
Ambiguity Concerning Homonymy and Polysemy: Difficulties in Determining Their Meanings

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Abstract

This review article examines the difficulty in determining the homonymous and polysemous lexical items, because of the ambiguous nature inherent in these lexemes. It starts by showing what lexicographers need to do in order to put words together into a dictionary, and how conventional dictionaries list lexical entries. Next the paper presents the views of some research scholars, which explain the ambiguous nature of homonymy and polysemy. Presenting some arguments about how homonymy and polysemy are related to each other, the paper states the difference between them. In the second part, the paper discusses, polysemy and homonymy, with clear examples, in standard Arabic language, and the difficulties the Arabic lexicographers face in making entries of such lexical items. The paper concludes that in spite of several research studies on homonymy and polysemy, the difficulty in determining these lexemes still exists, because of the ambiguous nature inherent in them.

1. Introduction

It is not always possible to distinguish polysemous lexical items from homonyms, and whenever this distinction is made, often, subjectivity prevails. The lexicographer's knowledge of the etymological development of the lexical items is of vital importance. In fact, the lexicographer shows the distinction made by entering homonyms separately in the dictionary, i.e. as two or more different lexical items even though they have the same spelling and/or pronunciation, while a polysemous lexical item is entered as one lexical item with its definition showing all its multiple meanings, i.e. two or more meanings attached to one lexical item. Lexicographers follow two criteria while determining the meanings of these lexemes: The first criterion

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has to do with the etymological derivation of words. Words that are historically derived from distinct lexical items are taken to be homonymous. The second criterion for the distinction between homonymy and polysemy has to do with the “relatedness/unrelatedness of meaning.” Linguists say that all natural languages have homonyms and polysemous lexemes. Arabic language too abounds in such lexical items. This paper, besides throwing light on the difficulties of determining the meanings of such lexical items, also discusses a few standard Arabic examples to show the problems that exist in Arabic language.

2. Significance of the study

Though there have been considerable number of research studies and discussions in recent years, concerning the multi-semanticity of words in natural languages, in the field of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, semantics and literature, the clear distinction between polysemy and homonymy still remains difficult for both the teachers and learners, because of the inherent ambiguity in these lexical items. This article examines ambiguous nature of polysemy and homonymy, with examples, both in English and Arabic, and throws further light on the difficulty concerning them, which enhances the significance of this article.

3. Lexemes and Lexical Entries

When someone wants to learn another language or even to seek information about a language, he is likely to look in a dictionary in order to search for the meanings of those words that together build up various sentences, according to specific grammatical rules. However, to be able to understand their meanings, we have to know how to use dictionaries and how words are organized and sequenced. Riggs (1999) assumes that lexicographers need criteria to distinguish different words from each other even though they are spelled the same way. This usually hinges on etymology and, sometimes, parts of speech. He supposes one might think that that firm (steadfast) and firm (business unit) are two senses of one word (polysemy). However, this is not the case. Lexicographers class them as different words because the first evolved from a Latin stem meaning throne or chair, and the latter from a different root in Italian meaning signature.

Lyons (1977) indicates that conventional dictionaries are essentially lists of what might be called lexical entries. Each of these entries is introduced by a head-word in its standard orthographic representation; and the lexical entries are alphabetized in terms of their head-word. He considers the alphabetisation as no more than a technique for listing the entries according to a conveniently applicable, but theoretically irrelevant, principle. He adds that the head-word of a lexical entry in conventional dictionaries of English is typically both the citation-form of the lexeme and also the stem-form, to which various suffixes may be added in order to produce other inflexional forms of the same lexeme. Therefore, the lexeme or the lexical item, which is the smallest unit in the meaning system of a language that can be distinguished from other similar units, can occur in many different forms and is regarded as the same lexeme even when inflected. For example, in English, all inflected forms such as **give**, **gives**, **given**, **giving**, and **gave** would belong to the one lexeme **give**. And according to Cruse (1986), a lexeme is a family of lexical units; a lexical unit is the union of a single sense with a lexical form; a lexical form is an abstraction from a set of words forms which differ only in respect of inflections. A lexeme is usually a single word, but may be a phrase in which the meaning belongs to the whole rather than its parts, as in verb phrases **tune in**, **turn on**, **drop out**.

Considering the fact that a word, phrase, or sentence that has more than one meaning is said to be ambiguous, we should pay more attention to the lexical ambiguity. Some words or lexemes can have several meanings, e.g. **face** meaning: “human face”, “face of clock”, “cliff face”. Also the word **bank** in:

He will put his money in a bank.

