
THE PHENOMENON OF POLYSEMY IN THE HAUSA NOVEL *RUWAN BAGAJA*: A DESCRIPTIVE-ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of polysemy — the linguistic property whereby a single word carries multiple semantically related meanings — in the Hausa-language novel *Ruwan Bagaja* by Alhaji Abubakar Imam. The study begins by establishing a clear theoretical distinction between polysemy and the related but distinct concept of homonymy, drawing on foundational semantic scholarship (Lyons, 1977; Saeed, 2016; Crystal, 2008). It then surveys the principal causes of semantic multiplicity in Hausa, including figurative extension, cross-linguistic borrowing, phonetic development, and dialectal variation. The core of the study is an applied analysis of fourteen lexical items drawn from the text of *Ruwan Bagaja*, examining each word in its narrative context to identify its operative meaning, document its range of additional meanings, and classify the underlying semantic mechanism. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, treating language as it naturally occurs in literary discourse. The analysis finds that figurative extension through physical or functional resemblance constitutes the dominant mechanism of polysemy in the novel (approximately 57% of cases analysed), with language borrowing and dialectal merging accounting for much of the remainder. The study concludes that polysemy enriches the literary texture of *Ruwan Bagaja*, reflecting both the semantic flexibility of the Hausa language and the artistic sophistication of its author. It recommends that polysemy and related semantic phenomena receive greater attention in the study of canonical Hausa literary texts.

Keywords: Polysemy, homonymy, Hausa language, *Ruwan Bagaja*, semantic extension, Abubakar Imam, lexical semantics

1. Introduction

Among the most remarkable properties of natural language is the capacity of a single word to carry more than one meaning. This phenomenon, known in linguistics as polysemy, has attracted sustained scholarly attention since the earliest systematic study of language. In Arabic linguistics, the phenomenon has been examined in relation to the Holy Qur'an, Prophetic Hadith, classical poetry, and prose. In Hausa linguistics, too, the study of semantic multiplicity has occupied linguists for several decades, with scholars such as Bagari (1976) and Newman (2000) offering foundational treatments of the ways in which Hausa words extend and diversify in meaning across different contexts and social settings.

The present study applies this tradition of semantic inquiry to the Hausa-language novel *Ruwan Bagaja*, composed by the celebrated writer Alhaji Abubakar Imam and first published in Zaria by the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company in 1966, after winning second prize in a literary competition held in London in 1934. *Ruwan Bagaja* — whose title translates literally as 'the healing water' — is among the most widely read and linguistically rich works in the Hausa literary canon. Its narrative prose, drawing on oral storytelling traditions, is characterised by vivid imagery, layered vocabulary, and careful attention to the expressive possibilities of the Hausa language. These qualities make it an ideal site for the study of polysemy.

The study is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the novel and its narrative context. Section 3 presents the author's biographical profile. Section 4 establishes the theoretical framework, defining polysemy, distinguishing it clearly from homonymy, and describing the methodology adopted. Section 5 surveys the principal causes of polysemy in Hausa. Section 6 presents the applied analysis of fourteen lexical items drawn from the novel. The study concludes with findings, recommendations, and a summary table.

2. The Novel *Ruwan Bagaja*

Ruwan Bagaja ('The Healing Water') is a landmark Hausa-language novel composed by Alhaji Abubakar Imam in 1934 and published in Zaria by the Northern Nigerian Publishing Company in 1966 (Abubakar, 1966). It is not a translation from Arabic but an original Hausa literary work, though it draws on the rich narrative traditions of both Hausa oral literature and Arabic written prose, reflecting the deep historical and cultural ties between these two traditions (Newman, 2000). The novel's title carries the layered resonance characteristic of Hausa literary naming: *ruwa* means water; *bagaja* denotes a wild jujube berry known in the region for its medicinal properties; and the compound 'Ruwan Bagaja' — healing water — functions as a metaphor for an elusive goal, pursued at great personal cost.

