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A Review of the Approaches to Enantiosemy in Linguistics in the XXI Century

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Abstract: The phenomenon “enantiosemy”, commonly understood as the coexistence of two opposing meanings within one linguistic form, has been discussed for more than a century, yet the field remains theoretically fragmented. This article offers a historical comparative review of major approaches to enantiosemy, with the aim of clarifying how the phenomenon has been conceptualized from early descriptive accounts to contemporary cognitive-pragmatic models. The study adopts a qualitative review design. It investigates research on English, French, German, Slavic and Turkic language materials, drawing on theoretically influential and methodologically different studies published mainly between 2008 and 2025. Furthermore, it also acknowledged earlier historical perspectives frequently cited in these literatures. This discussion argues that the most productive current understanding of enantiosemy is multidimensional: it requires simultaneous attention to lexical structure, semantic history, cognitive construal, contextual activation and socio-discursive stabilization.

Keywords: Enantiosemy, auto-antonymy, contronymy, lexical semantics, semantic change, evaluative semantics, pragmatic mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

Enantiosemy is a semantic configuration in which a single linguistic form develops two opposite meaning directions. This phenomenon has also been discussed under such terms as auto-antonymy, contronymy, antonymy, Janus words, enantiodromia, though not always under the same theoretical assumptions. The term enantiosemy is often attributed to V.I.Shertsl who discussed words with opposite meanings in 1883 [1]. However, recent researches show that this term was proposed by German linguist J.I.Kanne before V.I.Shertsl [2] in the early XIX century. Some researchers view enantiosemy as a subtype of polysemy, and others define it as a borderline phenomenon between polysemy and homonymy. The term enantiosemy comes from the Greek *enantios* (“opposite”) and *sema* (“sign”). Some researchers still consider it as an independent manifestation of semantic opposition in a single form. Diachronic studies have demonstrated that oppositional meanings can be formed through semantic broadening, narrowing, reinterpretation, actant reversal, derivational change or long-term evaluative reanalysis. Cognitive accounts are concerned with conceptualisation and perspective shifts. Pragmatic and discourse-oriented studies highlight irony, hyperbole, stance, media framing and socially negotiated reinterpretation. So enantiosemy is increasingly viewed

not as a peculiar lexical phenomenon but as a multidimensional phenomenon that mirrors the way language systems handle internal contradiction.

In this paper we aim to fill this gap by means of a historical-comparative review of the approaches to enantiosemy, from the first descriptive formulations to the contemporary cognitive-pragmatic models. (1) outline the main stages in the development of enantiosemy research; (2) classify the dominant theoretical approaches and the phenomena they focus on; (3) identify ongoing debates about the status, mechanisms and scope of enantiosemy; and (4) devise a research agenda that can connect lexical semantics, semantic change, cognitive construal and pragmatic interpretation

The review is conducted around four research questions:

RQ1: How has enantiosemy been conceptualized in major phases of linguistic scholarship?

RQ2: What are the most common formal, diachronic, cognitive and pragmatic mechanisms used to explain the emergence of opposite meanings in one form?

RQ3: What are the theoretical discussions that are still open in the current research?

RQ4: What seems to be the most promising direction for future empirical and cross-linguistic study?

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical-comparative review design. The aim is to reconstruct the main intellectual currents in the study of enantiosemy and to compare the ways in which the object of study is defined, the emergence of opposite meanings is explained, and the levels of the functioning of the phenomenon are determined by different approaches.

The review points to studies on English, French, German, Slavic, Turkic and related materials as these areas are well represented in the contemporary literature and exemplify complementary tendencies in the field. English studies are particularly useful for classification and lexicographic interpretation, French and German studies highlight typological diversity and contextual actualisation, Slavic and Czech studies offer rich diachronic evidence, Uzbek and Khakas studies expand the typological spectrum of Turkic linguistics, and media or law studies illustrate the applied significance.

