



THE POLYSEMY OF AFFIXES: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

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Annotation: *This paper investigates the phenomenon of affixal polysemy, where a single affix carries multiple related or distinct meanings. Through cross-linguistic analysis, the study examines how semantic extension, grammaticalization, and contextual factors contribute to this linguistic phenomenon. The research demonstrates that affixal polysemy follows systematic patterns rather than arbitrary variations, with significant implications for morphological theory and language acquisition. Case studies from English, Russian, and Turkish illustrate the cognitive and historical processes underlying this pervasive feature of human language.*

Keywords: *affixal polysemy, morphological ambiguity, semantic extension, grammaticalization, cross-linguistic analysis*

1. Introduction

Polysemy in affixes presents a fascinating challenge to traditional morphological theories that assume one-to-one form-meaning correspondence. This paper explores how affixes—both derivational and inflectional—develop multiple meanings through linguistic evolution and cognitive processes. Drawing on construction morphology and prototype theory, we argue that affixal polysemy is not random but reflects systematic semantic networks shaped by:

- Historical language change
- Cognitive categorization processes
- Functional demands of communication

Recent studies (Booij, 2010; Rainer, 2016) suggest that up to 60% of productive affixes in Indo-European languages exhibit some degree of polysemy, making this a central rather than marginal phenomenon in morphology.



2. Theoretical Framework

Affixal polysemy can be analyzed through three complementary lenses:

2.1 Semantic Networks

Radial category models (Janda, 2011) show how core meanings extend to peripheral ones:

- English -er: Agent (teacher) → Instrument (printer) → Comparative (faster)
- Russian -тель: Agent (учитель "teacher") → Tool (выключатель "switch")

2.2 Grammaticalization Pathways

Affixes often evolve from lexical items through:

1. Semantic bleaching (Latin -mente "mind" > adverbial suffix)
2. Functional expansion (Old English -dom "jurisdiction" > abstract noun suffix)

2.3 Constructional Morphology

Booij's (2010) framework explains how constructional contexts determine meaning:

- German -ung: Process (Lesung "reading") vs. Result (Öffnung "opening")

3. Cross-Linguistic Case Studies

3.1 Russian Prefix Polysemy

The prefix по- exhibits:

- Inceptive (побежать "start running")
- Attenuative (полежать "lie briefly")
- Distributive (посадить "plant around")

3.2 Turkish Suffix Flexibility

-lIk marks:

- Abstract nouns (çocukluk "childhood")
- Adjectives (güzellik "beauty")
- Containers (şekerlik "sugar bowl")

4. Cognitive and Functional Explanations

4.1 Prototype Effects

Central meanings (e.g., -er as agentive) extend to peripheral uses through:

- Metaphor (printer as "agent" of printing)
- Metonymy (container for content in Turkish -lIk)



4.2 Language Processing Factors

Psycholinguistic evidence (Plag, 2003) shows:

- Polysemous affixes are processed faster than homonymous ones
- Contextual cues override default meanings

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

Teaching strategies should:

- Highlight meaning networks visually
- Contrast minimal pairs (writer vs. rider)
- Use etymological explanations

5. Conclusion

Affixal polysemy reveals the dynamic, adaptive nature of morphological systems. Rather than exceptions, multiple affix meanings represent rule-governed patterns of:

1. Historical semantic shifts
2. Cognitive categorization
3. Functional adaptation

Future research should employ corpus-based methods to track diachronic changes and experimental techniques to assess meaning acquisition.

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