

NAVIGATING AMBIGUITY: COGNITIVE SEMANTICS OF POLYSEMIOUS TITLES IN *BREAKING BAD*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated how episode titles in *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) carried multiple interconnected meanings that influenced narrative interpretation. By applying a cognitive semantics framework, it explored how polysemous titles activated semantic networks and invited dynamic reinterpretation as the story unfolded. Using qualitative content analysis, four episodes—*Pilot* (S1E1), *Cancer Man* (S1E4), *Crazy Handful of Nothin'* (S1E6), and *I See You* (S3E8)—were examined for literal and metaphorical layers of meaning. Findings revealed that titles functioned simultaneously as direct references (e.g., medical diagnosis, poker bluff, hospital surveillance) and as metaphorical devices (e.g., Walt as “pilot” of his destiny, cancer as moral decay, bluff as illusion of power, surveillance as vulnerability). Cognitive semantics explained how audiences process these layered meanings: viewers initially interpreted titles literally, but as narrative contexts evolved, they re-accessed metaphorical dimensions through semantic network activation. These layered meanings enriched character arcs, foreshadowed conflicts, and amplified thematic resonance, particularly in the exploration of morality, identity, and consequence. By highlighting polysemy as both a linguistic and cognitive-semantic device, this research contributed to television studies and linguistic analysis, offering new insights into how ambiguity in language deepened storytelling and sustained audience engagement across disciplines.

Keywords: *cognitive semantics, polysemy, content analysis, episode titles, Breaking Bad, ambiguity*

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INTRODUCTION

Breaking Bad, created by Vince Gilligan and aired on AMC from 2008 to 2013, is widely recognized for its critical acclaim and its exploration of moral ambiguity. The series follows Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, who partners with his former student Jesse Pinkman to produce methamphetamine. As Walt transforms into the



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drug lord Heisenberg, the narrative probes themes of pride, responsibility, secrecy, and moral decay.

Breaking Bad has been analyzed through several studies from its philosophical (Fernando, 2017; Sharett, 2021), and cinematic aspects (Restivo, 2019; Koch, 2017; Logan, 2016). These studies underscore the series' thematic richness but leave unexplored the role of episode titles as polysemous narrative devices and the linguistic ambiguity embedded in its episode titles. Episode titles are not merely labels; they embed multiple layers of meaning—literal, metaphorical, and intertextual—that enrich character arcs, foreshadow conflicts, and amplify thematic resonance. This study investigates how polysemous titles in *Breaking Bad* contribute to plot development and thematic richness, focusing on four episodes: Pilot (S1E1), Cancer Man (S1E4), Crazy Handful of Nothin' (S1E6), and I See You (S3E8). By applying Krippendorff's (2018) content analysis methodology, this study addresses that gap, showing how titles such as Pilot, Cancer Man, Crazy Handful of Nothin', and I See You operate simultaneously on literal and metaphorical levels. In doing so, the analysis demonstrates how polysemous titles navigate ambiguity to shape storytelling.

This study positions ambiguity as the key to understanding how *Breaking Bad's* episode titles shape its storytelling. By navigating the tension between literal and metaphorical meanings, the titles act as narrative signposts that both anchor the plot and invite deeper interpretation. They frame Walter White's transformation, foreshadow moral conflicts, and expose vulnerabilities that resonate across character arcs. In doing so, polysemous titles transform linguistic ambiguity into a powerful narrative device—one that sustains viewer engagement, amplifies thematic depth, and elevates the series' exploration of morality, identity, and consequence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Navigating Ambiguity in Language and Narrative

Polysemy, where a word or phrase has many related meanings, and often metaphorical meaning, can increase narrative depth by embedding layered meanings in a single term (Kaplan & Hudson, 2010; Redden, 2017). These polysemous episode titles activate a broader semantic network, allowing viewers to reinterpret them as the narrative evolves. As Lupker and Pexman (2019) emphasize, words with richer semantic representations—those connected to different meanings, associations, or contexts—can be processed more efficiently and flexibly. Polysemy is also best understood through the lens of semantic relatedness, distinguishing them from homonyms by the conceptual relationships between meanings. This distinction is especially important when analyzing *Breaking Bad* episode titles, which often carry many intertwined interpretations (Johanson (2007).

