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THE ROLE OF L1 IN EFL LEARNERS’ MEANING CONSTRUAL OF POLYSEMOUS NOUNS

Abstract: A learner of any foreign language has the arduous task of mastering the vocabulary of that particular language, especially if the person wants to reach a near-native level of proficiency. It is one of the most dreaded parts of learning a foreign language, with English being no exception. In this paper, the role of Macedonian as the learners’ L1 and its influence on the understanding of different meanings of polysemous nouns will be examined. The study described in this thesis was conducted to test the hypothesis that learners will transfer some meanings from their L1 into English and distinguish between metonymical and metaphorical extensions of meaning which could affect the acquisition differently. Given that the study was based on another study dealing with a very similar topic, the nouns selected for the instrument were mostly taken from that study, which deals with polysemous nouns in English and Turkish. Some specific examples for Macedonian were added to the study for accuracy reasons. In the aforementioned study, the author Meral Ozturk (2018) tests each word twice: in its core sense and in its extended sense. This approach was adopted for the study at hand, along with the methodology for testing the data. The main criterion for selecting vocabulary for the instrument was that the words had to be familiar to the participants, as the aim was to test if they could discern core and extended meanings of the words with which they should already be familiar, and not to choose the ones the learners are unacquainted with. The first part of the paper deals with the theoretical background and explains the different aspects of polysemy as the main focus of the paper, as well as the difference between polysemy and homonymy. This lays the foundation for data processing in the discussion part of the thesis. The second part of the paper presents the study itself, its aims, and the means through which it was conducted. After that, there is a discussion about the results of the study and the main conclusions are drawn.

Key words: polysemy, transfer, English, Macedonian, language.

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1. Introduction

Learning the vocabulary of a foreign language is a challenging task, particularly for those aiming to reach near-native proficiency. This is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language acquisition, and English is no exception. What makes vocabulary learning even more complex is that many words in English have multiple meanings. As Vanhove (2008, p. 55) points out, "most natural languages are characterized by their plasticity." For native speakers, navigating different senses of a word poses little difficulty, as they have been exposed to the language from birth, absorbing these meanings both passively and actively. However, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) must recognize polysemous words and actively learn their various meanings, often by drawing semantic connections to aid in comprehension and retention. Some learners may even hesitate to use such words due to the fear of being misunderstood or making semantic errors, as Nerlich and Clarke (2003, p. 3) note: "there is always a danger of being misunderstood or of falling into semantic traps."

An additional layer of difficulty comes from the influence of the learner's first language (L1), which can interfere with understanding new meanings in the target language. This paper explores the impact of Macedonian, the learners' L1, on their comprehension of the different meanings of polysemous nouns in English. The study described here investigates the hypothesis that learners may transfer meanings from Macedonian into English and that they may interpret metonymic and metaphoric meaning extensions differently, which could influence their learning outcomes. The study is modeled on a similar one that examined polysemous nouns in English and Turkish, and most of the vocabulary used in the instrument was drawn from that research. However, some examples specific to Macedonian were added to better reflect the participants' linguistic background. In the referenced study, Meral Ozturk (2018) tested each word in both its basic (core) sense and its extended meaning—an approach that was also adopted in the present research, along with the same methodology for data collection. A key criterion for selecting the vocabulary was ensuring that all the words were already familiar to the participants. The goal was to assess whether they could distinguish between core and extended meanings of known words, rather than test unfamiliar vocabulary.

1.1 Categorization

Radden and Dirven (2007, p. 3) describe a *category* as a mental representation formed from a collection of similar experiences that carry meaning and relevance within a specific community. In essence, categories are created for elements that hold importance in a certain context, and these categories together form a larger system known as *categorization*. Language itself can be viewed as an ecological system, where linguistic categories function similarly to organisms occupying specific "ecological niches."

