# LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN YORUBA: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Abstract**
The paper examines the manifestation of lexical ambiguity as evidenced in homonyms in Yoruba though it could equally manifest in polysemy. The paper notices that in spite of the lexical function and or phonemicity of tones in meaning specificity in the Yoruba language, homonymous words requires some mental processing and contextual placement for the selection of the approximate form. The paper observes that the prediction of the sense enumeration lexicon (SEL) approach, namely that all ambiguous words are processed similarly, is in direct contrast to the position of reordered approach, which the paper adopts, as shown by the present results, that differential processing depending on the type of ambiguity as seen in *pa* and *ro* which represent a class of verbs that exhibit strict subcategorisation. Homonyms are one of the sources of miscommunication and incomprehension among L2 readers. This phenomenon often results in phonological and lexical ambiguities as well as delays in lexical decision by L2 readers, especially in exploring the contextual clues in using the words. These processes of mental processing and selection retard language comprehension and use by L2 learners.
**Key Words***:* homonymy; L2 learners; lexical ambiguity; phonology; semantics; Yoruba

## Introduction

Ambiguity is a phenomenon of human language. Wherever it occurs, it requires more than one denotation. It manifests at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of language. At all of these levels, the outcome is communication failure or miscommunication. Ambiguity is a term used to characterise phenomena that have more than only one meaning. These meanings are distinct from each other and have no close schema in common. That is why a single expression may lead to multiple interpretations. In natural language according to Kempson (1977) and Fordor (1983), many words, strings of words and sentences are ambiguous, simply because of the fact that numerous words cover several distinct meanings, or specific structural elements give rise to different readings.

That means that "an expression or utterance is ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way" (Löbner 2002: p. 39). This duality of meaning often results in what Frost, Feldman and Katz (1990) and Simpson, (2014) call lexical ambiguity. In other words, meaning is obscured and when this happens, defective communication comes about. It becomes very necessary at this juncture to establish the relationship between orthography and phonology on the one hand and phonology and meaning on the other. Frost *et al* (1990:569) express the view that ambiguity can exist in the relation between the orthographic and phonological forms of a word or between the phonological form and its semantic representation. The point of convergence between phonology and semantics is that both help in accounting for meaning. A word is a phonological structure; its phonological representation is its lexical entry.

The orthography, and phonology (segmental and suprasegmental representations) of homonyms notwithstanding, the meaning of homonyms require some mental and contextual processing. Lexical ambiguity is concerned with multiple interpretations of lexemes.

Most discussions about lexical ambiguity, within theoretical and computational linguistics, concentrate on polysemy, which can be further divided into two types (Tabossi, 1988; Apresjan, 2015). Homonymy is the case where both the pronunciation and written form of two words are the same but they have distinct and unrelated meanings, as seen in the following examples,

1.

i. *Suit* yourself and wear a *suit.*
ii. We went to the *fair* because the price is *fair*.
iii. I *left* my phone on the *left* side of the room.
iv. She will *park* the car so we can walk in the *park*.

Theoretical linguistics has focused mostly on the semantics of lexical ambiguity. According to theoretical linguistic accounts, lexical ambiguity is not a uniform phenomenon. Traditionally, two kinds have been distinguished. Homonymy, in which a lexical item accidentally carries two (or more) distinct and unrelated meanings and polysemy, in which a single lexical item has several different but related senses, such as ‘‘mouth’’ meaning both ‘‘organ of body’’ and ‘‘entrance of cave’’ (Cruse, 1986; Lyons 1977, 1995). The difference between homonyms and polysemy is subtle. Lexicography defines polysemy within a single dictionary lemma, numbering different meanings, while homonyms are treated in separate lemmata.

Two criteria have been proposed for the distinction between homonymy and polysemy (Lyons, 1977). The first criterion has to do with the etymological derivation of words. Words that are historically derived from distinct lexical items are taken to be homonymous. It is generally taken to be a sufficient condition of homonymy that the lexical items in question should be known to have developed from what were formally distinct items in some earlier stage of the language. In practice, however, the etymological criterion is not always decisive. One reason is that there are many words whose historical derivation is uncertain. Another reason is that it is not always very clear how far back we should go in tracing the history of words (Lyons, 1995). The second criterion for the distinction between homonymy and polysemy has to do with the ‘‘relatedness/unrelatedness of meaning.’’ The distinction between homonymy and polysemy seems to correlate with the native speaker’s feeling that certain meanings are connected and that others are not. Generally, unrelatedness in meaning points to homonymy, whereas relatedness in meaning points to polysemy (Lyons, 1977). However, it seems that ‘‘relatedness of meaning’’ is not an all-or-nothing relation, but rather a matter of degree. In a large number of cases, there does not seem to be an agreement among native speakers as to whether the meanings of the words are related. So, it seems that there is not a clear dichotomy between homonymy and polysemy, but rather a continuum from ‘‘*pure’’* homonymy to ‘‘*pure’’* polysemy (Lyons, 1977).

