



Word Meaning in Lexical Semantics: A Literature Review of Nouns, Adjectives, Verbs, and Figurative Language

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Abstract: Word meaning is one of the central topics in linguistic theory because it connects language structure, human cognition, and cultural experience. This literature review examines word meaning from the perspective of lexical semantics, focusing on how nouns, adjectives, and verbs construct meaning differently and how figurative mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and idioms extend literal meaning. Using a library research approach, the study synthesizes classical semantic theories proposed by Bloomfield, Lyons, and Jespersen with cognitive semantic frameworks developed by Lakoff, Fillmore, Talmy, Evans and Green, as well as recent empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025. The review shows that noun meaning is shaped by denotation, prototype structure, and frame knowledge, while adjective meaning is inherently context-dependent and organized along semantic scales. Verb meaning is explained through aspectual classification, event structure, and force dynamics, providing a more comprehensive understanding of lexical representation. The analysis further demonstrates that figurative language is not merely a stylistic feature but reflects systematic conceptual mappings that organize human thought, as explained in Conceptual Metaphor Theory and cognitive accounts of metonymy. The findings indicate a significant shift from traditional reference-based semantics toward cognitive semantics, highlighting that these approaches complement rather than replace one another. The review also emphasizes pedagogical implications for English language teaching by suggesting that explicit instruction in conceptual metaphor, frame knowledge, and idiomatic expressions can improve learners' lexical and figurative competence. Overall, word meaning is best understood as a dynamic, usage-based, and culturally embedded phenomenon shaped by linguistic structure, cognitive processes, and communicative context.

Keywords: Cognitive Semantics; English Language Teaching; Figurative Language; Lexical Semantics; Word Meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Meaning is often described as the invisible substance of language: it cannot be observed directly, yet without it, words would be no more than empty phonological shapes. Within linguistics, the study of how individual words carry, organize, and transmit meaning falls under the domain of lexical semantics, a field that has occupied scholars since the early structuralist period and that continues to generate active debate in contemporary cognitive and computational linguistics (Alduais et al., 2022). Because words function as the smallest freely occurring units that carry meaning, understanding how meaning is assigned, stored, and extended at the word level is a prerequisite for any broader account of sentence meaning, discourse coherence, or communicative competence.

The traditional view, most influentially articulated by Lyons (1977), treats word meaning largely as a matter of reference: a word is meaningful because it points to, or stands for, an entity, property, or event in the world. This referential orientation was reinforced by Bloomfield's (1933) behaviourist insistence that meaning could only be described through the observable situation in which an utterance occurs, and by Jespersen's (1924) functional

classification of word classes according to the kinds of entities they name. These classical positions provided linguistics with rigorous descriptive tools, but they also left open a persistent question: how can a single word extend to cover new senses, novel metaphors, or culturally specific connotations if meaning is nothing more than a fixed link between a linguistic form and a real-world referent?

The emergence of cognitive semantics in the final decades of the twentieth century offered an alternative answer. Lakoff (1987) argued that lexical categories are not defined by necessary and sufficient conditions but are instead organized around prototypes, with some members judged more central or representative than others. Around the same period, Fillmore (1982) proposed that word meaning is inseparable from the background knowledge structures, or frames, that a speech community associates with a concept, while Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that abstract domains of thought, such as argumentation, time, or emotion, are routinely understood through systematic metaphorical mappings from more concrete, embodied domains. Evans and Green (2006) later consolidated these insights into a coherent cognitive linguistic programme, asserting that the lexicon is not a static inventory of word–referent pairings but a dynamic, usage-based system continuously shaped by human experience, culture, and context.

This paper positions itself within that ongoing conversation. It focuses on three major word classes, namely nouns, adjectives, and verbs, because each of them encodes meaning through a distinct semantic logic: nouns typically profile entities, adjectives profile scalar properties, and verbs profile relations, events, and processes unfolding in time. In addition, the review devotes substantial attention to figurative language, since metaphor, metonymy, and idiomatic expression are not marginal ornaments of speech but central mechanisms through which literal word meaning is extended, reorganized, and enriched (Gibbs, 1992; Kövecses, 2010). By reviewing classical and cognitive accounts side by side, and by incorporating recent empirical scholarship published between 2019 and 2025, this article aims to answer three guiding questions: first, what is the concept of word meaning in contemporary semantics; second, how are nouns, adjectives, and verbs understood in terms of the meaning they encode; and third, how does figurative language influence and expand word meaning beyond its literal boundaries. In addressing these questions, the review also considers what implications the classical–cognitive dialogue holds for linguistic theory and for the teaching of English as a foreign or second language.

