

Heterosemy

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Altres idiomes: [Heterosemia](#)

Heterosemy is a variant of polisemy. Heterosemy supposes that the various interrelated meanings of a morpheme are associated with different grammatical categories.

An example of heterosemy is the verb *To Go*, which functions as a full verb of motion (*I go to the swimming pool*), but also as an auxiliary verb in verbal periphrases meaning future tense (*I'm going to tell you the truth*).

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Explanation

The concept of heterosemy was coined by Linchtenberk (1991) in a paper about Oceanic languages. Heterosemy is the consequence of a semantic and syntactic change that originates words with different—but related—meanings, which pertain to different grammatical categories.

A representative example is the verb *To Have*, which can be used in different meanings and with different grammatical values. Hence, in (1), (2), and to some extent in (3), *To Have* functions as a possessive verb.

(1) I have a yellow car

(2) Irene has a fertile imagination

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(3) I have many mails to send/I have a lot of mails to send

In (1) there is a prototypical example of a possessive verb ('to have a tangible object'); in (2), however, the notion of possession is metaphorical: *imagination* is not an object that may be held in literal terms. In (3) the possessive meaning is less defined, since it is near that of (4)/it is close to that of (4), where *To Have* is an auxiliary verb. That is, the utterance of (3) is ambiguous between a possessive reading (*I have many mails*) and a deontic sense (*I have to send many mails*). In (4), instead, the order of elements in the sentence favors that the sentence would be interpreted as an obligation.

(4) I have to send many mails/a lot of mails

On the one hand, the posposition of the complement *many mails/a lot of mails* weakens the possessive sense: *many mails* is now the direct object of *send*. And, on the other hand, the new order makes impossible that *que* functions as a relative, and, in consequence, reinforces the deontic sense of the whole construction (*Tener + que + infinitive*).

The above examples show that the different, but related, meanings of a morpheme can be related to different grammatical contexts. This kind of polisemy is that which defines heterosemy.

Related concepts

[Antonymy](#)

[Semantic change](#)

[Syntactic change](#)

[Grammaticalization](#)

[Polysemy](#)

[Synonymy](#)

Basic bibliography

Lichtenberk, Frantisek (1991), "[Semantic Change and Heterosemy in Grammaticalization](#)", *Language*, Vol. 67, No. 3, pp. 475-509.

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Further readings

Ameka, Felix K. - Dench, Alan Charles - Evans, Nicholas (2006), *Catching Language: The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing*. *Trends in linguistics*, 167, Berlin, M. de Gruyter.