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Wafa Naji Hammad
Department of the Russian language, College of Arts, Samarra University, Iraq

Semantic ambiguity interpretation in English: A case of the second language learners

Wafa Naji Hammad

Abstract

Ambiguity is a global problem in languages, and English is one of the most important languages in the world with a high rate of ambiguous communication in both spoken and written forms. The semantically involved parts of ambiguity are the possibilities of multiple interpretations for certain expressions in the language that speakers use or listeners hear in relation to words, phrases, and sentences. The concept of semantic analysis of ambiguity aims at stating and enhancing a better approach of comprehension of the language in general. It also aims at testing interpretation of semantic ambiguity. It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learner encounter difficulties in interpreting semantic ambiguity. As for data analysis, the hypothesis of the study is verified, i.e. it has been observed that Iraqi EFL learner encounter difficulties in interpreting semantic ambiguity.

Keywords: Ambiguity, polysemy, homonymy, lexeme, interpretation

1. Introduction

This research aims to establish these relationships as they are inferred in ambiguous phrases or expressions discovered in a sample of common conversations, newspaper headlines, announcements, and literary writings. Ambiguity is deliberately utilized in such terms to disclose hilarious and ironic effects or meanings. Ambiguity is the attribute of being /əmbiguiti/, where a word, term, notation, sign symbol, phrase, sentence, or any other form used for communication is deemed ambiguous if it can be understood in more than one manner. Ambiguity, on the other hand, is context-dependent, which means that the same linguistic object, whether a word, phrase, or sentence, can be ambiguous in one context and unambiguous in another.

Ambiguity is a global problem in languages, and English is one of the most important languages in the world with a high rate of ambiguous communication in both spoken and written forms. The semantically involved parts of ambiguity are the possibilities of multiple interpretations for certain expressions in the language that speakers use or listeners hear in relation to words, phrases, and sentences. The concept of semantic analysis of ambiguity aims at stating and enhancing a better approach of comprehension of the language in general. It also aims at testing interpretation of semantic ambiguity. It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learner encounter difficulties in interpreting semantic ambiguity. The primary benefit of producing this paper is to aid, to some extent, and assist some English language learners in avoiding some of the typical ambiguous misconceptions and reducing them for a better comprehension of English language and to improve the level of communication of certain learners.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Semantics: An Overview

Semantics is a major field of linguistics that deals with the study of meaning in language. This concept is also utilized in philosophy and logic, though not to the same extent or with the same focus as in linguistics. Philosophical semantics investigates the relationships between linguistic expressions and the phenomena in the world to which they relate, as well as the conditions under which such expressions can be said to be true or incorrect, and the factors that influence how language is employed. The technique of structural semantics is particularly important here, since it demonstrates the application of structural linguistic principles to the study of meaning via the concept of semantic relations (sense or 'meaning' relations such as synonymy), (Saeed, 2016: 13) [15].

Correspondence Author;
Wafa Naji Hammad
Department of the Russian language, College of Arts, Samarra University, Iraq

According to Lyons (1981:152) [11], a lexeme that is associated with other lexemes is related to them in meaning, but a lexeme that is related to the outer world is related through denotation. Trask and Stockwell (2007: 255) [16], on the other hand, believe that there are a variety of techniques to dealing with word meanings. Words do not have meanings in and of themselves; rather, the meanings of other words frequently influence the meaning of a word. Some of the most noteworthy of these meaning relations are sense relations.

Riemer (2010:136) [16] contends that one of the primary goals of lexical relations is to define, account for, and understand the meaning of an expression, which includes not only its definition but also its relationship to other words in the language. Similarities (synonymy), differences (antonymy), a part-to-whole relationship (meronymy), class inclusion (hyponymy), and other elements are considered in such links. The researcher, on the other hand, will concentrate on three of these relationships: synonymy, hyponymy, and oppositeness.

2.2 Sense Relations

In this regard, Riemer (2010:136) [16] asserts that characterizing, accounting for, and recognizing the meaning of an expression entails not just its definition but also its relationship to other words in the language, which is one of the primary aims of lexical relations. Such linkages investigate the relationships between word meanings in terms of resemblance (synonymy), difference (antonymy), a part-whole relationship (meronymy), class inclusion (hyponymy), and so on. Nonetheless, in the current study, the researcher will look into three of these relationships: homophone, homonymy, and polysemy.

