

Module I. Lecture 6

Homonymy

Plan

1. Homonymy of words and word forms
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3. Some peculiarities of lexical and grammatical homonymy
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1. Homonymy of words and word forms

Homonyms are words that are spelled the same but have different meanings. In linguistics, homonyms are words which are either *homographs*—words that have the same spelling (regardless of pronunciation)—or *homophones*—words that have the same pronunciation (regardless of spelling)—or both. Using this definition, the words *row* (propel with oars), *row* (a linear arrangement) and *row* (an argument) are homonyms because they are homographs (though only the first two are homophones): so are the words *see* (vision) and *sea* (body of water), because they are homophones (though not homographs).

A more restrictive and technical definition requires that homonyms be simultaneously homographs *and* homophones – that is to say they have identical spelling *and* pronunciation, but with different meanings. Examples are the pair *stalk* (part of a plant) and *stalk* (follow/harass a person) and the pair *left* (past tense of leave) and *left* (opposite of right). A distinction is sometimes made between true homonyms, which are unrelated in origin, such as *skate* (glide on ice) and *skate* (the fish), and polysemous homonyms, or polysemes, which have a shared origin, such as *mouth* (of a river) and *mouth* (of an animal).

The relationship between a set of homonyms is called homonymy, and the associated adjective is homonymous, homonymic, or in latin, equivocal. The adjective "homonymous" can additionally be used wherever two items share the same name, independent of how closely they are or are not related in terms of their meaning or etymology.

A homonym which is both a homophone and a homograph is fluke, meaning:

- A fish, and a flatworm.
- The end parts of an anchor.
- The fins on a whale's tail.
- A stroke of luck.

These meanings represent at least three etymologically separate lexemes, but share the one form, fluke. Fluke is also a capitonym, in that Fluke Corporation (commonly referred to as simply "Fluke") is a manufacturer of industrial testing equipment.

Similarly, a river bank, a savings bank, a bank of switches, and a bank shot in the game of pool share a common spelling and pronunciation, but differ in meaning. The words bow and bough are examples where there are two meanings

associated with a single pronunciation and spelling (the weapon and the knot); two meanings with two different pronunciations (the knot and the act of bending at the waist), and two distinct meanings sharing the same sound but different spellings (bow, the act of bending at the waist, and bough, the branch of a tree). In addition, it has several related but distinct meanings – a bent line is sometimes called a 'bowed' line, reflecting its similarity to the weapon. Even according to the most restrictive definitions, various pairs of sounds and meanings of bow, Bow and bough are homonyms, homographs, homophones, heteronyms, heterographs, capitonyms and are polysemous.

- bow – a long stick with horse hair that is used to play certain string instruments such as the violin
- bow – to bend forward at the waist in respect (e.g. "bow down")
- bow – the front of the ship (e.g. "bow and stern")
- bow – a kind of tied ribbon (e.g. bow on a present, a bowtie)
- bow – to bend outward at the sides (e.g. a "bow-legged" cowboy)
- Bow – a district in London
- bow – a weapon to shoot projectiles with (e.g. a bow and arrow)

A lime can refer to a fruit or a material. A mold (mould) can refer to a fungus or an industrial cast. The words *there*, *their*, and *they're* are examples of three words that are of a singular pronunciation, have different spellings and vastly different meanings. These three words are commonly misused (or, alternatively, misspelled).

- there – "The bow shot the arrow there," he said as he pointed.
- their – "It was their bow and arrow." the Mother said.
- they're – They're not going to get to shoot the bow again after puncturing the tire (tyre) on Daddy's car. (Contraction of They and Are.)

The words metal and mettle are polysemes and homophones, but not homographs.

