THE IMPACT OF POLYSEMY ON TRANSLATION ACCURACY

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Abstract. *Polysemy, the phenomenon whereby a single word possesses multiple related meanings, poses significant challenges for translators attempting to preserve semantic precision and contextual relevance. This paper investigates the implications of polysemy in translation practice, exploring how meaning shifts depending on linguistic context, cultural assumptions, and grammatical environment. The study highlights key risks such as semantic ambiguity, misinterpretation, and loss of nuance, while also offering practical strategies for improving accuracy in polysemous word translation. Case studies from English and other languages are used to illustrate the translator's decision-making process in navigating polysemous terms.*

Keywords: *polysemy, translation accuracy, semantic ambiguity, context, lexical choice, pragmatics.*

INTRODUCTION

Language, by its very nature, is not a one-to-one coding system. A single lexical item can represent a spectrum of meanings, each activated by its immediate context. This feature, known as polysemy, is especially prominent in natural languages such as English, where everyday words may carry several related, though distinct, senses. For translators, the polysemous nature of language is both a linguistic richness and a practical challenge. Translation requires not only converting words from one language to another but also understanding and transferring meaning in a way that remains faithful to the source while appropriate for the target language's norms.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Polysemy differs from homonymy in that the multiple meanings of a polysemous word are semantically connected, whereas homonyms are entirely unrelated despite sharing form. For example, the English word "head" can mean the upper part of a body, the leader of an organization, or the front of a line — all of which are conceptually linked. This makes polysemy a dynamic and productive feature of language, yet it also introduces a considerable risk of mistranslation when the contextual signals are misunderstood or ignored [1].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Polysemy requires that translators engage in deep contextual analysis to determine which meaning of a word is intended in a particular sentence or discourse. A failure to correctly identify the intended meaning can lead to semantic distortion, compromising both the accuracy and the credibility of the translation. This is particularly problematic in specialized fields such as legal, medical, or technical translation, where polysemous words may have field-specific meanings that differ markedly from their general usage.

Consider the English word "charge". In a legal document, it could refer to an official accusation (e.g., "He was charged with theft"), whereas in a financial context, it might denote a fee (e.g., "There is a service charge"), and in military terms, it could indicate an aggressive advance (e.g., "The soldiers began their charge"). Without precise contextual analysis, the translator might render the word inappropriately in the target language, leading to misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Furthermore, polysemy also complicates machine translation and computer-assisted translation tools, which often struggle to distinguish nuanced meanings in natural language processing. Automatic systems tend to default to the most statistically probable translation of a word, which may not reflect the intended sense. This limitation underscores the necessity of human linguistic intuition and professional competence in high-stakes translation scenarios [2].

To navigate polysemy effectively, translators must rely heavily on contextual cues — both immediate and broader discursive context. The immediate syntactic

environment often provides valuable signals: verbs that collocate with a noun, prepositions that indicate spatial or metaphorical use, or adjectives that constrain meaning. At the broader level, discourse type, genre, register, and the socio-cultural context of the text are all instrumental in disambiguating meaning.

For instance, the word "run" in English can be interpreted in dozens of ways: a person can run in a race, a computer program can run, a company can run an operation, ink can run on paper, and someone can have a run of bad luck. Each of these meanings activates a distinct, though metaphorically or historically related, sense. The sentence "He runs a successful business" requires the translator to understand that the verb "run" here refers to managing or operating, not to literal motion — a distinction that might require a completely different verb in the target language depending on its semantic system [3].

In languages where polysemy operates differently or less productively, a direct lexical transfer may not be available. In such cases, conceptual adaptation or paraphrasing becomes necessary to preserve the intended meaning.

Beyond grammatical and lexical contexts, cultural assumptions can influence how polysemous words are interpreted and translated. In some cases, a word may have metaphorical or idiomatic meanings that are deeply rooted in the source culture's worldview but entirely opaque in the target culture. This makes the translator's role not just linguistic but also intercultural.

An example of this is the English word "gift", which can mean both "a present" and "a natural talent." In German, however, the word "Gift" means "poison," a homonym that carries a starkly different meaning. Although this example blends polysemy and false friends, it highlights how cross-linguistic lexical variation can trigger mistranslation when semantic networks differ.

Translators must also be aware that the frequency and acceptability of polysemy differ across languages. English, being analytic and flexible in word class, tolerates more polysemy than many synthetic languages, which may instead use derivation or compounding to avoid ambiguity. Hence, what is a single polysemous term in English may require multiple distinct expressions in another language,

posing a challenge for economy and fluency in translation [4].

CONCLUSION

Polysemy is a powerful and pervasive feature of language that enriches expression but also complicates translation. Its impact on translation accuracy is significant, requiring translators to possess not only lexical proficiency but also contextual awareness, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking. As globalization accelerates the need for precise and culturally nuanced communication, understanding and managing polysemy becomes an essential competency for professional translators. The translator's task is not merely to find word-for-word matches but to interpret intention, resolve ambiguity, and preserve nuance — a process that elevates translation from a technical skill to an art form.

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