

Homonymy

Homonymy is a semantic relationship in which two or more words have the same spelling and/or pronunciation but have completely different, unrelated meanings. The term comes from the Greek *homos* ("same") and *onoma* ("name").

The Two Types of Homonymy

Homonyms are typically categorized based on whether their similarity is in sound, spelling, or both.

1. **Homophones:** Words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings.

- **Examples:**

- *to, too, and two*
- *flour and flower*
- *knight and night*

2. **Homographs:** Words that have the same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings.

- **Examples:**

- *lead* (the metal, rhymes with *bed*) and *lead* (to guide, rhymes with *deed*)
- *wind* (air movement, rhymes with *sinned*) and *wind* (to coil, rhymes with *find*)
- *bow* (a weapon, rhymes with *toe*) and *bow* (to bend at the waist, rhymes with *cow*)

A word can be both a homophone and a homograph if it has the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings. These are sometimes called "true" homonyms.

- **Examples:**

- *bank* (the side of a river) and *bank* (a financial institution)
 - *bat* (a flying mammal) and *bat* (a piece of sports equipment)
 - *ruler* (a measuring tool) and *ruler* (a person who governs)
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Homonymy vs. Polysemy

It's easy to confuse homonymy with polysemy, but the key distinction is whether the meanings are related.

- **Homonymy:** The meanings are **unrelated**. For example, there is no conceptual link between a river *bank* and a financial *bank*.

- **Polysemy:** The meanings are **related**. For example, the meanings of the word *head* (part of the body, leader, top of a nail) are all connected by the central concept of "top" or "chief."

The distinction between these two concepts is important for lexicographers and linguists because it affects how words are listed in a dictionary. Polysemous words get one entry with multiple numbered meanings, while homonyms get separate entries.

