Are You “Sick”?: Exploring the Polysemy of “Sick” and Perceptions of ELF Speakers

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: This study posits the continued emergence of polysemy, the phenomenon where a single word carries multiple meanings. It is a fundamental characteristic of languages that reflects semantic evolution and improvement. Among several polysemous words in English, “sick” stands out given its various interpretations, ranging from its prototypical sense of "physical illness" to such extended meanings as "disgust" and even "superbness.” While native speakers rely on contextual cues to distinguish these meanings, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers, who engage in cross-cultural communication, may interpret them differently. This study investigates the gap between its contemporary digital distribution and its reception among ELF speakers. Rather than claiming these senses are novel, this research aims to quantify the prevalence of the prototypical sense of "physical illness" alongside established extended meanings, namely "disgust," "boredom," and "superbness,” in modern social media discourse. By applying the Principled Polysemy Approach by Tyler and Evans (2003), the study unveils how these senses are retained or filtered by ELF users in intercultural communication.

Methodology: To analyze the extended meanings of “sick,” the researcher manually collected all the data from social media posts and reel captions on Facebook, X, and Instagram. The obtained instances were investigated to verify the word’s prototypical meaning and its extended meanings. To reveal ELF speakers' perceptions, on the other hand, an online survey was conducted, with ELF participants being reached online and identified as non-native speakers of English. The survey contained questions that purposively assessed their familiarity with and usage of “sick” in various contexts.

Main Results: The results confirmed that “sick” maintains its prototypical meaning of physical illness while obtaining three non-prototypical meanings throughout the analysis: "to feel disgusted," "to feel bored," and "to be superb." It was moreover noted that ELF speakers predominantly associated sick with its prototypical meaning, and they also recognized and employed its extended meanings to some extent simultaneously.

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Discussions: Even if polysemous words can have extended meanings over time, like “sick” does, their adherence to the prototypical meaning is always explicit, as aligning with the prototype theory as well. In addition, it was found that the perceptions of the word “sick” among ELF speakers were not distant from prototypical association with physical illness. The speakers’ non-literal senses of the word on digital content indicated their interpretation of “sick” over its foundational meaning, which is often in health-related situations. Besides, in ELF settings, communication effectiveness is prioritized over stylistic novelty, reasoning why the word sick can be interpreted differently despite being in the same context, remarking an important role of intelligibility in interactions.

Conclusions: The study highlights how polysemy is perceived in ELF communication, providing insights for lexicography, English language teaching, and international communication. The rise of three new, non-prototypical meanings of this only single word “sick” strenuously confirms possibilities that words can keep evolving both semantically and morphologically, in line with the constant creativity of speakers of languages, whose needs for lexical innovation in response to various purposes seem to know no bounds.

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Introduction

Speakers of languages are increasingly embracing flexible communicative strategies in response to the soaring development of today’s interconnected world, where digital disruption, global economic exchange, and sociocultural factors have significantly affected the ways meaning is constructed and conveyed (Ahmad, 2024). Among these strategies, the semantic expansion of existing words has arisen as a particularly adaptive phenomenon, which enables speakers to repurpose familiar lexical items for new or contextually specialized uses. This process, linguistically referred to as polysemy, demonstrates how fluid language can be and how speakers create meanings for words outside of their literal or conventional boundaries to satisfy the changing communicative environments.

According to Ravin and Leacock (2000), polysemy is the phenomenon in which a single word possesses multiple, related meanings and thus is not merely a lexical curiosity but a fundamental feature of natural languages. As words undergo semantic widening, speakers are usually supposed to rely on contextual and cognitive mechanisms to distinguish each of them among multiple possibilities of interpretations. Understanding how polysemous words are processed and interpreted is therefore essential, especially in studies concerned with semantics, pragmatics, and multilingual communication. Previous research has analyzed polysemy in both academic (Skoufaki & Petrić, 2021) and general usage (Ding, 2021; Huang et

al., 2022), and it has been revealed that even frequently used vocabulary can embody complex semantic networks that remain unconsciously employed in daily communication.

The word “sick” offers a compelling case of polysemous development. Once confined to its well-known meaning of “to be physically ill,” the word has reportedly expanded to embrace a range of extended meanings. Consider the following utterances:

(1) The meeting was postponed because the president was reportedly sick.

(2) I feel sick after eating too much.

(3) We are more than sick of you, so just leave.

(4) That trick you did on the show was sick!

In (1), “sick” retains its prototypical reference to physical illness. In (2), while still related to physical discomfort, the sense leans toward revulsion, which is a subjective, psychological reaction. Example (3) differs in that it introduces a figurative sense of boredom or exhaustion, and (4) demonstrates an inverted slang usage, where “sick” expresses admiration or superbness (Besserman, 1989). These examples illustrate how a single lexical form can become semantically diversified in different contexts, raising important questions about interpretive variability, especially for non-native users of English.

For the majority of native English speakers, such shifts in meaning are often comprehended with ease due to longstanding cultural immersion and innate exposure to as well as familiarity with real use. Nevertheless, the scenario looks different for English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers, who use English in intercultural settings without sharing the same linguistic and cultural background. These individuals more likely interpret these polysemous meanings differently or, in some cases, not at all. While previous studies suggest that polysemous words activate multiple senses in the brain simultaneously (Beretta et al., 2005), it remains unclear whether ELF users handle these senses similarly to native speakers. Given that ELF speakers often acquire English in diverse, non-native environments and prioritize communicative clarity over precision (Seidlhofer, 2002, Dewey, 2014), their interpretation of polysemous words may significantly deviate from the native norms.