The review also includes studies that have become recurrent reference points in contemporary discussion, such as A. Klegr's account of enantiosemy as a word-internal semantic relation [3], A. Shmelev's cognitive-communicative perspective [4], E. Rivelis's critique of imaginary opposites [5], E. Kulikova's analysis of pragmatic enantiosemy in media discourse [6], I. Duraj-Nowosielska's account of pragmatic meaning evolution [7], and M. Benes's intersubjective explanation of rule formation [8].

Table 1. Analytical stages in the development of enantiosemy research.

Stage	Dominant orientation	Typical questions	Representative directions
Early descriptive and historical	Recognition of opposite meanings within one form	How can a word contain opposed senses? Is this anomaly or regularity?	Historical observation; lexical description; terminological formation
Structural-systemic	Classification of enantiosemic relations	Is enantiosemy a subtype of polysemy, homonymy or a distinct category?	Componential analysis; lexical typologies; internal opposition
Diachronic and cognitive	Mechanisms of semantic divergence	How do semantic shifts, perspective inversions and conceptual bipolarity produce opposition?	Etymology; semantic change; construal and cognitive asymmetry
Pragmatic and intersubjective	Contextual actualisation and social conventionalisation	How do speakers, genres and discourse communities stabilize opposite meanings?	Irony; hyperbole; media discourse; intersubjective rules
Applied and cross-linguistic	Functioning in specialised domains and typological comparison	What difficulties arise for translation, legal interpretation and language teaching?	Legal terminology; media terminology; comparative typology

3. Results

A first major result of the review is the shift from treating enantiosemy as a curious lexical irregularity to analysing it as a structured type of intra-form semantic opposition. A. Klegr is especially influential in this regard. Rather than presenting enantiosemy as an accidental contradiction, he places it within a broader network of word-internal semantic relations and identifies several recurring structural patterns. His account suggests that enantiosemy may be motivated by relations comparable to converseness, directionality and other forms of semantic reorientation. A related position appears in M. Avdeeva et al., who connect lexical enantiosemy to the category of opposition and emphasise its systematic nature in Germanic and Slavic materials [9]. H. Kajberuny and T. Hakobyan similarly survey competing approaches and show that modern accounts increasingly frame enantiosemy as a meaningful semantic configuration rather than an exception that resists theory [10].

A second result is the expansion of typological scope. Modern research distinguishes lexical and phraseological enantiosemy, linguistic and speech-based enantiosemy, synchronic and diachronic types, and even affixal, grammatical and syntactic manifestations. I. Smushchynska and E. Nikolaiesku propose a wide-ranging typology for French, distinguishing linguistic and speech forms, semantic and emotional-evaluative types, lexical and phraseological cases, and synchronic and diachronic manifestations [11]. M. Nikolova-Tsaneva argues that contrastive research also requires attention to derivational and affixal patterns [12]. G. Ostrikova extends the discussion to German material at lexical, phraseosyntactic and syntactic levels, highlighting the decisive role of context in actualising opposite meanings [13]. This typological expansion has two implications. First, it shows that enantiosemy is not confined to a narrow subset of dictionary entries. Second, it creates a methodological challenge: the broader the scope of enantiosemy becomes, the more carefully researchers must distinguish stable lexical

opposition from occasional irony, contextual reversal, constructional ambiguity and broader discourse effects.

A third result concerns the mechanisms through which opposite meanings arise. P. Nejedlý's analysis of Old Czech materials demonstrates the value of reconstructing semantic development in detail rather than assuming that every apparent opposition is straightforwardly inherited [14]. Y. Murzin foregrounds the role of semantic evolution, sign asymmetry and subject-object inversion [15]. A. Shmelev likewise argues that enantiosemey often emerges from ordinary mechanisms of cognition and communication, including divergence from an initially broad or underspecified meaning [16]. Turkic-focused research contributes an important comparative dimension. Y. Odilov discusses the occurrence of enantiosemey in Uzbek and relates it to broader debates over polysemy, antonymy and speech usage [17]. O. Shagdurova, working on Khakas verbs, shows that enantiosemic development can be investigated through structured lexical classes and context-sensitive verbal semantics [18]. Together, these studies caution against language-specific exceptionalism: enantiosemey may arise through recurrent mechanisms that are realised differently across linguistic systems.