2.2.1 Homonymy

Lyons (1981: 72) [11] defines homonymy as lexical elements with the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings. Homonymes include lie, as in "you have to lie down and lie," and don't lie, as in "don't lie, tell the truth." The preceding definition excludes homophones and homographs, and it also introduces a difficulty with polysemy.

Furthermore, according to Saeed (2016: 59) [15], homonyms are unrelated senses of the same phonological term. Some authors distinguish between homographs, which are different written senses of the same word, and homophones, which are different spoken senses of the same word. In this context, the term homonym will be used interchangeably.

2.2.2 Different types can be recognized based on their syntactic behavior and spelling, for example:

1. Lexemes of the same syntactic category, and with the same spelling: e.g. lap "circuit of a course" and lap "part of body when sitting down";
2. of the same category, but with different spelling: e.g. the verbs ring and wring;
3. of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb bear and the noun bear;
4. of different categories, and with different spelling: e.g. not, knot.

Of course variations in pronunciation mean that not all speakers have the same set of homonyms.

Some English speakers for example pronounce the pairs click and clique, or talk and torque, in the same way, making these homonyms, which are spelled differently, (ibid).

2.2.3 Polysemy

Polysemy is used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings, e.g. *plain* = 'clear', 'unadorned', 'obvious' (Crystal, 2011: 373) [3]. A polysemous lexeme has several (apparently) related meanings. The noun head, for instance, seems to have related meanings when one speaks of the head of a person, the head of a company, head of a table or bed, a head of lettuce or cabbage, (Kriedler, 2002: 52) [18].

Furthermore, polysemy is defined as the existence of a single lexeme with many related meanings. In principle, the fact that polysemy is a feature of single words distinguishes it from homonymy, (Lyons, 1981:146) [11]. For example, the terms "neck, guard, music, and bachelor" are polysemous since each of them appears in conventional English dictionaries as a single lexeme with numerous distinguishing meanings, whereas homonyms often have separate dictionary entries marked with superscripts 1, 2, and so on (Fromkin *et al*. 2003: 180) [4].

The dilemma of where to draw the line between "homonymy and polysemy" can be handled by acknowledging that the different senses of the term are historically related, i.e. they can be traced back to the same source, such as "pupil (student) and pupil (of the eye)". Yule (2010: 107) [17], on the other hand, claims that homonyms are not historically related but have become similar by accident– or if one meaning can be derived from the other, i.e. there is a metaphorical connection between them and they are different uses of the same word, e.g. "face (noun-front part of head) and face (noun- front part of clock)".

To sum up, Palmer (1976: 68) [13] states that polysemy sometimes overlaps with homonymy, i.e. different meanings with the same shape. For instance, flight is a single (polysemic) word which has no less than five words (i.e. five homonyms) for mail 'armour', 'post', 'payment', 'halfpenny' and 'spot'. Because a polysemic item will be considered as a single entry, a homonymous item will have a distinct entry for each of the homonyms, the dictionary must decide whether to handle it in terms of polysemy or homonymy. This does not imply that one can determine between polysemy and homonymy simply by checking a dictionary, because the selections made by the dictionary maker frequently appear to be extremely arbitrary.

2.2.4 Homophone

Homophonous words have been employed in cognitive research to examine the relative influence of phonology, orthography, and semantics during word recognition, production, and retrieval, with and without context. In this subject, homophones are words that share some combination of phonology and/or spelling but have different meanings. Although the definitions connected with homophonous nouns are sometimes used interchangeably, Webster's definitions are employed in this study (Mish, 1991:98) [12].

Homophones are two words that have the same sound (phonology) but differ in spelling (orthography) and meaning (semantics) (Gorfein, *et al*, 1982:67) [5].

Despite the relevance of phonological variables in explaining diversity in the learning of word recognition and

production abilities, another class of factors could explain extra variance. Despite the fact that the relationships between phonological processing skill, word recognition ability, and word production ability are extremely strong, they most likely leave some reliable word recognition variance unaccounted for. Furthermore, some researchers think that developing a basic degree of phonological sensitivity is a required but not sufficient prerequisite for the development of efficient word recognition mechanisms (Juel & Gough, 1986: 56) [9].