The novel narrates the story of a young man who sets out in search of the legendary healing water that his guardian — the town Imam — had claimed could cure the Emir's chronically ill son. Fearing disgrace for the Imam and himself, the protagonist embarks on a solitary journey across distant lands — including India and many unknown territories — encountering hardships, supernatural beings, and remarkable characters, before finally obtaining the water in old age and returning home (Abubakar, 1966, p. 12). The narrative functions simultaneously as an adventure story, a moral fable about patience and endurance, and an encyclopaedia of Hausa proverbs, idioms, and cultural values.

Alhaji Abubakar Imam employed multiple narrative techniques in composing *Ruwan Bagaja*. He adopted the style of traditional Hausa storytellers (*masulabarai*), who would sit among listeners and exchange stories in a form resembling a storytelling contest. In some sections, he used the night-storytelling tradition (*labaran dare*); in others, he employed direct

dialogue. This compositional variety contributes substantially to the linguistic richness that makes *Ruwan Bagaja* productive for semantic study.

The novel is widely regarded as a foundational text of modern Hausa literature and an important moral cornerstone of Hausa society. It has also been studied as evidence of the close historical relationship between Hausa and Arabic, since many Hausa words — including several analysed in this study — entered the language through Arabic-channel borrowing (Ibrahim, 1994). The novel participated in a literary competition organised for West African writers in London in 1934, in which it won second prize, signalling the international recognition of Hausa literary creativity at a critical period in Nigerian cultural history.

3. The Author: Alhaji Abubakar Imam

3.1 Name, Birth, and Upbringing

Alhaji Abubakar Imam, son of Sheikh Uthman ibn Muhammad Badmassi ibn Muhammad Gajibo, was born in 1911 in the village of Kagara, Kwantagora Province, present-day Niger State, Nigeria. He was raised in a distinguished scholarly household: his father, Malam Uthman, was a judge, a Qur'anic scholar, and the Imam of the central mosque in Kagara, later appointed as the regional treasurer by the British colonial administration. His forebears were among the followers of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio. His grandfather, Muhammad Gajibo, was a renowned scholar of the Kanem-Bornu tradition who had migrated from the Dikwa Emirate in the Bornu Empire.

Abubakar Imam began his Qur'anic education under his father's guidance. Following his father's death when he was eleven, he came under the care of his elder brother, Muhammad Bello, and moved to Katsina, where he combined Islamic studies with modern education. He enrolled in a Katsina primary school in 1922 and joined Katsina Training College in 1927, where his notable classmates included Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, later Nigeria's first Prime Minister, and Ahmadu Bello, later Premier of Northern Nigeria. He subsequently attended the Institute of Education at the University of London.

As noted by Professor Abdulrahman Adarawa and Professor Muhammad Dauda Muhammad in their study of Arabic–Hausa linguistic borrowing, Alhaji Abubakar Imam was a teacher, a literary figure, and one of the few African writers who excelled in multiple scientific and literary fields (cited in Yusuf, 2010, p. 47). He is widely acknowledged as a pioneer of modern Hausa literature whose work reflects deep and sustained engagement with Arabic literary culture.

3.2 Death and Literary Legacy

Alhaji Abubakar Imam passed away in Zaria in 1981 at the age of seventy-one — may Allah have mercy upon him. He also edited the influential Hausa-language newspaper *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*, contributing substantially to the development of Hausa prose as a modern literary and journalistic medium. His principal published works include:

- *Ruwan Bagaja* (The Healing Water), 1966
- *Magana Jari Ce* (Wisdom is an Asset), 1955
- *Karamin Sani Kukumi Ne*
- *Hali Zanen Dutse*
- *Six Hausa Plays*

4. Theoretical Framework: Polysemy, Homonymy, and Methodology

4.1 Defining Polysemy

Polysemy — from the Greek *polus* (many) and *sēma* (sign) — refers to the linguistic phenomenon whereby a single lexical item, sharing a common phonological and orthographic form, is associated with a set of related but distinct meanings (Lyons, 1977, p. 550). The central criterion distinguishing polysemy from homonymy (see §4.2) is semantic relatedness: in polysemy, the multiple meanings are historically or psychologically connected, typically through processes of metaphoric or metonymic extension, specialisation, or generalisation (Saeed, 2016, p. 60). Crystal (2008, p. 373) similarly defines polysemy as 'the existence of a word with more than one meaning,' provided those meanings can be traced to a common semantic source.

