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# THE STUDY OF POLYSEMOUS AND MONOSEMOUS WORDS IN TRANSLATION THEORY

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**Abstract:** Polysemy (one word with multiple related senses) is a classic headache in translation because dictionaries list meanings but context chooses the right one. Monosemy (a word with one main sense) looks easier, yet it still causes problems when collocation, domain, or reader knowledge changes how the "one meaning" should be expressed. This article explains how translation theory treats polysemous versus monosemous items through the ideas of regular equivalents, context selection, and occasional (context-built) substitutes. It also connects translator practice to word-sense disambiguation research, where polysemy is modeled as a context-driven decision task and where higher polysemy generally increases error rates. Using short English–Uzbek-style examples with commentary, the paper shows why polysemous words require wider context windows, while monosemous terms require consistency and terminology control. The main takeaway is simple: translation accuracy improves when you treat meaning as "word-in-context," not "word-in-isolation."

**Keywords:** polysemy; monosemy; translation theory; regular equivalents; context-bound words; word sense disambiguation; lexical ambiguity; terminology; contextual substitute; English–Uzbek translation

## Introduction

If you ask translation students what makes translation difficult, they often say "vocabulary." In real work, the bigger problem is usually meaning choice: the same word form can carry different senses (polysemy), and the translator must pick the intended one using context. Translation theory has long recognized this: meaning is not a fixed label stored in a word; it is activated by context and situation, and the target text must reproduce that activated meaning in a natural way. Baker's coursebook approach is a good summary of this view because it repeatedly shows that equivalence is not a one-word swap; it depends on how meaning is conveyed and interpreted in real texts. At the same time, translators also deal with monosemous items (words with one main sense), such as many technical terms and standardized names, where the core challenge is not "which sense?" but "how to keep the same label consistently and appropriately across genres." A practical translation theory needs both sides: polysemy explains why context selection is essential, while monosemy explains why stability, standardization, and terminology systems matter.

## Methods

This is a qualitative, example-based study. First, it synthesizes how translation theory and pedagogy describe the behavior of polysemous words, especially the idea that context disambiguates meaning and that translators may need to build contextual substitutes when regular dictionary equivalents fail; Baker's discussion of meaning in use is used as the main pedagogical anchor. Second, it uses pragmatic and cognitive accounts of polysemy to explain why sense selection is not mechanical; Falkum's relevance-theoretic thesis is used to support the idea that new senses are often constructed during online comprehension, which is exactly what translators must simulate consciously. Third, it adds web-based research evidence linking polysemy to error patterns in disambiguation tasks (WSD), since WSD is basically "polysemy made measurable"; the Senseval-related error analysis is used to illustrate how higher polysemy correlates with higher error rates. Finally, it brings in a translation-focused study explicitly discussing polysemy as a lexical problem, plus a recent systematic review of polysemy in Translation Studies, to show this topic is still active and relevant. The examples are short and typical; after each example, a short supportive explanation clarifies the risk and the reason behind the recommended translation move.

## Results

Across the literature and the examples, two patterns are consistent. First, polysemy produces translation difficulty mainly through sense selection: the translator must identify which semantic component is dominant in the given context, and then choose a target-language equivalent that fits collocation, register, and discourse function. Second, monosemy produces translation difficulty mainly through stability and distribution: even if there is "one meaning," the translator still has to maintain consistent terminology, choose the right level of technicality for the audience, and prevent false familiarity from pushing the term into a wrong everyday equivalent. The results also show a simple asymmetry: polysemous items often need more context to translate correctly, while monosemous items often need more discipline (glossaries, termbases, consistency checks) to avoid accidental variation.

## Discussion

### Polysemy: why one word becomes many translation decisions

Polysemy is not rare; it is normal. A large number of everyday words have clusters of related senses, and readers resolve them rapidly using context cues. Falkum's work supports a pragmatic view: people often construct the intended sense dynamically during comprehension rather than retrieving a fixed list of meanings, which explains why decontextualized sentences make translators uneasy. Translation becomes difficult when context is weak, when the text is short (titles, UI strings), or when multiple senses are plausible inside the same domain. A translation paper focused on polysemy as a lexical problem states the point directly: polysemous words become problematic when there is no strongly biasing linguistic context, forcing translators to rely on situational context. Here is what that looks like in practice. Example: English "bank" can refer to a financial institution or a river bank. If the sentence is "He went to the bank," the translator must look for triggers: money words (account, deposit, loan) versus nature words (river, shore, fishing). After this example, the key takeaway is that

sense selection is not about guessing; it is about collecting clues. Translators should widen the context window by at least one sentence before deciding, because one extra sentence often contains the trigger word that eliminates the wrong sense.

