



The Use of Polysemous Words in the Pashto Language

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to elucidate the use of Polysemous words in the Pashto language and to clarify their various semantic aspects. Compared to other world languages, relatively little research has been done on this topic in Pashto, and previous works have primarily been confined to a few limited examples. The main objective of this study is to investigate the multiple meanings of a single word across different linguistic contexts and to highlight the distinctions between its primary (literal) and transitional (figurative/metaphorical) meanings. This article reviews the concept of meaning and the perspectives of various scholars on the subject. It discusses different dimensions of words and illustrates currently used Pashto Polysemous words—such as Shin (green/blue), Gaṭa (profit/stone), Tor (black/net), Pashto, Kor (house), Zāray, Ghāra (neck/bank), and Grān (expensive/dear)—as examples of how a single word can alter its meaning and convey new concepts based on context, style, and linguistic environment.

KEYWORDS: *Pashto, Polysemous words, Linguistic context, Semantics.*

Introduction

Language is the most crucial instrument for conveying human thoughts and preserving the intellectual and cultural wealth of a society. In this process, words function as the fundamental building blocks of language, each responsible for expressing diverse meanings. While extensive research has been conducted on the semantic aspects of words in many developed languages, the study of Polysemous words has not received adequate attention in Pashto linguistic and lexicological literature. Historically, discussions have been largely traditional and restricted to limited examples. Therefore, this research aims to clarify the usage mechanisms of Polysemous words in Pashto and to demonstrate the various meanings a single word can adopt in different linguistic environments.

Recognizing this gap, the current study was undertaken after a meticulous review of Pashto lexicology and semantics literature, which often repeated the same one or two examples traditionally. However, the Pashto language possesses a vast array of such words that have remained largely unexplored. To address this issue, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the Polysemous nature of selected words, carefully examining them in various linguistic contexts and sequentially presenting their multiple meanings.

Polysemous words are those that, alongside their primary (original) meaning, acquire other transitional or figurative meanings due to shifts in context and linguistic environment. The significance and necessity of this research lie in its precise examination of the semantic aspects of Pashto words, identifying the specific conditions and environments in



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which a word conveys different meanings. This endeavor not only enriches the Pashto vocabulary but also sheds light on the accurate comprehension of discourse and the historical evolution of the language; notably, the meanings of some words have been traced and accurately defined within texts from the Middle Period of Pashto literature.

Another significant aspect of this study is its focused exploration of the Polysemous dimensions of words in specific linguistic contexts, uncovering the various environments that trigger different meanings. The necessity for this research stems from the fact that, until now, no systematic study or comprehensive academic article had been written with such clarity on the topic of Pashto Polysemous words.

To date, broad and professional research on Polysemous words in the Pashto language has been scarce; however, a few limited examples can be found in previous literature. Pashto lexicology and semantics books have mentioned words like “Warsho” having two or three meanings, but these are presented merely as passing examples rather than as parts of a systematic study. [Habibi \(1384\)](#) provided a valuable analysis of the socio-cultural expansion of Pashto words in his work, *History of Pashto Literature*.

[Rashad \(1386\)](#) numerically listed the various meanings of a few Polysemous words, yet he did not elucidate the causes of these meanings' origins, the relationships between primary and secondary meanings, or the role of context. He did, however, point to the historical and contemporary meanings of words like Zāray, Ghāra, and Māya. Rashad's book serves as a dictionary-style etymology where these examples are scattered across various pages.

[Dawlat Mohammad \(1399\)](#) highlighted the difference between primary and transitional meanings, offering limited examples such as Kor (house) and Kaḍa (family/tent). [Hesam \(1398\)](#) conducted a comprehensive discussion on the word (Shin), demonstrating how a single word can yield six different meanings. In *Linguistic Theories*, Khkaly (1401) touched upon the concept of meaning and the relationship between the signifier and the signified but did not dedicate a separate discussion specifically to Polysemous words.

Globally, advanced theories on polysemy exist within cognitive linguistics (e.g., Turner, Lakoff) and semantics (e.g., Ullmann); however, these theories have yet to be applied to Pashto linguistic data. This research analyzes specific Pashto examples in light of these international theories. While the aforementioned Pashto works provide a valuable foundation, there was a pressing need for a comprehensive, systematic study based on modern linguistic theories that simultaneously examines all dimensions (historical, social, cognitive, and stylistic) of Pashto Polysemous words. This research gap is the primary motivation for the current study.

