

## THE SEMANTICS OF “BEING”: A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY STUDY OF A POLYSEMANTIC TERM IN PHILOSOPHY AND LINGUISTICS

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### Abstract

The term “being” holds a pivotal role in both philosophical discourse and linguistic expression, encompassing a rich tapestry of meanings across disciplines. In philosophy, “being” is deeply intertwined with debates on existence, essence, and reality, reflecting a complex history of interpretations from ancient to modern thought. This article delves into the various philosophical perspectives on “being,” including existential, essential, and dynamic interpretations, while also examining its implications within the realm of linguistics. The linguistic exploration reveals the term’s grammatical significance, particularly through the verb “to be,” which serves various functions such as a copula, existential verb, and more across different languages. The intersection of philosophy and linguistics presents challenges in translating and interpreting “being,” highlighting how language shapes and reflects philosophical concepts. By analyzing the polysemous nature of “being” in both fields, this study provides valuable insights into how humans conceptualize existence, identity, and reality, thus bridging the abstract world of metaphysics with the tangible structures of human language.

**Keywords:** Being, Philosophy, Linguistics, Existentialism, Semantics, Cross-disciplinary study, Polysemy, Identity, Translation, Existential verbs.

The term “being” occupies a central place in both philosophical discourse and linguistic expression. In philosophy, the term has been at the heart of debates surrounding existence, essence, and reality for centuries. Simultaneously, in linguistics, the concept of “being” is foundational to the structure of languages, particularly in the grammatical function of verbs like “to be” and its equivalents across different languages. This article explores the polysemantic nature of the term “being,” examining its multiple meanings in both fields and highlighting the ways in which philosophy and linguistics intersect when addressing this concept.



In philosophy, the term “being” has a complex and layered history, with multiple interpretations depending on the philosophical tradition. Within traditional linguistic theory, furthermore, it was clearly understood that one of the qualities that all languages have in common is their “creative” aspect. Thus an essential property of language is that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations(Chomsky, 1965).

Below are some key perspectives on the concept of “being”:

### **Existential Being**

In its simplest form, “being” refers to existence. To say something “is” means that it exists in reality. This concept is foundational to ontology, the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of existence. The ancient Greeks, notably Parmenides , argued that “being” is the fundamental reality, and that anything that “is not” cannot exist or even be conceived of (Ross, 1924).

### **Essential Being**

In Aristotelian philosophy, “being” takes on a more nuanced meaning, referring to the essence of something—what it is in itself. This view distinguishes between a thing's essence (what makes it what it is) and its accidents (the properties it may have but does not necessarily need) (Aristotle, 1908). Thus, “being” in this sense is about what it means for something to be a certain kind of thing.

### **Being as Becoming**

In more modern contexts, especially in existentialist and phenomenological traditions (e.g., Heidegger ), “being” is not seen as static. Rather, it is a dynamic process, constantly in flux and always “becoming.” Heidegger's concept of Dasein —the way human beings exist in the world—is a central example of this perspective, emphasizing that “being” is something we enact through our existence (Heidegger, 1927)

### **Ontological 'Being' :**

Spinoza and Hegel further broaden the concept by suggesting that “being” is not just about individual entities, but about the totality of existence itself. In Spinoza's system, for example, everything is a manifestation of a single, infinite substance



(God or Nature), and individual things are simply modes of this substance's being (Heidegger, 1927).

These various interpretations demonstrate the rich polysemy of the term “being” in philosophical discourse. From the existence of individual objects to the dynamic unfolding of human life, “being” resists a single, fixed definition.

### Linguistic Perspectives on 'Being'

Semantics is generally defined as the study of meaning; and this is the definition that we will provisionally adopt: what is to be understood by 'meaning' in this context is one of our principal concerns (Lyons, 1995).

From a linguistic standpoint, the concept of “being” is equally significant, although it manifests differently across languages. The verb “to be” serves several key functions in language, playing roles in existential statements, identity, location, and states of being. Linguists recognize that the semantic complexity of “being” varies across cultures and languages (Lyons, 1995).

#### 1. Copula Function :

In many languages, the verb “to be” serves as a copula, linking the subject of a sentence with a predicate, as in “The sky is blue.” This usage expresses a state of being or an attribute, and it plays a central role in defining relationships between entities and their properties. However, in some languages (e.g., Russian or Arabic), the copula is often omitted in the present tense, which alters the syntactic structure but retains the semantic function of expressing being (Chomsky, 1965).

#### 2. Existential Verbs :

The existential use of “being” is common across languages and expresses the presence or existence of something. For instance, the English “There is a book on the table” conveys both location and existence. In other languages, existential constructions are expressed differently. In Spanish, for example, the verb *haber* is often used in existential sentences (e.g., *Hay un libro en la mesa*), while the verb *ser* is used for identity and *estar* for states, illustrating how languages encode different nuances of “being” (Lyons, 1995).

#### 3. Nominal vs. Verbal 'Being' :

In some languages, the concept of “being” is more naturally expressed through nominal forms rather than through verbs. For example, classical Chinese lacks a



verb equivalent to “to be” but conveys the concept of existence and identity through nominal sentences or through existential markers like you (有), meaning “there is” or “there exists” (Whorf, 1956). In contrast, English relies heavily on the verb “to be,” making it more grammatically indispensable.

#### 4. Aspectual and Modal Nuances :

Some languages further complicate the idea of “being” by encoding aspectual or modal nuances. For instance, in Mandarin Chinese, the verb shì (是) often indicates identity or definition (e.g., “He is a student”), while other verbs or constructions indicate temporary states, possession, or existence (Whorf, 1956). Similarly, in Russian, the verb byt' (быть, “to be”) is frequently used in past or future tenses but is omitted in the present, and temporary states of being are often expressed through adjectival constructions (Lyons, 1995).

The Intersection of Philosophy and Linguistics in 'Being'

The polysemous nature of “being” is evident not only in its philosophical interpretations but also in how it is expressed across different languages. The challenge arises when one attempts to translate or interpret the philosophical concept of “being” in a linguistic context, particularly when languages differ in their conceptualization of existence and identity.

For example, Heidegger's exploration of “being” (Sein) and “beings” (Seiende) has no direct equivalents in many languages. Translators often face difficulty conveying his existential concepts, which depend on German's specific linguistic structures (Heidegger, 1927). Similarly, Aristotle's distinction between substance and accident has to be carefully nuanced in translation, as some languages may not differentiate between types of “being” as explicitly as Greek does (Aristotle, 1908). Moreover, the existential function of “being” in languages raises questions about how philosophy and language shape each other. Philosophers like Whorf and Sapir have suggested that language influences thought, and in the case of “being,” the way languages grammatically encode existence might reflect and shape the philosophical ideas of the cultures that speak them. A language that lacks a present-tense copula, for instance, may lead to different conceptions of identity and existence compared to one that obligatorily uses it (Whorf, 1956).

The term “being” illustrates the fascinating interplay between philosophy and linguistics, revealing its polysemous nature across both disciplines. In philosophy,



“being” spans concepts of existence, essence, and becoming, with each tradition offering a unique perspective. In linguistics, the term is foundational to the structure of meaning, whether it functions as a copula, an existential verb, or is omitted entirely in some languages. By studying the multiple meanings of “being” across languages and philosophies, we gain deeper insight into how human beings conceptualize existence, identity, and reality. The term continues to serve as a bridge between the abstract world of metaphysics and the tangible structure of human language.

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