More recent research (e.g., Sultanova, 2025; Babaxanova & Daliyeva, 2025) continues to highlight that polysemous words represent one of the most complex features of the English semantic system for non-native speakers. While native speakers utilize intuitive cognitive networks, ELF users often face one-to-many mapping challenges, where a single form triggers multiple, often conflicting, translation equivalents (Oktavianus & Xenia, 2025).

To address this gap, the present study seeks to explore the polysemous state of the word “sick” from both a semantic and perceptual perspective. Using the Principled Polysemy approach (Tyler & Evans, 2003), this research first analyzes the extent to which “sick” has acquired distinct meanings based on usage data from major social media platforms. It then investigates how ELF speakers perceive and apply these meanings in practice.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) To what extent and how does the word “sick” obtain other meanings than its prototypical meaning?

(2) What are the perceptions of ELF speakers towards the polysemy of the word “sick?”

By combining a usage-based semantic analysis with survey-based perception data, this research aims to illuminate how variation in meaning is viewed across cultural and linguistic differences. The results are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions in lexicography, English language teaching, and global communication, further providing practical insights into how ELF users perceive semantic shifts in an increasingly polysemous English lexicon.

Literature Review

To offer a comprehensive understanding of the polysemy of "sick," this section presents relevant theoretical foundations and related studies. To begin with, an overview of the concept of prototypical meaning is provided, as it paves the polysemous development of words. This is followed by a discussion of polysemy as a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon, including how it differs from homonymy. Subsequently, the Principled Polysemy approach is introduced as the framework adopted in this study. In addition, recent discussions from cognitive models of multilingual word processing, sociolinguistic variation, and semantic change in digital contexts are also given to strengthen the theoretical framework.

Prototypical Meaning

Before a word can undergo semantic expansion, it must first hold a widely recognized meaning. As suggested by Tyler and Evans (2003), a word's central meaning, referred to as the prototypical meaning, serves as the cognitive base from which extended meanings stem. The prototypical meaning is generally the most frequently used in people's interactions, the most likely to be listed first in lexicographic entries, and historically traceable in etymological records. To ensure the clarity, Tyler and Evans proposed five core criteria that characterize a prototypical meaning, as follows:

(1) The prototypical meaning of a word is the one that is most widely recognized and accepted by the majority of language users. It must also be the first meaning typically listed in dictionaries and can often be traced back to its historical origins.

(2) Newly emerging meanings of a word usually derive from the prototypical meaning, forming a network of related senses.

(3) The prototypical meaning is often in opposition to or in relation to another word (e.g. hot versus cold; good versus bad).

(4) The prototypical meaning provides a clue that helps speakers predict and infer non-prototypical meanings.

(5) Meaning is closely linked to human perception and experience. This criterion was later emphasized by Evans (2004), who added that meaning always pertains to cognitive and sensory experiences. He exemplified the concept of time, which is universally understood as duration due to shared human experiences of temporal progression.

The idea of prototypicality pertains to the Prototype Theory, as proposed by Rosch (1975). This suggests that mental categories are ordered neatly not through fixed boundaries but around relatable examples, or prototypes with which common individuals feel familiar. This theory has been deemed instrumental in cognitive semantics, because it provides a psychological basis that accounts for the reason why certain meanings are perceived as central while others are considered peripheral. In lexical semantics, the prototypical meaning of a word such as "sick"

(physically ill) functions as the most cognitively salient, and this influences how new or metaphorical meanings and uses are interpreted in reality.

Polysemy

Polysemy refers to the linguistic phenomenon in which a single lexical item possesses multiple, related senses (Cruse, 2004). Through the lens of linguistics, it is often contrasted with homonymy, which involves identical forms with entirely unrelated meanings (e.g. bank as a financial institution versus bank of a river). While homonyms are semantically dispersed, polysemous meanings have a structured semantic network based on conceptual and contextual connections (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003).

Furthermore, linguists have long debated the theoretical status of polysemy: whether each sense constitutes a distinct lexical entry or a contextual modulation of a single concept. Recent advances in cognitive linguistics reveal that polysemy is not an arbitrary phenomenon; instead, it illustrates systematic processes of conceptual extension, which are typically attributed to metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Furthermore, these metaphorical processes are influenced by the embodied experience of language speakers. This is in line with the claim that semantic shifts are not random; they are gradually fostered by shared perception of speakers of a particular language (Evans, 2004; Langacker, 1987).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, polysemous words are processed more efficiently than homonyms due to their semantic overlap (Klepousniotou & Baum, 2007). Experimental studies such as Beretta et al. (2005), indicate that multiple meanings of a polysemous word are stimulated simultaneously in human brain. Thismay facilitate comprehension among frequent users; however, it can cause confusion for some learners or cross-cultural communicators. The implications are particularly relevant for ELF speakers, who come from different backgrounds with different native languages and may not have full exposure to a word's semantic variations.

Furthermore, polysemy has been examined in applied contexts. For example, in the study by Skoufaki and Petrić (2021), which focused chiefly on academic vocabulary, it was found that polysemous words were more common than monosemous ones in scholarly writing. Other studies (e.g., Ding, 2021; Huang et al., 2022) have analyzed polysemy in general English usage and have uncovered systematic semantic networks. However, unfortunately, noticeably less attention has been given to how non-native English speakers, especially ELF users, comprehend or produce polysemous words in different contexts.

