
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Homonymy Related English Vocabulary Learning: Investigating the Difficulties of the Third Year Students

Zina Ali Hussein

Faculty of Modern Language and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: Zina Ali Hussein, **E-mail:** zina.ali.145@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Homonymy, as a type of lexical relations between words, is a significant linguistic phenomenon which has received a lot of attention in recent years. English contains numerous homonymous forms with different meanings, which often cause confusion for EFL/ESL learners. In line with that, this research was carried out primarily to investigate the linguistic difficulties of learning and teaching homonymy in English in the Yemeni context. Hence, this data-oriented descriptive study was designed to investigate the difficulties in learning using homonymous English words as the data of the study. A total sample of 80 third-year English major students and 20 of their teachers at the Faculty of Education, Aden, University of Aden, were selected randomly as the subjects for this study. The qualitative and quantitative data required for this investigation were collected by employing two research instruments: a diagnostic test and a questionnaire. The major findings of the study revealed that phonological and orthographical identities of homonymic words, 'unrelatedness' of meanings, similarity in pronunciation, insufficient vocabulary size and knowledge, inadequate practice, poor focus in the course materials and stereo-typed teaching methodology contribute to learner difficulties with homonymy. Significantly, the literature survey and the findings of this work would be a modest contribution to vocabulary teaching and learning with special reference to homonymy.

KEYWORDS

Ambiguity, homonymy, polysemy, lexical relations, vocabulary.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, many studies have underscored the essential role that vocabulary plays in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition at all proficiency levels. Homonymy, as a type of lexical relations between words, is a significant linguistic phenomenon that has received a lot of attention in recent years. English contains numerous homonymous forms with different meanings, which often cause confusion among EFL/ESL learners. "Homonyms present an interesting challenge for theories of word learning because learning a secondary meaning of a homonym differs fundamentally from learning a single-meaning word" (Storkel, H. and Maekawa, J. (2005:828). Because the meanings of homonyms are usually completely unrelated to one another, they are a fruitful source of ambiguity. In some rare but interesting cases, the two meanings of a homonym are opposites--as in cleave '*split asunder*' and cleave '*stick closely*'. Some other related studies show that the differences between polysemy and homonymy and the ways in which they are resolved in dictionaries are obstacles to L2 learners in the process of acquiring vocabulary. Yanase, M. (2001) emphasized that the concepts as well as the criteria of classification of e polysemy and homonymy) are not easy to understand for non-native speakers like the Japanese. In another study, Conklin (2005:152) found that L2 learners responded more quickly to words with multiple related senses than to words with multiple unrelated ones. As Haastруп and Henriksen (2000:222) point out, learning a word is not a linear process. For Graham, A. (2008:16), "this an important issue to consider with regard to homonymic acquisition, which proves that the psychological realities of vocabulary acquisition in an L2 increase the psychological demand that homonymy places on that acquisition process." These statements make two points relevant to the EFL

learner. First, homonymic relations are an important part of the language to be mastered. Second, it is an area which seems to 'resist' tuition and, therefore, requires special, systematic attention. Having said that, three pertinent questions arise: What are the factors that influence the processing of homonymy? What kinds of homonymic information do learners need? And in what ways can such information facilitate learning? Since the three questions are interrelated, any attempt at answering one is bound to take the others into account. Very little work has been done on the problems and difficulties of teaching and learning homonymy in Yemen, even at the tertiary level. Hence, an investigation into the sources and nature of possible solutions to the problems of learning and using homonymous English words is necessary; this is what the proposed study aims to address directly.

2. Materials and Methods

The present work is a data-oriented descriptive study. The qualitative and quantitative data required for this investigation were collected by employing two research instruments: a diagnostic test to be given to the subjects of the study and a questionnaire to be given to the teachers concerned. The subjects were eighty third-year English major students of the Faculty of Education, Aden, University of Aden; all of them sat for the diagnostic test. They were selected randomly from groups 1, 2, and 3, the total strength of which was one hundred and twenty-nine. The subjects were presumed to constitute a homogenous representative group for the following reasons. They all shared the same L1, namely Arabic, and had very similar L2 backgrounds. Twenty teachers were selected as respondents for the second research instrument, viz., the questionnaire.

3. Results and Discussion

The study focused on the problems of homonymy in relation to phonological and orthographical identities, 'unrelatedness' of meanings, the role of context, frequency of homonymic vocabulary, and knowledge of more and less familiar meanings of homophones and homographs. The results of the diagnostic test and the questionnaire provide some explanation for the students' difficulties in processing English homonymy. It is evident from the results that the subjects had problems in both the broad areas of homonymy, viz., homophony and homography. The subjects gave a variety of wrong meanings for the homographs, as it is difficult for them to perceive the distinct and unrelated meanings of such words; identical orthographic form only adds to their confusion. Phonological similarities of homonymic words can be considered as a more serious cause of students' difficulties in processing homonyms; similarity in pronunciation is a powerful distracter leading them away from form-meaning relationship. The results of this present study are thus consistent with Zughoul (1991:52) in that "homonymy (both phonological and graphic similarities) complicates the form-meaning relationships in English and increases the learning burden of homonyms".

The surprising element in the results is that contextual clues in single sentences or a larger text seem not to be helpful to the subjects, no matter whether they deal with homographs or homophones. Instead of aiding word comprehension, the clues appear to hinder it. This finding supports the claim that lexical processing depends heavily on the richness of the learners' semantic and conceptual systems (Fukkink and Block, 2001).

Furthermore, the results indicate that the participants faced greater problems in processing low frequency homonyms than high frequency ones. This is in total conformity with what has been discussed that word frequency influences language processing; high frequency words are generally produced or recognized more accurately and more appropriately than low frequency words.

The learners' incorrect answers in the data also suggest that a more important factor that might be linked to the use of homonymic words is learner motivation; the subjects were not, as the researcher observed, very enthusiastic about taking the diagnostic test when it was administered. This finding is in line with Brown (1987) that there is a strong relationship between the learners' affective factors and their performance and academic achievement. The analysis of the data of the questionnaire and interpretation bring out clearly that there are three major causes of difficulty in processing homographs: (a) guessing a new meaning for an ambiguous familiar form, (b) comprehending its less common meaning, (c) Unfamiliarity with its different parts of speech, insufficient vocabulary size and knowledge, inadequate practice, and low learning motivation are three other minor causes.

4. Conclusion

Homonyms are one of the essential constructions in English vocabulary and a problematic area for Yemeni EFL university learners. The results obtained by both tools, namely the diagnostic test and the questionnaire, have revealed that Yemeni EFL university students have different levels of difficulty with homophonic words with or without sentential/textual contexts. The major findings of the study revealed that phonological and orthographical identities of homonymic words, 'unrelatedness' of meanings, similarity in pronunciation, insufficient vocabulary size and knowledge, inadequate practice, poor focus in the course materials and stereotyped teaching methodology contribute to learner difficulties with homonymy. The survey of literature and the findings of this work would be a modest contribution to vocabulary teaching and learning with special reference to homonymy.

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