Methods and Materials

This research discusses the identification of Polysemous words in Pashto and the expansion of their meanings. In linguistics, particularly in semantics, a word frequently adopts transitional meanings derived from its primary meaning based on historical development, social relations, and context. Accordingly, this study examines the semantic shifts, naming processes, and the signifier-signified relationships of specific Pashto words such as Shin, Gaṭa, Pashto, Ghāra, Māya, Zāray, Grān, and (Kaḍa), illustrating how a single word conveys different concepts across diverse referents.

The fundamental framework of this research is qualitative. To clarify the content and linguistic characteristics of the topic, a descriptive-analytical method was employed. First, academic concepts related to meaning and polysemy are presented descriptively; then, the varied usages of the selected words are subjected to deep analytical scrutiny.

Data collection was collected entirely through library-based research, utilizing prominent and credible sources in Pashto linguistics and semantics. To ensure the richness and accuracy of the information, printed works, articles, and linguistics books were studied. Additionally, two authoritative linguistics dictionaries were used as primary sources to verify the various meanings of the words.

Various academic tools were utilized for data extraction and validation, including Pashto dictionaries and the theoretical and cognitive models proposed by renowned linguists such as Ullmann, Turner, Ogden and Richards, as well as domestic scholars like Rashad, Dawlat Mohammad, and Khkaly. Furthermore, everyday Pashto idioms and the literary usages of poets like Khwaja Rizqullah and Shafiullah Babarzarai serve as linguistic evidence to substantiate the transitional and figurative meanings of the words.

The data analysis involved examining each word separately across different linguistic contexts after collection. To discover the relationship between the signifier (sign) and the signified (meaning), special attention was paid to three main factors:

1. Context: The specific sentence, literary framework, or style in which the word appears.
2. Social Relevance: How society and culture assign new meanings to a word (e.g., the word Pashto, which, beyond being a language, has found broad application as a synonym for honor and ethics).
3. Historical Development: How societal progress in various aspects of life leads to the creation of new derivative meanings. Additionally, the conceptualization of linguistic phrases was analyzed based on cognitive semantics.

The necessity of this research lies in the fact that, due to the historical and social evolution of the Pashto language, the meanings of many words have changed or multiplied. To enable readers and researchers to comprehend texts accurately, distinguish between synonymous and Polysemous words, and understand the philosophy of naming, such a study was essential. This research helps decode the connections between literal and figurative meanings, clarifying that words derive their meaning through the interplay of mind, society, and context.

This study faced some certain limitations. First, finding close relationships or similarities between the fundamental and figurative meanings of highly Polysemous words (like Grān, Shīn, Kaḍa, and Māya) is quite challenging. Second, tracing the root of the original meaning of non-derivative words poses a major obstacle (e.g., it remains largely unanswered why a human or animal nose was originally named (poza). Third, investigating all Polysemous words in Pashto within a single short article is impossible; therefore, this study is limited to a few specific examples.

Results and Discussion

There are many definitions of word polysemy, while formulating a concise technical overview require to define it comprehensively. Meaning is the content of a linguistic sign. The sign (word, phrase, sentence, speech, text) is called the (signifier); its content is the (signified) (meaning), and the relationship between them is called (signification). Understanding the meaning of a word implies conceiving a concept. Linguists, especially lexicographers, often limit meaning to the definition of vocabulary. However, most linguists and psychologists argue that meaning resides in the mind, fundamentally linked to the linguistic relationship between thoughts and concepts ([Samoon, 1402](#)).

Ogden and Richards (as cited by [Solizay, 1399; P.167](#)) define meaning as follows:

The intrinsic characteristics of an object or phenomenon.

The connotative concept of a word.

The concept derived from someone's speech.

The intended concept that a listener grasps from a speaker's utterance.

If a speaker of a language understands the speech and intent of another speaker of the same language, that comprehension is considered "meaning"

Pashtonzoy states: "Since words convey meanings, they must possess a physical existence (meaning they refer to an object that can be experienced) as well as a logical existence (they do not contradict themselves). Thus, meaning is the relationship between the word and the object, or the name and the named (signifier and signified)" ([Arghand, 1396; P.52](#)). Meaning is a formless existence that a writer attempts to shape and organize, making it comprehensible ([Khawakh, 1401](#)).

[Khkhalay \(1401\)](#) offers the following perspective on semantics: "Semantics searches for the meanings of linguistic signs or signifiers; in other words, semantics examines the relationship between the signifier and the signified. What is meaning? How and from what sources is it generated? These are the questions semantics answers. Classical rhetoric only focused on the literary signification of speech (Parole); however, modern semantics illuminates all significations that help us determine the meaning of an expression, alongside the literary ones" (P. 178).