Principled Polysemy

Proposed by Tyler and Evans (2003), the Principled Polysemy approach was developed to systematically identify and validate distinct meanings of polysemous words. This approach illustrates how extended meanings arise according to well-defined, structured patterns, rather than through arbitrariness. At its core, Principled Polysemy assumes that a prototypical meaning exists first and is followed by additional meanings that arise in response to contextual factors, which subsequently form an intertwined semantic network.

To operationalize polysemous identification, the model sets out three evaluative criteria:

(1) Meaning Criterion: The new meaning must be semantically distinct from previous meanings and clearly identifiable as a separate sense. This criterion is mandatory, meaning that if a meaning does not meet this requirement, it cannot be considered a polysemous extension.

(2) Concept Elaboration Criterion: The new meaning must involve a shift in conceptual structure, often observable through differences in collocational patterns (e.g., run in run a marathon versus run a business).

(3) Grammatical Criterion: A distinct meaning must exhibit syntactic differences from prior meanings, such as minor changes in verb transitivity or major changes in grammatical categories, also known as part of speech.

To establish a new sense as a recognizable polysemous extension, at least two out of these three criteria must be satisfied, with the Meaning Criterion being indispensable. The Principled Polysemy approach helps differentiate absolute polysemy from ambiguous semantic variations or sheer contextual interpretations. Remarkably, the Principled Polysemy approach also stands as part of broader linguistic theories, such as cognitive linguistics (Langacker, 1987), which suggested that meaning is dependent on human cognition and embodied experience.

ELF Pragmatics and Polysemy in Digital Contexts

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) offers a challenging promise for polysemous interpretation. Given that ELF speakers rely on shared intelligibility rather than the norms of native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2002), their interpretations of polysemous words are more likely distinct, varying according to familiarity with each particular word, functionality, and the communicative context in which their interactions take place. Dewey (2014) emphasizes that ELF users become more adaptive when dealing with ambiguity or the complexity of either words, phrases, or sentences to which they are not accustomed. Likewise, this may include the adoption, reinterpretation, or even rejection of certain meaning variants despite the words being used by native speakers of English. As such, this adaptability, while being considered a significant characteristic of ELF, also implies variation in perceptions across different groups of ELF speakers, leading to potential miscommunication when informal or idiomatic meanings are not mutually embraced in comprehension.

Additionally, the rise of digital communication at present has accelerated semantic change and lexical innovation. Social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, and X) serve as breeding grounds for uncommon slang and thus play a vital role in the extended usage of words, with meanings evolving rapidly in response to trends and meme culture (Zappavigna, 2011; Tagg, 2015).

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the intersection of digital communication and semantic expansion. For instance, Lahlou (2022) found that even though many prevalent terms are polysemous, learners often acquire only a single fixed sense, leading to comprehension failures when encountering non-literal usages in digital spaces. This situation poses challenges for ELF users, whose engagement with native-speaking communities or popular digital subcultures is relatively scarce, thereby limiting their awareness of informal extensions.

Accordingly, understanding how ELF speakers interpret polysemous words, especially those circulating in informal digital settings, is considered daunting, and requires a multidimensional theoretical lens with a comprehensive blend of cognitive semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. To catch up with this, the present study builds on this theoretical framework to investigate how “sick,” as a polysemous word, is perceived in ELF usage.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that combines a semantic analysis of naturally occurring data with perceptual insights into the community of ELF speakers. Following a usage-based framework, the Principled Polysemy approach (Tyler & Evans, 2003), the methodology was designed to address both dimensions of the research questions: (1) the extent to which the polysemous word of "sick" obtains further meanings than its prototypical one; and (2) the perceptions and usage of these meanings among ELF users. Data were collected in two phases: one focusing on real-world language use from social media platforms, and the other eliciting user perceptions through an online survey. Each phase is described below.

Data Sources and Sampling Procedures

To investigate the semantic expansion of sick, data were retrieved from three major social media platforms: Facebook, X, and Instagram. These platforms were selected given that they are large, diverse communities, who generate spontaneous textual information, and have a high prevalence of informal and expressive language. As suggested by Tagg (2015), social media data are particularly well-suited for polysemy research, because they reflect real-time language use across a wide range of communicative contexts, including humorous content, emotional expressions, performance commentaries, and personal reflections.

Using platform-specific search functions and manual filtering, a collection of 2,144 public posts and reel captions containing extended, non-prototypical usages of the word "sick" was included for detailed analysis. While instances of the prototypical meaning (physically ill) were observed during the initial data screening to establish the core sense, they were excluded from this specific sub-corpus to focus on the proportions and distribution of semantic extensions. The primary search query was the single lexical item "sick." To capture extended meanings effectively, Boolean filters and platform-specific operators were used where available (e.g., "sick -ill" or "sick of"). Manual filtering was then applied to ensure only the target adjective was collected, excluding instances where "sick" functioned as a noun or was part of a proper name.

Data collection was restricted to English-language posts. To ensure a diverse and unique dataset, a deduplication process was performed manually: identical text across different platforms (e.g., a shared post from Instagram to Facebook) was counted only once based on its original timestamp. Reposts on X and shared posts on Facebook were excluded to prioritize original user-generated content and avoid over-representing viral trends.