A second classic example is "state." In "Both the state and federal authorities reacted," "state" is most likely "a federal unit" (Uzbek would typically need "shtat" or a descriptive equivalent depending on style). In "They created a police state," "state" becomes "a political regime," closer to "davlat" with a qualifying phrase. After this example, the important point is that collocates ("federal," "police") are strong sense signals; ignoring them produces a meaning error, not a style issue. This is exactly why translation pedagogy insists that meaning is "word-in-text," not "word-in-dictionary."

Polysemy also causes quieter problems: translators may choose a sense that is roughly correct but wrong in register or connotation. For instance, "ambitious" can be positive ("grand, impressive") or negative ("self-seeking"). A translator who always chooses the same equivalent will sometimes invert the author's attitude. After this example, the supportive point is simple: when a word carries evaluative meaning, translators must ask, "Is this praise or criticism here?" because that determines the target choice more than the dictionary entry.

**Monosemy: why "one meaning" is still not automatic**

Monosemy seems easy: if a word has one meaning, just translate it and move on. In reality, monosemous items still create translation problems in three ways: (1) terminology variation, (2) audience mismatch, and (3) contextual restrictions. Technical terms are often close to monosemy within a domain, but they require consistent equivalents; if a translator alternates between two near-synonyms, readers may assume they refer to different concepts. After this point, the practical rule is: monosemy demands standardization. A stable term should usually have a stable equivalent, and if the translator changes it, they should have a clear reason (different subdomain, different genre, different audience).

Another monosemy trap is "near monosemy": a term may be stable for specialists but confusing for general readers. Translation pedagogy notes that translators sometimes choose between a borrowed term and a "native" descriptive term depending on audience. Baker's coursebook repeatedly shows that equivalence choices depend on context and readership, which applies strongly here: a specialist term can be correct but still communicatively ineffective if the reader cannot interpret it. After this explanation, the key idea is that monosemy is not only semantic; it is also pragmatic—meaning includes usability for the reader.

Finally, even monosemous words can become misleading when the translator relies on form similarity across languages (false friends). A "monosemous-looking" international word can still carry different connotations or usage constraints in the target language. After this point, the lesson is: stability is not guaranteed by appearance; it is guaranteed by verified usage and domain norms.

**Regular equivalents, variable equivalents, and contextual substitutes**

Translation theory often talks about regular equivalents: common target-language substitutes that translators can reuse. Polysemy explains why many regular equivalents are variable (one-to-many): the same source word has several regular target options, and context chooses among them. The Ziyonet teaching PDF on translating polysemantic words emphasizes choosing equivalents and handling contextual meaning and combinability—exactly the skills

polysemy demands. After mentioning this, the practical point is that a dictionary is not the final authority; it is a menu, and context is the ordering rule.
When no regular option fits, translators create contextual substitutes (occasional equivalents). The polysemy translation paper notes that translators may need situational context when linguistic context is insufficient. After this, the applied lesson is: if the sentence is too short to disambiguate, the translator must consult wider text context, genre context, or real-world context (who is speaking, where, why). In professional practice, this can mean checking the document type (legal, medical, marketing), checking surrounding paragraphs, or asking the client for clarification if ambiguity affects critical meaning.

**What WSD research teaches translators**

WSD (word sense disambiguation) is basically polysemy under a microscope: researchers measure how well systems choose the right sense in context. The Senseval error analysis summary reports a clear pattern: higher polysemy yields higher error rates, and multiword/phrasal items are particularly error-prone. After this evidence, the translator-friendly takeaway is not "become an NLP engineer," but "treat high-polysemy words as high-risk." Words like run, set, issue, matter, charge, case, and right can behave like translation minefields. The safe habit is to slow down at these words, scan for domain triggers, and test the candidate equivalent inside the whole sentence to see whether it collocates naturally and preserves the intended meaning.
A recent systematic review of polysemy in Translation Studies also shows that polysemy remains a major research theme and is closely tied to MT and disambiguation, which supports the idea that this is not an "old topic"; it is still modern and relevant. After this, the practical conclusion is: learning polysemy handling is future-proof because it improves both human translation and post-editing of MT output (where wrong-sense errors are common).

**Conclusion**

Polysemy and monosemy are dictionary labels; they describe different kinds of translation risk. Polysemous words mainly create problems of sense selection, connotation control, and context dependence; monosemous words mainly create problems of consistency, terminology discipline, and audience fit. Translation theory suggests a simple professional mindset: trust stable equivalents when the item is truly stable, choose among variable equivalents using strong context triggers, and construct contextual substitutes when regular options fail. Evidence from pragmatic polysemy research supports the idea that meanings are often built during comprehension, which is why translators must work with context windows rather than isolated words. Evidence from WSD error analysis supports the practical observation that higher polysemy increases error risk, reinforcing why translators should treat high-polysemy items as "slow down and verify" zones. In short, the best translation habit is simple and realistic: translate the sense the text activates, not the word the dictionary lists first.

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