According to cognitive theory, language symbolizes meaning, but this meaning is inherently incomplete; it merely guides the listener to construct rich models of conceptualization. [Turner \(1996\)](#) articulated this by stating that linguistic expressions do not inherently possess meaning; rather, they instruct us on how to construct meaning using processes we

already know. Words do not contain pre-packaged meaning. Understanding an utterance does not merely mean grasping what the words say, because words say nothing without our powerful cognitive processes and extensive background knowledge. In this theory, conceptualization arises from the actual use of language in context. Simply put, in cognitive semantics, meaning is not pre-stored knowledge within the language; rather, meaning-making is a complex process occurring at the conceptual level ([Mohanad, 1403](#)).

Some linguists seek a meaning that bridges language and the external world, looking at objects, events, and realities to reach the intended referent. The meaning of a literary work begins with language, embracing linguistics and syntax; therefore, nothing is void of linguistic quality. Linguistic examples, syntax, morphemes, phonemes, and all linguistic elements contribute to the meaning of texts.

The famous English semanticist [Ullmann \(1959\)](#) who states: Meaning is a reciprocal relationship existing between a mental image and a word. Seeing or hearing a word forms an image in our minds, and a mental image can substitute for a word. This occurs because thinking about an object or phenomenon brings the word to life in our minds. Based on meaning, words are categorized into two types: "Synonyms" and "Polysemes." Synonymy and polysemy are two distinct categories, though some fail to distinguish the boundary between them. Synonymy refers to different words sharing the same meaning, whereas polysemy refers to a single word conveying different meanings when used in various sentences. In other words, in synonymy, several words yield one meaning; in polysemy, the opposite is true—one word yields several meanings. This discussion focuses on Polysemous words ([Samoon, 1402](#)).

A Polysemous word is one that possesses two or more related meanings, or words that, in addition to their primary meaning, carry other meanings known as transitional (figurative) meanings ([Dawlat Mohammad, 1399](#)).

In the realm of polysemy, homophones/homographs may also appear. Homonymous words are those whose written forms are identical, and sometimes their pronunciation is also the same. When the syntactic category of a word changes, its meaning changes as well ([Solizay, 1404](#)).

In the process of naming, words easily shift from one object to another. Words with multiple meanings are termed Polysemous (from Greek 'poly' meaning 'many' and 'semy' meaning 'sign'). In Polysemous words, the semantic relationships between the various meanings are close, hence all meanings are considered to belong to the same word. In dictionaries, these different meanings are listed numerically. For example, the word (Warsho) has multiple meanings presented as follows ([Hesam, 1398](#)):

1. A barren desert, a wide and expansive land.
2. Cultivated and lush land or place.
3. Pasture, a place for grazing animals.
4. Meadow and suitable grazing ground ([Habibi, 1384](#)).

Dictionaries utilize this numerical arrangement for Polysemous words. In language, words acquire derivative meanings alongside their primary ones. The cause of these derivative meanings is the historical evolution of the language. Language assists humans in all social interactions and maintains connections between people. It preserves a society's scientific, productive, and technical achievements and disseminates them among its members. Because language serves individuals in all aspects of life, progress in any life sector causes progress in the language, resulting in multiple meanings being assigned to a single word.

While some Polysemous words share close semantic relationships between their meanings, others do not. For example, the word (Shin) is used for the color green (e.g., shna wana - green tree, shne panre - green leaves). Closely related meanings include 'sprouting/growth' (e.g., (ghanam shna shawi di) - the wheat has sprouted). Furthermore, (Shin) is used to describe a foolish person (e.g., plankay tak shin day) or the slang phrase (shin khar day), meaning 'a green donkey', used for an impolite or foolish person). Sometimes, (Shin) is used to mean 'sad' (e.g., sta la ghama me zra shin day) - my heart is (shin) [sad/bruised] from your sorrow). Additionally, (Shin) means 'raw/unripe' (e.g., badam shna di, angor shna di) - the almonds are unripe, the grapes are unripe) ([Hesam, 1404](#)).

The word (Gaṭa) is also highly Polysemous; it is used to mean 'profit/benefit' and also means 'stone/rock'. The word (Tor) has multiple meanings: 'dark/black color', 'accusation/slander', and the 'net' hunters use to catch birds. The

word (Mali) is used in lower Pashtunkhwa (Peshawar) to mean 'gardener', but in upper Pashtunkhwa/Afghanistan, it refers to an accountant or finance officer ([Ziyar, 1396](#)).