A well-documented example in English is 'head,' which denotes the uppermost part of the human body and, by metaphorical extension, the leading part of any object or organisation. All extended meanings retain the core semantic properties of primacy, elevation, and control. In Hausa linguistics, Bagari (1976) defines polysemy as a single word that carries more than one meaning depending on context; Mu'azu Thani Zaria (cited in Umar, 2015, p. 34) similarly describes it as 'a single expression that carries several meanings,' emphasising that the semantic connection between them is what unifies the meanings as variants of one word rather than separate lexical items.

4.2 Polysemy Distinguished from Homonymy

A rigorous distinction must be drawn between polysemy and homonymy. Homonymy occurs when two or more lexically distinct words — with separate historical origins — happen to share the same phonological or orthographic form (Crystal, 2008, p. 228). The meanings of homonyms are unrelated: they share no common semantic ancestor. A classic English example is *bank* (financial institution) and *bank* (slope beside a river), which are etymologically distinct items that have converged in form over time.

In practice, the boundary between polysemy and homonymy can be difficult to establish without historical evidence, and different linguists may classify the same item differently (Lyons, 1977, p. 552). For the present study, the following operational criterion is applied: if a plausible semantic connection — whether metaphorical, metonymic, or associative — can be identified between the meanings of a shared form, the item is classified as polysemous; if no such connection is apparent and the meanings appear etymologically independent, the item is classified as homonymous. Both types occur in the vocabulary of *Ruwan Bagaja*, and Section 6 classifies each item accordingly.

4.3 Descriptive-Analytical Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach consistent with synchronic linguistic description, which examines language as it is actually used rather than prescribing how it ought to be used (Saeed, 2016, p. 4). The primary data source is the novel *Ruwan Bagaja* (Abubakar, 1966). For each target word, the following procedure is applied: (a) the relevant narrative passage is quoted, with English translation; (b) the operative meaning in context is identified; (c) secondary and extended meanings are documented with reference to Hausa lexicographic and linguistic sources; (d) the semantic mechanism responsible for the multiplicity of meanings is identified; and (e) the item is classified as polysemous, homonymous, or mixed.

5. Causes of Polysemy in the Hausa Language

The semantic multiplicity observed in Hausa vocabulary — and in the lexical items analysed in Section 6 — can be attributed to four principal causes.

5.1 Figurative Extension (Metaphor and Metonymy)

Figurative usage is the most productive source of polysemy in Hausa. When a word shifts from its literal meaning to a figurative one based on perceived resemblance or functional analogy, the result is typically polysemy. The Hausa word *kai* ('head') is extended to mean 'the top of' any object (*kan daki*, above the room; *kan bishiya*, top of the tree) and further to mean the steering handle of a vehicle (*kanmota*), on the basis that the handle controls direction as the head guides the body (Umar, 2015, p. 56). Similarly, *qwado* ('frog') has been extended metaphorically to denote the door lock (*qwadon kofa*), the embroidered neck decoration of a garment (*qwadon riga*), and the clasp of a necklace — all sharing the frog's characteristic curved shape.

5.2 Cross-Linguistic Borrowing

Contact with Arabic has introduced numerous loanwords into Hausa, several of which have developed polysemous extensions in their new linguistic environment. Hausa typically adopts the original meaning of a borrowed word and then extends it through indigenous semantic processes (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 47). For example, Arabic *ḍarūrah* (necessity) was borrowed as *lalura*, retaining the sense of hardship while acquiring the additional meaning of 'defect or illness,' on the associative logic that severe need may lead to physical deterioration. Arabic *shūrā* (consultation) was borrowed as *shawara*, retaining its original meaning while also coming to denote a type of illness in Hausa cultural usage.