The concept of ambiguity itself lies at the heart of this study. In linguistic theory, ambiguity often emerges through polysemy, where a single word or phrase carries multiple related meanings (Johanson, 2007; Kaplan & Hudson, 2010; Vicente & Falkum, 2017). Far from being a flaw in communication, ambiguity is recognized as a resource that enriches meaning-making, allowing audiences to interpret texts on both literal and metaphorical

levels (Redden, 2017; Littlemore & T., 2016). Scholars of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics argue that such layered meanings stimulate reflection, deepen engagement, and invite interpretive openness (Thomas, 1995; Lupker & Pexman, 2019).

Integration of Linguistic Theory into Media Studies

While polysemy has been widely studied in linguistics, its application to television storytelling remains underexplored. As it is said above, polysemy is distinguished from homonymy by emphasizing conceptual relatedness, a distinction that becomes crucial when analyzing episode titles that carry intertwined meanings. That is why Kaplan & Hudson (2010) highlight how lexical ambiguity activates multiple interpretive pathways. Meanwhile, Vicente & Falkum (2017) argue that polysemy enriches the mental lexicon by embedding words within dynamic semantic networks. By applying these frameworks to *Breaking Bad*, this study extends linguistic theory into media analysis, showing how episode titles function not merely as labels but as narrative devices that anchor literal events while simultaneously opening metaphorical dimensions. This integration demonstrates that linguistic ambiguity can shape audience interpretation, foreshadow conflict, and reinforce thematic depth in serialized storytelling.

Cognitive Dimension of Polysemy

Recent psycholinguistic research highlights how audiences process polysemous words through semantic network activation. Lupker & Pexman (2019) show that words with multiple related meanings are accessed more efficiently because they activate richer mental representations. Kapnoula & Samuel (2019) further demonstrate that the mental lexicon dynamically integrates contextual cues, allowing audiences to reinterpret meanings as narratives unfold. This cognitive flexibility explains why polysemous episode titles in *Breaking Bad* resonate so strongly: viewers initially interpret them literally, but as the plot develops, they re-access the title's metaphorical dimensions, aligning linguistic ambiguity with evolving character arcs. Friederici (2011) adds a neurocognitive perspective, noting that language processing involves both structural and functional networks in the brain, which support the reinterpretation of ambiguous signals.

Ambiguity as a Narrative Device

In narrative contexts, ambiguity functions as a storytelling device that sustains tension and complexity. Bordwell and Thompson (2019) highlight how ambiguity in film and television encourages viewers to negotiate between competing interpretations, while Restivo (2019) and Koch (2017) demonstrate how *Breaking Bad's* cinematic language relies on ambiguity to heighten suspense and moral uncertainty. Logan (2016) further shows how visual storytelling amplifies this interpretive openness, making ambiguity central to the series' aesthetic and thematic impact.

Research on linguistic ambiguity has long emphasized the role of polysemy in activating multiple interpretive routes, allowing audiences to negotiate meaning dynamically (Johanson, 2007; Kaplan & Hudson, 2010;

Vicente & Falkum, 2017). Pragmatic perspectives further highlight ambiguity as a communicative resource that sustains interpretive openness (Thomas, 1995; Redden, 2017). Within media studies, scholars argue that ambiguity is central to sustaining audience engagement, particularly in serialized television, where layered meanings encourage ongoing reinterpretation.

Building on these insights, recent scholarship has introduced the idea of narrative impact analysis, which examines how linguistic devices such as titles function not merely as labels but as active narrative mechanisms. This perspective emphasizes how ambiguity embedded in titles foreshadows conflict, marks moral decay, highlights deception, and exposes vulnerability, thereby shaping plot progression, character development, and thematic depth (Logan, 2016; Koch, 2017). By treating titles as narrative units, narrative impact analysis extends linguistic theory into media studies, demonstrating that polysemy is deliberately embedded in narrative design to enrich storytelling and sustain audience engagement.