The word (Pashto) originally functioned strictly as the name of the language. Over time, however, it acquired a profound cultural and literary concept, being used in various meanings across different contexts. This social conceptualization among Pashtuns is highly significant. Though a small word, (Pashto) has expanded vastly in meaning, encompassing the entire social and vital system of the Pashtuns. Today, Pashtuns refer to their traditions, national ethics, virtues, and entire socio-spiritual system as (Pashto). This semantic expansion makes it one of the most richly Polysemous words. Pashtuns have a deep affection for the word (Pashto), viewing it as the manifest symbol of their nationality.

If someone tells a Pashtun, "You have no Pashto" (Pashto na lare), it is a severe insult, implying the negation of all noble human qualities. Thus, in the vital dictionary of Pashtuns, the short translation of (Pashto) is: "The collection of all good human attributes and the foundation of Pashtun traditions, ethics, and good customs" ([Habibi, 1384](#)).

Just as (Pashto) evolved from a proper noun to a broad socio-national concept, the word (Pashtun) did not remain merely a proper noun. Used as an adjective, it means a person endowed with all noble and excellent human ethics—specifically, someone truthful, brave, and possessing firm resolve. In this socio-ethical context, (Pashto) and (Pashtun) are used for numerous concepts. For example, the phrase "Khushal Khan Pashto kare da" means he has made a firm resolve regarding a task and will not back down. Similarly, "pa khpala Pashto ting day" means he stands firm on his word, promise, and honor. The poet Khwaja Rizqullah employs this meaning in a couplet:

d bīla guḡi me: xε:ʒi lə pu:fto:

ze xwa:dʒə rəziq ulla: na: prε:ʒdəm pəxtu:

(Even if the arrows of calamity pierce me / I, Khwaja Rizqullah, will not abandon (Pashto) [my honor/resolve]).

Idioms like "tar Pashto awakhtal" mean breaking a promise, lacking courage, or violating ethical rules. "Khpala Pashto sara kawal" means fulfilling one's promise and resolve to the end. "Pashtun kedāl" means standing bravely on one's resolve and publicly declaring one's noble ethics and human emotions. While such social meanings are abundant, these examples suffice for this study ([Habibi, 1384; P.76](#)).

In the naming process, words easily transfer from one entity to another. Sometimes the name of a whole object is given to its part, or vice versa. Thus, investigating Polysemous words is essentially questioning the philosophy of naming—why the word remains the same while the referenced objects change. The primary question of polysemy is determining the primary (literal) meaning versus the transitional meaning. Transitional meanings are built upon the primary meaning; however, the origin of the primary meaning for non-derivative words remains largely unanswered ([Dawlat Mohammad, 1399](#)).

For example, why is the protruding front part of a ship called a (poza) (nose)? The answer is that its shape resembles the protruding nose of humans or animals. Based on this primary meaning, the ship's bow was named (poza). But why is a human or animal nose called (poza) in the first place? No one can provide a definitive answer, as this linguistic origin remains unresolved. We can only state that this word signifies this specific entity.

It is important to note that a transitional meaning should not be considered a fixed linguistic reality, as it often emerges within specific texts and contexts. For instance, the word Kor literally means 'house/home'. However, depending on style and context, it also refers to a 'wife'. When someone says "Kor ye wadan day" (His house is built), it metaphorically means he is married or has a wife ([Dawlat Mohammad, 1399](#)).

The word (Māya) is used in some Pashtun areas to mean 'leaven/yeast'. In the Middle Period of Pashto literature, Roshan (as cited by [Rashad, 1386](#)) used it in Khayr al-Bayan to mean 'wealth and capital'. When used as an adjective for a camel, (Māya) means 'hairy and large'. A nest egg left for a hen to encourage laying is also called Māya. Furthermore, in the game of marbles, the small hole into which the marble must be thrown is called (Māya).

The word (Zāray) has multiple meanings. It refers to a crop that is close to harvest. It also refers to a one-year-old calf. Furthermore, it describes a cow whose milk is drying up, and is applied generally to any young domestic animal from the age of two months until it is completely weaned ([Rashad, 1386](#)).

The word (Ghāra) is used in several senses. It refers to the human neck. It also denotes the bank or edge of a river or sea. As the eastern region poet Babarzai writes: "/d sind pə ɡlɾə rɑ:zɪə dʒɑ:nɑ:nə - χʊrʊ ʊbʊ jʊ:ʊrəm mɑ:χɑ:m dɪ/." (Come to the river's bank, my beloved...). It also refers to the collar of a shirt (da kamis ghara) (Naghma Zar, 2021). Metaphorically, it implies responsibility, as in "da zma pa ghara sho" (This is upon my neck / This is my responsibility). Professor Rashad notes that in (Khayr al-Bayan; p. 69), this word is used to mean the 'horizon': It is the time of true dawn, the white light that appears on the (ghara) (edge/horizon) of the sky" (Rashad, 1386).

