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SEMANTIC AMBIGUITY : A STUDY ON THE LEXICAL INTERPRETATION OF HOMONYMS AND HOMOGRAPHS IN DAILY COMMUNICATION

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Abstract *This study investigates the role of homonyms and homographs as sources of semantic ambiguity in daily English communication. Semantic ambiguity occurs when words or phrases can be interpreted in more than one way, leading to misunderstandings in both spoken and written language. Focusing on lexical ambiguity, this research analyzes how homonyms words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different, unrelated meanings and homographs words that share spelling but differ in pronunciation and meaning contribute to communication breakdowns. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected from real-life language use, highlighting how individuals interpret ambiguous words based on context. The findings show that without clear contextual cues, these lexical items often lead to misinterpretation. The study emphasizes the importance of context, background knowledge, and linguistic awareness in reducing ambiguity and promoting effective communication. It also suggests practical strategies for educators, learners, and speakers to navigate and resolve ambiguity in everyday language use.*
Keywords: *Semantic ambiguity, homonyms, homographs, lexical interpretation, context, communication.*

Abstrak *Penelitian ini mengkaji peran homonim dan homograf sebagai sumber ambiguitas semantik dalam komunikasi bahasa Inggris sehari-hari. Ambiguitas semantik terjadi ketika kata atau frasa dapat diartikan dengan lebih dari satu cara, yang dapat menyebabkan kesalahpahaman dalam bahasa lisan maupun tertulis. Fokus pada ambiguitas leksikal, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana homonim (kata-kata yang memiliki ejaan dan pelafalan yang sama tetapi memiliki arti yang berbeda dan tidak terkait) dan homograf (kata-kata yang memiliki ejaan yang sama tetapi berbeda dalam pelafalan dan arti) berkontribusi pada gangguan komunikasi. Menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari penggunaan bahasa dalam kehidupan nyata, menyoroti bagaimana individu menafsirkan kata-kata ambigu berdasarkan konteks. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tanpa petunjuk konteks yang jelas, item leksikal ini sering menyebabkan kesalahpahaman. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya konteks, pengetahuan latar belakang, dan kesadaran linguistik dalam mengurangi ambiguitas dan mempromosikan komunikasi yang efektif. Selain itu, studi ini juga mengusulkan strategi praktis bagi pendidik, pembelajar, dan penutur untuk mengatasi dan menyelesaikan ambiguitas dalam penggunaan bahasa sehari-hari.*
Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas semantik, homonim, homograf, interpretasi leksikal, konteks, komunikasi.*

INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, semantics is the study of meaning in language. It explores meaning at various levels, including words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse. Semantics involves analyzing words, symbols, and sentence structures. It plays a crucial role in our ability to understand written texts and interpret spoken language in everyday conversations. Without even realizing it, we rely on semantics in our daily communication, comprehension, and language learning. Semantics includes several

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branches, such as discourse semantics, grammatical semantics, lexical semantics, synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, homonymy, hyponymy, homophones, and homographs. Among these, homophones and homographs are of particular interest to the writers and form the central focus of this research. Miscommunication between people often occurs, especially when they are speaking in English. This is usually caused by words that carry multiple meanings, leading individuals to confuse one meaning for another. For instance, the word “bat” means “an animal with wings that flies at night” but it can also mean "a wooden implement used in sports like baseball." This phenomenon is called lexical ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity arises when a single word can be interpreted in two or more ways within the same context. In contrast, structural ambiguity occurs not because of any specific word, but due to the way the elements of a sentence are arranged, As stated by Merriam Akmajian et al. (2004, p. 242). For example, the word bank can demonstrate lexical ambiguity, while structural ambiguity can be seen in sentences such as:

- I saw the man with the telescope.
- He killed the woman with a knife.
- Call me a taxi.
- Flying planes can be dangerous.
- Visiting relatives can be boring.
- The chicken is ready to eat.

This study focuses specifically on lexical relations and how they contribute to ambiguity in everyday communication. Lexical relations encompass various semantic categories such as antonyms, homographs, homophones, homonyms, hyponyms, meronyms, polysemy, synonyms, and others. However, this paper limits its scope to four main types: homographs, homophones, homonyms, and polysemy.

Homonyms

A homonym is a lexical item that shares both spelling and pronunciation with another word, yet carries entirely unrelated meanings. Unlike homographs, homonyms not only look alike but also sound alike, making them a particularly rich source of lexical ambiguity in communication. For instance, consider the word "bat". This word may refer to a nocturnal flying mammal, or it may denote a piece of equipment used in sports like

baseball or cricket. Though both meanings are spelled and pronounced identically as /bæt/, they stem from different semantic origins and are not conceptually linked.