The dataset consisted of 1,027 instances from Facebook, 774 from X, and 343 from Instagram, all posted between January 1st, 2024, and March 30th, 2025. This date range was selected to ensure contemporary relevance while avoiding global health crises or other events that could disproportionately affect illness-related discourse. Posts or captions that included the word sick without supporting contexts (e.g., single-word comments or hashtags) were excluded so that the accurate semantic interpretation could be optimized.

Due to Instagram's limited search filtering capabilities, data collection from that platform was conducted manually, relying on keyword monitoring and visual caption scanning. Each retained instance included the full sentence or clause in which "sick" appeared, along with sufficient context for pragmatic and grammatical analysis.

To address the second research question concerning ELF speakers' perceptions, an online survey was distributed using a snowball sampling technique. The researcher created the survey using Google Forms and disseminated it via email, social media, and online academic groups. A total of 213 participants responded to the survey, all of whom self-identified as non-native English speakers who regularly use English in their routine interactions. The selection of these participants was in line with Seidlhofer's (2002) characterization of ELF users.

The 213 ELF participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, including L1 speakers of Thai, Chinese, and Japanese, ensuring that the findings were not restricted to a single dialect or country. The initial gatekeeping questions ensured that all respondents were active users of English in lingua franca settings, defined as interactions where English is used as a common medium between speakers with different first languages

In detail, a screening question was presented at the beginning of the survey to ensure that participants met the ELF criteria. Those who answered "No" to either (a) being a non-native speaker of English or (b) using English regularly with other non-native speakers were asked to leave the survey site. This initial gatekeeping mechanism helped ensure that only relevant respondents contributed to the perception data.

The survey instrument consisted of six questions, structured as follows:
(1) Demographic confirmation and ELF use
(2) Familiarity with the word "sick"
(3) Familiarity with different meanings of "sick"
(4) Frequency of use in various situations
(5) Situational context in which "sick" is most often used
(6) Perceived prototypical meaning of "sick"

All items were written in English, assuming an intermediate to advanced level of comprehension typical of ELF communicators. The questionnaire focused on exploring both recognition and usage in contexts, allowing the study to examine not only which meanings were familiar to ELF users, but also which ones were functionally applied in their real-world interactions.

To ensure consistency in the manual filtering of social media data, a 10% sample was cross-verified by an independent coder to ensure that contextual cues like emojis and surrounding evaluative adjectives were interpreted consistently according to the Principled Polysemy criteria.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis of "Sick" Polysemy

Each instance of "sick" collected from the platforms was categorized based on lexical category, syntactic role, and pragmatic function. This study found that throughout the collected data, the word functioned as an adjective. Its syntactic roles included attributive, predicative, and postpositive constructions, with distribution patterns informing the subsequent semantic analysis.

Following Tyler and Evans' (2003) Principled Polysemy approach, three core criteria were applied to each observed meaning of sick:

(1) Meaning Criterion: Does the new meaning clearly differ from the prototypical meaning?

(2) Concept Elaboration Criterion: Is there a shift in conceptual structure and/or collocational pattern?

(3) Grammatical Criterion: Does the meaning involve a change in syntactic property?

For a sense to be classified as a legitimate polysemous extension, it had to satisfy the Meaning Criterion and at least one of the other two. Collocational analysis was also undergone in order to demonstrate common lexical pairings for each meaning (e.g., “sick of,” “totally sick,” “a sick move”), which allows for the uncovering of how different new meanings of sick pattern within usage environments.

To ensure objective categorization of the 2,144 instances, the researcher established the following decision rules based on syntactic and collocational markers. As can be seen in Table 1, while boredom and annoyance often co-occur, for the purposes of this study, instances were coded as Bored only when the contextual focus was on the repetitive or monotonous nature of the stimulus (e.g., sick of waiting), rather than a purely aggressive reaction. In addition, the distinction between bored and disgusted was operationalized through the presence of the preposition “of.” While “sick of” almost exclusively indicated boredom or satiety, the use of “sick” as a bare predicative adjective (e.g., his behavior is sick) was coded as “disgust” due to the focus on moral or social revulsion.

Table 1

Categorization of Extended Meanings

Meaning	Definition	Operational Decision Rule	Syntactic & Collocational Markers
Bored / Fed up	Mental exhaustion or dissatisfaction with a stimulus due to repetition or duration	Must involve a state of satiety or weariness where the subject no longer wishes to engage with the object/situation.	Predominantly uses the "be sick of" + [Noun/Gerund] construction.
Disgusted	Moral, sensory, or aesthetic revulsion; a psychological extension of nausea	Must describe a reaction to something perceived as offensive, revolting, or "unhealthy" in a metaphorical sense.	Often used with intensifiers like "absolutely" or "totally"; typically appears in predicative positions.
Superb	A positive evaluation of skill, performance, or aesthetic quality	Rule: Must occur in a context of admiration or high achievement, where the intensity of "illness" is remapped to "excellence.”	Found in exclamations (e.g., "That was sick!") or attributive phrases like "sick move" or "sick vocals.”

To validate the coding process, a second linguistics researcher independently categorized a random 10% sample (*N*=215) of the dataset. Inter-rater reliability was calculated

using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a score of 0.86, indicating a high level of agreement and robust operational boundaries between the identified senses.

Perception Analysis from ELF Respondents

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to assess:

(1) The proportion of participants familiar with each meaning of sick

(2) The frequency with which they used each meaning in everyday communication

(3) The situational contexts in which different meanings were employed

(4) Their identification of the prototypical meaning.

