Homographs Comprehension Challenge among Semantics Learners

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Abstract

Teaching experience has shown that most undergraduates cannot identify English homographs and them with other semantic relations. It was thus found interesting to explore factors leading to such students' partial understanding of English homographs. The study used group discussion, documentary review and questionnaires to collect data. The data analysis was guided by the Theory of meaning stipulating that articulation may realize several meanings from a lexeme. The article found that the number of vowels, phonetic coding ability, and perplexing and mentorship sources were the factors that triggered incomplete knowledge of undergraduate English learners of English homographs. The study recommends that students be involved in critical and evaluative reading to avoid confusion of English homographic from non-homographic lexemes. Meanwhile, instructors should instruct English Homographs using factual materials and the right knowledge. Instructors need to emphasize English Homographic meanings and their functions in the real context. This would facilitate a clear understanding of Homographs.

Keywords: English, semantics, homographs, challenges and undergraduate learners.

1.0 Introduction

This Article dwells on the association of words in a language such as homonymy, polysemy, hyponymy, hypernym, antonym, metonymy, homophony and homograph. These are relations showing closeness or distance among group meanings of words (Leech, 1981). The relations are essential in grasping meanings and attracting considerable research. Homograph, which is the focus of this study, has not been defined succinctly by scholars. The focus is on the problem of pinning down the meaning of the group known as homographs defined homographs as words sharing spelling, regardless of how they are pronounced (Ibrahim, 2008). Examples given are bark (the sound of a dog) and bark (the skin of a tree); sow (verb) – to plant seed and - sow (noun) – female pig and bear (verb) – to support or carry and - bear (noun) – the animal. In this regard, homonyms and polysemy are considered homographs by semanticists such as Ibrahim.

The meaning becomes more complicated by scholars such as Verhaar (2006), who considers homographs as a branch of homonyms. For him, homonymy consists of homophones (words sounding the same and homographs (words with the same spelling but different pronunciations). The samples of definition analyses expose confusion about homonyms, homographs, and homophones. Confusion in textbooks implies transferring incorrect knowledge of the terms during the teaching process. In this regard, the current study reviewed the distinction between homographs and homonyms to arrive at a clear and open conclusion in academics. The Article explores how knowledge of phonology is pertinent to homophones and homographs might contribute to the poor understanding of the relation.

Homographs seem to be very cumbersome to scholars, writers and other academicians following the way they write or present in literature, sometimes the data available do not reflect the sense of homographs. This calls Booth's opinion that was on the opinion that research problem is motivated not by palpable unhappiness but by incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding, thus we can solve it not by changing the world but by understanding it (Booth, 2003). From this base, the current study desires re-analysis on the matter of facts pertinent to English homographs. The two specific objectives were based on data collection results to show students' ability to identify English Homographs and examine reasons for students' inability to understand English Homographs.

This paper was guided by The Use Theory of Meaning. The theory is propounded by Wittgenstein (1953). In his "Philosophical Investigations", Wittgenstein (2014) wrote: "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language", (p.78). The use theory of meaning admits that not all words refer to something, and not all utterances are true or false. What is common to all words and all sentences, without exception, is that people use them in speech. Consequently, their meaning may be the restrictions, rules, and regularities governing their employment. This means that a lexeme may have more than one meaning, but the way its senses are differentiated from another depends on the rules and restrictions. Thus, the word (with the same spelling) can mean blue if it is either pronounced properly or red if it is written or pronounced properly. Thus, the meaning-in-use theory specifies the meaning of an expression with its use by participants in an interaction (Wittgenstein, 1976).

The use theory of Meaning has three conceptions or characteristics, namely, the pre-eminent role of the rules of use of an expression, the abstract character of the bearer of meaning, and the conception of the sentence as the unit of meaning. The first tenet implies that lexemes have rules and principles for using them and the position to be positioned in the sentence structure. The second argument shows that the *word* is not dictated by its use or representation of meaning. Thus, meaning should be determined when it is altered especially in homographic senses of lexemes. The third tenet means that when a word is configured in sentence units, its meaning becomes more concrete. Thus, Wittgenstein argues that for a person to know the meaning of a word is for him to know the rules of its use; for a word to have meaning is for these to be, among some groups of speakers, a practice of using it in accordance with a set of rules, thus meaning of an expression is the rules which determine its use in discourse.

