to positive transfer,
- 2) the different learning content of two languages leads to negative transfer, and
- 3) a certain language feature in the target language can be absent, which causes difficulties for second language learners.

The study

As polysemous words often have a large number of meanings, it cannot be expected that all of the meanings of all polysemous words can be taught in a formal setting, which leads to a conclusion that some have to be learned outside of the classroom. Some researchers argue that high-frequency words tend to be more polysemous. This is because frequently used words often have a longer history of usage and interaction with various contexts, which can lead to the development of multiple meanings over time. These words become versatile and adapt to different situations, acquiring additional senses. On the other hand, some linguistic studies suggest that there might not be a strong correlation between word frequency and polysemy.

While certain high-frequency words may indeed be polysemous, there are also examples of low-frequency words with multiple meanings. Because the point of this study was to investigate the understanding of multiple meanings of frequently used words, the present study used words whose core senses the participants should be familiar with to test their knowledge of those words' extended senses.



The aim

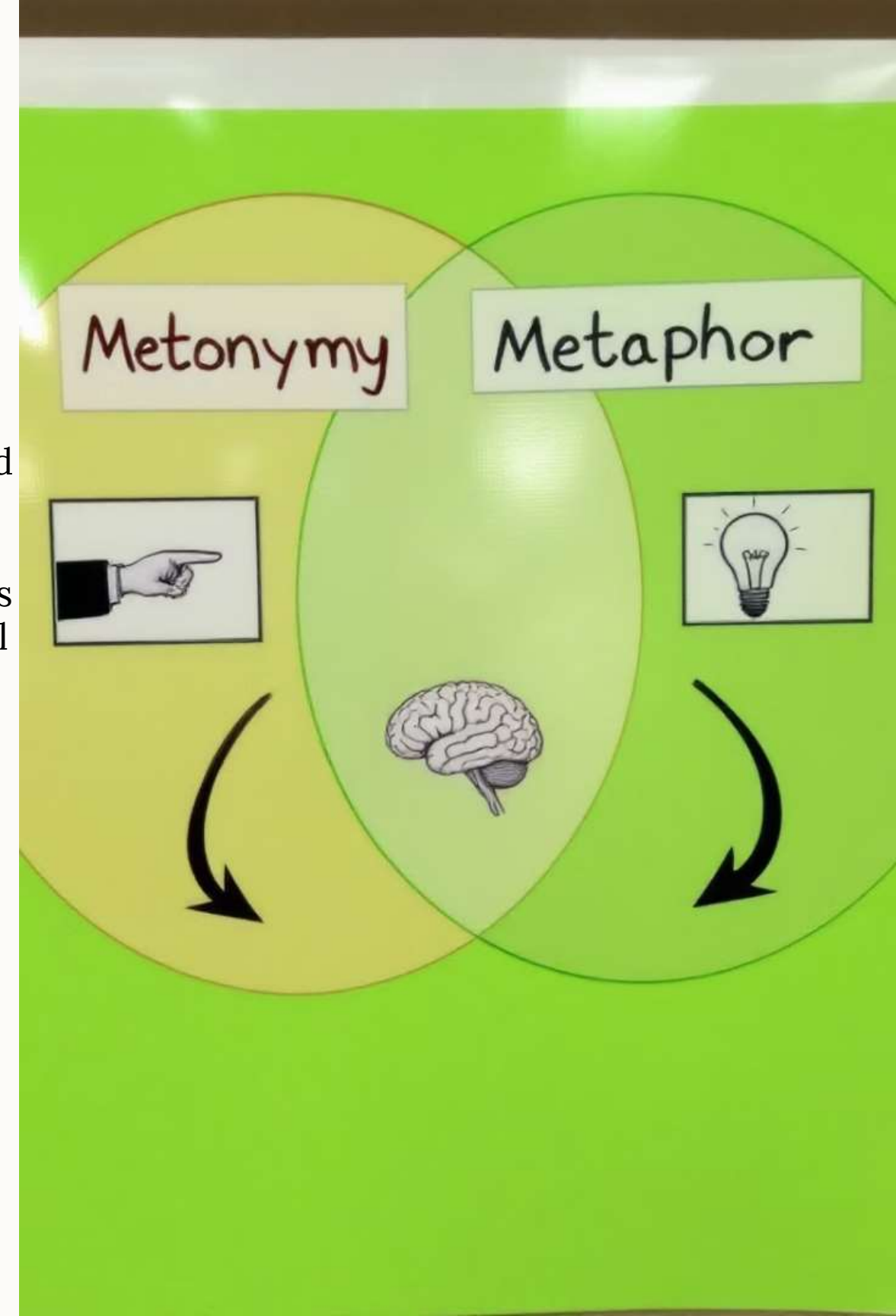
This study closely examines the mechanisms through which one's first language (L1) can either support or hinder the acquisition and development of polysemous L2 words. Modelled on Ozturk's 2018 paper, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Are core senses of polysemous nouns in English understood more easily by EFL learners than extended senses, and metonymically extended senses than metaphorically extended senses?
2. Are extended senses of polysemous L2 nouns with parallel L1 senses understood more easily by EFL learners than those without? Is there a difference between metonymical and metaphorical extensions?
3. In the absence of L2 evidence, do EFL learners transfer meanings of polysemous words from their L1? Is there a difference between metonymical and metaphorical extensions?