2. METHOD

This article adopts a library research (literature review) design, a qualitative method appropriate for synthesizing and critically evaluating existing theoretical and empirical scholarship rather than collecting new primary data. The corpus of sources consists of two complementary strands. The first strand comprises foundational, classical works in semantics and lexical typology, including Bloomfield (1933), Jespersen (1924), Lyons (1977), Vendler (1967), Cruse (1986), Fillmore (1982), Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Levin (1993), Talmy (2000), Kennedy and McNally (2005), Evans and Green (2006), and Gibbs (1992). These texts were selected because they represent the theoretical backbone of lexical semantics and figurative language studies and remain widely cited in current scholarship.

The second strand consists of empirical and theoretical articles published between 2019 and 2025 in journals indexed by Scopus or by Indonesia's Science and Technology Index (SINTA), retrieved through targeted searches of academic databases. These sources were used to verify whether classical claims still hold explanatory power, to identify recent refinements of cognitive semantic theory, and to illustrate how figurative competence is investigated in applied and pedagogical contexts. Sources were selected based on thematic relevance to noun, adjective, and verb semantics, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, idiomatic processing, and the pedagogical application of lexical semantics in English language teaching. Data analysis followed a thematic-synthesis procedure: relevant claims and findings were extracted, grouped under the eight discussion themes that structure the Results and Discussion section, compared for points of convergence and divergence between classical and cognitive accounts, and reformulated into an integrated critical narrative rather than a mere summary of individual sources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Word Meaning

At the most general level, a word can be said to carry meaning when it establishes a stable, conventional association between a phonological or orthographic form and a conceptual content shared by members of a speech community. Lexical semantics, as a subfield of semantics, examines precisely how this association is structured, how meanings relate to one another within the vocabulary of a language, and how the boundaries of a word's meaning are drawn and redrawn through use (Cruse, 1986). Historically, the discipline moved through several theoretical stages: structuralist semantics concentrated on decomposing word meaning into discrete semantic features and on mapping sense relations such as synonymy, antonymy,

and hyponymy; generative and formal semantics sought to model meaning through truth-conditional logic; and cognitive semantics reframed meaning as a product of conceptualization, embodiment, and cultural experience (Alduais et al., 2022).

A central claim of the cognitive turn is that the lexicon should not be viewed as a closed inventory of fixed definitions comparable to dictionary entries. Evans and Green (2006) argue that word meaning is inherently flexible: a single lexical item can activate different facets of its meaning depending on the linguistic and situational context in which it is used, and its boundaries can shift gradually as speakers extend it to new referents or blend it with neighboring concepts. This dynamic view finds support in more recent scientometric analyses of the field; Alduais et al. (2022), for instance, mapped several decades of publications in cognitive linguistics and found that research attention has steadily moved away from static, feature-based descriptions of meaning toward models that emphasize perception, embodiment, and conceptual integration as the mechanisms underlying word meaning. Likewise, Zhang and Liu (2023) note that contemporary work increasingly draws on neurolinguistic evidence to show that the construal of word meaning engages the same cognitive and neural resources involved in general perception and reasoning, reinforcing the cognitive semantic claim that meaning is not detachable from human experience.

At the same time, the classical, reference-based tradition should not be dismissed as obsolete. Lyons (1977) rightly observed that without some notion of reference, it would be impossible to explain how language allows speakers to talk about a shared external world, to verify statements, or to communicate successfully about concrete objects and events. Bloomfield's (1933) insistence on situational context anticipates, in a rudimentary form, what cognitive linguists would later call contextual construal. Rather than viewing classical and cognitive semantics as competing paradigms, this review treats them as addressing different, complementary layers of the same phenomenon: the classical tradition explains how words anchor language to a shared world, while the cognitive tradition explains how that anchoring is filtered, categorized, and elaborated through human cognition and culture.