Similarly, (Kaḍa) is a Pashto word that, beyond its literal meaning (tent/family/belongings), contextually implies 'wife'. For instance, "kade ye warta ghag kral" means his wife called out to him. The logic behind such shifts is evident in literary usage: if a writer likens a girl to a deer (hosay) due to some similarity, eventually the simile dissolves, and the word (hosay) is used directly in place of 'girl'. It crosses the boundaries of simile and metaphor, and through stylistics and context, assumes the status of a primary noun representing the girl (Dawlat Mohammad, 1399).

In Polysemous words, the closeness or similarity between meanings is not always obvious; sometimes, it is incredibly difficult to find a logical link between two meanings of a word. For instance, the word (Grān) means 'expensive'. Besides this, it conveys the meanings of 'heavy', 'interesting/dear', and is also used for 'respected' or 'rare'. Finding the distinction between the fundamental and figurative meanings of this word is not as straightforward as it is for the word (Shin). Due to the historical evolution of words, identifying the similarities and differences between literal and figurative meanings is a challenging task present in all languages, but it is particularly prominent in languages that have undergone extensive evolutionary stages (Hesam, 1398).

The research indicates that the Pashto language is exceptionally rich in Polysemous words, yet there is a profound need for more professional and academic research in this area. Pashto contains many words (such as Grān, Kaḍa, Māya, Ghāra, Shin, and Pashto) that, alongside their primary meanings, offer broad transitional and social meanings across different linguistic environments, cultural structures, and contexts.

For instance, the word (Pashto) is not merely the name of a language; in its social context, it has transformed into a vast concept encompassing honor, resolve, and human emotion. The shift and expansion of a word's meanings are heavily tied to societal relations, the historical progression of the language, and metaphorical usage. Understanding Polysemous words and their contexts helps us accurately grasp the explicit and implicit concepts of spoken and written discourse, thereby further enriching the semantic study of the Pashto language.

The data and findings obtained from this research indicate that Polysemous words in Pashto fall into two main categories. The first includes words where a logical similarity exists between the primary and transitional meanings, such as (Poza, which means nose), which is used for both the front of a ship and the human face due to a logical morphological connection. The second category comprises meanings generated within socio-cultural environments, such as the word (Pashto), which evolved from denoting a language to representing honor, resolve, and ethical conduct.

In this discussion, it is noteworthy that many transitional meanings are born through metaphor and simile. When a word transitions from its original environment to a new context, it results in semantic multiplicity. For instance, the word (Kor, which means house) being contextually used to refer to a wife demonstrates that in Pashto, meaning is not confined solely to dictionary definitions; it relies heavily on social interactions and the intentional usage by the speaker or writer.

Based on this research, it can be argued that the challenge surrounding Pashto polysemy is not merely a lack of dictionaries, but also a deficit in deep linguistic analysis. Given that Pashto has three distinct literary historical periods, it is highly likely that such Polysemous words are abundant across these eras. However, differentiating between literal and figurative meanings requires a newer, broader discussion compared to other languages, making this study a strong foundational starting point. To further enrich this field, it is recommended that a specialized dictionary of Pashto Polysemous words be compiled in the future, recording the transitional and social meanings of each word across various contexts.

Ultimately, this research proves that semantic shifts in Pashto words are directly correlated with the historical development and cultural needs of the society. Establishing the separation between primary and figurative meanings remains an invaluable necessity for enriching Pashto semantics.

Conclusion

The topic of Polysemous words is a vital component in language learning and comprehension, revealing the connections between a word's multiple meanings. Polysemous words possess one or more meanings that assist in understanding the relationship between vocabulary and concepts. Meaning is the core content of a linguistic sign, expressing the relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (concept). Linguists believe that meaning resides in the mind, intrinsically linked to the linguistic connections between thoughts and concepts. In semantics, meaning represents a reciprocal relationship between a mental image and a word.

Examples of Polysemous words like (Gaṭa) and (Shīn) are highly valuable for understanding this phenomenon, clearly illustrating the nature of the relationships between various meanings. Such words play a critical role in our language structure and semantic comprehension because they possess the capacity to change meanings across different situations based on usage. Polysemy is an essential tool in creative literature and semantic richness, utilized to articulate cultural and social nuances.

The study of Polysemous words not only aids in understanding language structure but also forms a crucial foundation for expressing social relationships. Knowledge of these words can significantly contribute to the compilation of descriptive dictionaries, ultimately facilitating communication and the exchange of concepts. Overall, Polysemous words constitute a structural form of language vocabulary and serve as a vital source of semantic richness that contributes to the advancement of human communication.

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