The study was conducted among 122 high school students, in 3 separate high schools: technical school, the school of hotel and tourism management and hospitality, and grammar school, which also has a language track. The study was conducted among the students in their second and third grade of high school, which corresponds to approximately 16 and 17 years of age.

The instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 38 sentences with underlined test words. The task required from the participants to decide whether they thought the underlined word was used correctly or incorrectly.





L1 Influence on Meaning Construal

1

Mapping Meanings

Learners often apply L1 meanings to English polysemous nouns.

2

Transfer Accuracy

Correct transfer facilitates comprehension; errors may cause confusion or loss of nuance.

3

Role of Cultural Context

Cultural differences affect how meanings extend metaphorically or metonymically.

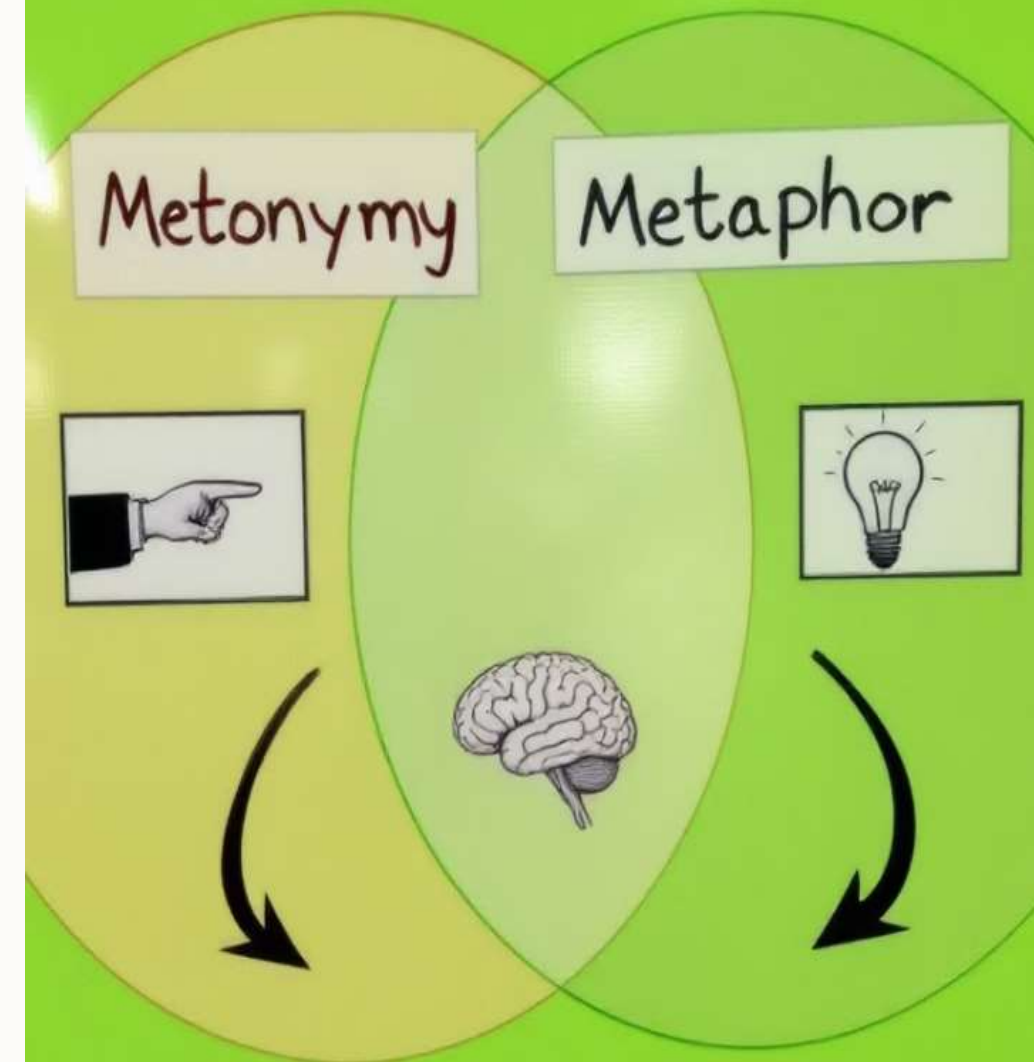


Results and discussion

In each pair, the first sentence contains the polysemous noun in its core sense, and the second sentence is where the extended sense of a polysemous noun is used. As previously described, the participants' task was to look at the underlined word in the sentence and determine whether they think this word sounds correct or incorrect in the English language.

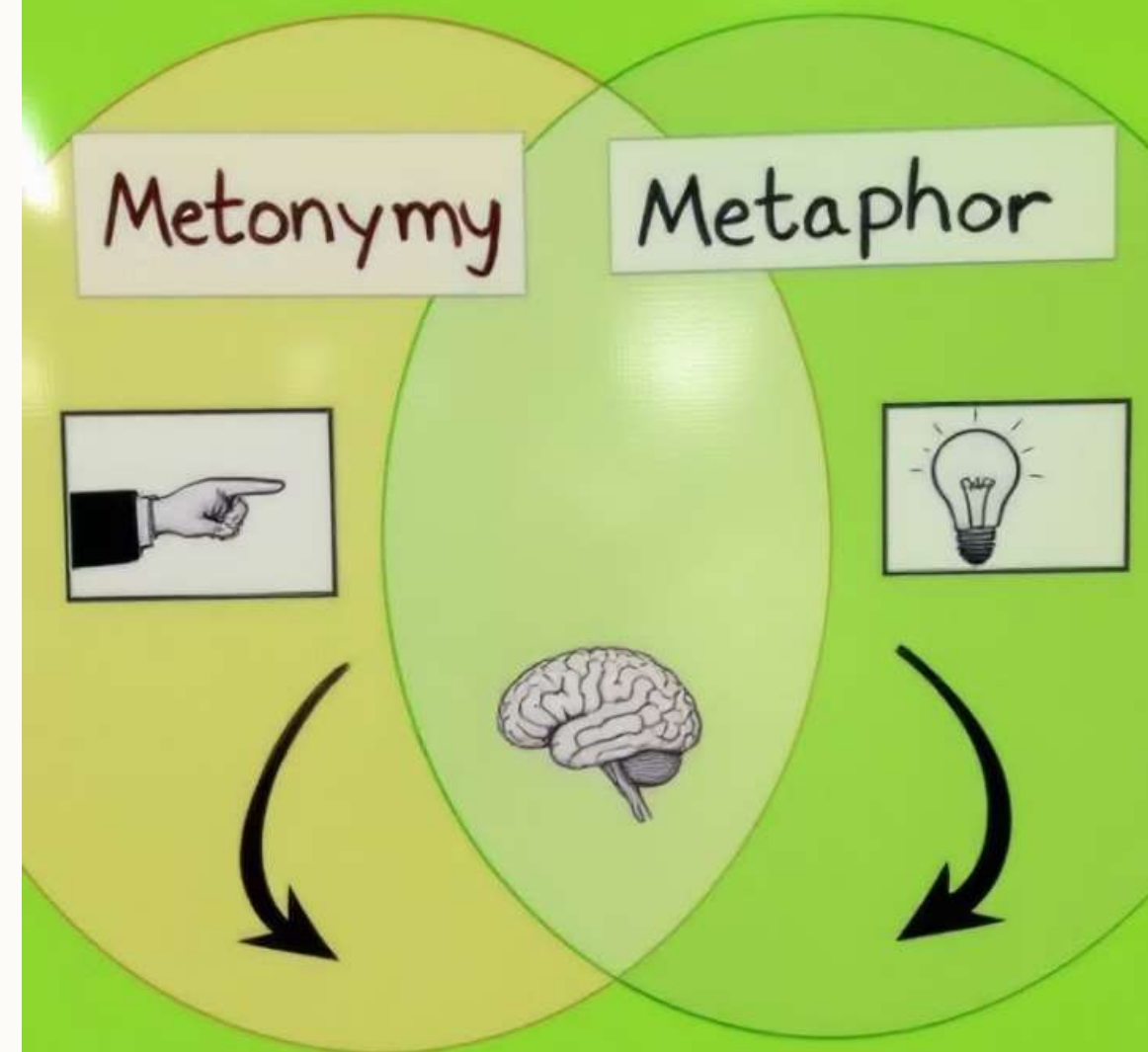
Her fingers were full of expensive rings. – In this sentence, the word 'finger' was used in its core sense to mean 'body part'. The majority (88.90%) of participants decided this word was used correctly, which is also the highest percentage in the group of sentences with the polysemous word used in its core sense.

