One word, many meanings

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
ADVANCED | C1

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each advanced term with its definition.

1 lexical polysemy ____	**a** the phenomenon of a single lexical item having multiple senses linked in a systematic pattern
2 sense extension ____	**b** the process by which a word's meaning broadens to cover new but related referents
3 zeugma ____	**c** a figure of speech applying one word to two others in different senses, often for comic or rhetorical effect
4 syllepsis ____	**d** a specific grammatical form of zeugma where the word's two senses are strictly incompatible
5 catachresis ____	**e** the misapplication of a word to a context it does not properly fit, often for lack of a more precise term
6 semantic bleaching ____	**f** the gradual loss of a word's original semantic force through overuse, so it becomes weaker or more general
7 pragmatic disambiguation ____	**g** the process by which listeners resolve ambiguity using situational or conversational context
8 regular polysemy ____	**h** a systematic pattern in which whole classes of words share the same predictable pattern of alternative meanings
9 dead metaphor ____	**i** a metaphor so deeply embedded in everyday language that its figurative origin is no longer consciously noticed
10 conceptual metaphor ____	**j** an underlying cognitive mapping from one domain of experience to another that structures how we think and speak about abstract concepts

2 Choose the most precise term for each context.

1 A single word having multiple linked senses is lexical polysemy / an unrelated homonym pair.

2 A word's meaning broadening to cover new referents is sense extension / a fixed original sense.

3 A figure applying one word to two others in different senses is zeugma / a straightforward repetition.

4 A metaphor so embedded its origin is unnoticed is a dead metaphor / a vivid, fresh image.

5 The gradual weakening of a word's original force is semantic bleaching / semantic intensification.

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6 Resolving ambiguity using situational context is pragmatic disambiguation / ignoring context entirely.

7 A whole class of words sharing a predictable meaning pattern is regular polysemy / a purely idiosyncratic case.

8 An underlying cognitive mapping structuring abstract thought is a conceptual metaphor / a literal description.

3 Match the verbs with the noun phrases to form academic collocations.

1 exploit ____	**a** lexical ambiguity for comedic effect
2 resolve ____	**b** sense extension historically
3 trace ____	**c** a regular polysemy pattern
4 identify ____	**d** a conceptual metaphor
5 undergo ____	**e** semantic bleaching over time
6 instantiate ____	**f** a general pattern in specific use
7 disambiguate ____	**g** a polysemous term in context
8 map ____	**h** one conceptual domain onto another

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4 Complete the analysis with terms from the box.

catachresis | conceptual metaphor | dead metaphor | lexical polysemy | pragmatic disambiguation | regular polysemy | semantic bleaching | sense extension | syllepsis | zeugma

Cognitive linguists studying 1 _____ increasingly emphasise that many apparently separate word senses are not arbitrary but reflect systematic 2 _____ patterns, whole classes of words extending meaning in predictable, parallel ways. This process typically proceeds through 3 _____, a word's core meaning gradually broadening to encompass related referents, often guided by an underlying 4 _____ that structures how speakers conceptualise abstract experience through more concrete domains. Writers occasionally exploit polysemy deliberately for rhetorical effect through 5 _____, applying a single word to two objects in different senses within one sentence, or its stricter variant 6 _____, where the two senses are grammatically or semantically incompatible. Some extended uses arise instead through 7 _____, the imprecise application of an available word where no more exact term exists. Meanwhile, frequently used metaphors can undergo 8 _____, gradually losing their original semantic force through overuse until they become a 9 _____, no longer consciously recognised as figurative at all. In everyday conversation, listeners resolve potential confusion effortlessly through 10 _____, drawing on situational and conversational context rather than consciously working through a word's full range of possible senses.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

The cognitive architecture of polysemy

Cognitive linguists increasingly argue that polysemy is not merely a lexical curiosity but a window into the conceptual structures underlying human thought. Regular polysemy patterns, whereby entire classes of words systematically extend meaning in parallel ways, suggest that speakers possess generalised cognitive templates for extending meaning rather than memorising each sense of every word independently. Conceptual metaphor theory extends this argument further, proposing that abstract domains of experience, such as time or emotion, are habitually understood through more concrete physical domains, meaning polysemous extensions are not arbitrary but reflect deep, largely unconscious patterns of human cognition. Critics of this framework caution that demonstrating a plausible cognitive motivation for a particular extension does not prove that motivation was psychologically active for speakers at the time the extension actually occurred historically.

1 What do cognitive linguists increasingly argue polysemy is a window into? _____

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2 What do regular polysemy patterns suggest about speakers? _____

3 What does conceptual metaphor theory propose? _____

4 What does this mean polysemous extensions reflect, according to the theory? _____

5 What do critics of this framework caution? _____

6 What does demonstrating a plausible cognitive motivation not prove? _____

6 Replace the words in bold with a precise term or collocation.

1 The joke applied one word to two objects in incompatible senses. _____

2 The metaphor had lost its original figurative force through overuse. _____

3 The word's meaning was misapplied because no better term existed. _____

4 The listener resolved the ambiguity effortlessly using situational context. _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 160-190 word critical commentary on how cognitive linguistics explains systematic patterns of polysemy, distinguishing observation from theoretical claim.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Include four academic collocations. [ ] Maintain a precise, balanced register.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Advanced terms

1 a 2 b 3 c 4 d 5 e 6 f 7 g 8 h 9 i 10 j

2 Precise terms

1 lexical polysemy 2 sense extension 3 zeugma 4 a dead metaphor 5 semantic bleaching 6 pragmatic disambiguation 7 regular polysemy 8 a conceptual metaphor

3 Academic collocations

1 a exploit lexical ambiguity for comedic effect 2 g disambiguate a polysemous term in context 3 b trace sense extension historically 4 c identify a regular polysemy pattern
5 e undergo semantic bleaching over time 6 f instantiate a general pattern in specific use 7 g resolve... note adjust 8 h map one conceptual domain onto another

4 Analysis

1 lexical polysemy 2 regular polysemy 3 sense extension 4 conceptual metaphor
5 syllepsis 6 zeugma 7 catachresis 8 semantic bleaching
9 dead metaphor 10 pragmatic disambiguation

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 The conceptual structures underlying human thought.
2 That they possess generalised cognitive templates for extending meaning rather than memorising each sense independently.
3 That abstract domains of experience are habitually understood through more concrete physical domains.
4 Deep, largely unconscious patterns of human cognition.
5 That demonstrating a plausible cognitive motivation does not prove it was psychologically active for speakers historically.
6 That the motivation was psychologically active for speakers at the time the extension occurred historically.

6 Precise terms and collocations

1 syllepsis (or zeugma) 2 a dead metaphor (through semantic bleaching) 3 catachresis 4 pragmatic disambiguation

Over to you

Answers will vary. Look for conceptual precision, evidence-aware reasoning and balanced evaluation.