One word, many meanings

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each precise term with its definition.

1 polysemy ____	**a** a single word having multiple, related meanings
2 homonym ____	**b** two or more words that are spelled and pronounced the same but have unrelated meanings
3 homophone ____	**c** two words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings
4 homograph ____	**d** two words that are spelled the same but pronounced differently or with different meanings
5 semantic shift ____	**e** the gradual change in a word's meaning over time
6 figurative meaning ____	**f** a non-literal, symbolic meaning of a word or phrase
7 literal meaning ____	**g** the direct, exact meaning of a word
8 lexical ambiguity ____	**h** a situation where a word or phrase can be reasonably interpreted in more than one way
9 metaphorical extension ____	**i** the process by which a word's core meaning is extended metaphorically to new contexts
10 context-dependent ____	**j** depending on surrounding words or situation for correct interpretation

2 Choose the word with the most suitable connotation.

1 For a word with multiple related meanings: polysemy / a single fixed sense.

2 For unrelated words that happen to look and sound the same: homonym / a synonym.

3 For words that sound alike but are spelled differently: homophone / a homograph.

4 For a non-literal, symbolic meaning: figurative meaning / the exact dictionary definition.

5 For the direct, exact meaning of a word: literal meaning / a poetic interpretation.

6 For a phrase reasonably interpreted more than one way: lexical ambiguity / total clarity.

7 For a word's meaning extended metaphorically: metaphorical extension / an unrelated new word.

8 For meaning depending on surrounding context: context-dependent / fixed regardless of use.

3 Complete the linguistics collocations with one word.

One word, many meanings

1 a case of _____ (= a word with multiple related meanings)

2 an unrelated _____ (= same form, unrelated meaning)

3 a perfect _____ (= sounds the same, spelled differently)

4 a subtle _____ shift (= gradual meaning change)

5 a _____ meaning (= symbolic rather than exact)

6 the _____ sense (= the direct, exact meaning)

7 resolve the _____ (= a word open to more than one meaning)

8 a _____ extension (= meaning extended through metaphor)

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4 Complete the case notes with words and phrases from the box.

context-dependent | figurative meaning | homograph | homonym | homophone | lexical ambiguity | literal meaning | metaphorical extension | polysemy | semantic shift

Case A: The word 'bank' illustrates 1 _____, since a river bank and a financial bank are historically unrelated meanings sharing the same word, making it a true 2 _____.
Case B: By contrast, 'head' as in 'head of the company' shows genuine 3 _____, since the meaning extends from the physical body part through 4 _____ rather than coincidence.
Case C: 'Read' (present) and 'read' (past) form a 5 _____, spelled identically but pronounced differently.
Case D: 'Flower' and 'flour' are a classic 6 _____, sounding identical despite different spellings and meanings.
Case E: The 7 _____ of 'awful' shifted from 'inspiring awe' to 'very bad', an example of gradual 8 _____ over centuries.
Case F: The joke relied on 9 _____, exploiting a phrase that could be read either 10 _____ or figuratively.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

Distinguishing polysemy from homonymy

Linguists carefully distinguish polysemy from homonymy, even though both describe a single word form carrying multiple meanings. Polysemous meanings share a historical or conceptual connection, typically traceable through metaphorical extension from an original core sense, as with 'mouth' extending from a body part to the mouth of a river. Homonyms, by contrast, arise from historical coincidence, with genuinely unrelated words happening to converge on identical spelling and pronunciation over time, as with the financial 'bank' and the river 'bank', which derive from entirely separate etymological roots despite their modern identical form. This distinction matters for lexicographers deciding whether to list related senses under one dictionary entry or separate entirely unrelated words as distinct entries.

1 What do linguists carefully distinguish? _____

2 What do polysemous meanings share, typically? _____

3 Give the example used to illustrate polysemy. _____

4 Where do homonyms arise from, by contrast? _____

5 Give the example used to illustrate homonymy. _____

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6 Why does this distinction matter for lexicographers? _____

6 Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals. Do not change the meaning.

1 The word had many related meanings that developed from one core sense. POLYSEMY _____

2 The two words were spelled and pronounced identically but historically unrelated. HOMONYM _____

3 The two words sounded the same but were spelled differently. HOMOPHONE _____

4 The phrase could reasonably be read in more than one way. LEXICAL AMBIGUITY _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 120-150 word account analysing the difference between polysemy and homonymy using specific examples, distinguishing observation from linguistic theory.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Control connotation carefully. [ ] Avoid unsupported assumptions.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise terms

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

2 Connotation

1 polysemy 2 homonym 3 homophone 4 figurative meaning 5 literal meaning 6 lexical ambiguity 7 metaphorical extension 8 context-dependent

3 Collocations

1 polysemy 2 homonym 3 homophone 4 semantic 5 figurative 6 literal 7 ambiguity 8 metaphorical

4 Case notes

1 polysemy 2 homonym 3 polysemy 4 metaphorical extension 5 homograph
6 homophone 7 figurative meaning 8 semantic shift 9 lexical ambiguity 10 literal meaning... note adjust

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 Polysemy from homonymy.
2 A historical or conceptual connection, typically traceable through metaphorical extension from an original core sense.
3 'Mouth' extending from a body part to the mouth of a river.
4 Historical coincidence.
5 The financial 'bank' and the river 'bank'.
6 Because it affects whether to list related senses under one dictionary entry or separate unrelated words as distinct entries.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 This is an example of polysemy. 2 The words were homonyms.
3 The words were homophones. 4 The phrase showed lexical ambiguity.

Over to you

Answers will vary. Check lexical precision, appropriate connotation and separation of fact from inference.