In homonymy, the distinct senses are stored separately while in the case of polysemy, only the basic sense of the word is stored in the lexicon. The extended senses are created, when required by the context, by means of a lexical rule that derives them from the basic sense, which is stored in the lexicon. The sense enumeration lexicon (SEL) account on one hand opines that the meanings of ambiguous words are listed separately in the mental lexicon, irrespective of whether the ambiguous word is homonymous or polysemous. The mental lexicon would process all ambiguous words in a similar way, given the fact that they have

similar representations. The generative lexicon account on the other hand holds that the senses of homonymous words are whereas the senses of polysemous words are derived from the basic sense, which is stored in the lexicon, by means of a lexical rule, would predict that there is differential processing depending on the type of ambiguity that the given word exhibits (Pustejovsky, 1995).

This present paper could be tempted to align with the position of the sense enumeration lexicon since the appropriate use of homonymous words is context-dependent, the mental lexicon would process the ambiguous word to determine its use. However, such attempted alignment is prevented by some limitations as we shall see in the analysis. The term homonymy is consistently used to refer to words that have the same pronunciation (as determined by the tones) and written forms, but distinct and unrelated meanings.

Yoruba homonym is one of the sources of miscommunication and incomprehension among L2 readers. This is partly due to its inherent potentials to generate ambiguity even at the expense of tones. Tone marks on some words in Nigerian languages, like Yoruba for example, help in making the meaning of words specific. This lexical function of tone is referred to as 'semantic phonemicity' (Atoye, 1989:48). Tones which help in indicating the phonological contextualization that allows for correct elicitation of the word as intended by the encoder in a written text are restrained by the ambiguity. This linguistic instance poses some challenges to the relevance of tone to pronunciation as a bridge between orthography and semantics. In other words, the occurrence of lexical ambiguity found in homonymous words limits the strength of tones in meaning specificity especially in the Yoruba language.

The issue of lexical ambiguity has been of great interest because it addresses foundational issues regarding the nature of the mental lexicon and lexical access. It has been found in a number of studies that in visual lexical decision tasks, ambiguous words yield faster reaction times than unambiguous words. This linguistic phenomenon often results in phonological and lexical ambiguities as well as delays in lexical and pronunciation decisions by L2 readers, especially those that are not capable of exploring contextual clues in pronouncing the words. L2 learners are expected to rely on pragmatic contextualization before written texts can be read and appropriate meanings decoded by them. Schreuder and d'Arcais (1989) note that this task of pragmatic contextualization requires higher level of language awareness on the part of L2 readers. Words that are phonologically ambiguous are not problematic to skilled readers but are so to infant and second language learners. Besides, when bivalent words are read as two different entities, they lead to delay decision in correct meaning as readers take time to match meaning with context. Homonym, can bring confusion to even adults. The context of use usually determines the actual communicative implications of such lexical items. Lexical ambiguity is very common in natural language. A single string of words (i.e., an utterance) may lead to more than one interpretation simply because one of the words has more than one meaning. Psycholinguistic research has often dealt with lexical ambiguity, but has, generally, overlooked the semantics and the different types of it. Psycholinguistic experiments have shown that homonymous words are represented differently within people's mental lexicon. The different meanings of homonyms (which are semantically unrelated) tend to interfere or compete with each other during comprehension (Swinney, 1991, Klepousniotou, 2002).

The inability of the L2 learners determine the correct use of these homonyms has led to meaning impairment thereby creating 'noise' between the encoder and the decoder. Noise is perceived as anything that interferes with, slows down, or reduces the clarity of

communication. The overall effect is communication failure. This paper therefore underscores the point that tonal and orthographical representations are not enough symbols of sending messages correctly but rather the encoder should carefully put the words in contextual perspective that will not lead to phonological ambiguity and consequently defective communication.

There is some evidence that homonymous and polysemous words are processed differentially. In particular, polysemous words were found to require shorter fixation times (Frazier & Rayner, 1990) than homonymous words in reading tasks. On the basis of these findings, Frazier and Rayner (1990) suggested that there are different implications for the processing of these two types of ambiguous words. In the case of polysemy, since the multiple senses are not incompatible with one another, immediate selection of one sense may not be necessary for processing to proceed. In the case of homonymy, on the other hand, the meanings of the word are mutually exclusive. Therefore, one meaning must be selected before further processing, and this is time consuming.