She is sitting on the bank of the river.

This lexical ambiguity of the words **face** and **bank** is called polysemy or homonymy. Subsequently, in the study of word meaning it is considered a very significant issue to identify these two notions and discriminate the difference between them.

4. What are homonymy and polysemy?

4.1 Homonymy

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002) homonymy is defined as words which are written in the same way and sound alike but which have different meanings. For example, the English verbs lie in you have to lie down and lie in don't lie, tell the truth have the same spellings and pronunciations but different meanings. In addition, Hanks (1986) adds a second point in his definition of homonymy, which is "a person with the same name as another".

Homonyms are sometimes called homographs or homophones. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002) homographs are words which are written in the same way but which are pronounced differently and have different meanings, such as the English words **lead** /li:d/ in **Does this road lead to town?** And **lead** /led/ in **Lead is a heavy metal**. Homophones are words that sound alike but are written differently and often have different meanings. For example, the English words **no** and **know** are both pronounced /nəu / in some varieties of British English and the words **bear** and **bare** are pronounced / beə(r) /. It is stated by Hanks (1986) that a homophone is "a written letter or combination of letters that represents the same speech sound as another: 'ph' is a homophone of 'f' in English". So, homophonous words have identical sounds but entirely different meanings, not sharing a core meaning. Some further examples from English are **meat** and **meet**.

4.2 Polysemy

Polysemy, according to Richards and Schmidt (2002) is defined as having two or more closely related meanings, e.g. **foot** in:

He hurt his foot.

She stood at the foot of the stairs.

The foot is the lowest part of the human body just as the lowest part of the stairs. Looking at Hanks (1986), polysemy is an "ambiguity of individual words". Thus polysemy means 'multiple meanings'. A knife that has been honed is **sharp**. A mind that has been trained to think through things and be

incisive and not muddled is also said to be **sharp**. A person who speaks incisively, directly, and abruptly is **sharped tongued**. So a word is polysemous if it has two or more extended meanings whose extensions differ somewhat but which clearly share a common semantic core.

4. The Difference between homonymy and polysemy

The problem of identifying the difference between homonymy and polysemy is well-known in semantics. Saeed (2003) states that there is a traditional distinction made in lexicology between homonymy and polysemy. He indicates that both of them deal with multiple senses of the same phonological word, but polysemy is invoked if the senses are judged to be “related”. In addition, Hirst (1987) proposes that homonymous words are those whose meanings are “unrelated” to each other, like the bark of a tree and a dog’s bark; and polysemous words are those whose meanings are more closely related, like the verb ‘open’ with its senses concerning unfolding, expanding, revealing, making openings in, and so on. A word can be both polysemous and homonymous: the adjective ‘right’ has several senses concerning correctness and righteousness, but also senses concerning the right-hand side. But the question arises here of what “**related**” means. Leech (1981) proposes two answers to this question, a historical answer and a psychological answer, which do not necessarily coincide. He says that two meanings are historically related if they can be traced back to the same source, or if the one meaning can be derived from the other; two meanings are psychologically related if present-day users of the language feel intuitively that they are related, and therefore tend to assume that they are different uses of the same word. He cites some examples for English from Ullmann, (1962) which are **ear** as an organ of hearing and as a head of corn, and **weed** as a wild useless plant and as a mourning garment worn by a widow. In both these cases, he argues, the etymologies of the two meanings are quite different. Nevertheless, people often see a metaphorical connection between them, and adjust their understanding of the words accordingly. Thus what from a historical point of view is a homonymy, resulting from an accidental convergence of forms, becomes reinterpreted in the context of present-day English as a case of polysemy.

5. Difficulty in determining polysemy and homonymy

As a matter of fact it is really not easy to recognize the difference between polysemy and homonymy because their relations are interlocked with each other. From Palmer's point of view (1981), the problem is how to decide when we have polysemy and when homonymy. If we have a written form with two meanings, are we to say that it is one word with different meanings (polysemy) or two different words with the same shape (homonymy)? He illustrates that dictionaries usually base their decision upon etymology. If it is known that identical forms have different origins they are treated as homonymous and given separate entries; if it is known that they have one origin, even if they have different meanings, they are treated as polysemic and given a single entry in the dictionary. But he considers this far from satisfactory. He says that the history of a language does not always accurately reflect its present state. He exemplifies that we should not usually relate **pupil** (student) with the **pupil** of eye, or the **sole** of a shoe with the fish **sole**. These words are historically from the same origin, and are examples of polysemy. Yet in the language of today they are pairs of unrelated words, i.e. homonyms.