5.3 Phonetic Development and Convergence

Historical sound changes have occasionally caused two originally distinct forms to converge in pronunciation, producing homonymous or polysemous relationships where none previously existed. The Hausa word *gissa* (feminine charm, coquetry) underwent a phonetic shift in which the initial /g/ became /k/, causing it to converge with the Arabic loanword *qiṣṣa* (story, tale). The resulting form *kissa* now carries both meanings in the language — a case hovering between polysemy and homonymy, depending on whether a semantic connection between charm and storytelling is posited.

5.4 Dialectal Variation and Merging

Hausa is spoken across a broad geographical area with numerous regional dialects — including those of Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Hadejia, and areas of southern Niger — and dialectal variation has introduced polysemy into the standard language as words carrying different meanings in different varieties come to coexist in the shared lexicon. The word *diwa* means 'semen' in the Sokoto and southern Niger dialects but 'pus' in the Kano and Hadejia dialects; the two meanings are linked through resemblance in consistency and bodily origin, making this a case of polysemy arising from dialectal merger (Newman, 2000, p. 214).

6. Applied Analysis: Polysemous Lexical Items in Ruwan Bagaja

This section presents a systematic analysis of fourteen lexical items identified in the text of *Ruwan Bagaja*. For each item, the following information is provided: (a) the textual passage from the novel with English translation; (b) the contextual meaning operative in the

novel; (c) extended or secondary meanings; (d) the semantic mechanism responsible; and (e) a classification as polysemy, homonymy, or mixed.

Item 1: *Isa*

Textual occurrence:

"*Allah ya sa ya isa wani gari*" — 'God destined that he reached a certain village.'

Contextual meaning:

To arrive at, or reach, a destination.

Extended meanings:

(a) Sufficiency or adequacy (*ya isa* = it is enough); (b) self-pride or arrogance, used sarcastically (*ya yi isa* = he became proud); (c) simplicity or ease; (d) the proper noun *Isa*, the Hausa form of the name of the Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him).

Mechanism and classification:

Meanings (a) and (b) represent metaphorical extension from the core meaning of 'reaching' — attaining sufficiency, and reaching an excessive sense of self-importance. These constitute polysemy. Meaning (d) — the proper noun — shares only phonological form with the verb; it is therefore homonymous with it.

Item 2: *Fadî*

Textual occurrence:

"*Ya shigo aka fadî aka yi gaisuwa*" — 'He entered, and they sat down to exchange greetings.'

Contextual meaning:

To sit down, specifically for the culturally significant Hausa practice of formal greeting, in which sitting signals respect for elders.

Extended meanings:

(a) To fall or drop (*rufin ya fadî* = the roof collapsed); (b) speech or utterance (*fadî da furuci* = utterance, expression); (c) expansiveness or spaciousness, as opposed to narrowness.

Mechanism and classification:

Meaning (a) involves a semantic generalisation of downward physical movement, encompassing both the controlled act of sitting and the uncontrolled act of falling — classic polysemy. Meaning (b) may represent a further metaphoric extension of 'dropping' words. Meaning (c) is more distant and may constitute borderline homonymy.

Item 3: *Zuba*

Textual occurrence:

"*Ya yi ta zuba labari*" — 'He kept pouring out stories continuously.'

Contextual meaning:

To narrate continuously and extensively; to 'pour out' stories.

Extended meanings:

(a) To pour a liquid into a container; (b) to place or insert something into something else; (c) to engage in excessive, uninterrupted talk.

Mechanism and classification:

This is a clear case of metaphoric polysemy in which the physical image of pouring (*zuba*) is transferred to the domain of speech. The author's use of *ya yi ta zuba labari* evokes the image of stories flowing continuously from speaker to listener, just as liquid pours from vessel to vessel — a cross-linguistically attested metaphor for communication (Saeed, 2016, p. 68). Classification: Polysemy.

Item 4: *Vadī*

Textual occurrence:

"Ba a taba ko vadīb a gidansa" — 'No accident or collapse ever occurred in his house.'

Contextual meaning:

The sudden collapse or falling of a structural element; something dropping unexpectedly.