Categorization is the process of creating these categories by drawing conceptual boundaries, thereby organizing the otherwise chaotic world around us. A typical category usually has a *prototype*—a central or most representative example—along with less typical members that lie at the category's edges. Additionally, categories can be grouped into broader organizational systems. Specifically, categories:

a) exist within a hierarchical structure or taxonomy (e.g., the word *car* belongs to the broader category *means of transport*);
b) can be part of a *partonomy*, meaning they represent components of a larger whole (e.g., *wheels* are part of a *car*); and
c) are connected to broader conceptual systems such as *frames* and *domains* (e.g., the *car* frame or the *combustion* domain).

Our capacity to activate these frames and domains allows us to greatly expand both our conceptual and linguistic categories (Radden & Dirven, 2007, p. 12). One key way in which categories are extended is through conceptual shifts such as *metonymy* and *metaphor*. These shifts involve *mappings*, or the projection of one set of conceptual elements onto another. In metonymy, the mapping happens within the same frame or domain—such as using the word *crown* to represent a *monarch* within the context of royalty. Here, *crown* is a salient element that helps the mind access the broader concept of *monarch*. In contrast, metaphor involves mapping between different domains. For example, in the phrase *I am crazy about her*, the structure of the domain *madness* is projected onto the domain of *love*, with *madness* serving as the source and *love* as the target. Many metaphors originate from *image schemas*—basic patterns of understanding such as UP/DOWN or FRONT/BACK, which help convey meaning in a fundamental and intuitive way.

1.2. Polysemy vs. Homonymy

Polysemy and homonymy are two linguistic phenomena that deal with the existence of multiple meanings linked to a single word form, but they differ in key ways. Polysemy occurs when a single word has several meanings that are conceptually related. As noted by Kovács (2011, p. 4), polysemous words share a common origin and are semantically connected, often through processes like metaphor or metonymy. For example, the word *bank* can refer to a financial institution, the edge of a river, or a slope. These different uses are all linked by an underlying concept—such as boundaries or containment—which ties them together meaningfully.

In contrast, *homonymy* refers to words that are spelled or pronounced the same but have entirely unrelated meanings. Homonyms can be a source of confusion because there is no conceptual link between their meanings. For instance, *bat* might refer to an animal or a piece of sports equipment. These meanings are unrelated in both origin and concept, making *bat* a classic example of homonymy.

Ravin and Leacock (2002, p. 1) highlight why distinguishing between polysemy and homonymy matters—it helps differentiate systematic, meaningful patterns in language from coincidental similarities. They raise an important point: if the meanings of polysemous words are structurally connected, how do they evolve from one another, and how should they be categorized?

However, this distinction is not always easy to draw. Sometimes, words that were once semantically linked may drift apart over time to the point that their original connection becomes unrecognizable. Kovács (2011, p. 4) gives the example of *pupil*, which can mean a schoolchild or the part of the eye. Despite having a shared etymology, the meanings are now so distinct that many would classify them as homonyms.

Polysemy is especially relevant to this paper because it can be more confusing for language learners, who might misinterpret familiar words used in unfamiliar ways. Cognitive models are shaped by experience and play a significant role in how we structure ideas and form categories. According to Geld (2006, p. 194), categorization at the basic level involves placing the most cognitively salient categories in the middle of a hierarchy, with more abstract generalizations above and more specific instances below.

Kovács (2011, p. 14) explains that, with the development of cognitive linguistics, words are now seen as categories themselves. The

various senses of a polysemous word form a network, structured by general cognitive processes such as metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specification, and transformations based on image schemas. Within this cognitive framework, what distinguishes polysemy from homonymy is the systematic connection among the meanings in polysemy. Unlike older approaches that focused only on the historical or lexical aspects of polysemy, cognitive linguistics sees it as a broader organizational principle that influences not just vocabulary, but also morphology, phonology, and syntax.

1.3. Metaphor and Metonymy

Beyond the distinction between homonymy and polysemy, theoretical linguistics further divides polysemy into two subtypes based on two fundamental figures of speech: *metaphor* and *metonymy*. According to Lakoff (1992, p. 39), metaphor is a central cognitive mechanism that allows us to grasp abstract concepts and carry out abstract reasoning. In the view of cognitive linguistics, metaphors are not merely stylistic devices but are conceptual in nature. They enable us to understand abstract or vague ideas by relating them to more concrete or structured concepts (Lakoff, 1992, p. 39).

