COGNITIVE MECHANISMS BEHIND HOMONYMY IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Ahmedova Lola
Master's Degree student
at the University of Exact and Social Sciences
Scientific adviser: Mannonova Saodat Artiqovna

Abstract: This article explores the cognitive mechanisms that underlie the phenomenon of homonymy in the Uzbek and English languages, offering a comparative perspective rooted in the principles of cognitive linguistics. Homonyms words that share the same form but possess different meanings are a rich source for examining how language users mentally organize and process lexical ambiguity. By investigating how native speakers of Uzbek and English perceive, differentiate, and contextualize homonymous expressions, the study sheds light on the cognitive strategies that facilitate meaning construction and disambiguation in real-time language use.

Keywords: Homonymy, cognitive linguistics, lexical ambiguity, semantic processing, mental lexicon, meaning disambiguation, conceptual mapping, linguistic worldview, cross-linguistic analysis.

Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of how humans perceive, conceptualize, and interact with the world around them. One of the most fascinating phenomena that illustrate the complexity of language and thought is homonymy the occurrence of two or more words having the same form (in spelling or pronunciation) but different meanings. Homonymy is deeply rooted in the structure of human cognition, and its study provides insight into how individuals mentally organize and retrieve lexical items. In this regard, examining homonymy through a cognitive linguistic lens offers a rich understanding of how the brain processes semantic ambiguity and how context aids in meaning disambiguation.

In both Uzbek and English, homonymy plays a significant role in language use and comprehension. While traditional linguistic approaches often focus on the classification and grammatical functions of homonyms, cognitive linguistics emphasizes the mental mechanisms and conceptual structures underlying this phenomenon. The meaning of a homonymous word is not static; rather, it is dynamically constructed based on context, conceptual mapping, and prior knowledge. Therefore, investigating the cognitive mechanisms behind homonymy involves exploring how speakers of Uzbek and English use conceptual frameworks to resolve ambiguity and achieve understanding.

Furthermore, comparing homonymy in Uzbek and English reveals both universal cognitive patterns and language-specific features that reflect distinct

cultural and linguistic worldviews. This comparative analysis not only enriches our understanding of each language but also contributes to the broader field of cognitive semantics by highlighting the diversity of lexical processing strategies.

This article aims to explore the cognitive mechanisms underlying homonymy in the Uzbek and English languages. It will examine how homonymous words are structured, processed, and interpreted in each language, drawing upon cognitive theories such as prototype theory, conceptual metaphor theory, and frame semantics. Additionally, the paper will address the role of context, pragmatics, and conceptual blending in disambiguating homonyms, while also considering the cultural and linguistic influences that shape the way homonymy is perceived and used by speakers of each language.

1. Understanding homonymy from a cognitive perspective

In traditional linguistics, homonymy is typically treated as a lexical phenomenon, where words that share form (either phonetically or orthographically) have distinct, unrelated meanings. However, from a cognitive linguistic viewpoint, homonymy is not merely about form but about how the brain categorizes and interprets ambiguous stimuli. In this approach, language is seen as a reflection of general cognitive capacities such as categorization, mental imagery, memory, and inference. Therefore, homonymous words are processed based on context, prior experience, and cultural knowledge.

Homonymy challenges the cognitive system because it requires the speaker or listener to activate multiple mental schemas and select the appropriate meaning. This selection is guided by conceptual domains, frames, and prototype structures. For example, in English, the word *"bank"* can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. The disambiguation of meaning relies on which conceptual frame is activated finance or geography.

2. Types of homonyms in Uzbek and English

Both Uzbek and English languages contain various types of homonyms, including:

Perfect Homonyms (identical in form and pronunciation):

- English: *bat* (animal / sports equipment)
- Uzbek: *oy* (moon / month)

Homophones (same pronunciation, different spelling and meaning):

- English: *pair* / *pear*
- Uzbek equivalents are less frequent due to phonetic spelling consistency.

Homographs (same spelling, different pronunciation and meaning):

- English: *lead* (to guide / a metal)
- Uzbek examples are rarer, but dialectal variation may produce such phenomena.

While both languages possess homonyms, Uzbek, being an agglutinative language, relies more on morphological markers to clarify meaning, which can reduce ambiguity compared to English. However, in both languages, polysemy

(where meanings are semantically related) often overlaps with homonymy, making cognitive distinction crucial.