Noun Meaning

Nouns constitute the word class most directly associated with reference, since their primary function is to identify persons, objects, places, substances, and abstract concepts. In the classical tradition, Lyons (1977) distinguishes between count nouns, which denote discrete, individually countable entities such as chair or phone, and mass nouns, which denote undifferentiated substances such as rice or oil. The distinction has clear syntactic consequences: count nouns accept numerals and plural marking (three chairs), whereas mass nouns typically

resist pluralization and instead combine with quantifiers such as *some* or *a great deal of* (*some oil*, not *three oils* in ordinary usage). Jespersen (1924) frames the same phenomenon slightly differently, describing nouns as naming expressions whose function is to designate an entity in the world, whether a person (teacher), a place (city), or an artifact. Bloomfield (1933) adds a further constraint by anchoring noun meaning to the relationship between linguistic form and an actual referent in physical reality, so that a word such as *dog* is meaningful precisely because it corresponds to an identifiable class of animals.

While these classical accounts remain descriptively useful, they struggle to explain several phenomena that are pervasive in everyday language use. Why, for example, is an apple judged a more typical fruit than an olive, even though both satisfy the same dictionary definition of fruit? Why does a single noun such as *airport* evoke an entire scenario involving passengers, security checks, and boarding gates, rather than simply designating a location? And why can a concrete noun such as *freedom* carry emotionally and culturally loaded connotations that exceed any literal definition? Cognitive semantics offers answers to each of these questions. Lakoff (1987) proposes that lexical categories are structured around prototypes: certain category members are perceived as more central, or more representative, than others, so that apple functions as a better exemplar of the category fruit than olive does, even though both are technically fruits in a botanical sense. Fillmore's (1982) frame semantics complements prototype theory by showing that a noun such as *airport* is understood not in isolation but against an entire background frame of related concepts, actions, and participants; encountering the word activates this whole frame, not merely a dictionary-style definition. Finally, nouns frequently accrue cultural and emotional meaning that goes beyond their literal denotation, so that *freedom* may symbolize independence, civil rights, or personal autonomy depending on the socio-political context in which it is used (Lakoff, 1987).

Beyond these three cognitive mechanisms, more recent scholarship has continued to refine the picture of noun meaning by emphasizing the role of conceptual coercion and polysemy. Pustejovsky's (2011) account of coercion demonstrates that a single noun can shift between senses depending on the verb or construction in which it occurs, such that *book* can denote a physical object in *read the book on the table* but an informational content in *remember the book fondly*. This flexibility indicates that even highly concrete, seemingly stable nouns are subject to the same dynamic reinterpretation that cognitive semantics attributes to more obviously abstract vocabulary. Taken together, the classical distinction between count and mass nouns, the cognitive notions of prototype and frame, and the more recent treatment of coercion jointly demonstrate that noun meaning operates simultaneously at the level of literal

reference and at the level of conceptual structuring, cultural association, and contextual adjustment.

Adjective Meaning

Adjectives differ from nouns in that their primary semantic function is not to designate an entity but to attribute a property, quality, or degree to an entity that a noun has already introduced. Traditional grammars commonly divide adjectives into gradable types, such as *big*, *cold*, or *beautiful*, which admit intensification and comparison (*very big*, *bigger*, *the biggest*), and non-gradable types, such as *dead* or *complete*, which denote an absolute state that does not, in ordinary usage, accept degree modification (a thing cannot logically be more dead than another). This binary distinction, however, only partially captures the semantic complexity of adjectival meaning.

Kennedy and McNally (2005) provide a more precise account by proposing that gradable adjectives are associated with different types of underlying semantic scales. Open scales, exemplified by *tall* or *expensive*, have no fixed maximum or minimum endpoint, so that judgments of height or price remain relative to a contextually determined standard. Closed scales, by contrast, are bounded at one or both ends; an adjective such as *full* or *empty* has a clear maximum or minimum point beyond which further gradation is not meaningful. Relative adjectives, meanwhile, derive their interpretation entirely from a comparison class established by context, meaning that the same lexical item can denote very different absolute values depending on what it is predicated of. The adjective *fast* illustrates this point clearly: a *fast car* and a *fast runner* both invoke the concept of speed, yet the actual velocities implied are radically different, because each noun activates its own contextually appropriate standard of comparison. This scalar approach explains a range of phenomena that a simple gradable and non-gradable dichotomy cannot, including why certain adjectives resist modification by *very* while others readily accept it, and why speakers can disagree sharply about whether a borderline case, such as a moderately warm day, counts as hot.