Lakoff (1987, p. 77) also emphasizes metonymy as a core aspect of human cognition. He explains that people often rely on a familiar or easily perceived part of something to represent the whole, or to refer to another related part. This mental shortcut is common in everyday thinking and language use.

Robert (2008, p. 61), building on cognitive linguistic theory, explores the idea that meanings are not fixed but *malleable*—they can shift and evolve over time. Two key processes responsible for this change are *polysemy* and *meaning shifts*. A meaning shift occurs when a word's sense changes significantly, often influenced by cultural evolution, technological innovation, or changing social attitudes. In such cases, a word that once had a specific definition may take on new connotations or represent entirely different ideas. This dynamic process illustrates how language adapts in response to societal transformations.

Robert identifies *metaphor* and *metonymy* as the primary mechanisms behind these shifts. Metaphor allows one concept or domain to be interpreted through the lens of another. This process helps us to

understand complex or abstract subjects using concepts that are more familiar or tangible (Robert, 2008, p. 62). Through *metaphorical extension*, a word can take on additional meanings or associations that go beyond its original usage. For example, the word *light* can not only refer to physical brightness but also metaphorically suggest *knowledge* or *understanding*. Such metaphorical uses expand a word's semantic range.

Over time, metaphors can become so ingrained in everyday language that they lose their metaphorical quality and are interpreted literally. This process, called *conceptual metaphorization*, can cause significant changes in a word's meaning. A well-known example is the word *mouse*, which originally referred to the small rodent but has evolved to also denote a computer input device—illustrating how metaphor can fundamentally reshape language over time.

2. Transfer

Zhou (2018, p. 7) defines *transfer* as the general process where prior knowledge or past experiences influence new learning. In the context of language learning, *language transfer* plays a significant role in shaping a learner's *interlanguage*—the evolving language system that develops during second language acquisition. Transfer is not limited to a learner's first language (L1); it can also involve any other previously learned languages that influence the acquisition of a new target language.

Zhao (2019, p. 942) distinguishes between two types of transfer: *positive* and *negative*. Positive transfer happens when a learner's existing knowledge helps with learning a new language element—when something already known is appropriately applied in the new linguistic context. In contrast, *negative transfer* occurs when the learner incorrectly applies rules or patterns from their native language, leading to errors in the target language. This type of interference often results from assuming that expressions or structures from the L1 can be used in the same way in the new language.

2.1. Theories of Language Transfer

Zhao (2019, p. 942) also outlines two key theoretical approaches to understanding language transfer. One of the most influential is the

Contrastive Analysis Theory (CAT), which involves systematically comparing the learner's native language with the target language. The theory is based on several main principles:

1. When two languages share similar features, this similarity tends to result in *positive transfer*.
2. When there are significant differences between the languages, this often leads to *negative transfer* and learner errors.
3. In some cases, the target language may include structures or features that do not exist in the learner's L1, which can create additional challenges for second language acquisition.

2.2. The Influence of Negative Language Transfer

Contrastive Analysis focuses on examining pairs of languages to identify both structural similarities and differences. According to Thyab (2020), who investigated the impact of negative transfer on students' ability to produce accurate English, this approach is based on the idea that features in the target language that resemble those in the learner's first language are generally easier to acquire. Conversely, elements that differ significantly between the two languages are typically more challenging for learners.

Another key theory referenced by Thyab is Error Analysis Theory (EAT), which looks at learner errors in the second language to uncover the underlying causes. These recurring mistakes often stem from structural differences between the learner's native language (L1) and the target language (L2). For instance, grammatical elements such as determiners or prepositions can function very differently across languages, highlighting the role of negative transfer in language acquisition. Recognizing this, EFL teachers must consider how a learner's mother tongue can interfere with the learning process. Adapting teaching approaches to address these influences can result in improved proficiency and academic success for both learners and instructors.

As noted by Ozturk (2018, p. 87), a learner's first language can only affect their understanding of a polysemous word in the second language if they perceive an equivalence between the two. This equivalence is typically based on the core meaning of a word. For example, the English word eye and the Macedonian word oko are considered equivalents because they refer to the same body part, even though both are polysemous

and may carry different extended meanings in each language. Difficulties arise when learners encounter extended senses in the L2 that do not exist in their L1.