These descriptive results were then qualitatively interpreted upon the sociolinguistic theory on ELF communication, which is particularly the idea that ELF speakers typically prioritize clarity, frequency, and pragmatic appropriateness when interpreting ambiguous or novel concepts (Dewey, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2002). Comparisons were also drawn between the observed meanings in digital usage and the patterns of perceptions of ELF speakers, enabling an exploration of both semantic distribution and perceptual insights.

For the perception survey, percentages for familiarity and usage were calculated based on the total number of respondents (*N*=213). As participants were allowed to select multiple meanings they recognized, the cumulative percentages in the familiarity category exceed 100%, accurately reflecting the polysemous nature of their mental lexicon.

Research Findings

As illustrated in Table 2, the analysis and interpretation of research findings align with the following coding scheme.

Table 2

Core Meaning Criterion and Typical Collocations of "Sick"

Sense	Core Meaning Criterion	Typical Collocations
Physical Illness	Bodily ailment or unwellness	"Feel sick"; "get sick"
Boredom	Mental fatigue or dissatisfaction	"Sick of waiting"; "sick of routine"
Disgust	Aesthetic or moral revulsion	"Absolutely sick"; "totally sick reaction"
Superbness	High-level skill or admiration	"A sick move"; "sick trick"

Prototypical Meaning of "Sick"

As previously mentioned, the prototypical meaning of a word is identified based on a set of well-defined criteria that consider frequency of use and its relationship with other meanings. By applying these principles, the primary meaning of the word "sick" can be determined as "to be physically ill." This claim is substantiated, given the fact that the word "sick" has gained the dominant understanding across various English-speaking communities, with the image of physical illness. This definition is also consistently listed as the first entry in major English dictionaries, including the Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, and Cambridge

Dictionary. The prominence of this meaning in lexical resources suggests that it holds a primary status in conventional use. Besides, its extended meanings (e.g., “to feel disgusted,” “to feel bored,” and “to be superb”) can be traced back to the fundamental concept of physical illness. These related meaning senses ascertain that the original, concrete meaning of being unwell is a foundation from which other suggested meanings stem. Another piece of evidence that confirms the prototypical meaning of this word is that "physically ill" is in direct contrast with "healthy" or "well,” which meets the criterion that a word’s prototypical meaning can usually be of its own opposite meaning sense. Consequently, while "sick" may have acquired additional senses in contemporary usage, its core meaning is intertwined with physical illness.

New Meanings of “Sick”

Analysis of the data collected from the three social media platforms (Facebook, X, and Instagram) revealed three new, extended meanings of the word "sick" that stemmed from its prototypical meaning (“to be physically ill”). These meanings were examined based on the three criteria (Tyler & Evans, 2003), namely distinctiveness as a separate meaning, unique collocational patterns, and syntactic variation. Each of the identified meanings meets these criteria and thus could support the polysemy of the word.

Sick as “To Be Bored”

The first newly identified meaning of “sick” is “to feel bored,” which appeared in 1,094 posts (51.03%). This meaning differs from traditional uses of the word since it conveys mental exhaustion or dissatisfaction rather than physical illness. In this study, it was found in expressions involving frustration with monotonous or repetitive activities, and, based on the observation, it frequently occurred in collocations with the preposition “of,” forming the phrase “sick of.” Grammatically, this usage functions as an adjective in predicative constructions (following a copula or linking verb), describing an emotional state rather than a physical condition. Examples from the dataset include sentences like “I’m freakin’ sick of this idiot dog it ate my pops again!” and “Sick of your routine? Yeah, time for a change!”

Sick as “To Feel Disgusted”

The second meaning, found in 745 instances (34.75%), is "to feel disgusted." This usage stands out given that it provides the sense of revulsion rather than illness, boredom, or admiration. In general, it often appears alongside such intensifiers as "absolutely" or "totally" and is frequently used to describe offensive situations, behaviors, or objects. Like the boredom-related meaning, this sense of "sick" functions as a predicative adjective, but it is distinct in that, in this study, it was found to typically co-occur with negative evaluative terms. Examples include "Look at this pile of rotting food, bro; this trashy kitchen looks absolutely sick! I'm gonna vomit." and "Sick of all that lousy man’s fake apologies. May i vomit here?? Seriously ain’t he just be real?"

Sick as “To Be Superb”

The final meaning, "to be superb," was observed in 305 sentences (14.18%). This usage is unique because it conveys a positive evaluation rather than negativity or illness. As found during the analysis, it commonly appeared in contexts related to performance, achievement, or aesthetics, often modified by such adverbs as "totally" or "insanely." Unlike the previous

meanings, this meaning predominantly occurs in attributive positions, for instance, in "a sick move," or in exclamatory sentences like "That was sick!" Examples from the data include "That trick was sick, bro. Best shot I've seen this year" and "Her vocals were absolutely sick last night. What a performance!"

These findings indicate that the polysemy of "sick" continues to grow within digital communication, with users employing the term in several context-dependent ways. The predominance of "to feel bored" and "to feel disgusted" reiterates a shift in usage that emphasizes negative emotional states, whereas the relatively lower occurrence of "to be superb" implies that this meaning, regardless of its frequent use among adolescents (Besserman, 1989), remains less widespread in interactions of English speakers.

Collocational Patterns of "Sick" Across Meanings

To further support the claim that "sick" has extended into distinct semantic senses, an analysis of collocational behavior was conducted on the three suggested meanings. According to Tyler and Evans' (2003) Concept Elaboration Criterion, changes in meaning are often accompanied by shifts in typical lexical partners. This section highlights recurring collocations that uniquely pattern with each meaning, helping to distinguish each usage from the prototypical meaning: "physical illness".