Generally, three models have most prominently emerged from research on lexical ambiguity, namely the ordered search model, the selective (or context-dependent) access model, and the multiple (or exhaustive) access model. The ordered access model, which holds that the different meanings of ambiguous words are accessed according to their relative frequency, has found only limited support (Forster & Bednall, 1976; Hogaboam & Perfetti, 1975). The selective (or context-dependent) access model holds that only the meaning of the ambiguous word that is compatible with the context is activated or taken to support the interactive view of language (Simpson, 2008, 2010). Recently, a revised version of the selective access model, namely the context-sensitive model, has been proposed (see Martin, Vu, Kellas, & Metcalf, 1999; Paul, Kellas, Martin, & Clark, 2000). According to the context-sensitive model of lexical ambiguity resolution, activation is selective but either meaning frequency or biasing context can influence the activation process depending on the contextual strength (i.e., the degree the context constrains an ambiguous word). The multiple (or exhaustive) access model opines that all the meanings of an ambiguous word are activated upon its presentation. The activation occurs regardless of context or meaning frequency. It is after the initial activation of all meanings that the context plays a role in determining which of the meanings is the appropriate one (see Onifer & Swinney, 1981; Seidenberg et al., 1982; Swinney, 1979).

**Theoretical framework**

This article adopts the reordered access model. It is a hybrid model proposed by Duffy et al. (1988) and has found empirical support from studies using eye movement data (e.g., Duffy, Morris, & Rayner, 1988; Rayner, Binder, & Duffy, 1999; Rayner & Frazier, 1989; Rayner, Pacht, & Duffy, 1994). According to the reordered access model, the meanings of an ambiguous word are always exhaustively accessed, but prior context affects the access process by increasing the availability of the contextually appropriate meaning without affecting the alternative meaning. Looking at the results of all the processing studies collectively, it seems that they point toward a compromise between pure selective and pure exhaustive access of meanings of ambiguous words. Simpson (2010, 2014) suggested that the results of the studies on lexical ambiguity processing could be better explained by having a ‘‘hybrid’’ model where all meanings are activated, but the degree of activation would be sensitive to the meanings and the context in which the ambiguous word occurs. This theory

further helps us to account for how to disambiguate or provide a mechanism for selecting the intended information from the large number of linguistically possible interpretations (see Pinkall & Koller 2005:3). Thus, the meaning of an expression, therefore, is the effect(s) it creates in a particular context in which it is used. Words are not defined by reference to the objects they designate, or by the mental representations one might associate with them, but by how they are used. This theory helps maintaining the meanings of certain classes of words that could be lost if meaning were treated as just entities.

**Data presentation and analysis**

(2) Ẹyin pa 'The egg hatches'

(3). (a) Adé pa okùn 'Ade sets rope trap'
(b) Adé pa eku 'Ade kills a rat'
(c) Adé pa àlọ́ 'Ade gives riddles'
(d) Adé pa ìtàn 'Ade narrates a story'
(e) Adé pa àṣẹ 'Ade gives commands'
(f) Adé pa irọ́ 'Ade tells lies'
(g) Adé pa èkùrọ́ 'Ade shells palm-kernel '
(h) Adé pa ète 'Ade cooks a plan'
(i) Adé pa idán 'Ade displays a magic'
(j) Adé pa òwe 'Ade uses proverbs'

(4) ogún 'twenty'
ogún 'inheriatance'

ìran 'generation'
ìran 'scene'
ìran 'trance/vision'

ìtẹ́ 'throne'
ìtẹ́ 'nest'

Ọ̀wọ̀ 'a town'
Ọ̀wọ̀ 'respect'

ìdí 'reasons'
ìdí 'bottom'

èrò 'passengers/crowd'
èrò 'thought'

irú 'locust beans'
irú 'type/kind'

In accordance with the generative lexicon approach, one meaning has to be selected before further processing, and this is time-consuming. The results of the present study cannot be accounted for by the SEL approach. According to this theoretical approach, each meaning of an ambiguous word is stored separately in the mental lexicon. The SEL approach predicts similar processing patterns in order to access meaning for homonyms. Thus, the prediction of the SEL approach, namely that all ambiguous words are processed similarly, is in direct contrast to the present results that show differential processing depending on the type of

ambiguity. For instance, the form *pa* represents a class of verbs that exhibit strict subcategorisation in the literature (Awóbùlúyì, 1978: 52 and Bámgbóṣé, 1990: 34). By strict subcategorisation, we refer to a concept in the syntax of the verb in which a verb selects a particular noun as its specific object. According to the two writers, such verbs cannot select more than one specific noun phrase as their object. However, we have found out that the problem of homonymy was not taken into consideration in their analyses. It is discovered that while both Awóbùlúyì (1978: 52) and Bámgbóṣé (1990: 134) agree that *pa* can select only one specific noun object which is *òwe* 'proverb', the first question one would like to ask here is if there is only one *pa* in the Yoruba language. The answer to this seems to be in the negative. There are at least two tokens of the item in the language. The first one is transitive while the other one is intransitive. The intransitive *pa* is exemplified in (2) now repeated as (5) below.