If the extended meanings in the L2 overlap with those of the L1, learners benefit from positive evidence, which supports the acquisition of these senses without the need for additional learning. However, if such overlaps don't exist, learners must acquire new meanings independently. Crucially, learners also need negative evidence—feedback or context in the L2 that shows when an L1-derived meaning is incorrect or inappropriate. When there's no clear positive evidence in the L2, learners are left to rely on intuition or guesswork about whether certain meanings from their L1 apply.

Kellerman's 1978 study with Dutch learners of English illustrates this point well. When testing different senses of the English word break, he found that learners were more inclined to transfer the meanings of the Dutch equivalent breken when those meanings were closer to the core sense, even though all tested senses existed in English.

In the context of the present study, it is anticipated that metonymically extended meanings will be transferred more readily than metaphorical ones, as they tend to maintain a stronger semantic connection to the word's core meaning.

3. Corpus/Data

Since polysemous words often carry numerous meanings, it is unrealistic to expect that all their senses can be covered within formal instruction. As a result, some meanings inevitably need to be acquired outside the classroom environment. Some scholars claim that commonly used words are more likely to be polysemous. This is because frequent usage across diverse contexts over time can lead to the gradual development of additional meanings, making these words more adaptable and contextually versatile.

However, other linguistic research challenges the idea of a strong link between word frequency and polysemy. While it's true that some high-frequency words have many meanings, there are also less frequently used words that exhibit polysemy.

Given that this study aims to explore how learners understand the multiple meanings of commonly used words, the vocabulary selected for testing included words whose core meanings the participants were expected to already know. The goal was to assess their ability to recognize and interpret the extended senses of those familiar words.

4. Method

This study investigates how a learner's first language (L1) can either facilitate or interfere with the learning and comprehension of polysemous words in a second language (L2). Based on the framework of Ozturk's 2018 study, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do EFL learners find the core meanings of polysemous English nouns easier to understand than their extended meanings? Are metonymic extensions easier to grasp than metaphorical ones?
2. Are extended meanings of polysemous L2 nouns easier to comprehend when the learners' L1 contains parallel meanings? Is there a noticeable difference in understanding between metonymic and metaphorical extensions?
3. When L2 context or evidence is missing, do learners rely on their L1 to interpret the meanings of polysemous words? Again, does this differ between metonymic and metaphorical extensions?

To explore these questions, the questionnaire was specifically designed to test whether EFL learners project the meanings of equivalent L1 words onto L2 polysemous nouns. For this reason, the questionnaire includes more 'L1-Only' examples than 'L2-Only' ones. In his 2018 study, Ozturk posits that metonymic extensions are more prone to transfer from L1 to L2, which is also a key focus of the present research.

4.1. Participants

The study involved 70 high school students from three different institutions: a technical school, a school specializing in hotel and tourism management and hospitality, and a grammar school that includes a language-focused program. Participants were in their third and fourth years of high school, typically around 17 to 18 years old. The sample was nearly evenly divided by gender (64% male and 36% female) and by grade level (56% in third grade and 44% in fourth grade).

4.2. The Instrument

The research instrument was a questionnaire consisting of 12 sentences, each containing a polysemous noun used in a particular context. The key word in each sentence was underlined to draw the participants' attention, and their task was to determine whether the word was used correctly or not. The selected test words were all frequently used and morphologically simple nouns—that is, they had no derivational affixes—and were likely familiar to the learners based on their prior exposure.

For the purpose of the study, it was crucial that participants had some knowledge of the core meanings of these words. Testing unfamiliar vocabulary would not have provided reliable results. Each target noun had a clear translation equivalent in Macedonian, sharing an identical core meaning in both languages. Every word was tested in two uses: once in its core meaning and once in an extended sense.

Metonymic extensions involve a direct and often physical or contextual relationship to the core meaning - examples include using a container to refer to its contents, an animal for its meat, or a location for its people. In contrast, metaphorical extensions rely on perceived or functional similarity - such as referring to the *wings* of a window, or using *storm* metaphorically for a social *uprising*.