From this base, these rules are of two sorts, namely semantic and syntactic rules. The former connects meaning to things, properties, and state of affairs, to mention just but a few and the latter governs its possibilities of combination with, and its logical relations to other words. This would solve the claim of Bresnick (1998) who argued that the resolution of lexical ambiguity has proved to be one of the more refractory problems in the study of language comprehension. While it is generally recognized that most words have more than one distinct meaning, individuals are usually aware of only one meaning in any given utterance. The problem is how one resolves this basic ambiguity and selects one meaning from those available.

Thus, with the words' rules, usage such a problem would have been solved since tutors and learners would be able to entangle various meanings of a given lexeme, though its use in the context or when articulated would suit the specific context of use. Therefore, a lexeme is not used in isolation but rather embedded in a context related to one of its possible meanings. Presumably, it is the context that permits the selection of one meaning from the available alternatives. It remains to be shown, however, at what point in the encoding process this selection takes place and what the fate of unselected meanings might be. Wittgenstein (2014) wrote:

> You say to me: 'You understand this expression, don't you? Well then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with.' As if the senses were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind

> of application…... If, for example, someone says that the sentence 'This is here' (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is used. There it does make sense (p. 70).

From the above quotation, it is evident that the context in which the word is used or pronounced determines the meaning it refers to. This means when someone articulates or perceives a word not in its right use, it can be because of wrong perception and such lexeme has the meaning in its own context apart from how the speaker used it.

The choice of this theory comes because the theory combines the grammatical intricacies of the lexeme and the contextual manifestations of its use. In other words, when the same word refers to /can be pronounced differently when it refers to /y/. This theory solves the problems which appear in other semantic theories like ' Interpretive Semantic Theory' (Katz, 1972) whose one of its aspects is the complete exclusion of the context of the situation from its theoretical framework. To them meaning should confine itself to the knowledge of language and not to the knowledge of the world. In other words, the aspects of meaning which are explainable only in terms of one's knowledge of the world should be better discussed by pragmatics and not by semantics. This view is different from other views, particularly Wittgenstein as it has been described above.

2.0 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach which adopted the interpretivists' paradigm. In this paradigm reality and other vivid are naturalized in social settings in which the scenario is operationalized, consequently, a case study design was very important in which two (2) Universities were the case as the catalogue of pragmatism paradigm. The other reason for using such an approach was that meaning is not fixed or stable but is revised based on experience as it involves entering the field and setting observations (Gray, 2014: 24). The latter (quantitative) was applied when the data were subject to percents and statistical graphs' presentations. The data was collected through documentary review, questionnaires and focus group discussion. Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy and St. Augustine University of Tanzania were selected randomly (25 from each University). The reason for selection is based on the fact that they have studied semantics

(homographs) in the course called 'The Study of Language' as well as semantics itself as an independent course.

Fifty (50) students were given two exercises. The first question was to list two English Homographic words of their meaning for each student, the second was what are the challenges faced in identifying English Homographs? The first two tests captured the first objective of this Article. Thereafter, 50 informants were randomly selected to get ten (10) informants, this was done by counting the numbers of which each tenth was selected, and this group was special for focus group discussion henceforth (FGD). Hence, FGD was done by asking students to capture the reasons why homographic English words seem to be challenging to understand and use.

4.0 Reasons for Students' Misunderstanding of English Homographs

Questionnaires and focus group discussions with students were methodological standing points for students' incomplete knowledge of the English Homographic words. It was found that mentorship, transcription and perplexing sources were the factors that triggered students' incomplete understanding pertaining to homographic words. The article starts with a different number of vowels:

4.1 Number of Vowels

The number of vowels differs from one language to another language. Most Tanzanian University students use Kiswahili as their second or first language. For example, the English language has four (4) variants of the same vowel, being [a] as in /a/, /ʌ/, /æ/ and /ə/, but the Kiswahili language has one vowel [a]. On top of that, English has three (3) variants of the same vowel being [o] as in /o/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ/ and /ɔ:/ but Kiswahili language has one vowel [o]. About 95% of students agreed that the English language is complicated and many vowel phonemes are cumbersome to identify in homographic English lexemes. With this difference, it is observed that Swahili learners of English face difficulties in placing the four vowels in one or three vowels when appear in some homographic English lexemes. That is, the language background triggers challenges for students in understanding homographic words.