Cruse (1986) situates this scalar behaviour within a broader typology of adjectival meaning, distinguishing evaluative adjectives that express speaker judgment, dimensional adjectives that measure physical extent, and adjectives of physical property that describe sensory characteristics. More recent applied work has demonstrated that gradability is not only a matter of abstract semantic theory but also a genuine source of difficulty in second-language acquisition and figurative comprehension. In studies of English idiom and metaphor instruction, learners have been shown to rely heavily on gradable adjectives when constructing figurative comparisons, since the scalar flexibility of words such as *light* or *heavy* allows them

to be extended metaphorically far beyond their original physical sense, as in a light meal or a heavy silence (Alnujaidi, 2025). Such findings confirm Kennedy and McNally's (2005) theoretical prediction that scale structure, rather than a fixed literal definition, governs how far an adjective's meaning can be stretched into new figurative territory.

Verb Meaning

Verbs occupy a structurally central position in the sentence, since they typically determine how many participants an event involves, what roles those participants play, and how the event is temporally structured. Vendler's (1967) aspectual classification remains the single most influential framework for describing verb meaning from this temporal perspective. Vendler divides verbs, or more precisely the situations they describe, into four categories: states, such as know or understand, which are unbounded and involve no internal change; activities, such as walk or dance, which are durative but lack a natural endpoint; accomplishments, such as write a report, which are durative and culminate in a definite endpoint; and achievements, such as find a solution, which occur instantaneously and mark a sudden change of state. This classification has proved remarkably durable because it explains a wide range of grammatical phenomena, including why states resist the progressive aspect in standard English (knowing is markedly odd compared with dancing) and why achievements are compatible with adverbials such as suddenly but not with duration adverbials such as for an hour.

Building on this aspectual foundation, later scholarship has examined how verbs organize the participants of an event. Levin (1993) demonstrates that verbs can be systematically classified according to the syntactic alternations they permit, and that these alternations correlate with the semantic roles, such as agent, patient, and theme, that a verb assigns to its arguments. Talmy (2000), working from a cognitive semantic perspective, shows that many verbs encode not merely an action but an underlying pattern of force and causation: verbs such as push, block, or persuade all profile one entity exerting force upon another, whether that force is physical, as in push the door, or psychological, as in persuade a colleague. This force-dynamic perspective reveals that even highly abstract or metaphorical verb uses retain a coherent conceptual structure inherited from more concrete physical schemas.

Verb meaning is also strikingly susceptible to metaphorical extension, a fact that both classical and cognitive accounts must accommodate. The expression handle a problem, for instance, does not describe a literal act of grasping an object with the hands; instead, the physical sense of handle is mapped onto the abstract domain of managing a difficult situation. Similarly, the verb run extends from its core physical sense, as in run to the store, to a

managerial sense, as in run a business, through a systematic mapping of the event schema of directed, sustained motion onto the domain of organizational control. Contemporary research on figurative competence confirms that such extensions are not idiosyncratic but follow predictable conceptual patterns; studies of second-language learners' metaphorical awareness show that learners who are explicitly taught the underlying conceptual mapping behind a verbal metaphor retain and apply the extended sense more successfully than learners who memorize the figurative meaning as an isolated vocabulary item (Xu et al., 2022). Taken together, Vendler's aspectual classes, Levin's argument-structure alternations, and Talmy's force-dynamic schemas provide a layered account of verb meaning that spans temporal structure, participant roles, and the conceptual basis for metaphorical extension.