Sick as "To Feel Bored"

This meaning frequently occurs in the phrasal pattern "sick of + noun phrase/gerund," indicating a strong grammatical and lexical co-occurrence. The preposition "of" plays a role in forming this meaning. Common collocations observed include "sick of this routine," "sick of you," and "sick of waiting."

These collocations emphasize mental or emotional fatigue of individuals, and it presents a clear departure from physical illness while supporting the distinctiveness of this sense.

Sick as "To Feel Disgusted"

This meaning was often modified by such adverbs or degree words as "absolutely," "totally," and occasionally "literally." The disgust-related meaning typically appeared in evaluative or expressive utterances with highly negative tone. Observed collocations included "absolutely sick," "totally sick reaction" and "sick behavior."

In this sense, it is observable that these collocations sometimes structurally overlapped with the "to feel bored" meaning, but were distinguishable by contexts and tones. The presence of emotionally charged or moral-evaluative lexical partners around these disgust-related instances played a vital role in making them differentiable from the other.

Sick as "To Be Superb"

This meaning of sick, typically informal and expressive, appeared with modifiers that conveyed admiration to intensify senses such as "insanely," "totally," and "so." It was also commonly found in fixed phrases or exclamations. Notable collocations included "a sick trick," "sick vocals," "that move was sick," and "totally sick performance."

These collocations primarily occurred in contexts related to entertainment, performance, or youth-centered instances, marking them as stylistically distinct and semantically opposite from the prototypical meaning.

Sick as "Physically Ill" (Prototypical)

In contrast, the core meaning of "sick" as "to be physically ill" being presented on the target social media platforms typically occurred in neutral or clinical contexts, often accompanied by subjects like "I," "he," or "the patient." Likewise, it was rather found in predicative constructions than in the attributive or postpositive counterparts. Common collocations included "feel sick," "get sick," "reportedly sick," and "physically sick."

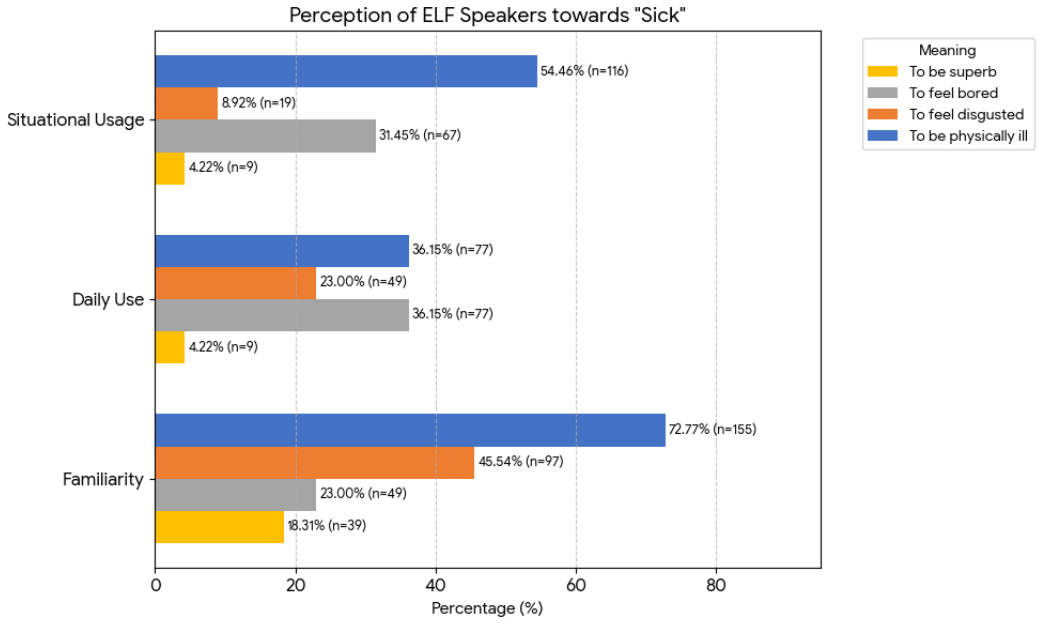
Overall, the distinct collocational patterns for each meaning reinforce the argument that these new, extended meanings of "sick" can satisfy not only the Meaning Criterion but also the Concept Elaboration Criterion, affirming their status as polysemous extensions of the word. Besides, the diversity in lexical patterns also aligns with Cruse's (2004) idea that polysemous senses form sense-structured networks, which can be tracked through observable shifts and varieties in language use across different contexts.

Perceptions of ELF Speakers towards the Polysemy of "Sick"

The second research question of this study sought to examine the perceptions of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers towards the word "sick," particularly in how they recognize and apply its polysemous meanings in real-life interactions. This was accomplished through an online survey that investigated not only participants' familiarity with various meanings of the word sick, but also their frequency of usage and the contexts in which ELF speakers employ those meanings. The total number of responses from ELF speakers was 213, all of whom were identified as non-native speakers of English and reported to hold regular use of English in interactions with those whose native languages differ from one another. Refer to Figure 1 for the responses from ELF participants obtained from the survey.

