

**POLYSEMY IN TRANSLATION STUDIES: CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING
POLYSEMIOUS LEXICAL ITEMS*****Damir Shermatov****Bachelor Student, Faculty of English Philology and Translation Studies**(Ingliz Filologiyasi va Tarjimashunoslik Fakulteti)**Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Samarkand 140100, Uzbekistan***Abstract:**

Polysemy—the phenomenon where a single lexical form carries multiple related senses—creates persistent translation difficulties because dictionaries list meanings, but context selects the intended one. This article explains how polysemy functions as a “sense-selection” problem in Translation Studies and why mistranslating a polysemous item often produces not only semantic error but also pragmatic distortion and coherence failure. Building on discourse- and pragmatics-oriented views of translation (which treat meaning as realized in use), the paper shows how translators can identify contextual triggers, narrow the active sense, and choose equivalents that fit collocation, register, and communicative purpose. The discussion also connects human translation practice to “word sense disambiguation” in language technology, where polysemy is formalized as a context-driven decision task. Recent research trends confirm that polysemy remains a major source of ambiguity and variability across languages, especially in culturally loaded or domain-specific texts.

Keywords:

polysemy; translation studies; context; word sense disambiguation; lexical ambiguity; pragmatic meaning; collocation; coherence; explicitation; translation strategies

Introduction

Translators rarely fail because they do not “know the word.” More often, they fail because the word has several plausible senses and the translator chooses the wrong one. Polysemy is therefore a core translation challenge, not a marginal vocabulary issue. In translation theory and pedagogy, meaning is commonly described as context-dependent: lexical items have a range of potential senses, but the text activates one (or one cluster) through co-text, genre, and situation. Mona Baker’s coursebook approach emphasizes that translators must move beyond isolated-word equivalence and consider how meaning is conveyed in use, including how reader interpretation depends on coherence and pragmatic inference.

Polysemy becomes even more complex in cross-linguistic transfer because languages divide semantic space differently. A polysemous English word may map onto multiple Uzbek words (or vice versa), and each candidate equivalent comes with its own collocational and stylistic constraints. This article explains (1) how context “chooses” among senses, (2) what kinds of errors polysemy typically

causes in translation, and (3) practical strategies for reducing risk through contextual analysis, collocation checking, and guided explication.

Polysemy and why context is the “selector”

Polysemy should be distinguished from simple homonymy: polysemy involves related senses that readers construct dynamically during comprehension. A pragmatic account of polysemy argues that new or specialized senses are often built “online” in context through concept adjustment, rather than retrieved as fixed dictionary entries. This matters for translation because it implies that correct interpretation is not a mechanical lookup process; it is an inference process guided by context.

For translators, “context” has two layers. Linguistic context (co-text) includes surrounding words, syntactic structure, discourse topic, and collocations. Situational context includes domain knowledge (law, medicine, politics), speaker intentions, time/place references, and what the target reader is expected to know. Baker’s discussion of coherence highlights that target readers may not share the same world knowledge as source readers, which can force translators to add minimal bridging information to prevent misunderstanding.

Typical translation difficulties caused by polysemous lexical items

A recent systematic review of polysemy in Translation Studies reports that polysemy repeatedly triggers ambiguity, variable renderings, and meaning shift—especially when senses are culturally or pragmatically loaded. In practical work, difficulties often cluster into three patterns: wrong sense selection, collocational mismatch, and connotation drift.

Wrong sense selection often happens when translators default to the most common dictionary meaning without verifying contextual triggers. Consider the English noun **state**:

Example A: “Both the **state** and federal authorities reacted.”

Example B: “They were accused of creating a police **state**.”

In Example A, “state” contrasts with “federal,” strongly triggering the sense “a constituent region” (Uzbek: *shtat*). In Example B, “police state” triggers the political concept (Uzbek: *politsiyachi davlat* / *politsiya davlati* or a descriptive equivalent). The supportive point is that adjacent lexical cues (“federal,” “police”) function as high-salience sense signals; ignoring them produces a political misreading rather than a minor lexical slip.

Collocational mismatch occurs when the translator chooses the correct general sense but expresses it in an unnatural partner pattern in the target language. For instance, English **strong** is polyfunctional: it can mean “physically powerful,” “intense,” “concentrated,” or “forceful.”

Example: “He likes **strong tea**.”

A literal Uzbek rendering like *kuchli choy* may sound odd in many contexts; a more natural equivalent may be *quyuq choy* or an alternative phrasing depending on usage norms. The supportive point is that collocation is part of sense realization: languages conventionalize “the same sense” differently, so translators must check whether the chosen equivalent actually belongs to the target-language phrase pattern.