Lexical Semantics

Having examined nouns, adjectives, and verbs individually, it is useful to step back and consider lexical semantics as an integrated field concerned with how meaning is organized across the vocabulary of a language as a whole. Traditionally, lexical semantics has been concerned with describing sense relations among words, including synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, and hyponymy, and with specifying the semantic features that distinguish related lexical items from one another. From a cognitive perspective, however, Evans (2019) argues that these sense relations are themselves a byproduct of a deeper conceptual organization: words are not static labels attached to fixed slots in the world but flexible access points into rich conceptual categories that reflect how a given culture and cognitive system partition experience.

This reconceptualization has direct consequences for how each word class is analyzed. As the discussion above has shown, nouns denote entities but readily extend to institutional or figurative identities through frame knowledge and cultural association; adjectives describe scalable or absolute qualities whose interpretation depends on an underlying semantic scale; and verbs denote actions or processes that are classified according to aspectual category, whether achievement, accomplishment, state, or activity, and that are further structured by force-dynamic and participant-role considerations (Cruse, 1986; Pustejovsky, 2011; Talmy, 2000; Vendler, 1967). What unites these three word classes, despite their distinct semantic logics, is that none of them can be fully described through denotation alone; each requires reference to conceptual structure, context, and usage in order to account for the full range of meanings a word class can express.

Recent bibliometric and scientometric research supports the claim that this integrated, cognitively oriented view of lexical semantics has become the dominant orientation in the field.

Alduais et al. (2022), analyzing thousands of publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Lens between 1969 and 2022, found that cognitive processes such as attention, perception, and conceptual mapping have increasingly displaced purely structural or feature-based approaches as the primary lens through which word meaning is investigated. This trend indicates that lexical semantics today is best understood not as a narrowly linguistic enterprise but as an interdisciplinary field situated at the intersection of linguistics, cognitive psychology, and, increasingly, computational modeling of meaning.

Figurative Language (Metaphor, Metonymy, Idioms)

Figurative language refers to any use of a word or expression whose interpretation departs from its literal, conventional sense, and it constitutes one of the clearest demonstrations that word meaning is not fixed but extensible. Rather than treating figurative expressions as decorative deviations from literal language, cognitive semantics treats them as systematic evidence of how the human mind understands abstract domains through more concrete, embodied domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Conceptual metaphor. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, a metaphor is not merely a figure of speech confined to poetry or rhetoric but a cognitive mapping projected from a source domain, typically concrete and physically grounded, onto a target domain, typically abstract (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The well-known mapping ARGUMENT IS WAR illustrates this mechanism: expressions such as he attacked my argument, she defended her position, and I won the debate all draw on the concrete domain of physical combat to structure the abstract domain of verbal disagreement. Other pervasive mappings include TIME IS MONEY, as reflected in expressions like spending time or wasting an opportunity, and LIFE IS A JOURNEY, reflected in expressions like reaching a turning point or being at a crossroads. Each of these mappings is systematic rather than arbitrary: once a source domain is selected, an entire cluster of related expressions becomes available, which is why metaphor functions as a productive generator of new figurative vocabulary rather than a closed list of fixed phrases.

Metonymy. Whereas metaphor operates across two conceptually distinct domains, metonymy operates within a single domain, or within what Radden and Kövecses (1999) term an Idealized Cognitive Model, through a relationship of conceptual contiguity. In metonymy, one entity, referred to as the trigger or vehicle, provides mental access to a related entity, referred to as the target. Radden and Kövecses (1999) identify several recurrent metonymic patterns. In part-for-whole metonymy, a salient part of an entity stands for the whole, as in all hands on deck, where hands refers to the sailors as complete persons rather than to their hands alone. In place-for-institution metonymy, a location stands for the organization or event

associated with it, as in the White House announced new sanctions, where the building refers metonymically to the executive branch of the United States government, or Chernobyl changed public attitudes toward nuclear energy, where the place name stands for the disaster that occurred there. In object-for-user, or more precisely producer-for-product, metonymy, the name of a manufacturer or brand stands for the object it produces, as in she drives a Toyota, where Toyota, formally the name of the company, metonymically designates the car, while the phrase as a whole additionally licenses drives to be understood as referring to the human user operating that vehicle. A further widely discussed case is the sentence the pen is mightier than the sword, in which the pen metonymically represents diplomacy, writing, or peaceful negotiation, while the sword represents military force, an instrument-for-action mapping in which a tool stands for the broader activity or domain of power it is conventionally associated with.