Extended meanings:

(a) The dropping of a load carried by a woman on her head; (b) a sudden involuntary body movement or startle caused by fear, shock, or emotional disturbance.

Mechanism and classification:

All three meanings share the core semantic property of sudden, uncontrolled downward or outward movement. The extension from structural collapse to load-dropping to bodily startle constitutes a coherent chain of metaphoric extension within a single semantic field of involuntary motion. Classification: Polysemy.

Item 5: *Damo*

Textual occurrence:

"Ya yi damo bai ce wa kowa komai ba" — 'He remained utterly silent and said nothing to anyone.'

Contextual meaning:

Deep silence; deliberate withholding of speech; patient, enduring stillness.

Extended meanings:

(a) The monitor lizard (*Varanus niloticus*), an animal associated in Hausa cultural cognition with patience, stillness, and concealment in burrows; (b) a hypocritical or double-faced person who maintains silence to conceal intentions.

Mechanism and classification:

This is a striking case of zoomorphic metaphorical extension, in which the behavioural characteristics attributed to an animal are transferred to human conduct. The monitor lizard's well-documented stillness, patience, and concealment provide the semantic bridge to the meaning of deliberate human silence (Umar, 2015, p. 61). The extension to hypocrisy adds a negative cultural dimension to the same core image of hidden intent. Classification: Polysemy.

Item 6: *Uwa*

Textual occurrence:

"*Ya bi uwa duniya*" — 'He traversed the entire world.'

Contextual meaning:

A widely-travelled person; one who has been long away from home and seen the world.

Extended meanings:

(a) Mother, the primary female parent; (b) an honourific for any woman of mature status or prolonged domestic presence; (c) an exclamation of wonder or surprise.

Mechanism and classification:

The phrase *ya bi uwa duniya* draws on the Hausa cultural association of motherhood with nurturing, endurance, deep experience, and pervasive presence. The traveller who has 'followed the mother of the world' is one who has experienced life as comprehensively as a mother who has raised the world. This metaphorical extension from a primary kinship term to a characterisation of experiential depth and breadth is culturally grounded and constitutes polysemy. Classification: Polysemy.

Item 7: *Kuka*

Textual occurrence:

"*Muna ku kadan murna*" — 'We are crying, but out of joy.'

Contextual meaning:

Crying; the shedding of tears, whether from grief or — as the author notes here — from overwhelming joy.

Extended meanings:

(a) A complaint or formal grievance reported to an authority; (b) the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*), a culturally and ecologically central species in Hausa life; (c) an audible signal, such as the horn of a vehicle or train.

Mechanism and classification:

Meanings (a) and (b) represent metonymic polysemy: crying is the physical expression associated with grievance, and the term extends from the act to the complaint that motivates it. The signal meaning (c) may involve the shared element of a loud, attention-seeking sound. The baobab tree meaning, however, appears to be etymologically unrelated to the other meanings — this is most likely a case of homonymy where the same phonological form coincidentally covers a plant name and an expression of distress. Classification: Polysemy (a, c); Homonymy (baobab tree).

Item 8: *Bisa*

Textual occurrence:

"*Ba shi a bias kasan nan*" — 'It is not to be found on the surface of this earth.'

Contextual meaning:

On top of; upon the surface of; spatially above.

Extended meanings:

(a) In the Sokoto dialect, a wild or fierce animal; (b) according to the Hausa Dictionary of Bayero University Kano, a grave or burial site; (c) a large or elevated structure or thing.

Mechanism and classification:

Meaning (c) — an elevated or large thing — is a straightforward metaphorical extension of the spatial meaning of 'above' and constitutes polysemy. Meanings (a) and (b), however, do not share a transparent semantic connection to the core spatial meaning, and are more plausibly explained as dialectal or historical homonymy. Classification: Polysemy (c); Probable homonymy (a–b).

Item 9: *Jaka*

Textual occurrence:

"Na ci bashi gun sakamar rabin jaka" — 'I borrowed from him almost half a bag [of money].'