Dillon and Wanjiru (2013) added that poor background and the effect of first language hinder the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. That is why Wittgenstein's (1976) Use Theory of Meaning stresses that, for a person to know the meaning of a word is for him to know the rules of its use, the meaning of an expression is the rules which determine its use in discourse. From this base, students fail to understand the pronunciation rules of the word having the same orthography though pronounced differently. Despite differences in the number of vowels between English and students' first language, it was also observed that students do not make an effort to make sure that they understand English homographic lexemes. Lack of consideration triggers misunderstanding of things in the world we live. During the focus group discussion, it was observed that learners do not make an effort to make follow-up pertinent to English homographic lexemes.

4.2 Phonetic Coding Ability

Phonetic coding ability determines the degree to which learners can use both oral and written linguistic input (Skehan, 1999). Most native English learners acquire better coding ability in pronunciation compared to those who learn the language being affected by age, exposure and mother tongue's accent. Most Tanzanian English learners are affected by age and mother tongue. For example, the homographic word */close/* can be pronounced ending with allophone /s/ for a noun and /z/ for a verb. Here, the difference is that in the Kiswahili language, there is no such thing as one sound to be pronounced differently in its surface form. This makes it difficult to identify English homographic words by Swahili language learners of the English language. During the focus group discussion, 98% of the students failed to pronounce the lexeme *close* as a homographic word and most of them did not agree that close is a homographic word. From this base, it is observed that there is a wider range of student's inability to pronounce homographic English words. P3 and P7 said:

> "The lexeme "close" is homophone because it is pronounced the same but has different meanings; one meaning can be " to be near with someone" or ''shutting the door"…even in our notes we have written this example as English homograph…" (P 3 & P7).

From this quotation, it is evident that homographs are problematic for students who learn English as their foreign language. For example, concerning the lexeme "close", most of the students

pronounced the same though meant different semantic meanings, hence they meant such lexeme to be a homonym though it is a homographic word.

In the context of the holism theory of use, students have not paid attention to understanding such a word in a wider range of contexts. They use experience and unjustified claims to conclude that such a word is not homographic. That is to say, what is *not* an English homographic word for them is what is homograph for them. With this regard, Wittgenstein (1976, 1979) as the result meaning of the word or expression becomes incomplete compared to the general technical knowledge of the lexeme.

This means the idea that the meaning of a word is something which the word carries with it like an atmosphere into every context of use should be taken into consideration by the students when learning English homographic lexemes rather than generalization. That is why the theory of Meaning is used (Wittgenstein, 2014) believed that there are general misconceptions about meaning the debunking of which is of direct relevance to how words are used. This follows the fact that Undergraduate students fail to associate different contexts or relevance in which a word with similar spelling but having different pronunciation and meaning is in use. Therefore, the application of "the meaning of a word (English homograph) is its use in the language" plays a key role in dispelling such misconceptions.

4.3 Perplexing Cause

These are forms of sources that contradict readers or make them understand the wrong idea about a certain phenomenon. This problematic or confusing source has been mentioned as one of the factors triggering the failure of students to understand and use homographs. Literature is the source of knowledge as people read authoritative documents for new or old knowledge. When literature presents a different thing, some readers believe in them so long as they are authoritative and even some mentors believe in them. For example, Alghamdi (2021) and Ibrahim (2008) indicated that lexeme *well* is a homographic word, while under the level of observation and descriptive adequacy, it is not a homographic lexeme, as it may be a homonymic word following the fact that it is pronounced equally, it has the same spelling but have different semantics. It is from this base, that some scholars have been affected by incomplete sources as a result they present and write wrong

homographic lexemes e.g., Bussmann (2006) wrote that lexeme *plan* and *plane* are homographic English words.