2. Classification of homonyms

Homonyms – words identical in their spelling or/and sound form but different in their meaning. When analyzing homonymy, we see that some words are homonyms in all their forms, i.e. we observe *full homonymy* of the paradigms of two or more different words, e.g., in seal₁ — 'a sea animal' and seal₂ — 'a design printed on paper by means of a stamp'. The paradigm "seal, seal's, seals, seals' " is identical for both of them and gives no indication of whether it is seal₁ or seal₂, that we are analyzing. In other cases, e.g. seal₁ — 'a sea animal' and (to) seal, — 'to close tightly', we see that although some individual word-forms are homonymous, the whole of the paradigm is not identical.

It is easily observed that only some of the word-forms (e.g. seal, seals, etc.) are homonymous, whereas others (e.g. sealed, sealing) are not. In such cases we cannot speak of homonymous words but only of homonymy of individual word-forms or of *partial homonymy*. This is true of a number of other cases, e.g. compare find [faind], found [faund], found [faund], and found [faund], founded

['faundid], founded ['faundid]; know [nou], knows [nouz], knew [nju:], and no [nou]; nose [nouz], noses ['nouzis]; new [nju:] in which partial homonymy is observed.

Walter Skeat classified homonyms into: 1) *perfect homonyms* (they have different meaning, but the same sound form & spelling: school - school); 2) *homographs* (Homographs are words identical in spelling, but different both in their sound-form and meaning, e.g. *tear* [tia] — 'a drop of water that comes from the eye' and *tear* [tea] — 'to pull apart by force'. 3) *homophones* are words identical in sound-form but different both in spelling and in meaning, e.g. *sean* and *seev*; *son* *n* and *sun*.

Smirnitsky classified *perfect homonyms* into: 1) *full homonyms* (identical in spelling, sound form, grammatical meaning but different in lexical meaning: *spring*); 2) *homofoms* (the same sound form & spelling but different lexical and grammatical meaning: "reading" – *gerund*, *particle 1*, *verbal noun*).

Arnold classified *perfect homonyms* by 4 criteria (lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, basic forms, paradigms) into 4 groups: 1) *different only in lexical meaning* (*board* - *board*); 2) *different in lexical meaning & paradigms* (*to lie/lie/lie* – *lie/lay/lain*); 3) *identical only in basic forms* (*light* /adj./- *light* /noun/); 4) *identical only in one of their paradigms* (*a bit* – *bit* /to bite/).

3. Some peculiarities of lexical and grammatical homonymy

It should be pointed out that in the classification discussed above one of the groups, namely lexical and grammatical homonymy, is not homogeneous. This can be seen by analyzing the relationship between two pairs of lexical and grammatical homonyms, e.g.

1. *seal*₁ *n* — 'a sea animal'; *seal*₃ *v* — 'to close tightly as with a seal';
2. *seal*₂ *n* — 'a piece of wax, lead'; *seal*₃ *v* — 'to close tightly as with a seal'.

We can see that *seal*₁ *n* and *seal*₃ *v* actually differ in both grammatical and lexical meanings. We cannot establish any semantic connection between the meaning 'a sea animal' and 'to close tightly'. The lexical meanings of *seal*₂ *n* and *seal*₃ *v* are apprehended by speakers as closely related. The noun and the verb both denote something connected with "a piece of wax, lead, etc., a stamp by means of which a design is printed on paper and paper envelopes are tightly closed".

Consequently the pair *seal*₂ *n* — *seal*₃ *v* does not answer the description of homonyms as words or word-forms that sound alike but differ in lexical meaning. This is true of a number of other cases of lexical and grammatical homonymy, e.g. *work* *n* — (to) *work* *v*; *paper* *n* — (to) *paper* *v*; *love* *n* — (to) *love* *v* and so on. As a matter of fact all homonyms arising from conversion have related meanings. As a rule however the whole of the semantic structure of such words is not identical. The noun *paper*, e.g., has at least five meanings (1. material in the form

of sheets, 2. a newspaper, 3. a document, 4. an essay, 5. a set of printed examination questions) whereas the verb (to) paper possesses but one meaning 'to cover with wallpaper'.