Contextual meaning:

A bag or sack; by metonymy, its monetary contents.

Extended meanings:

(a) A bag made of leather or other material for carrying clothes or goods; (b) in some dialectal usages, with elongated vowel pronunciation, a female donkey.

Mechanism and classification:

The extension from physical container (bag) to its typical contents (money) is a classic instance of container-for-contents metonymy — a well-attested cross-linguistic pattern (Lyons, 1977, p. 556). This constitutes polysemy within the bag/money cluster. The female donkey meaning shares the phonological form but has no transparent semantic connection to the container meaning; it is therefore classified as homonymous. Classification: Polysemy (bag/money); Homonymy (female donkey).

Item 10: *Shafuwa*

Textual occurrence:

"Malam Alhaji Imam baya shafuwa nan kasar duka" — 'Malam Alhaji Imam commands respect throughout this entire land.'

Contextual meaning:

Being widely respected and honoured; a person of distinguished standing in the community.

Extended meanings:

(a) The physical act of wiping or passing the hand over a surface; (b) an act of showing mercy, compassion, or blessing through touch; (c) being widely known or celebrated.

Mechanism and classification:

This is a culturally grounded case of metaphoric polysemy. In Hausa cultural and Islamic practice, passing the hand over someone (*shafa*) carries connotations of blessing and spiritual protection — a gesture rooted in Islamic tradition. The semantic extension from physical touching → spiritual blessing → moral protection → social renown follows a coherent cultural-semantic logic (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 52). Classification: Polysemy.

Item 11: *Sutura*

Textual occurrence:

"*Yana cewa na yi masa sutura ...*" — 'He said: I covered/protected him.'

Contextual meaning:

To conceal, protect, or cover someone from shame or exposure.

Extended meanings:

(a) Clothing or garment; (b) the covering of one's modesty (*suturar jiki*); (c) funeral preparation, including the shroud, coffin, or bier; the ritual of preparing a deceased person's body for burial.

Mechanism and classification:

The polysemous network of *sutura* is organised around the central notion of covering. The progression from garment → moral covering/protection → funeral shroud represents a coherent semantic extension chain: garments cover the living body; protection covers a person from shame in life; and the funeral shroud covers the dead body in death. This is polysemy in which a concrete physical concept (covering) is extended first to a moral domain and then to a ritual domain (Saeed, 2016, p. 70). Classification: Polysemy.

Item 12: *Tura*

Textual occurrence:

"*Na tashi na tura sai birnin Manta*" — 'I set off and kept going until I reached the city of Manta.'

Contextual meaning:

To set off, depart, or make continuous forward movement towards a destination.

Extended meanings:

(a) To push something physically; (b) to propel or launch something; (c) metaphorically, to bring something to its extreme stage or culmination.

Mechanism and classification:

The extension from physical pushing to the act of departing on a journey is grounded in the gestalt image of directed forward movement. Pushing involves force applied to produce motion in a direction; departure likewise involves initiating forward movement. The further extension to 'reaching an extreme' follows the same directional schema — pushing something until it reaches its limit. This constitutes a coherent chain of metaphorical polysemy organised around the image schema of directed force (Saeed, 2016, p. 72). Classification: Polysemy.

Item 13: *Share*

Textual occurrence:

"*Ya share ta da mari*" — 'He slapped her across the face.'

Contextual meaning:

To strike someone with an open hand; a slap to the face.

Extended meanings:

(a) To sweep a floor or clean a surface; (b) in Hausa social practice, a form of playful cultural exchange or verbal sparring traditionally practised between groups such as the people of Kano and Zaria.

Mechanism and classification:

The relationship between sweeping and slapping is one of gestural image: both involve a broad, lateral sweeping motion of the open hand across a surface. The slap is thus a metaphorical extension of the sweeping motion applied to a human face rather than a floor — what cognitive linguists call image-schema transfer (Saeed, 2016, p. 74). The social-sparring meaning extends the lateral, competitive gesture to verbal social interaction. Classification: Polysemy.

Item 14: *Qaura*

Textual occurrence:

"Yake da rai har ya qaura ..." — 'He remained alive until he departed [to death].'