The extended meanings were categorized based on how the English and Macedonian senses relate to each other, using the framework from Ozturk's 2018 study, which this research replicates and modifies. The meanings were grouped into four types:

Parallel Senses (N=22): These are metaphorical or metonymic extensions that appear in both English and Macedonian. For example, the word *button* and its Macedonian equivalent *ко̄чче* both extend to mean a control for operating a machine. Similarly, *fingers* and *ра̄ка̄ви* can refer to the parts of a glove, showing a metonymic relationship.

L2-Only Senses (N=2): These extended meanings are found only in English and not in Macedonian. Examples include *iron* used to refer to a clothes-pressing tool (a metonymic extension), and bed in the sense of a *'flowerbed'* (a metaphorical usage). These senses do not have corresponding meanings in the Macedonian terms *железо* and *кревет̄*.

L1-Only Senses (N=7): These meanings exist in Macedonian but not in English. For instance, *соба* (room/bedroom) can also refer to furniture through metonymy, and *рака* (hand) can metaphorically mean a *'coat of paint'*. Such uses are not found in the corresponding English words.

Nonce Senses (N=7): These are newly invented meanings created specifically for this study and are not present in either language. Their purpose was to assess whether learners would accept novel extended meanings without prior exposure in the second language. For instance, wool was used to mean clothing in the sentence *"Take your wools with you. It might be cold there."* Other metaphorical examples, like using envelope to mean *'container'*, were based on conceptual similarity with the core meaning. These served as a control in the analysis.

5. Results - Present Test Words Analysis

In this section of the research paper, each sentence from the questionnaire will be examined in detail. The sentences will be analyzed according to the order they appear in the Appendix, which differs from the sequence in which participants actually encountered them. The analysis begins with sentences featuring metonymically extended meanings, followed by sentences showcasing metaphorically extended meanings. In each pair of sentences, the first uses a polysemous noun in its core meaning, while the second uses an extended meaning of that same noun.

As explained earlier, participants were asked to focus on the underlined word in each sentence and decide whether they felt the word was used correctly or incorrectly in English.

In the sentence "I saw cows in the fields from the train window," the word *cow* is used in its basic meaning—an animal raised on farms for milk or meat. English, however, uses a different word, beef, for the meat of *cows*. This made the sentence useful for testing whether learners would apply a common metonymic pattern—using the animal's name to mean its meat, as seen with chicken (e.g., I hit a chicken with my car vs. We're having chicken for dinner).

In the test sentence "Have you cooked this cow?", researchers intentionally used cow to mean meat, even though that's not standard in English. Despite animal-for-meat being a valid pattern in some cases, it doesn't apply to "cow," which becomes "beef." About 70% of learners correctly recognized that English typically uses different words for meat than for the animals they come from. This difference dates back to the Norman conquest, when French terms for meats (like boeuf, porc, and mouton) were adopted into English as beef, pork, and mutton.

In “The sheep in this area have very good wool,” wool was widely recognized (by 82.6% of learners) in its basic sense: the soft hair from sheep. In the test sentence “Take your wools with you. It might be cold there,” wool was used to mean clothing made of wool. This follows a common pattern where material names stand in for products (e.g., silver used for utensils). But in English, “wool” can’t refer to a whole piece of clothing, which made this usage less acceptable to learners.

In the sentence “He fell and hit his head,” the word head was correctly understood by 87.7% of learners, likely because it’s a basic and frequently used word. The test sentence “My new coat has a head,” explored whether learners would apply the body part-for-garment pattern (similar to “finger” in “a glove has fingers”). Only 33.3% did. The study suggested that using jacket instead of coat might have worked better, since jackets often have hoods—something that could more easily be associated with a “head.”

In “The vase is too small for the flowers,” 89% of participants understood vase in its usual sense: a container for holding flowers. However, in “The vase smells wonderful,” the word was used to test the container-for-contents metonymy (like saying “The bottle is empty” to mean the liquid inside). Since this usage isn’t standard for “vase,” only 54% of learners accepted it.