6. Homonymy and polysemy in Arabic language

According to many researchers, there are a huge number of polysemous and homonymous words in Arabic language. The dictionary titled "Almonajed fema etafaka lafthahu wa ekhtalafa maanah", which is written by Karaa al namel, (310 H) included 900 homonymous and polysemous words. In fact the phenomenon of the multiplicity of significations for the same verbal unit is very common and familiar not only in the Arabic language, but in many languages. In poetry, for instance, the words' ability to express multiple senses is one of the basic features of the human speech.

Aljarem and Ameen (1951), explain homonymy in the Arabic language as words which are pronounced alike but have different meanings. They classified it into two types. The first is a perfect homonymy where the two words share four features: the same kind of letters, same form, same number of letters, and the same order. The second is an imperfect

homonymy where one of the words differs in one of those four features. Let us consider the following examples:

Ana samaitahu Yahya le yahya.

I named him Yahya to live

‘I named him Yahya to stay alive’

The third and fifth words in the original sentence have the same type, form, number, and order of letters, but completely different meanings. The first is a **proper male name** “actually it is the name of Prophet John the Baptist”, while the second word is a verb **to live**. Accordingly, here are some examples of a perfect homonymy in Arabic language that could be proper names:

The Arabic name	Its meaning	Male/female
Jamilla	Beautiful “adj”	Female proper name
Zahra	Flower “N”	Female proper name
Warda	Rose “N”	Female proper name
Saeed	Happy “adj”	Male proper name
Osama	Lion “N”	Male proper name
Saber	Patient “adj”	Male proper name

To consider polysemous words in Arabic language: one example is the word **Aien** which means eye, could mean water spring, spy, one who has been envied, money or gold, the right thing, the same thing, etc. One of the most used polysemous words in Arabic is the word **Yaamel**, whose extensive meaning is to work. This word has many senses and meanings and no one can ignore all its different meanings because they are all used in very wide areas. Let us examine some examples:

1. Al fallah yaamel fi mazraatahu.

The farmer work in farm his.

‘The farmer works in his farm.’

The verb yaamel in this sentence could mean grow, plant, plough...etc.

2. Howa yaamel be al ganoon.

He achieve in the law.

‘He achieves the law.’

The verb yaamel here means that that person is a lawful man.

3. Al katib yaamel ala nasher al kitab.

The writer try on publish the book.

‘The writer is trying to publish the book.’

Here yaamel means the writer finished writing the book and looking for a publisher.

4. Howa sawfa yaamel kula ma fi weseehi.

He will do every what in effort his.

‘He will do his best.’

The meaning of yaamel here is to do.

Another famous polysemous word is the verb **fataha** that means opened, as Kunbis (1987) mentioned:

1. Fataha al waladu al bab.

Opened the boy the door.

‘The boy opened the door.’

2. Al umda fataha a tareeg al jaded.

The mayor opened the road the new.

‘The mayor gave a permission to use the new road.’

3. Fataha a raaees al ejtemaa.

Began the president the meeting.

‘The president began the meeting.’

4. Al jaiieesh fataha al belad.

The military invaded the country.

‘The military invaded the country.’

5. Fataha lahu bakhtahu.

Predicted to him fortune his.

‘His fortune was predicted.’

6. Al hawaa al naqi fataha shahiyatahu ala al akel.

The air the fresh gave appetite his on the food.

‘The fresh air gave him an appetite on food.’

7. Fataha safha jadedah maa sahibihi.

Opened page new with friend his.

‘Started a new relationship with his friend.’

8. Fataha baina al khassmain.

Adjudged between the two opponents.

‘To adjudge or decide between two opponents.’

We have seen that the word **fataha** has so many meanings. Some are abstract and others are concrete meanings, which are used in the entire Arabic world. However, it has been widely debated whether all these meanings have come from the same source or are derived from the same origin.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that homonymy, especially when it is not restricted to homography and/or homophony but also happens to appear within the same word class, often leads to confusion, ambiguity and misunderstandings as homonyms with totally different meanings can make sense in the same utterance. Making sense, theoretically, of the homonymy-polysemy distinction has proven extraordinarily difficult. The difficulty becomes apparent when one reflects on what might be involved in clarifying the distinction between “related” and “unrelated” meanings, for the supposed senses are closely interrelated, at the very least they are all closely related to the mind. Moreover it is sometimes not easy to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy, as the polysemy of a word is caused by extension of a word's primary meaning. On the other hand, the word's ability to acquire multiple senses and various roles is a proof of how alive the language is.

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