With this regard, some students believe whoever is written houses reality. As it may, this has been an embedded problem because students read literature which has also written wrong information on the topic under discussion. Therefore, despite the wrong sources available, learners should adopt the critical or/ evaluative reading technique, the form of reading in which a reader judges the reality or the truth value of data other than picking whatever he or she meets with as homographic words. Adha and Widyaningtyas (2017:443) wrote:

> "Homographs (literary)" same writing" is usually defined as words that share the same spelling, regardless of how they are pronounced. If they are pronounced the same, they are also homophones (and homonyms) –for example, *bark* (the sound of a dog) and *bark* (the skin of a tree). If they are pronounced differently then they are heteronyms- for example, *bow* (the front of the ship) and *bow* a type of knot)'.

From the base of Adha and Widyaningtyas, homographs and homophones are the same. Such acknowledgement is wrong simply because homophones are not homographs. For example, in the two examples above, one is homographic but another is not an English homographic word. Thus, bark for either skin or sound of the dog is pronounced similarly as /ba: k/, from this base, it is not an English homograph. While this is true, the lexeme *bow* for either front of the ship or a verb is English homograph because it is pronounced differently as in /bəʊ/ and /baʊ/ respectively. However, when sources are incomplete, they can trigger misunderstanding on the phenomenon concerned that is why Strauss and Corbin (2008) argue that some problems come from technical and non-technical literature.

It is the work of writers putting effort into the phenomenon they present in their text for clarity. That is, words should be put in their contextual use for generalization avoidance that is why, the theory of meaning articulates that the word or expression or 'meaning of a word' in actual circumstances is to use it in the sense of 'the use of the word in the language. Hence if the lexeme is used in the circumstances of pointing to an object, it differs when it is used or articulated in the incident of action or verb, this is how linguistic meaning comes into being. In other words, the

specification of linguistic expression must – like any grammatical remark – be seen as instrumental in dissolving a specific rational problem (Wittgenstein, 2014).

4.4 Mentorship Cause

This seems to be one of the factors for makes students inability to use and understand homographic lexemes. Some assistants Lecturers and Lecturers instruct lexemes as homographs though in reality are not homographs, most students respect what is being instructed by their instructors simply because are the ones to be tested in their examinations. Some students argued that the lexeme *Bank* and *Pupil* were instructed to them as homographs by their instructors, this made them write as homographic English words when questionnaires were supplied to them. This has made some students generalize other lexical relations words as homonyms be homographs. During the focus group discussion student marked as P5 said:

> "The last year 2022 we were taught that Homograph is a word which is pronounced the same as in "bank" but has a different meaning…and even in our semester examination test, I wrote this example and was marked by our sir well done …"

This shows that sometimes English semantic lecturers instruct wrong information on the matter of facts. Within the same line of thinking Alghamdi (2021) observed the same critical challenges of misusing English homographs among the undergraduate students of the English language department of Albaha University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The author revealed a significant deficiency of students in the experiment in which they were required to give multi-meanings for each homographic word. This led to the conclusion that there is a serious learning problem as seen in the students' competence and performance. Lecturers should be aware of English homographic words for the benefit of the students. Academics remain a task of scientific research and harvesting the truth, therefore, mentors should not generalize issues on the sport rather they should read, re-read, evaluate through research and come out with a pure understanding of homographic words.

5. Conclusion

Most students cannot identify and use homographs, and many of them confuse homographs with homonyms. Their schemata on homographs contain no reality as they confuse homonyms and polysemous words. Such confusion has been triggered by a number of factors such as different

numbers of vowels that hinder transcriptions, mentorship, confused sources, and the phonetic coding ability of the learners. Students are advised to involve themselves in critical reading to avoid confusion of English homographic lexemes from non-homographic lexemes. Methodologically, when instruction takes place by instructors the classroom language needs to emphasize meanings and their functions. "Teachers should not merely point out the difference of meanings but also emphasize their usages in context" (Hogaboam & Perfetti, 1975). There should be another study to examine the ability of the Tanzanian University instructors who are instructing linguistics courses and semantics in particular following the fact that there has been a point that they also confuse homographic lexemes with non-homographic lexemes. Further studies are needed to see how instructors instruct and know about homographic lexemes.

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