Since last year, there have been many significant changes in the country. The phrase *a storm of changes* uses *storm* metaphorically, similar to how it’s used in phrases like *a storm of protest* or *a storm of applause*, where it conveys a sudden surge of strong emotion or reaction. However, in this context, *a storm of changes* is not a conventional expression in English or Macedonian. It was intentionally created for the study to observe whether learners would create their own metaphorical meanings. Interestingly, this expression had the highest rate of incorrect interpretations (71%) among all metaphorically extended senses, likely because the phrase sounds plausible despite being non-standard.

In contrast, the sentence *He quickly opened the envelope and took the letter out* uses the word *envelope* in its primary sense — a flat paper container for sending letters. Even though it appeared less frequently in the questionnaire, 82% of participants correctly identified its core meaning, which was higher than for more common words like *iron* or *wing*.

The sentence *She replaced the envelopes of the pillows with clean ones* represents a metaphorical extension of the word *envelope*, treating

it as a general container — in this case, the pillow cover. This is similar to how *bank* is extended metaphorically from a place where money is stored to *blood bank*, a place where blood is stored. But since an *envelope* is specifically defined as a paper container, this metaphorical extension doesn't exist in standard usage. Still, 58% of participants recognized that this usage was incorrect.

6. Discussion

The overall findings from the polysemy test indicate that participants correctly answered just under 70% of the items (69.82%). This result is slightly lower than expected given the learners' proficiency level and the common usage of the target words. Compared to Ozturk's study, where participants correctly identified only 52.18% of word meanings, learners in this research demonstrated a better understanding of word meanings. This also shows that learners were most successful at recognizing core meanings and showed higher accuracy with metonymical senses than with metaphorical ones.

The study also explored how the learners' first language (L1) influenced their understanding of extended meanings. Two factors were examined: the type of extended sense (metonymical or metaphorical) and the connection between learners' L1 and second language (L2) — categorized as parallel, L2-only, L1-only, or nonce. Although learners generally performed better with metonymical senses than metaphorical ones, the data suggested that the effect of the L1-L2 relationship differed depending on the type of extended sense.

6.1 Expected and Unexpected Results

The results generally confirmed the expectation that learners would be more successful with core senses than with extended senses, and with metonymical extensions than metaphorical ones. Core senses are more frequent and salient, which makes them more accessible and more strongly entrenched in learners' mental lexicons (Ozturk, 2018). Similarly, metonymical extensions rely on contiguity and concrete associations with the core sense, which are cognitively easier to process than metaphorical mappings that require abstraction (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987).

However, some results were unexpected. The frequency of overextension errors—especially with metaphorical senses—was higher than predicted. Although learners were anticipated to reject non-existent metaphorical senses, they frequently accepted them as plausible. This indicates that metaphorical extensions, by virtue of their ubiquity in language, may be perceived as generally acceptable even when they do not exist in English. This contrasts with earlier findings (Ozturk, 2018) and suggests that Macedonian learners may apply metaphorical reasoning more liberally in the absence of explicit L2 evidence.

6.2 Cognitive and Linguistic Factors

Cognitively, the disparity between sense types can be explained by the strength of conceptual associations. Core senses and metonymical extensions are closely related, making them easier to retrieve. Metaphorical extensions, on the other hand, require cross-domain mapping, which demands higher levels of abstraction (Lakoff, 1992).

From a linguistic perspective, L1 transfer played a dual role. Parallel senses facilitated accurate recognition, confirming the role of positive transfer (Zhou, 2018), whereas L1-only senses frequently led to overextension errors, reflecting negative transfer (Thyab, 2020). Interestingly, learners were more likely to assume that an L1-based sense should exist in English than to generate completely new (nonce) meanings, showing the strong influence of cross-linguistic correspondence.

6.3 Why the Overall Success Rate Was Lower

Although the participants were advanced EFL learners, the overall success rate (69.82%) was lower than anticipated. Several factors account for this: Polysemy complexity: High-frequency words accumulate many senses, making complete mastery difficult (Karlsson, 2013).