METHOD

A qualitative content analysis framework was used to examine how meanings emerge from the selected episodes. Content analysis was chosen as the guiding paradigm because it allows for systematic examination of linguistic and narrative elements, enabling the researchers to uncover both literal and metaphorical dimensions embedded in the titles (Preiser, Mancilla García, Hill, & Klein, 2021).

The subjects of the study consisted of four episodes selected for their narrative significance and thematic richness: Pilot (S1E1), Cancer Man (S1E4), Crazy Handful of Nothin' (S1E6), and I See You (S3E8). These episodes were chosen to represent different stages of Walter White's transformation and to illustrate how ambiguity in titles operates across seasons. Each title was treated as a unit of analysis, while dialogue, actions, and thematic developments within the episodes served as contextual units that informed interpretation.

The research procedure unfolded in several interconnected stages, following established frameworks for qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). First, the episode titles were unitized and examined in relation to their narrative context, a process that ensured each title was treated as a distinct unit of meaning within the broader storyline (Krippendorff, 2018).

Next, coding was conducted to distinguish literal meanings from metaphorical or symbolic ones, drawing on dictionary definitions and narrative cues. This approach aligns with Bardin's (2011) emphasis on identifying explicit and implicit meanings, and Neuendorf's (2017) guidance on systematically coding texts to uncover layered dimensions of meaning.

Abductive reasoning was then applied to infer connections between title meanings and broader plot developments, character arcs, and thematic concerns. As Tavory and Timmermans (2014) explain, abductive analysis allows researchers to move beyond descriptive coding toward theoretical insight, while Reichertz (2010) highlights its role in connecting empirical observations with interpretive frameworks.

To ensure validity, interpretations were cross-checked against episode transcripts, subtitles, and authoritative definitions, thereby grounding the analysis in both linguistic precision and narrative evidence (Schreier, 2012; Neuendorf, 2017). The materials used in the study included episode recordings, transcripts, and subtitles, which provided the textual and visual data necessary for analysis. Dictionaries such as *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) and *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (n.d.) were consulted to establish semantic accuracy, while scholarly references on polysemy and narrative ambiguity supported the interpretive framework (Kaplan & Hudson, 2010; Vicente & Falkum, 2017). Data collection involved transcribing and annotating relevant dialogue, actions, and visual cues, which were then systematically coded and analyzed.

Finally, the analysis techniques emphasized the interplay between literal and metaphorical meanings, focusing on how ambiguity functions as a narrative device. This approach reflects Kaplan and Hudson's (2010) view of polysemy as activating multiple interpretive pathways, Vicente and Falkum's (2017) insights into semantic networks, and Bordwell and Thompson's (2019) recognition of ambiguity as a central device in film storytelling. By examining how titles resonate with character development, foreshadow conflicts, and amplify thematic depth, the study demonstrated that polysemy in episode titles is not incidental but integral to the storytelling of *Breaking Bad*. This methodological design ensured that the findings were both coherent and reflective of the series' complex narrative strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of four selected episodes—*Pilot* (S1E1), *Cancer Man* (S1E4), *Crazy Handful of Nothin'* (S1E6), and *I See You* (S3E8)—demonstrates that polysemous titles in *Breaking Bad* function simultaneously on literal and metaphorical levels. This duality enriches plot development, deepens character arcs, and reinforces thematic resonance. The findings directly address the research objective: to explore how polysemous titles enhance storytelling through ambiguity.

Table 1 below is an example of a transcript of the *Pilot* (S1E1) quote used to show how to cite transcripts as in the other three *Breaking Bad* series: Season 1, Episode 1, aired January 20, 2008, AMC. Dialogue and actions are transcribed verbatim, with annotations related to polysemous meanings. The timestamp is an estimate, which is based on the standard duration of the episode.