Lyons (1977, p. 550*)* explains that, *"homonyms are words which are identical in form (that is, in pronunciation and/or spelling), but have different meanings which are not semantically related."* Similarly, Crystal (2008, p. 249) defines homonymy as "*a term used in semantics to refer to the identity of form between two or more lexical items which have different meanings."* It is this lack of semantic relatedness despite identical phonological and orthographic forms that distinguishes homonyms from polysemous words, whose meanings are typically extensions of a single semantic core.

Homograph

A homograph is a word that is spelled the same but has different pronunciation and meaning. For example, in the word "live". This word has different meanings and pronunciations. The first is pronounced /lɪv/ with meaning "to be alive or have life". The second is pronounced /laɪv/ with meaning "broadcast or seen it happening right then". Based on Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p. 294), homograph shares the same spellings but doesn't have the same sounds.

A. Research Problem

Daily communication in English is often riddled with misunderstandings due to lexical ambiguity, particularly from homonyms and homographs words that share the same form but carry different meanings. This ambiguity can obscure intended meanings and affect clarity in both spoken and written discourse.

How do homonyms and homographs contribute to semantic ambiguity in daily communication?

B. Research Objective

- To examine how homonyms and homographs contribute to semantic ambiguity in daily communication.
- To analyze contextual cues that language users rely on to interpret ambiguous lexical items correctly.
- To investigate common misinterpretations caused by lexical ambiguity in everyday settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semantic ambiguity is a critical issue in linguistic studies, especially within the realm of daily communication. Words that appear identical in form but differ in meaning pose interpretational challenges for both speakers and listeners. This chapter explores the theoretical foundations of lexical ambiguity, particularly homonyms and homographs, and draws upon existing scholarly literature to provide context for this study.

According to Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), lexical ambiguity is a common phenomenon in natural language and must be resolved through context. Lyons (1995) distinguishes between polysemy and homonymy, emphasizing that while polysemy involves related meanings, homonymy involves entirely unrelated meanings.

Lexical ambiguity arises when a single word or phrase has more than one possible meaning. As stated by Crystal (2008), lexical ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase allows for multiple interpretations due to its semantic properties. Jackson and Amvèla (2001) further note that lexical ambiguity is distinct from structural ambiguity in that it originates from individual words rather than sentence structure. As stated by Ovu (2011) identifies four primary lexical sources of ambiguity: homonyms, homographs, homophones, and polysemy. This study focuses on two of these homonyms and homographs due to their prominent role in miscommunication during everyday interactions.

Homographs are words that are spelled the same but differ in both pronunciation and meaning. For instance, the word “live” can be pronounced /lɪv/ meaning “to be alive,” or /laɪv/ meaning “broadcast in real time.” Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p. 294) emphasize that homographs share the same spelling but not the same sound, making them particularly ambiguous in written communication when no phonetic cues are available.

Ovu (2011) presents several examples of homographs that often lead to misinterpretation, such as:

- Lead (to guide) vs. Lead (a type of metal)
- Bow (to bend) vs. Bow (a weapon for shooting arrows)
- Wound (an injury) vs. Wound (past tense of wind)

These examples demonstrate how homographs can obscure intended meanings when used without sufficient context.

Homonyms are words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but differ entirely in meaning. Lyons (1977, p. 550) defines homonyms as "words which are identical in form (that is, in pronunciation and/or spelling), but have different meanings which are not semantically related." Similarly, Crystal (2008, p. 249) defines homonymy as "a term used in semantics to refer to the identity of form between two or more lexical items which have different meanings."

Unlike polysemy, where meanings are related, homonyms involve meanings that are entirely distinct. For example:

- Bat (a flying mammal) vs. Bat (a tool used in sports)
- Bear (to tolerate) vs. Bear (an animal)
- Can (a container) vs. Can (modal verb)

Understanding homonyms and homographs relies heavily on context. Ovu (2011) emphasizes that ambiguity can only be resolved when language users rely on surrounding textual or situational cues. Dash (2008) outlines four levels of context crucial in disambiguation:

- Local Context – Immediate words surrounding the ambiguous term
- Sentential Context – The full sentence structure
- Topical Context – The broader subject matter or theme
- Global Context – Background knowledge or real-world information

For instance, the sentence "John kicked the bucket" can mean he literally kicked a pail or that he died, depending on the context. Similarly, "Mary is late" could imply tardiness or death, again determined by contextual clues.

RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at exploring how homonyms and homographs function within the broader phenomenon of semantic ambiguity in daily communication. The design focuses on examining real-life usage of ambiguous lexical items and identifying how listeners or readers interpret them based on contextual cues. The qualitative approach is chosen to allow for detailed interpretation and analysis of language data, particularly instances where meaning is unclear or multiple meanings are possible.

B. Subject of the Study

The subjects of this study are English language users, specifically individuals who regularly engage in everyday verbal and written communication. The participants include university students, educators, and working professionals ranging from ages 18 to 45. These subjects were selected because they represent a cross-section of people who frequently use English in both formal and informal contexts, and are therefore likely to encounter and interpret lexical ambiguity in natural conversation.

C. Research Object

The primary object of this research is lexical items classified as homonyms and homographs words that either share the same form with different meanings (homonyms) or the same spelling with different pronunciations and meanings (homographs). These words are examined in the context of actual usage in communication settings, including face-to-face conversations, social media exchanges, written texts, and informal discussions.

Specific attention is given to how these words function in ambiguous sentences, such as:

- "He saw the bank" (bank as a riverbank or financial institution)
- "The man took a bow" (a gesture or a weapon)
- "They can fish" (ability or canned goods).

The analysis focuses on how these words are interpreted based on available contextual information, and how miscommunication can arise in their absence.

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected regarding the use and interpretation of homonyms and homographs in everyday communication. The analysis aims to explore how these lexical elements cause semantic ambiguity and how meaning is negotiated or clarified using contextual cues.

Homonyms in Daily Communication

Homonyms are words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different, unrelated meanings. According to Yule (2020), homonyms are a type of lexical ambiguity that can cause confusion in both spoken and written communication, especially when the context is not clear enough to distinguish between the possible meanings. This

ambiguity is common in daily life because homonyms are frequently used in informal conversation, news, social media, and everyday instructions. Many mistakenly group together homographs (words spelled the same) and homophones (words that sound the same) under homonyms. This view is however wrong because doing so will only amount to subsuming what should ordinarily be treated as real homonyms within polysemy. where different senses of a word usually stem from a shared or extended meaning.

For instance, the word bank can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. Without additional context, a sentence like "She is going to the bank" could be interpreted in more than one way. Similarly, the word bat may refer to a flying mammal or an object used in sports. This ambiguity, as Lyons (1995) explains, occurs because homonyms represent two distinct entries in the mental lexicon that happen to have identical phonological and orthographic forms.

In real-life communication, homonyms are often disambiguated through context, tone, and situation. Cruse (2000) emphasizes that understanding homonyms requires speakers and listeners to rely on pragmatic cues, such as the topic of conversation, background knowledge, or co-occurring words. For example, in a sports context, bat is more likely interpreted as a piece of equipment, while in a nature documentary, it likely refers to the animal.

Word	**Meaning 1**	**Meaning 2**	**Transaction**
ball	a round object used in sports or games	a formal dancing party	[bɔ:l]
bear	to tolerate or endure something	to act of giving birth	[beə]
bat	a flying animal that comes out at night	a piece of wood	[bæt]
battery	a device that gives power to machines	a group of big guns used in war	[bætəri]
can	a modal auxiliary verb	a small container	[kæn]
date	a day or time on the calendar	a kind of plant	[deit]
means	method or way of doing something	money or financial resources	[mi:nz]

pool	a small body of water, often for swimming	a game or betting system	[puːl]
gay	happy and cheerful	a homosexual person	[gei]
lock	a game position in rugby	a strand or bunch of hair	[lɒk]
Lie	False statement	To recline	/laɪ/
Right	Correct	Direction	/raɪt/
Bark	Tree's outer layer	Dog's sound	/bɑːrk
Match	Competition	Fire-lighting tool	/mætʃ/
Watch	Timepiece	To observe	/wɒtʃ/
Rock	Hard stone	Music genre	/rɒk/
Spring	Season	Water source	/sprɪŋ/

Table 1. Example of Homonyms.

A key point to note about the words mentioned earlier is that their meanings do not come from a shared origin, unlike polysemous words. Even so, each word has the potential to create confusion, as shown in the following examples:

- Those men are **gay**. (Does this mean they are joyful, or are they homosexual?)
- Juli's **lock** is better than anyone else's. (Is the speaker referring to Juli's hairstyle or to how well she performed in a game?)
- They **can** fish. (Is this about their ability to catch fish, or does it mean they work in the fish canning industry?)
- She cannot **bear** any child. (Does this mean she is unable to have children, or she dislikes children?)