Theoretical focus has recently shifted to orthographic processing abilities as a potential second source of variable in word recognition ability. Isolating individual differences on this dimension, however, is difficult because there is little doubt that the development of orthographic processing skills is influenced by phonological processing abilities (Barron, 1986:76) [2].

Simply said, a homophone is a series of words that sound the same yet are spelt differently to convey distinct meanings. For instance, the terms "to," "too," and "two." The key to getting them right is to understand the meaning of each of these terms. For example, "two" is the word for the number "2," while "too" denotes that something is more than enough or excessive (Hotopf, 1983:76) [7]. The issue is that not everyone understands the meanings of the phrases they use all of the time. These are just a few examples of the most regularly misused homophones, which also happen to be the easiest to learn and hence avoid, (ibid).

2.3 Semantic Ambiguity: An Overview
According to Crystal (2011:15) [3], ambiguity refers to a word or sentence that reflects more than one meaning, and this reference is related to linguistics. Several sorts of ambiguity can be identified in this regard, including grammatical (or structural) ambiguity in a sentence like "new houses and shops ", which could be parsed as either "new houses and shops ", i.e., both are new, or "new houses and shops ", i.e., only the houses are new.

Semantic ambiguity is a type of linguistic ambiguity. Syntactic and semantic forms are also available. In general, lexical ambiguity occurs when context is insufficient to discern the meaning of a single word with many meanings. Trask (2007:14) [16] provides the following example in this regard:
-"The sailors had a good time in port."
Obviously, such a statement has distinct meanings depending on whether the port refers to fortified wine or a seaside town. As a result, the complete string of words has two alternative interpretations or meanings, yet the phrase structure is identical in both circumstances. It is worth noting that lexical ambiguity is sometimes referred to as semantic ambiguity (ibid). Such ambiguity suggests two types: semantic ambiguity caused by inadvertent homonymy ("e.g. bank= financial institution vs. bank= side of a river") and semantic ambiguity caused by the meaning of the word ("e.g. door= pannel of material that may rotate on its hinges vs. door= aperture").

According to Birnbaum (1985: 90) [19], lexical ambiguity is more than just an issue for semantic analysis. It is also one of the primary causes of structural ambiguity, therefore it is a problem with which syntactic analyzers must grapple. This component of the problem has long been recognized. Birnbaum gives a good example to demonstrate this point by saying that much of the structural ambiguity in the

sentence "Time Flies Like an Arrow" originates from the part-of-speech ambiguity of the words "time," "flies," and "like," which in turn reflects their semantic ambiguity.

Sentences are distinguished by their phonetic representation rather than a combination of phonetic and semantic representations; each different phonetic representation enumerated by the grammar represents a distinct sentence. When a statement is ambiguous, it is connected with two or more 'semantic' representations. A single semantic representation, on the other hand, may be associated with two or more different sentences, which are then referred to as "paraphrases ".

2.4 For example, Huddleston (1981: 12) [8] cites the following line as 'semantically' ambiguous:
1. Mary looked hard. The ambiguity arises from the fact that the sentence could roughly mean either:
2. Mary looked intensively, or
3. Mary appeared hard. Whereas sentences (4)and (5) below :
4. Give it to the girl that John's talking to.
5. Give it to the girl John's talking to. Are "paraphrases".

The relationships between sentences and their meanings are exceedingly intricate. The presence of ambiguity, ambiguity, and paraphrasing is only one aspect of this complexity. To characterize them systematically, we will need to establish levels of representation intermediate between the semantic and phonetic, so that instead of moving in one step from meaning to pronunciation, we will continue in smaller, more manageable steps through these intermediate levels. For example, we will examine each sentence as a string of words categorized according to "parts of speech and grammatical categories." The ambiguity in (1) above stems from the fact that "hard" belongs to both the adverb and adjective classes, and "look " appears in a combination with both; note, however, sentences like these lack such an ambiguity:

6. She looked carefully.
7. She looked cruel.
8. She worked hard.

The reasons why these sentences are unambiguous is that the elements that follow the verbs belong to a definitive class, either adjective or adverb.