Table 1: Sample Transcript of Citation: "Pilot" (S1E1)

Timestamp	Scene Description	Dialogue/Action	Meaning of Polysemy
00:02:15– 00:03:30	Walt in his class, teaching chemistry.	Walt: " <i>Chemistry is the study of matter... but I prefer to see it as the study of change.</i> "	Metaphorical (Piloting a New Identity): Walt's lectures show Walt's surprising

			psychological turning point into Heisenberg, using chemistry as a tool to "navigate" new life.
00:12:45–00:14:00	Walt learned of his lung cancer diagnosis.	Doctor: <i>"It's inoperable... Stage IIIA."</i> Walt: [Silenced, stunned]	Literal (TV Pilot): Establishes the narrative premise—Walt's diagnosis as a catalyst for his transition to criminality.
00:25:30–00:27:10	Walt faces a bully at a clothing store.	Walt: <i>"You want to step outside?"</i> [Aggressively confront bullies]	Metaphorical (Piloting His Destiny): Walt asserts control, marking a shift from passive to agency.
00:45:20–00:47:50	Walt and Jesse in the RV, using gas to kill Emilio and Krazy-8.	Action: Walt throws phosphine gas, causing chaos. Jesse: <i>"What the hell did you do?!"</i>	Metaphorical (Navigator): Walt's attempt to "navigate" the drug world leads to unwanted violence, signaling a loss of control.

Coding Framework

The next table (Table 2) relates to the coding framework for the four episodes, summarizing the main meanings and their narrative impact. Each entry includes examples of evidence from the episode and the conclusions drawn.

Table 2: Breaking Bad Series 4 Coding Framework

Epi- sode	Title	Categories of Coding	Meaning	Evidence	Inference (Plot Impact)
S1E1	Pilot	Literally	Television Episodes	The opening sequence introduces the plot of Walt, Jesse, and drugs.	Establishes the premise of the series, captivating the viewer.
		Literally	Navigator	Walt's chemistry skills were used to make drugs.	Shows Walt's attempt to take control of his life.
		Metaphor	Walt as a destiny pilot	Walt's decision to	Encouraging conflict,

				make drugs after diagnosis (00:12:45).	signifying a loss of control.
		Metaphor	New identity	Confrontation with bully (00:25:30).	marked a shift to Heisenberg, increasing character development.
S1E4	Cancer Man	Literally	Walt's Diagnosis	Walt reveals cancer to family (00:40:10).	Encourage emotional betting, justify crimes.
		Literally	<i>X-Files References</i>	Implied from Gilligan's background, Walt's secrecy.	Adding inter-textual pages, framing Walt as an antihero.
		Metaphor	Walt shows violence	Walt hiding drug money (00:35:20).	Signifies a destructive impact on others.
		Metaphor	Slush-nyi decay	Walt's secret behavior (00:20:15).	It signifies moral erosion, builds tension.
S1E6	Crazy Handful of Nothin'	Literally	Poker bluff	Walt bluffs in a poker game with Hank (00:15:40).	Indicates fraud against Tuco.
		Literally	Mercury fulminated	Explosion at Tuco Cemetery (00:45:50).	Advance the plot through daring power plays.
		Metaphor	The rise of Heisenberg	Walt shaves his head, facing Tuco (00:42:30).	Marking transformation, increasing the role of criminals.
		Metaphor	The illusion of power	Walt's deceptive power masks despair.	Highlight moral compromises, predict risks.

S3E8	I see You	Literally	Hospital supervision	Hank's recovery is monitored (00:10:25).	Increase tension, ground setting.
		Literally	DEA surveillance	DEA investigates Cousin (00:30:15).	Increases the risk of exposure to Walt.
		Metaphor	Recognition of consequences	Walt looks at Hank's condition (00:25:10).	Encouraging guilt, encouraging negotiations with Gus.
		Metaphor	Vulnerability	Skyler's suspicions grow (00:38:40).	Signifies relational conflict, deepening the flow improvement

The coding process was guided by several methodological principles to ensure rigor and clarity. Semantic validity was established by grounding meanings in dictionary definitions (e.g., “pilot” as navigator, “cancer” as malignancy) and aligning them with narrative context (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Oxford University Press, n.d.). Empirical validity was achieved by cross-examining evidence against episode events, ensuring accurate representation of polysemy (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). Through analytical construction, recurring themes such as control and moral decay were identified to infer how titles enhanced plot, character development, and thematic elements (Bardin, 2011; Neuendorf, 2017). Finally, the conclusion process involved drawing relationships between the meanings of titles and their narrative impact, based on patterns in dialogue, actions, and thematic cues (Kaplan & Hudson, 2010; Vicente & Falkum, 2017).