Figure 1

Perceptions of ELF Speakers



The first point of the analysis pertained to the recognition of meaning, reporting how many participants were familiar with the different meanings of "sick." As can be seen in Figure 1, the

vast majority (72.77%, *N*=155) of the participants selected "to be physically ill" as the most familiar meaning. This response ascertains the cognitive salience of the prototypical meaning, and this is likewise consistent with Tyler and Evans' (2003) criteria for prototypicality, which emphasize frequency, conventionality, and centrality within semantic networks. Notably, this recognition far exceeded that of the other three extended meanings: "to feel disgusted" (45.54%. *N*=97), "to feel bored" (23.00%, *N*=49), and "to be superb" (18.31%. *N*=39).

These proportions unveil that ELF speakers, while being capable of identifying new meanings to numerous extents, remain adhesive to the central meaning of physical illness. Such results align with previous ELF studies (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2002; Dewey, 2014), which reiterate that non-native speakers of English tend to prioritize stability, clarity, and mutualized conventional meaning in their real-life communication and interactions. This tendency may be accounted for by the fact that ELF speakers often encounter English in instructional, professional, or transnational environments, where ambiguity can occasionally hinder their mutual intelligibility. As a result, semantically extended or inverted meanings, particularly those derived from informal interactions or youth slang words (e.g., sick as "superb"), may fall outside the scope of their routine communicative exposure.

Apart from this recognition, the survey explored frequency of use in daily communication. Interestingly, while "to be physically ill" remained one of the two most frequently used meanings (36.15%, *N*=77), it was matched in frequency by "to feel bored," which was also marked by 36.15% (*N*=77) of the ELF participants. This similarity in usage may appear counterintuitive owing to the familiarity gap between the two meanings. Nonetheless, it becomes plausible when considered from a pragmatic and emotional standpoint. The "bored" sense of sick, often appearing in constructions like "sick of waiting" or "sick of someone", is semantically obvious and emotionally affective, making it an effective way to express frustration, fatigue, or discomfort of individuals. These emotions are as such universally experienced and commonly verbalized, thereby increasing the contextual accessibility of this sense even among those who may not classify it as the first-perceived meaning.

On the contrary, the meaning of "to feel disgusted" was selected by 23.00% (*N*=49) of the participants, while "to be superb" was the least used one, appearing in only 4.22% (*N*=9) of responses. This downward trend in frequency from central to periphery meanings corresponds to what cognitive linguists describe as radial semantic structuring (Lakoff, 1987), where new, extended meanings become less opted in, and therefore it becomes less likely to be employed in daily interactions of speakers in majority, as based on distance from the prototype and speaker experience. While "disgust" is an emotion that is closely tied to physicality and can conceptually derive from illness, it remains a more evaluative and less situationally neutral expression, perhaps resulting in its lower use. In comparison, "superb" as a slang usage requires specific familiarity and contextual awareness. It is consequently not a surprise that this meaning may appear to be opaque among ELF speakers who are unfamiliar with contexts in which such slang is employed or included, such as youth-centered entertainment or hip-hop culture (Besserman, 1989).

The third area of investigation concerned the situational use of the word "sick." The participants of this study were also asked to select the context in which they most frequently used the word. It then turned out that the majority (54.46%, *N*=116) selected "describing one's physical illness." This affirms the dominant role of the prototypical meaning in real-world communication in the ELF community. The second most selected context was "when feeling

bored with someone or something" (31.45%, *N*=67), again highlighting the emotional relatability and functional versatility of this extended meaning. Lastly, the remaining two options: "when feeling disgusted" (8.92%, *N*=19) and "when giving a compliment to someone or something" (4.22%, *N*=9) further confirmed the marginal role of these meanings in the linguistic repertoire of ELF speakers.

To triangulate these perceptual findings with usage-based data, it is worth noting that the analysis of social media instances (*N*=2,144) revealed that "to feel bored" appeared in 51.03% (*N*=1,094) of posts, whereas "to feel disgusted" and "to be superb" occurred in 34.75% (*N*=745) and 14.18% (*N*=305), respectively. While these distributions demonstrate that non-prototypical meanings are active in digital communication, they do not necessarily correspond to high uptake among ELF speakers. This discrepancy strengthens the idea that ELF communication, despite openness to innovation, is fundamentally driven by intelligibility rather than idiomatic creativity. As Dewey (2014) suggests, ELF speakers may borrow or repurpose forms of native speakers of English when they serve communicative clarity but tend to resist ambiguous or culturally dense constructions that may more or less impede their mutual understanding.

The final survey item aimed to verify whether the ELF participants perceived "to be physically ill" as the prototypical meaning of sick or not. Consistently, 72.7% of them confirmed this association, further substantiating the theoretical proposition that prototypicality is not only a matter of historical origin or dictionary listing but also a matter of cognitive preference and communicative frequency among real-world users despite their difference in language (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

All in all, the results of the present study indicate that ELF speakers, while not entirely unfamiliar with the polysemy of "sick," are exposed to the phenomenon selectively. In other words, many ELF speakers throughout the study relied heavily on contextually reciprocal and emotionally accessible interpretations. The prototype remains predominant both in recognition and in application, while peripheral meanings gain different degrees of peripheral presence depending on emotional transparency, collocational familiarity, and pragmatic functions. This discovery supports the claim that polysemous meanings are not uniformly distributed across speaker populations, but are actually influenced by such contributing factors as language exposure, sociocultural alignment, and communicative priorities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study supportively reiterated the notion that polysemous words, despite their acquisition of extended meanings over time, are more likely to maintain themselves as a prototypical meaning, as seen in the case of "sick." This finding is consistent with the theoretical principles suggested by Tyler and Evans (2003) and aligns with Rosch's (1975) prototype theory as well. Notwithstanding, aside from theoretical validation, the results yielded multiple implications in relation to sociolinguistic variation, pragmatics in ELF communication, and pedagogical design.