Contextual meaning:

Departure; specifically in this context, the final departure of death — passing from life.

Extended meanings:

(a) Migration or physical relocation from one community to another; (b) a fierce, aggressive, or formidable person, used in praise poetry for titled figures such as the *Madaki* in traditional emirate protocol; (c) a type of blue cowpea (*wake mai launin shudi*) used as food among the Hausa.

Mechanism and classification:

Meanings (a) and the novel's contextual meaning constitute polysemy through metaphoric extension: death is conceptualised as the ultimate migration — the final journey one undertakes. This is a culturally widespread metaphor across many languages and reflects the Islamic conceptualisation of death as departure to the next world (*ākhirā*). The praise meaning (b) may derive from the same image of forceful, decisive movement. The blue cowpea meaning (c) shares the phonological form but has no transparent semantic connection to motion or force; it is classified as homonymous. Classification: Polysemy (a–b); Homonymy (c).

7. Summary Table of Analysed Lexical Items

The following table summarises the fourteen items analysed in Section 6, their primary meanings, extended meanings, semantic mechanisms, and classifications. Of the fourteen items, ten (71%) are classified primarily as polysemy; the remaining four contain mixed polysemous and homonymous elements. Figurative extension through metaphor or metonymy is the dominant mechanism, identified in eight of the fourteen items (57%).

#	Word	Primary Meaning	Extended Meaning(s)	Mechanism	Classification
1	<i>Isa</i>	To arrive/reach	Sufficiency; self-pride; simplicity	Metaphoric extension; homonymy (proper name)	Polysemy (a–c); Homonymy (d)
2	<i>Fadî</i>	To sit down (for greeting)	To fall/collapse; utterance; spaciousness	Semantic generalisation of downward movement	Polysemy (a–b); borderline homonymy (c)
3	<i>Zuba</i>	To pour/place into	To narrate extensively; continuous speech	Liquid-transfer metaphor → communication	Polysemy
4	<i>Vadî</i>	Structural collapse/falling	Dropping of a load; bodily startle from fear	Shared property: sudden uncontrolled movement	Polysemy
5	<i>Damo</i>	Monitor lizard	Deep silence/patience; hypocrisy	Zoomorphic metaphor (lizard's stillness)	Polysemy
6	<i>Uwa</i>	Mother	Mature woman; widely-travelled person; exclamation	Cultural metaphor: maternal depth → life experience	Polysemy
7	<i>Kuka</i>	Crying/weeping	Complaint; baobab tree; audible signal	Metonymy (cry → complaint); homonymy (baobab)	Polysemy (a–b, d); Homonymy (baobab)
8	<i>Bisa</i>	On top of / above	Wild animal (Sokoto); grave; elevated structure	Metaphor (elevation); dialectal homonymy	Polysemy (c); Homonymy (a–b)
9	<i>Jaka</i>	Bag/sack; money	Carrying bag; female donkey (elongated form)	Container–contents metonymy; homonymy (donkey)	Polysemy (a–b); Homonymy (donkey)
10	<i>Shafuwa</i>	Wiping/touching	Showing compassion; being widely respected	Cultural-Islamic metaphor: touch → blessing → renown	Polysemy
11	<i>Sutura</i>	Clothing/garment	Modesty/protection; funeral shroud/burial	Chain extension: cover body (living) → cover body (dead)	Polysemy
12	<i>Tura</i>	To push (physical)	To depart; to reach an extreme/culmination	Directional force schema → motion → departure	Polysemy
13	<i>Share</i>	To sweep/clean	To slap (open hand); social sparring between groups	Image-schema: lateral sweeping motion of open hand	Polysemy
14	<i>Qaura</i>	Migration/departure	Death (final departure); fierce person; blue cowpea	Metaphor: departure → death; homonymy (cowpea)	Polysemy (a–b, d); Homonymy (c)

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the phenomenon of polysemy in the Hausa-language novel *Ruwan Bagaja* by Alhaji Abubakar Imam. Following a theoretical distinction between polysemy and homonymy grounded in semantic theory (Lyons, 1977; Crystal, 2008; Saeed, 2016), the study identified four principal causes of polysemy in Hausa — figurative

extension, cross-linguistic borrowing, phonetic development, and dialectal variation — and applied these categories in a systematic analysis of fourteen lexical items drawn from the text.