A fourth result is the growing prominence of pragmatic and discourse-oriented explanations. E. Kulikova offers a clear example through the Russian socio-political term "optimization" [19]. Originally associated with improvement, the term acquires negative interpretations such as deterioration, destruction or collapse in critical media discourse. The importance of this case is not merely that a word changes evaluative orientation; it is that the positive sense remains formally available while a strongly negative interpretation becomes socially recognisable under specific discourse conditions. I. Duraj-Nowosielska develops a pragmatic mechanism of semantic evolution in Polish, linking enantiosemey to exaggerated or hyperbolic usage that is reinterpreted by addressees and gradually conventionalised. M. Benes highlights an intersubjective perspective: new meanings may emerge through inferential misalignment, become codified as shared rules and then circulate within a community. E. Rivelis, meanwhile, suggests that not every perceived opposition has equal theoretical status, thereby underscoring the need to distinguish genuine enantiosemey from analyst-created or contextually superficial contrasts.

A fifth result is the growing applied relevance of enantiosemey research. Once treated mainly as a theoretical issue in lexical semantics, the phenomenon is now examined in specialized registers where semantic ambiguity has practical consequences. V. Ozyumenko demonstrates that legal English, despite its orientation towards precision, contains terms whose meanings may display internal opposition or perspective-dependent interpretation [20]. Such cases challenge the assumption that technical vocabulary is naturally monosemous and point to concrete risks in legal translation and second-language instruction. In media discourse, E. Kulikova's study shows that politically charged terminology can undergo pragmatic polarization, with consequences for public interpretation and ideological framing.

4. Discussion

On the basis of the reviewed scholarship, this article proposes an integrative five dimensions: (1) formal unity of the linguistic sign; (2) semantically demonstrable opposition between senses; (3) diachronic or system-internal pathway of divergence; (4) contextual and pragmatic conditions of activation; and (5) degree of socio-discursive stabilization. This framework is not offered as a final theory, but as a synthesis that may help future studies distinguish between fully lexicalized enantiosemey, emergent pragmatic polarity shifts and merely occasional rhetorical reversal.

Such an integrated perspective also clarifies why debates over classification persist. Researchers who focus primarily on dimension (1) and (2) tend to situate enantiosemia within polysemy or opposition theory. Researchers concerned with dimension (4) and (5) are more likely to emphasize speech, discourse and conventionalization. A historically informed synthesis suggests that both viewpoints are necessary, but they address different analytical questions.

The review has several theoretical implications. Enantiosemia should not be defined solely through dictionary contrast. Lexicographic evidence is important, but the phenomenon also depends on contextual compatibility, conventionalised patterns of use and the persistence of opposing readings within a speech community. The study of enantiosemia has implications for wider theories of semantic change. Furthermore, opposite meanings do not necessarily arise through sudden reversal. They may develop through gradual drift, narrowing of evaluative perspective, pragmatic strengthening, social irony or repeated contextual contrast. Enantiosemia therefore provides a useful test case for models that seek to relate lexical structure to communicative practice.

5. Conclusion

Enantiosemia is no longer best understood as a marginal lexical curiosity; it is a theoretically revealing phenomenon that connects lexical semantics, semantic change, cognition, discourse and social interpretation.

Five tendencies stand out. First, enantiosemia has been reconceptualised as structured intra-form opposition rather than unexplained anomaly. Second, its typology has broadened beyond lexical items to include phraseological, derivational, grammatical and syntactic dimensions. Third, diachronic explanations now operate alongside system-internal and cognitive mechanisms. Fourth, pragmatic and discourse-based accounts have become essential for explaining how opposite readings are activated and stabilized. Fifth, the phenomenon has increasing applied significance in media analysis, legal terminology, translation and pedagogy.

To sum up, enantiosemia should be approached as a multidimensional semantic process. Its study contributes not only to the description of opposite meanings within a single lexical unit, but also to a broader understanding of how languages organize contradiction, negotiate evaluative shifts and transform contextual interpretation into relatively stable meaning.

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