3. Conceptual framing and contextual clues

Cognitive linguistics stresses the importance of conceptual framing in understanding homonyms. Frames are structured sets of knowledge activated during language use. For instance, in the sentence "She sat on the bank and watched the water flow," the *bank* activates the *landform* frame. In contrast, "She opened a new account at the bank" invokes the *financial institution* frame.

In Uzbek, similar processes occur. The word *ko'z* can mean *eye* or *bud* (as in a plant). Contextual elements such as verbs or surrounding nouns help activate the correct frame:

- *Ko'z yosh to'kdi* (*She shed tears*) – human anatomy frame.
- *Ko'kargan ko'zlar* (*Budding eyes*) – plant/botanical frame.

4. Role of metaphor and conceptual blending

Another cognitive mechanism relevant to homonymy is conceptual metaphor. Metaphors are mental mappings from one domain to another, and many homonymous usages arise due to metaphorical extensions. In English, the verb *to shoulder* can mean to carry something physically (*He shouldered the bag*) or take on responsibility (*She shouldered the blame*). Uzbek also uses similar metaphorical mappings, for example, *yurak* (heart) used metaphorically to mean *courage* or *emotion*.

Conceptual blending further explains how meanings merge. It involves taking elements from two input spaces and blending them into a new, emergent meaning. Homonyms often result when such blends become lexicalized over time.

5. Mental lexicon and semantic networks

In both English and Uzbek speakers, homonymous words are stored in the mental lexicon, a network of interconnected nodes representing meanings, sounds, and usage patterns. When encountering a homonym, the brain activates multiple nodes, and contextual priming helps narrow down the appropriate node. Frequent exposure and cultural familiarity influence the strength of these connections.

Studies in psycholinguistics show that homonymous words with dominant meanings (more frequently used) are accessed faster than subordinate ones. For example, English learners often recognize *bat* as the sports equipment before the animal. Similarly, Uzbek learners might interpret *til* primarily as *language* rather than *tongue* unless context dictates otherwise.

6. Cultural influences and language-specific patterns

Culture plays a significant role in how homonyms are understood. Certain meanings become prominent due to societal importance. In English-speaking cultures, financial contexts make the *bank* (financial) meaning more salient. In Uzbek, agricultural contexts may highlight meanings like *yaproq* (leaf/petal) in different ways depending on regional culture.

Language-specific features such as morphological richness in Uzbek or idiomatic expressions in English also influence how homonyms are formed and understood. For instance, English phrasal verbs contribute to homonymy (*pick up*, *break down*, *run over*), while Uzbek might create homonymy through derivational suffixes.

Conclusion

The study of homonymy from a cognitive linguistic perspective reveals that homonymous phenomena are far more than mere lexical coincidences — they are deeply embedded in the mental and conceptual structures that govern language processing. In both Uzbek and English, homonyms challenge speakers to rely on cognitive mechanisms such as conceptual framing, contextual inference, metaphorical mapping, and semantic network activation to derive accurate meanings from seemingly identical linguistic forms.

Our comparative exploration has demonstrated that while Uzbek and English differ significantly in structural and morphological aspects, the underlying cognitive strategies used to disambiguate homonyms show striking similarities. Both languages utilize context and shared cultural knowledge to activate appropriate meaning schemas, and both rely heavily on metaphorical extension and conceptual blending to enrich the semantic range of homonymous expressions.

Furthermore, the mental lexicon's organization with its reliance on usage frequency, dominant-subordinate meaning relationships, and cross-linguistic priming underscores how homonymy is handled as a dynamic, context-sensitive process. Uzbek’s agglutinative nature offers more overt morphological cues, whereas English often depends on syntactic and idiomatic cues to resolve ambiguity. Nonetheless, the role of cognitive frameworks remains central in both.

In conclusion, the cognitive approach provides a powerful and insightful lens through which to understand the complexity of homonymy across languages. By analyzing how the brain interprets, categorizes, and selects meanings, we gain a deeper understanding of how homonyms function not only as linguistic artifacts but as reflections of human thought. Future research could benefit from experimental psycholinguistic studies and cross-linguistic semantic analysis to further validate and elaborate these cognitive mechanisms in diverse linguistic environments.

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