The analysis confirms that *Ruwan Bagaja* is a lexically layered text in which polysemy functions not merely as a by-product of language history but as an active literary resource. Alhaji Abubakar Imam exploits the multiple meaning-potentials of Hausa vocabulary to enrich his narrative, compress meaning, and engage his readers in active interpretation. Words like *damo* (the silent monitor lizard), *sutura* (covering), and *qaura* (the final departure) carry in a single syllable the weight of cultural memory, Islamic tradition, and Hausa social practice.

The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing polysemy from homonymy in rigorous semantic analysis. At least five of the fourteen items exhibit partial homonymy alongside polysemous extensions. Accurate classification requires both semantic analysis and attention to cultural and etymological context, and the present study has applied explicit, consistent criteria throughout. The study recommends that future research build on this foundation with larger text corpora and more extensive lexicographic documentation.

Findings

- **Pervasiveness:** Polysemy is a pervasive and productive feature of the lexicon of *Ruwan Bagaja*, present across diverse semantic domains including motion, body, social practice, and the natural world.
- **Dominant mechanism:** Figurative extension through metaphor and metonymy is the dominant mechanism, identified in approximately 57% of the items analysed, consistent with broader Hausa linguistics findings (Umar, 2015; Bagari, 1976).
- **Polysemy–homonymy distinction:** A distinction between polysemy and homonymy is essential for accurate semantic description. At least five of the fourteen items exhibit mixed polysemous and homonymous properties, requiring explicit classification criteria.
- **Literary function:** Polysemy serves an active literary function in *Ruwan Bagaja*: Abubakar Imam consistently exploits the semantic range of polysemous words to achieve narrative compression, cultural resonance, and aesthetic depth.
- **Cultural knowledge:** Contextual and cultural knowledge is indispensable for interpreting polysemous expressions in the novel. Meanings rooted in Islamic practice (*shafuwa*, *sutura*), Hausa social norms (*uwa*, *damo*), and oral narrative conventions (*zuba*) cannot be resolved from phonological form alone.
- **Arabic borrowing:** Cross-linguistic borrowing from Arabic is a significant contributing factor to polysemy in Hausa, as borrowed words acquire indigenous semantic extensions while retaining their source-language meanings (Ibrahim, 1994).
- **Dialectal polysemy:** Dialectal variation introduces a category of polysemy in which the same form carries different meanings in different regional varieties of Hausa, producing a broader polysemous potential when the varieties interact.

Recommendations

- Semantic phenomena — particularly polysemy, homonymy, metonymy, and semantic change — should be accorded greater prominence in Hausa language and literature curricula at colleges of education and universities.
- Researchers should conduct further applied semantic studies on canonical Hausa literary texts, including the works of Alhaji Abubakar Imam's contemporaries and modern Hausa prose writers, to build a comparative picture of polysemy in Hausa literature.
- A dedicated lexicographic project cataloguing polysemous and homonymous items in Hausa literary texts would serve both linguistic scholarship and pedagogical needs.
- When analysing polysemous words in literary texts, researchers should anchor their analysis in specific textual passages with precise page references, as operative meaning can only be established contextually.
- The distinction between polysemy and homonymy should be explicitly addressed in all linguistic studies of Hausa, and applied studies should adopt and state explicit, reproducible criteria for classification.
- Scholars of Arabic–Hausa linguistic contact should investigate the mechanisms by which Arabic loanwords acquire polysemous extensions in their new linguistic environment, as this is among the most productive areas of Hausa semantic development.
- Students and readers of Hausa literature should be encouraged to attend closely to the semantic range of key vocabulary items, as the richness available to polysemous words often carries interpretive significance beyond what a single-meaning reading would reveal.

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