3. Methodology
The current section focuses on the empirical part of this paper. It looks into testing whether Iraqi EFL university students interpret semantic ambiguity or not. It also intends to provide readers with the primary research equipment and techniques that were used to collect data for this study. The purpose of this task is to elicit students' perspectives on the relevant skill. Their perspectives and opinions are critical in testing the presented hypothesis. The questionnaire is the primary research tool used to obtain the essential data. A research instrument, according to Parahoo (1997: 52- 325), is "a tool used to collect data." An instrument is a device used to assess knowledge, attitude, and skills." The research instruments are of several types: questionnaires, interviews, observations, and so on. In this experiment, one instrument was utilized to learn the opinions of university informants; a questionnaire was chosen to obtain data from students. The

questionnaire is the most frequent instrument for acquiring information about a certain issue by sending a series of specified questions to a specific audience.

Brown (2001: 89) [20] defines a questionnaire as "any written instrument that presents respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to respond either by writing out their replies or selecting from a list of options." The questionnaire in this work was addressed for (20) fourth stage EFL university learners. The questionnaire consists of five questions.

3.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Questionnaire on Five Questions

No.	Correct Answers	Percentages	Incorrect Answers	Percentages
1	10	50%	10	50%
2	7	35%	13	65%
3	11	55%	9	45%
4	9	45%	11	55%
5	4	20%	16	80%
Total	41	100%	59	100%

From the table above it can be noticed that the students' responses on the first question divided ten learners answered correct answers and (10) ones replied in correct answers with the percentage of (50%) for each. As for the second question, most of students answered incorrect answers with the percentages of (65%). Concerning the third question, seven learners answered (11) correct answers with percentages of (55%) while nine of them replied incorrect ones with the percentages of (45%). In relation to the fourth question, students replied (9) correct answers with the percentages of (45) while eleven of them replied incorrect ones scores (11) with the percentages of (55%). Finally, in the fifth question, most of students answered incorrect answers with the percentages of (80%).

3.2 Results
The purpose of this study was to look at the process of gaining interpreting semantic ambiguity for fourth year EFL students at Samara University. In this regard, the questionnaire was utilized as an instrument to collect information from EFL students in order to test the researcher's hypothesis. Following an examination of the research instrument, the majority of students struggle with misunderstanding and making mistakes (see table 1). This could be due to a lack of practicing. The data also demonstrate that EFL Iraqi learners might be motivated by using a competition technique among students. According to the findings of this study, EFL teachers at Samara University agree on the necessity of teaching with practice in order to improve EFL learners' ability to identify the correct answers from incorrect ones. Thus, the hypothesis of the study is verified.

4. Conclusion
The following points are worth mentioning:
1. Semantics is a major field of linguistics that deals with the study of meaning in language. This concept is also utilized in philosophy and logic, though not to the same extent or with the same focus as in linguistics.
2. Homonymy is lexical elements with the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings.

3. Polysemy is used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings,
4. Homophones are two words that have the same sound (phonology) but differ in spelling (orthography) and meaning (semantics)
5. Ambiguity refers to a word or sentence that reflects more than one meaning, and this reference is related to linguistics.
6. Semantic ambiguity is a type of linguistic ambiguity. Syntactic and semantic forms are also available.
7. As for data analysis, the hypothesis of the study is verified, i.e. Iraqi EFL learner encounter difficulties in interpreting semantic ambiguity.
8. Because productive abilities are an integral aspect of the communication process in every language, they play an important role in the learning operation.

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Appendix

Q1/ **The meaning of the verb "lead" is:**
- Giving direction
- A piece of metal

Q2/Minute means:
- A minute of time
- Small in size
- Both of them

Q3/Does the word "Wound" refers to the past form of wing:
- Yes
- No

Q4/ The sentence "They are canning peas" means:
- They are putting peas in the cans
- They are putting cans in the peas

Q5/ The sentence "I told the girl that I liked the story" means:
- I told the girl, who I like, the story.
- I told the girl the story which I like.
- Both of them