The task type where the acceptability judgment task requires fine-grained metalinguistic awareness, which may exceed the learners' spontaneous comprehension skills (Elston-Güttler & Williams, 2008).

In this section must be mentioned and the negative evidence where the learners rarely receive explicit correction for semantic overextensions in classroom contexts, making it harder to "unlearn" inappropriate L1-based mappings (Kellerman, 1978).

6.4 Implications for Language Teaching

The results underline the need for more explicit treatment of polysemy in EFL pedagogy. Teachers should highlight the networks of related senses (Geld, 2006; Kovács, 2011), rather than treating word meanings as isolated.

Contrast English polysemous patterns with learners' L1 equivalents to raise awareness of potential interference. Provide targeted practice in recognizing non-transferable senses, especially metaphorical ones. Encourage learners to develop strategies for inferring meaning from context, rather than memorizing word lists.

6.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings support the cognitive linguistic framework, which views polysemy as a structured semantic network organized by metaphor, metonymy, and image schemas (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Dirven, 2007). They also reinforce theories of language transfer, showing that L1 influence extends beyond form-to-meaning equivalence and shapes learners' conceptual construal of meanings (Odlin, 1989). The prevalence of overextension errors highlights the need to integrate both positive and negative transfer effects into theoretical accounts of L2 lexical development.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the participant group was restricted to Macedonian high school learners, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, proficiency levels, or L1 backgrounds. Second, the methodology (acceptability judgments) may not fully capture learners' real-time processing of polysemous meanings in authentic communication. Third, the exclusive focus on nouns excludes other categories such as verbs and adjectives, which may follow different patterns of polysemous development.

6.7 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could replicate the study with learners from different L1 backgrounds to determine whether the observed tendencies

are universal or language-specific. Conduct longitudinal studies to track the development of polysemous networks over time and employ online processing methods (e.g., eye-tracking, ERP) to investigate cognitive mechanisms underlying polysemy recognition (Frazier & Rayner, 1990). Expand the scope to other word classes and productive tasks (writing, speaking) to assess how learners actively use polysemous words.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how learners' first language (L1) affects their acquisition of polysemous nouns. The test words, commonly used by the participants, required them to judge the correctness of various word senses. Given their age and proficiency, learners were expected to handle these words well. However, they found it easier to accept appropriate senses within the second language (L2) context than to reject inappropriate ones.

Two variables were analyzed: sense type and L1 influence. As expected, core senses were identified more accurately than extended ones, and metonymical senses better than metaphorical. When learners' L1 shared parallel senses with English, their performance improved for both types. Notably, overextension errors occurred more often with metaphorical senses, stemming from a general acceptance of metaphorical meanings, while metonymical errors were linked to L1 influence.

The results highlight the need to emphasize polysemy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. Teaching every meaning of polysemous words is unrealistic, especially for high-frequency words with multiple meanings. Instead, instruction should focus on raising learners' awareness of how core and extended senses relate and on helping them use context clues to distinguish meanings. Awareness of metonymical patterns and L1-L2 differences can also support learning.

Karlsson's (2013) research suggests that learners are most familiar with the most frequent word senses rather than all meanings. Thus, teaching should prioritize the most common senses first. Although not definitively proven here, earlier studies indicate that explaining the core sense aids understanding and retention of peripheral meanings. Since core senses often coincide with the most frequent meanings, starting with these can be an effective approach to teaching polysemous words in L2 learning. the main findings and suggest implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

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Appendix: Acceptability Judgements Test Sentences

Polysemous Words with Nonce Metonymical Senses

I saw **cows** in the fields from the train window. (animal)
Have you cooked this **cow**? (meat)
The sheep in this area have very good **wool.** (material)
Take your **wools** with you. It might be cold there. (product)
He fell and hit his **head.** (body part)
My new coat has a **head**. (part of garment)
The **vase** is too small for the flowers. (container)
The **vase** smells wonderful. (contents)

Polysemous Words with Nonce Metaphorical Senses
It is dangerous to go out in this **storm.**
There has been a **storm** of changes in the country since last year.
He quickly opened the **envelope** and took the letter out.
She replaced the **envelopes** of the pillows with clean ones.