Idioms. Idioms represent a further, more entrenched form of figurative meaning. Gibbs (1992) characterizes idioms as non-compositional expressions whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived by summing the literal meanings of their individual constituent words; the meaning of kick the bucket, for instance, bears no transparent semantic relationship to the literal acts of kicking and a bucket. Idioms are conventionally stored and retrieved as single lexicalized units, shaped over time by historical usage, cultural narrative, and community convention, rather than generated anew through ordinary compositional rules each time they are used. Break the ice, for example, literally denotes the physical fracturing of a frozen surface but has come to mean easing social tension or initiating conversation in an unfamiliar social setting, while spill the beans literally describes the accidental scattering of legumes but has come to mean disclosing a secret prematurely. Because idioms are non-compositional, they pose a distinctive challenge for second-language learners, who cannot rely on word-by-word decoding to arrive at the intended meaning.

Recent applied research reinforces the pedagogical significance of figurative competence. Alnujaidi (2025) compared lexical, etymological, and multimodal approaches to teaching idiomatic expressions to English as a foreign language learners and found that instruction which explicitly traces the historical or conceptual motivation behind an idiom, rather than presenting it as an arbitrary fixed phrase to be memorized, produces significantly stronger long-term retention and more accurate figurative comprehension. Similarly, Xu et al. (2022) and Abdulaal et al. (2023) show, through multimodal analyses combining verbal and visual data, that learners' metaphorical conceptions of abstract experiences, such as language learning itself, are systematically structured rather than idiosyncratic, which suggests that

figurative competence can be cultivated through deliberate instruction rather than left to incidental exposure. Complementary evidence from corpus-based studies of public discourse, including analyses of metaphor and metonymy in online media surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, further demonstrates that figurative mappings are not confined to literary or pedagogical contexts but pervade everyday public communication, reinforcing the cognitive semantic claim that figurative language is a fundamental, rather than peripheral, feature of the lexicon (Younes & Altakhaineh, 2022).

Classical vs. Cognitive Perspectives

The preceding sections have repeatedly shown that classical and cognitive semantics offer complementary rather than contradictory accounts of word meaning, and it is worth making this relationship explicit through direct comparison. Classical semantics, represented by Bloomfield (1933), Jespersen (1924), and Lyons (1977), treats meaning primarily as a relation of reference or denotation between a linguistic form and an entity, property, or event in the world. Its principal strength lies in its descriptive precision: distinctions such as count versus mass nouns, or gradable versus non-gradable adjectives, remain accurate and pedagogically useful generalizations about English grammar. Its principal limitation, however, is that a purely referential account struggles to explain systematic figurative extension, prototype effects within categories, and the culturally variable connotations that accompany even highly concrete vocabulary.

Cognitive semantics, represented by Lakoff (1987), Fillmore (1982), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Talmy (2000), and Evans and Green (2006), reframes meaning as a matter of conceptualization: words are windows onto mental structures, including prototypes, frames, image schemas, and conceptual metaphors, that organize human experience. This perspective successfully accounts for phenomena that classical semantics leaves unexplained, such as why apple is judged a better example of fruit than olive, why airport activates an entire scenario rather than a narrow definition, and why handle a problem is immediately interpretable even though it involves no physical grasping. At the same time, cognitive semantics has occasionally been criticized for underspecifying the boundary between linguistic meaning proper and general encyclopedic or world knowledge, a concern that structuralist and formal semanticists have long raised against frame-based and prototype-based theories.

Recent scholarship suggests that the productive way forward is integrative rather than adversarial. Zhang and Liu (2023) argue that emerging neurolinguistic evidence, drawn from event-related potential studies of semantic and rhetorical processing, indicates that literal, referential meaning and figurative, conceptually mapped meaning are processed by

overlapping, rather than entirely separate, cognitive and neural systems, which implies that the classical and cognitive accounts may ultimately describe two layers, or two degrees of abstraction, within a single underlying meaning-construction process rather than two incompatible theories of language. Likewise, the scientometric review by Alduais et al. (2022) documents that contemporary cognitive linguistics has increasingly incorporated corpus-based, quantitative, and even computational methods traditionally associated with structural and formal semantics, suggesting a methodological convergence that parallels the theoretical complementarity argued for here. On this reading, the historical shift from classical to cognitive semantics is best understood not as the replacement of one paradigm by a superior successor but as a broadening of the theoretical toolkit available for describing how word meaning is constructed, extended, and shared.