At the episode level, the findings reveal how ambiguity operates as a deliberate narrative device. In *Pilot* (S1E1), the literal meaning refers to the introductory episode and Walt’s role as a “navigator” of his new life, while the metaphorical meaning frames him as the “pilot” of his destiny, steering toward transformation into Heisenberg. The plot impact establishes the premise of the series, foreshadows moral decline, and highlights Walt’s illusory sense of control.

In *Cancer Man* (S1E4), the literal meaning denotes Walt’s lung cancer diagnosis and an intertextual nod to *The X-Files*’ “Cancer Man.” The metaphorical meaning portrays Walt as a destructive force spreading like cancer, symbolizing hidden decay and moral erosion. The plot impact escalates family conflict, justifies Walt’s criminal acts, and underscores secrecy as a thematic thread.

In *Crazy Handful of Nothin’* (S1E6), the literal meaning refers to a poker bluff and Walt’s use of fulminated mercury to intimidate Tuco. The

metaphorical meaning conveys Walt’s existential emptiness, the illusion of power, and his transformation into Heisenberg. The plot impact advances the narrative through deception, reinforces themes of risk and moral compromise, and marks Walt’s rise as a feared figure.

In *I See You* (S3E8), the literal meaning highlights hospital surveillance during Hank’s recovery and DEA monitoring of drug activity. The metaphorical meaning reflects recognition of consequences, vulnerability, and emotional clarity among characters. The plot impact heightens tension, exposes Walt’s guilt, and deepens relational conflict, particularly with Skyler and Gus.

Table 3. Summary of Polysemous Meanings and Narrative Impact

Episode	Literal Meaning	Metaphorical Meaning	Plot Impact
Pilot	Introductory episode; navigator	Walt as destiny pilot; new identity	Establishes premise; foreshadows moral decline
Cancer Man	Walt’s diagnosis; <i>X-Files</i> nod	Walt as destructive force; hidden decay	Escalates family conflict; justifies criminality
Crazy Handful of Nothin’	Poker bluff; fulminated mercury	Rise of Heisenberg; illusion of power	Advances plot; marks transformation; moral compromise
I See You	Hospital/DEA surveillance	Recognition of consequences; vulnerability	Heightens tension; exposes guilt; deepens conflict

The findings confirm that ambiguity embedded in episode titles is a deliberate narrative strategy in *Breaking Bad*. Titles anchor episodes in literal events while simultaneously opening metaphorical dimensions that enrich storytelling. This aligns with linguistic theories of polysemy, which emphasize semantic networks and layered meanings (Johanson, 2007; Kaplan & Hudson, 2010; Vicente & Falkum, 2017), and with pragmatic perspectives that highlight ambiguity as a resource for meaning-making (Thomas, 1995; Redden, 2017). From a media studies perspective, ambiguity sustains audience engagement and interpretive openness, reinforcing the dynamic interplay between narrative design and viewer reception (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Restivo, 2019).

Episode-level analysis illustrates how polysemy operates as both a linguistic and narrative device. *Pilot* exemplifies Walt’s illusory control, echoing Sharett’s (2021) analysis of pride as a driver of his downfall and Fernando’s (2017) philosophical reading of his moral descent. *Cancer Man* resonates with these interpretations, symbolizing Walt as a destructive force, consistent with Littlemore and Tagg’s (2016) view of metaphor and metonymy as tools for representing hidden decay. *Crazy Handful of Nothin’* exemplifies deception and existential emptiness, supporting Lupker and Pexman’s (2019) argument that polysemous words activate richer semantic

networks, which audiences reinterpret as narratives evolve. Finally, *I See You* highlights surveillance and vulnerability, reinforcing Logan's (2016) observations on visual storytelling and Koch's (2017) analysis of cinematic ambiguity.