It is additionally noted that the perceptions of the word "sick" among ELF speakers were affective of the prototypical association with physical illness. Despite increasing exposure to non-literal usages through digital content, the participants in this study gravitated towards interpreting "sick" using its conventional meaning, particularly in health-related contexts. This leads to a potential embedment of semantic reliance in ELF settings, where communication

effectiveness is prioritized over stylistic or cultural novelty (Seidlhofer, 2002). Such a tendency marks the pivotal role of intelligibility in lingua franca interactions, where the use of marked expressions like “sick” as “superb” may not be strong enough to foster communicative clarity and may even provoke confusion in their communication.

While ELF users did demonstrate some awareness of extended meanings: particularly “to feel bored,” their actual usage patterns suggest that these meanings are applied cautiously. For instance, the meaning of “to be superb,” though prevalent in native speaker slang and adolescent communication (Besserman, 1989), was the least familiar and least used among the ELF participants. This may result from their limited exposure to idiomatic expressions in formal educational contexts or a lower frequency of native-speaker social interactions, as also indicated by Dewey (2014).

The retention gap observed in this study, where ELF speakers recognized but rarely used the superb sense, mirrors findings by Sultanova (2025), who notes that communicators often filter idiomatic or slang-heavy polysemes to prioritize mutual intelligibility. This cautious application of extended meanings aligns with the pragmatic sensitivity described in recent ELF-based assessment models (Dewey & Slamet, 2025), where the goal is functional success rather than native-like stylistic novelty. Consequently, the preference for the prototypical illness sense among this study’s participants confirms that stability remains the preferred strategy in modern global interactions, even in the age of digital disruption.

In addition, a deeper investigation of context-based data from social media reveals another discussion. It appears that the use of “sick” in online interactions is largely influenced by a mixed variety of emotional expressions, which can include yet are not limited to boredom, disgust, and sarcasm being the dominant tones. These extended meanings, as presented in the study, reflect a broader semantic alternation where illness becomes metaphorically linked to psychological states, and this goes in line with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) conceptual metaphors. The phrase “sick of it,” for example, does not merely denote frustration; rather, it invokes a symbolic sense of emotional toxicity. This figurative dimension may not always transfer successfully into ELF contexts, where metaphorical conventions vary cross-culturally.

In practice, the results as discovered in this study lead to several pedagogical implications. English language teaching, especially within ELF-aware classrooms, should incorporate awareness-raising activities on polysemy in real-world communication. To exemplify, contextual inference exercises, semantic mapping of prototypical and extended meanings, and social media discourse analysis can help learners internalize the multi-dimensionality of vocabulary for their further use. Additionally, lexicographic practices may also benefit from an integration of corpus-driven polysemy models that are not necessarily confined to words with dictionary definitions and demonstrate contextual variability through usage patterns. Online dictionaries, in particular, can include such marked labels as “slang,” “informal,” or “context: admiration” to learner interpretation.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the empirical analysis conducted by the researcher, it should be noted that the present study was confined by some limitations. First of all, the approach was limited to online responses only. The researcher did not broaden the analysis by incorporating such procedures as individual or group interviews. Apart from that, while the textual instances found in the study

uncovered three newly suggested meanings of “sick,” continued searchs with a larger dataset could potentially provide further extended meanings of the word.

In addition, the selection of ELF participants was not limited to any particular demographic group. In other words, participants varied widely in their nationalities and dialects. Despite the promising variety represented in the ELF community, exploring specific cohorts of ELF speakers may have yielded a different viewpoint on their perceptions towards the polysemous word “sick.”

Recommendations for Further Studies

Based on the above-mentioned limitations of the present study, future research could consider employing more instruments for data collection in order to gain a more precise insight into how polysemy is perceived among ELF speakers. Additionally, exploring more instances where “sick” appears may enlarge the data size and reflect a greater variety of extended meanings that might be uncovered. Likewise, varying the selection of participants can strengthen generalizability of the data, especially for those further investigating ELF speakers’ perceptions.

Apart from that, it is recommended that further research explore how different ELF groups perceive and adopt polysemous meanings across various contexts, such as academic exchanges or workplace communication. Another suggestion is that investigating how polysemous words are processed cognitively among ELF users may provide deeper insights into meaning representation and lexical access in multilingual minds. By expanding the scope of polysemy studies, linguistic research can continue to magnify the advances in and adaptiveness of meaning in global English usage.

Author Contributions

Throughout the process, the author (TD) was solely responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data collection, text analysis, qualitative data interpretation, writing (i.e. original draft preparation, and writing), review, and editing of the manuscript.

Declaration of the Use of Generatve AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Google’s Gemini (Version 3) to assist with language editing and polishing of the draft. The tool was used solely to enhance clarity, grammatical accuracy, and overall readability. The author carefully reviewed and revised the output as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Ethics

In accordance with the policies in effect at the time of the study, formal ethical approval was not required for research involving publicly available data and anonymous survey responses. The author hereby certifies that the present study adhered to standard ethical practices for studies involving human participants. The author used publicly accessible social media posts as linguistic data. During the process of data retrieval, no personal information of any users was recorded. In addition, perception data were collected through an anonymous online survey, in which participants voluntarily consented to participate.

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