

Homonymy and Polysemy

This handout contains a brief explanation of homonymy and polysemy. It is intended to supplement the discussion on pages 130-132 of the textbook, not replace it.

- A word is **polysemous** if it can be used to express different meanings. The difference between the meanings can be obvious or subtle.
 - Two or more words are **homonyms** if they either sound the same (homophones), have the same spelling (homographs), or both, but do not have related meanings.
 - In other words, if you hear (or read) two words that sound (or are written) the same but are not identical in meaning, you need to decide if it's really two words (homonyms), or if it is one word used in two different ways (polysemy).
 - The only real way we have of telling the two apart is by applying our judgement. There are no tests that can tell them apart in a foolproof manner. Still, for many cases this is enough.
 - There are, however, many other cases for which this decision is not clear. This doesn't mean that they are both or halfway between each; that makes no sense, because a word can't be both one word and two words. Rather, it means that one of the following options holds:
 1. Different speakers treat the word differently. It might be one word for me but two for you.
 2. We are dealing with two homonyms, but there is enough overlap between them.
 3. We are dealing with one word whose different uses are relatively far enough apart.
1. **A clear case of homonymy 1:** The word *down* in sentence (1-a) and the word *down* in sentence (1-b). These are two words that happen to share sound and spelling. There is no relation between them:
- (1) a. Sarah climbed down the ladder.
 - b. Sarah bought a down blanket.

2. **A clear case of homonymy 2:** The word *bark* in sentence (2-a) and the word *Bark* in sentence (2-b).

- (2) a. My dog would always bark at mailmen.
- b. The tree's bark was a rusty brown.

3. **A clear case of polysemy 1:** The word *Newspaper* in the following sentences. The object that got wet cannot fire people, and the company didn't get wet. Still, it's obvious that the same word is used to refer to them both.

- (3) a. The newspaper got wet in the rain.
- b. The newspaper fired some of its editing staff.

4. **A clear case of polysemy 2:** The word *Good* in the following two examples. In one case it's a moral judgement, in the other case it's a judgement of skill.

- (4) a. John was a good man. He donated a lot of money to charity.
- b. Bill was a good painter. His drawings always were exciting to look at.

5. **Unclear case 1:** *Hammer* in sentence (5-a) is a noun referring to a physical object. *Hammer* in sentence (5-b) is a verb describing an action normally (but not in this case) performed with that object. Is this one word or two? Different people may disagree.

- (5) a. I own a big heavy hammer.
- b. I hammered the tent pole into the ground using a small rock.

6. **Unclear case 2:** The word *bright* in the following two sentences. The meanings are clearly not the same, but is it one word that is used metaphorically in (6-a) and literally in (6-b), or are these two different words?

- (6) a. Laura was a very bright student and always got good grades.
- b. The lights in this room are very bright.