The fingers of her gloves were wet. – This was the only example sentence of a polysemous word with a parallel metonymical sense, where 65.90% of participants answered correctly. In this example of metonymy, in both English and Macedonian the name of the body part is used for a part of the garment. Learners themselves are aware of the fact that they can sometimes incorrectly transfer meanings from their L1 and can be anxious of this mistake when faced with making a decision, as they had to do in this test. This may be the reason for such a small percentage of correct answers when the extended sense actually exists in both languages, which is the reason why the expectations were a bit higher.



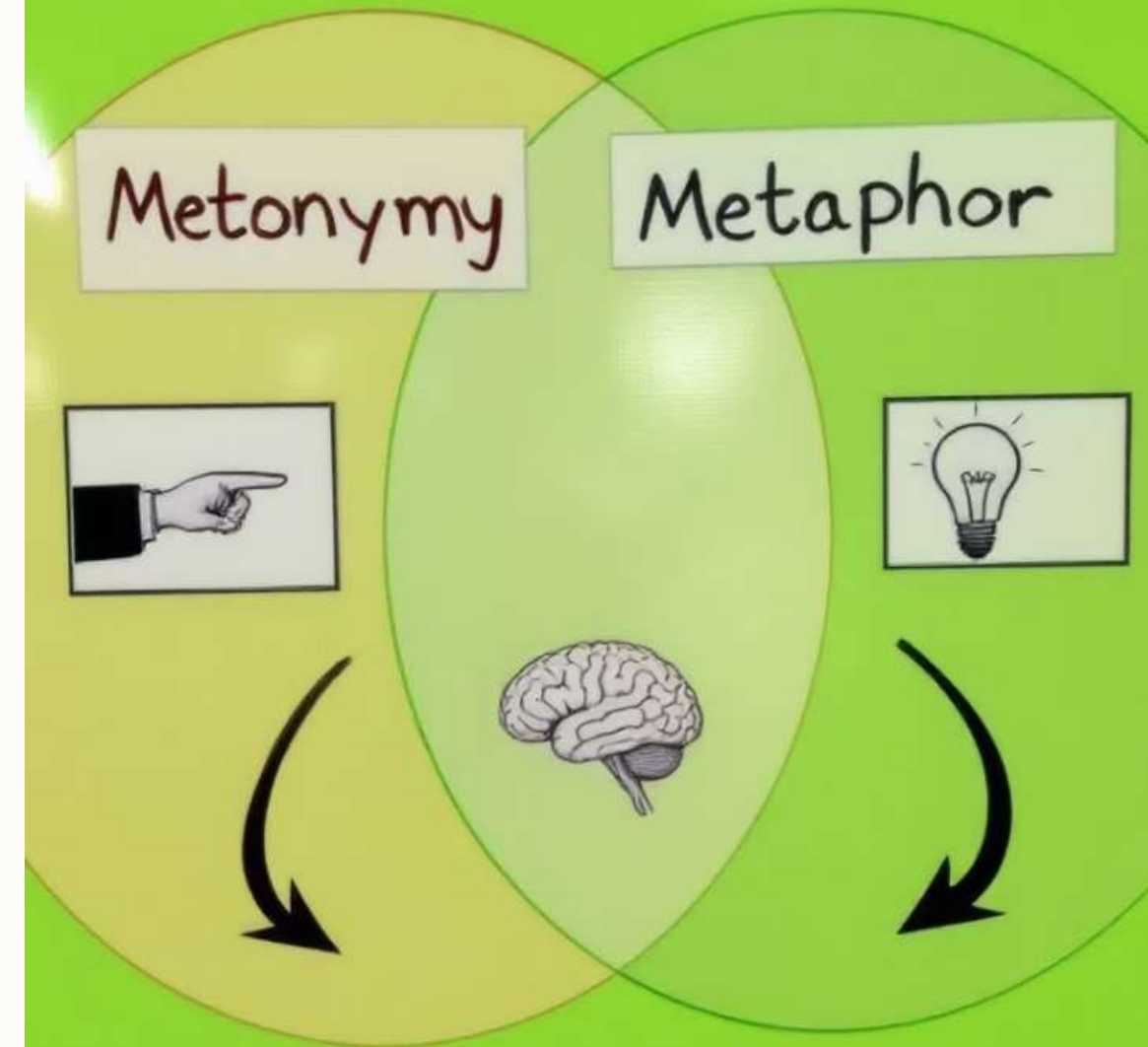
I have eaten the last apple in the fridge. – Apple is the most widely known and recognised fruit in many languages because of its many connections and uses in cultural and biblical references. The fruit is the main subject of various phrases, such as *Apple does not fall far from the tree*, *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*, *apple of somebody's eye*, while among the Christian community, the forbidden fruit is most often depicted as an apple. This is why it comes as no surprise that nearly all learners (88.50%) recognised the core meaning of this word.