Connotation drift happens when the translator selects a semantically plausible equivalent but shifts evaluative attitude. The adjective **ambitious** is a classic case because it can be laudatory (“grand, impressive”) or critical (“overly self-seeking”).

Example A: “The UN’s **ambitious** program...” → Uzbek tends to require a positive intensifier like *ulkan* or *keng ko‘lamli* depending on tone.

Example B: “His **ambitious** plans to dominate...” → Uzbek may require *shuhratparast* or a critical paraphrase.

The supportive point is that connotation is also context-selected: the translator must preserve not only referential meaning but also stance, because stance shapes the reader’s interpretation of motives and evaluation.

A practical routine for translating polysemous items

Because polysemy is systematic, translators benefit from a repeatable routine. The first step is to scan for “sense triggers” before choosing any equivalent. Triggers include collocates (nearby typical partners), grammar patterns, domain markers, and discourse topic. A simple but reliable habit is to widen the window: read the whole sentence and at least one adjacent sentence before deciding. This aligns with the view that meaning is distributed across textual relations rather than located in isolated words.

The second step is domain narrowing. Many words become less ambiguous once you identify the field. The noun **case** can mean “legal case,” “container,” “instance,” or “situation.” If the paragraph mentions court, charges, trial, judge, then the legal sense becomes dominant; if it mentions suitcase, luggage, carry, then the container sense dominates. The supportive point is that domain narrowing reduces cognitive load: instead of choosing among five senses, you are often choosing among one or two.

The third step is candidate testing inside the full target sentence. Translators should propose 2–3 candidate equivalents and test them for (a) collocation, (b) register, and (c) coherence with the broader paragraph. If two candidates both seem acceptable, choose the one that best matches the text type (academic, dialogue, news) and the intended tone. This reduces random synonym switching and makes decisions defensible.

The fourth step is to allow occasional equivalents (contextual substitutes) when no “regular” dictionary equivalent fits. For example, English **issue** may mean “edition,” “topic,” or “problem.”

Example A: “This **issue** of the newspaper...” → Uzbek: *son* / *nashr*.

Example B: “This is a serious **issue**...” → Uzbek: *muammo* / *masala*.

After the example: notice how co-text triggers sense—“newspaper” selects the publication sense; “serious” selects the problem/topic sense. If a sentence uses “issue” in a specialized institutional sense, a translator may need an occasional equivalent (paraphrase) to preserve meaning accurately.

The fifth step is guided explicitation when target readers lack presupposed knowledge. Baker emphasizes that coherence depends on reader expectations and experience; if the ST assumes shared knowledge that TT readers do not have, translators may add small clarifications.

Example: “Talks in **Washington** resumed.”

A TT for general readers may need: “Talks in Washington (the U.S. capital) resumed.”

The supportive point is that explicitation should be minimal and purposeful: just enough to protect coherence, not so much that it becomes commentary.

What web-based research adds: the link to Word Sense Disambiguation

In language technology, the same problem is formalized as **word sense disambiguation (WSD)**—the task of identifying which sense of a word is intended in a given context. Recent reviews describe WSD as critical to reducing ambiguity in machine translation and other NLP tasks because polysemy is a primary source of lexical uncertainty. Although translators do not run algorithms, the conceptual parallel is useful: professional translators perform human WSD by reading contextual cues, narrowing senses, and selecting target items accordingly.

A recent paper focusing on polysemy and translation challenges highlights how ambiguity and vagueness can affect fidelity and readability in translation, reinforcing the point that lexical decisions must be evaluated for both meaning and function. Another recent study explicitly frames polysemy in translation as a recurring research theme and emphasizes methodological approaches that analyze how translators manage multi-sense items across genres and cultures. These sources support the practical claim that polysemy is not an “occasional problem,” but a stable driver of translation variability.

Conclusion

Polysemy is a normal feature of language, but it becomes a translation difficulty because sense selection is context-driven and cross-linguistic mappings are rarely one-to-one. Translators face predictable risks: choosing the wrong sense, producing unnatural collocations, or shifting connotation and stance. The most reliable solution is not a larger dictionary but stronger context competence: scanning for sense triggers, narrowing by domain, testing candidate equivalents inside the full sentence, using occasional equivalents when needed, and applying minimal explicitation to preserve coherence for target readers. Pragmatic accounts of polysemy underline that senses are often constructed during comprehension, which further supports a context-first approach. Ultimately, high-quality translation depends on making polysemy visible as a decision problem and managing it with disciplined, reader-aware strategies.

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