Considering this peculiarity of lexical and grammatical homonyms we may subdivide them into two groups: A. identical in sound-form but different in their grammatical and lexical meanings (seal₁ *n* — seal₃ *v*), and B. identical in sound-form but different in their grammatical meanings and partly different in their lexical meaning, i.e. partly different in their semantic structure (seal₃ *n* — seal₃ *v*; paper *n* — (to) paper *v*). Thus the definition of homonyms as words possessing identical sound-form but different semantic structure seems to be more exact as it allows of a better understanding of complex cases of homonymy, e.g. seal₁ *n* — seal₂ *n*; seal₃ *v* — seal₄ *v* which can be analyzed into homonymic pairs, e.g. seal₁ *n* — seal₂ *n* lexical homonyms; seal₁ *n* — seal₃ *v* — lexical and grammatical homonyms, subgroup A; seal₂ *n* — seal₃ *v* — lexical and grammatical homonyms, subgroup B.

4. Sources of homonymy

One source of homonyms is phonetic changes which words undergo in the course of their historical development. As a result of such changes, two or more words which were formerly pronounced differently may develop identical sound forms and thus become homonyms.

Night and *knight*, for instance, were not homonyms in Old English as the initial *k* in the second word was pronounced, and not dropped as it is in its modern sound form: OE. *kmht* (cf. OE *niht*). A more complicated change of form brought together another pair of homonyms: *to knead* (OE *cnedan*) and *to need* (OE *neodian*).

Shortening is a further type of word-building which increases the number of homonyms. E.g. *fan*, *n.* in the sense of "an enthusiastic admirer of some kind of sport or of an actor, singer, etc." is a shortening produced from *fanatic*. Its homonym is a Latin borrowing *fan*, *n.* which denotes an implement for waving lightly to produce a cool current of air. The noun *rep*, *n.* denoting a kind of fabric has three homonyms made by shortening:

repertory -> *rep*, *n.*,

representative - * *rep*, *n.*,

reputation - * *rep*, *n.*

Borrowing is another source of homonyms. A borrowed word may, in the final stage of its phonetic adaptation, duplicate in form either a native word or another borrowing:

ritus *Lat.* - * rite *n.* - write *v.* - right *adj.*;

pais *OFr* - * piece, *n.* - pettia *OFr* -> peace *n.*;

vitim *Lat.* - wrong, an immoral habit - * vice *Eng.* - evil conduct;

vilis *Lat.* - spiral -* vice *Eng.* - apparatus with strong jaws
in which things can be hold tightly;

vice *Lat.* - instead of, in place of -» vice - president *Eng.*

Words made by sound-imitation can also form pairs of homonyms with other words:

bang, n. "a loud, sudden, explosive noise" - *bang*, n. "a fringe of hair combed over the forehead".

mew, n. "the sound a cat makes" - *mew*, n. "a sea gul" - *mew*, n. "a pen in which poultry is fattened" - *mews* "small terraced houses in Central London".

Two or more homonyms can originate from different meanings of the same word when, for some reason, the semantic structure of the word breaks into several parts. As soon as a derived meaning is no longer felt to be connected with the primary meaning at all polysemy breaks up and separate words come into existence, quite different in meaning from the basic word but identical in spelling: *bar* - 6anKa;

This type of formation of homonyms is called split polysemy. The semantic structure of a polysemantic word presents a system within which all its constituent meanings are held together by logical associations. In most cases, the function of the arrangement and the unity is determined by one of the meanings. If this meaning happens to disappear from the word's semantic structure, associations between the rest of the meanings may be severed, the semantic structure loses its unity and falls into two or more parts which then become accepted as independent lexical units.

Questions for discussion

1. Give the definition and examples of the homonyms
2. How are they classified? Give examples
3. What are the main peculiarities of lexical and grammatical homonymy?
4. How outstanding scientists classified homonyms?
5. What is split polysemy? Give examples

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