

Polysemy is a semantic relationship where a single word has **multiple, but related, meanings**. These different meanings share a common conceptual or historical origin. The word "polysemy" comes from the Greek *poly* ("many") and *sema* ("sign").

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## How Polysemy Works

The core idea of polysemy is that a word's meanings are not random but are connected by an underlying concept. One meaning often develops from a metaphorical or metonymic extension of another.

For example, the word **head** is a classic example of polysemy:

- **Part of the body:** The top part of a person or animal's body. (This is the literal, original meaning.)
- **Leader:** "The **head** of the department." (This meaning is a metaphoric extension of the first meaning—the person at the top or in charge.)
- **Top of a list:** "The column **head**." (This meaning also relates to the idea of "top.")
- **Foam on a beer:** "A beer with a good **head**." (This meaning is a metaphorical extension of the "top" idea.)

In all these cases, the meanings are different but are linked by the central concept of being the **top part** of something.

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## Polysemy vs. Homonymy

Polysemy is often confused with **homonymy**, but there is a key difference.

- **Polysemy:** Multiple, **related** meanings of a single word.
  - **Example:** The word **crane** can mean a bird or a construction machine. The meanings are related because the machine was named after the bird due to its long neck.
- **Homonymy:** Two or more completely **unrelated** words that happen to share the same spelling and/or sound.
  - **Example:** The word **bank** can mean the side of a river or a financial institution. These two meanings are not related in any way.

The distinction between polysemy and homonymy can sometimes be blurry, but the key is to determine if there is a shared historical or conceptual root between the meanings.