Ẹyin pa 'The egg hatches'

The *pa* that assigned an accusative case is involved in one type of homonymy. This is shown in (3) above and recopied as (6) below:

(a) Adé pa okùn 'Ade sets rope trap'
(b) Adé pa àlọ́ 'Ade gives riddles'
(c) Adé pa ìtàn 'Ade narrates a story'
(d) Adé pa irọ́ 'Ade tells lies'
(e) Adé pa èkùrọ́ 'Ade shells palm-kernel '
(f) Adé pa ète 'Ade cooks a plan'
(g) Adé pa òwe 'Ade uses proverbs'
(h) Adé pa eku 'Ade kills a rat'
(i) Adé pa àṣẹ 'Ade gives commands'
(j) Adé pa idán 'Ade displays a magic'

As seen above, *pa* in examples (6 a, b, c, e, f and g) connotes one form of production or the other while the *pa* in (6 h, i and j) connotes an act of termination. The question, then, is how many tokens of *pa* exist in the Yoruba language? He concludes that those token that are grouped together may be seen as those that are involved in accidental homonymy. We can see those that belong to separate groups as tokens that are involved in a systematic homonymy. So, the position of the SEL that all ambiguous words are processed similarly negates the results that show differential processing of the above *pa's* depending on the context of each. The analysis shows that ambiguity involves differential processing in the mental lexicon. Rather, the foregoing instance of *pa* is in conformity to the tenet of hybrid model which stipulates that all meanings be activated, but the degree of activation would be sensitive to the meanings and the context in which the ambiguous word *pa* occurs. There are lots more similar verbs whose subcategorisations negate homonyms. It is noticeable that such verbs usually bear a mid-tone. This approach helps throw light on how to disambiguate or provide a mechanism for selecting the intended information from the large number of linguistically possible interpretations as shown in the bisyllabic nominal homonymous examples (4) above repeated as (7) below:

ogún 'twenty' ìdí 'reasons'
ogún 'inheriatance' ìdí 'bottom'

ìran 'generation' èrò 'passengers/crowd'
ìran 'scene' èrò 'thought'

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ìran | 'trance/vision' | | |
| | | irú | 'type' |
| ìtẹ́ | 'throne' | irú | 'locust beans' |
| ìtẹ́ | 'nest' | | |
| ọ̀wọ̀ | 'a town' | | |
| ọ̀wọ̀ | 'respect' | | |

The results of the present study may be interpreted as consistent with the generative lexicon approach. Homonymous words, on the other hand, have all their senses stored separately in the mental lexicon. Context is useful in deciding which of the meanings will be selected, but it is not actively involved in the on-line creation of senses. In addition, since two or more meanings of a homonymous word are competing for activation, the process of activation will possibly be compromised by the process of ambiguity resolution. It has been shown that even when the context is biased toward one meaning, all the meanings of a homonymous word are initially activated (e.g., Onifer & Swinney, 1981; Seidenberg et al., 1982; Swinney, 1979). The initial activation of all meanings probably reflects comprehension processes that are involved in the retrieval and consideration of the several meanings of an ambiguous word (Onifer & Swinney, 1981; Swinney, 1979). The slower reaction times that were observed in the processing patterns of homonymous words could thus be explained.

The present findings also have important implications for the nature of the mental representations of ambiguous words. They point toward a dichotomy in the nature of the mental representations, depending on the type of ambiguity that the words exhibit. Homonymous words appear to have several, distinct mental representations, one for each meaning. The obtained results are consistent with psycholinguistic models of representation and processing called the semantic form, Forster, (1976), and Bierwisch and Schreuder (1992). Homonymous words are associated with more than one semantic form, thus having multiple representations. Homonymy relies on the process of sense selection whereby the different meanings of the word are activated by being chosen from a preexisting, exhaustive list of senses.

**Summary of findings and conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is evident that homonyms present a special challenge to L2 learners of English as well as to sight readers such as broadcasters. The following steps are suggested as a way of reducing the challenges this linguistic phenomenon constitutes to readers:

(i) The level of competence of Nigerian University undergraduates in reading should go beyond what Cummins (1980) calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) needed for everyday discourse to the mastery of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALPS) needed in coping with the rigours of reading academic texts. The social competence in English is not enough in comprehending the knowledge of academic vocabulary which homonyms present

(ii) In furtherance to (i.) above, Jacobson, Lapp and Flood (2007:103) suggest that when reading a text with homonyms, readers should define and visualize the words, identify the grammatical structure of each word, use a cloze activity in analyzing the meaning and finally determine the meaning of the sentence. This suggestion, to us, is very instructive in that it

will help readers compare new words with one another; enhance the use of personal insights about words, context, pronunciation before meaning can be elicited.

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