The apple gave fruit for the first time this year. – In Macedonian, and many other, especially Slavic, languages, the word apple is used to mean not only the fruit, but also the tree. Here, the students were tasked with recognising that this is not usually the case in English, where the whole syntagm apple tree is almost always used. The results were divided equally into correct and incorrect answers, which can either be attributed to L1 transfer, or to the fact that sometimes in English only the word 'apple' can be used to mean 'apple tree', but this is not conventional.



You will need a lot of milk to make this dessert. – In general, milk refers to a white liquid produced by cows, goats and some other animals as food for their young and used as a drink by humans. It also refers to the white liquid that is produced by women and female mammals for feeding their babies. The word milk can be used in compounds when referring to a white liquid produced by or made from plants (almond milk, coconut milk, oat milk, soya milk). As such, milk was one of the most highly recognised words in its core sense within the framework of this research (87.30%).

I drink a milk every night to sleep well. – Using metonymical analogy, a nonce sense was made up for the purpose of this research, where the core meaning of the word ‘milk’, which is ‘drink’, was extended to ‘portion’. This works in other similar contexts, such as with the word ‘coffee’ – it can mean ‘drink’ (e.g. I’m going to make some coffee.) or it can mean ‘portion’ (e.g. Can I have two coffees, please?). However, the word milk cannot be used for portioning, which was recognised by 50.40% of participants in the current study. Grammar also plays an important role in this example, because learners are taught early on that milk is an uncountable noun, so this could have altered the result.



Results from the Macedonian Learners' Study

The overall results of the polysemy test show that learners were able to answer just over two thirds of the items on the test correctly (69.82%), which is slightly below what was anticipated, considering the learners' proficiency level and the frequent usage of the target words.

The participants in this research knew more word meanings than in that of Ozturk's, where the total percentage of correctly determined meanings was only 52.18%.

As we can also see from Table, learners excelled in understanding core senses, and they displayed greater accuracy in comprehending metonymical senses compared to metaphorical ones.

Sense type	Percentage
Core	83.98%
Metonymical	59.75%
Metaphorical	50.66%
Total	69.82%

Overall results on the polysemy test for sense type

Implications for Teaching EFL Vocabulary

Focus Teaching on Core Meanings

Ensure learners have firm grasp of core senses before introducing extended meanings.

Explicitly Differentiate Extensions

Clarify differences between metonymical and metaphorical meanings to reduce confusion.

Use L1 as Resource

Leverage learners' L1 knowledge to draw parallels and explain polysemy strategically.

The present study investigated the role of the learners' L1 in their acquiring process of polysemous nouns. The nouns used as test words in this study are of high frequency use among the learners, and the participants were tasked with a decision-making process of correctly assessing different senses of polysemous words. Due to their age and level of proficiency, the learners were expected not to have many issues with the chosen words.

Learners appeared to encounter more challenges when attempting to narrow their understanding of senses compared to expanding it. Specifically, they were more proficient at recognizing senses that were part of the L2 context than at rejecting senses that were outside of the L2 context.



Key Takeaways and Future Research



L1 Role is Significant

First language shapes how EFL learners construe multiple meanings in English nouns.



Metonymy Easier to Acquire

Because of direct semantic links, metonymical meanings are generally acquired more readily than metaphorical ones.



Teaching Strategies Needed

Explicit instruction on polysemy types can improve vocabulary acquisition.



Further Studies

More research could explore diverse L1 backgrounds and their influence on polysemy understanding across different languages.





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