Implications for Linguistics and English Language Teaching

The theoretical synthesis developed in this review carries direct implications for both linguistic theory and pedagogical practice. For linguistic theory, the central implication is that any adequate model of the lexicon must accommodate multiple layers of meaning simultaneously: a stable core of denotational or referential content, a graded structure of prototypicality and scalarity, and an open-ended capacity for figurative extension governed by systematic conceptual mappings. Treating any one of these layers as sufficient on its own, whether through a purely feature-based structuralist model or through an unconstrained cognitive model that risks conflating linguistic meaning with general world knowledge, produces an incomplete account of how words actually function in real communication.

For English language teaching, these findings suggest several concrete pedagogical directions. First, vocabulary instruction that addresses nouns, adjectives, and verbs should move beyond simple definitional glossing and should instead draw learners' attention to prototype structure, frame knowledge, and scale structure, since these cognitive dimensions determine how a word can be naturally extended or combined in authentic discourse; for instance, teaching the adjective *fast* alongside a discussion of the different comparison classes it invokes, as Kennedy and McNally (2005) demonstrate, can help learners avoid rigid, decontextualized translations. Second, because figurative language pervades ordinary usage rather than being confined to literary registers, explicit instruction in conceptual metaphor and metonymy is likely to accelerate learners' comprehension of idiomatic and figurative expressions; the comparative study by Alnujaidi (2025) shows that learners exposed to the conceptual or etymological motivation behind an idiom outperform learners who rely on rote memorization, while the multimodal studies of metaphorical conception in EFL learners

conducted by Xu et al. (2022) and Abdulaal et al. (2023) suggest that combining verbal explanation with visual or experiential elaboration further strengthens figurative competence. Third, verb instruction should highlight aspectual class and argument structure explicitly, since learners who understand why a state verb resists the progressive, or why an achievement verb is compatible with suddenly but not for an hour, are better equipped to use verbs accurately in extended and metaphorical contexts alike (Vendler, 1967; Levin, 1993). Taken together, these implications indicate that a cognitively informed approach to lexical semantics offers not only a more empirically adequate theory of word meaning but also a more effective foundation for vocabulary and figurative language pedagogy in the English as a foreign language classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined word meaning as a central concern of lexical semantics, tracing its development from classical, reference-based accounts toward cognitive semantic frameworks that emphasize conceptualization, embodiment, and cultural experience. The review has shown that nouns, adjectives, and verbs each encode meaning through distinct semantic logics: nouns denote entities while extending figuratively through prototype structure, frame knowledge, and cultural association; adjectives denote scalar or absolute properties whose interpretation depends on an underlying semantic scale and comparison class; and verbs denote actions, processes, and states that are organized by aspectual category, argument structure, and force-dynamic patterns, while readily extending into metaphorical senses through systematic conceptual mapping. Figurative language, examined through conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and idiom, has been shown to be a systematic rather than peripheral feature of the lexicon, reflecting general cognitive mechanisms rather than isolated stylistic devices.

The comparison between classical and cognitive perspectives suggests that the two traditions are best understood as complementary layers of a single, multidimensional account of meaning rather than as competing, mutually exclusive theories. Recent scientometric and neurolinguistic evidence lends further support to this integrative view, indicating that literal and figurative meaning may be processed through overlapping cognitive and neural mechanisms. Pedagogically, the review suggests that English language teaching stands to benefit from an approach to vocabulary instruction that explicitly engages prototype structure, frame knowledge, scale structure, aspectual classification, and conceptual metaphor, rather than treating word meaning as a fixed, dictionary-bound property to be memorized in isolation. Future research would benefit from further corpus-based and experimental investigation of how

classical and cognitive dimensions of word meaning interact across different word classes, languages, and learner populations, in order to build an increasingly precise and pedagogically actionable model of lexical semantics.

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