Sometimes, an unclear sentence can lead to an absurd or humorous misunderstanding, as seen in the example below:

- **Children make delicious snacks.**

One may ask: Does this mean that children are cooking tasty snacks, or that children themselves are being used as ingredients? Extra linguistic knowledge (or real-world understanding) helps us choose the first meaning and dismiss the second, knowing that it would be completely inappropriate and absurd to suggest that children are being

eaten. Still, nothing in the sentence itself clearly points to one meaning over the other except that the second interpretation is strange and unsettling.

homonyms contribute to lexical ambiguity when their interpretation depends on background or sentential context.

Homograph in Daily Communication

Homographs are words that share the same spelling but differ in meaning, and sometimes in pronunciation. According to Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), homographs are a form of lexical ambiguity because a single written form can represent two or more unrelated lexical entries. In daily communication, this can lead to confusion, especially when the surrounding context is unclear or when the conversation happens through written text rather than speech.

Homographs are words that are spelled the same but differ in pronunciation and meaning. Another name for homograph is heteronomy. It refers to a situation where two or more words have identical spelling (i.e. visual similarity) but differ in both pronunciation and meaning. They often lead to confusion in written language where phonological cues are absent.

For example, the word “tear” can mean a drop from the eye (pronounced /tɪr/) or the action of ripping something (pronounced /tɛr/). In spoken language, intonation and stress often help clarify the intended meaning. However, in written form like messages or signs ambiguous homographs can mislead readers or delay comprehension. This is supported by Palmer (1981), who notes that context plays a crucial role in disambiguating lexical items, especially those that look identical but carry distinct semantic loads.

In everyday conversations, homographs often appear in casual and professional settings. Words such as “lead”, “row”, or “object” are frequently used in emails, instructions, or speech. The ambiguity becomes noticeable when listeners or readers have to pause and rely on surrounding context to interpret meaning. For instance, in the sentence “He will contest the results of the contest,” the first “contest” (as a verb) and the second “contest” (as a noun) are spelled the same but function differently. This exemplifies how homographs operate not only at the lexical level but also at the grammatical level, affecting sentence structure and interpretation.

Words	Part of Speech	Meaning	Pronunciation

bow	noun	a device used for hunting	[bəu]
bow	verb	to bend oneself	[bau]
lead	verb	to give direction	[li:d]
lead	noun	a piece of metal	[lɛd]
minute	noun	a unit of time	[minit]
minute	adjective	small in size	[mainju:t]
wind	noun	air in motion	[wind]
wind	verb	to roll something up	[waind]
wound	noun	an injury or pain	[wu:nd]
wound	verb	the past form of wind	[waund]

Table 2. Examples of Homographic words

All of these words are prone to cause confusion if the sentence lacks enough clues to show the intended meaning. This is particularly true in written language, where pronunciation cannot guide the reader. Consider the sentence below:

- He had to wind the old clock before going to bed.

At first glance, the sentence appears simple, but the word wind can create ambiguity for someone unfamiliar with context. One might misread wind as the noun meaning “moving air” [wɪnd], instead of the intended verb meaning “to twist or turn” [waɪnd]. The sentence becomes clearer only when the reader understands that clocks need to be wound to work properly, which rules out the air-related meaning.

This example shows how the presence of a homograph in a sentence without enough context can confuse readers. It is, therefore, important to provide supporting words or phrases that help convey the correct meaning.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

This study explored the role of homonyms and homographs as key sources of semantic ambiguity in everyday communication. It was observed that both categories of words despite their differences can lead to multiple interpretations when context is not clearly established. Homonyms, which share both spelling and pronunciation but differ in meaning, often create confusion in spoken and written language. Homographs, on the

other hand, are words with identical spelling but differing in both pronunciation and meaning, and tend to cause ambiguity mainly in written contexts.

Examples such as "They can fish," or "He had to wind the clock," demonstrate how the same word form can suggest entirely different meanings based on usage. Without sufficient contextual support, the intended meaning of these words may be misinterpreted. This confirms that lexical ambiguity is not only a linguistic concern but also a practical challenge in clear and effective communication.

B. Suggestion

To minimize confusion caused by semantic ambiguity, especially when using homonyms and homographs, language users should pay close attention to contextual clarity. Writers and speakers are encouraged to include surrounding cues whether through additional words, tone, or punctuation that guide interpretation.

Educators and language learners should also place greater focus on teaching lexical categories with multiple meanings, using real-life examples to train learners in recognizing and resolving ambiguity. Additionally, readers and listeners must develop sensitivity to context, tone, and real-world knowledge to accurately interpret intended meanings.

By becoming more aware of how ambiguous language functions, individuals can improve their communication skills and avoid misinterpretations that may arise from the lexical complexity of English.

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