These findings agree with prior studies that emphasize ambiguity as a narrative device in film and television (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Restivo, 2019; Koch, 2017; Logan, 2016). However, a gap remains: while earlier scholarship focused on philosophical, cinematic, or visual aspects of *Breaking Bad*, few have examined the linguistic ambiguity of its episode titles. This study contributes to filling that gap by demonstrating how polysemy functions as a storytelling tool, extending linguistic theory into media studies.

Three contributions emerge. First, through the integration of linguistic theory, the analysis distinguishes polysemy from homonymy by showing that each title carries multiple related meanings. For example, *Pilot* refers both to the first episode and to Walt "piloting" his destiny, reflecting Johanson's (2007) emphasis on conceptual relatedness. Similarly, *Cancer Man* literally denotes Walt's diagnosis but metaphorically frames him as a destructive force, supporting Kaplan and Hudson's (2010) claim that lexical ambiguity opens diverse pathways for meaning-making. By applying these linguistic frameworks to television storytelling, the findings extend linguistic theory into narrative analysis, demonstrating that ambiguity is deliberately embedded in design.

Second, the study introduces narrative impact analysis, showing how titles foreshadow conflict (*Pilot*), mark moral decay (*Cancer Man*), highlight deception (*Crazy Handful of Nothin'*), and expose vulnerability (*I See You*). This demonstrates that titles themselves are narrative devices shaping plot progression, character development, and thematic depth, not merely labels. By treating episode titles as units of analysis, the findings show that polysemous meanings actively drive narrative momentum.

Third, the study emphasizes the cognitive dimension. By referencing semantic network activation (Lupker & Pexman, 2019; Kapnoula & Samuel, 2019), it can be argued that audiences process these titles dynamically, reinterpreting them as the story evolves. Viewers initially interpret them literally (e.g., *Pilot* as the first episode, *Cancer Man* as Walt's diagnosis), but as the narrative unfolds, they reinterpret them metaphorically (e.g., *Pilot* as Walt piloting his destiny, *Cancer Man* as moral decay). This process reflects Lupker and Pexman's (2019) argument that polysemous words activate richer semantic networks, and Kapnoula and Samuel's (2019) finding that the mental lexicon integrates contextual cues to allow reinterpretation. Friederici (2011) further adds that the brain's structural and functional networks support the reprocessing of ambiguous signals, suggesting interdisciplinary potential for future research.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its small sample size of four episodes, restricting generalization across the entire series. Data interpretation is also context-dependent and shaped by the researcher's perspective. Future research could expand the dataset, compare polysemous titles across different series, or integrate cognitive linguistic experiments to measure audience reception of ambiguity. Comparative studies across genres

and cultures may reveal whether linguistic ambiguity operates differently in diverse narrative traditions. This would deepen our understanding of how polysemy functions as a storytelling device across media contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that episode titles in *Breaking Bad* are integral to its storytelling, functioning as deliberate narrative devices rather than simple labels. By analyzing four episodes—*Pilot*, *Cancer Man*, *Crazy Handful of Nothin'*, and *I See You*—the research shows how titles simultaneously anchor literal events and open metaphorical dimensions. These layered meanings enrich character development, foreshadow conflict, and reinforce thematic depth, sustaining audience engagement and interpretive openness.

The analysis highlights three key contributions. First, the study integrates linguistic theory with cognitive semantics, showing how polysemy activates semantic networks that allow audiences to reinterpret meanings dynamically as narratives evolve. Second, it introduces narrative impact analysis, demonstrating that titles actively drive plot progression and character arcs. Third, it emphasizes the cognitive dimension, revealing how audiences process ambiguity through semantic network activation and contextual reinterpretation, aligning with cognitive semantics perspectives on meaning-making. Together, these contributions establish polysemy as a deliberate storytelling strategy in serialized television. While limited to four episodes, the study underscores the potential of episode titles as sites of semantic richness, narrative design, and cognitive engagement. Future research can expand this approach to other series and genres, exploring how linguistic ambiguity operates across diverse narrative traditions and how audiences cognitively reinterpret layered meanings in real time, thereby deepening our understanding of the intersection between language, cognition, and media storytelling.

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