

## **Lexical Ambiguity**

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Vocabulary plays a significant role in learning languages. Yet, learning new vocabulary can be difficult due to factors such as learners' proficiency level, the large number of words that students need to learn, the complexity of words, the differences between the written and spoken forms of words, and ambiguity, which refers to a word that has two or more meanings. Over the past few decades, lexicon has received considerable attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), especially lexical ambiguity. Empirical research has addressed issues such as acquisition of ambiguous lexicon, processing lexical ambiguity, effect of lexical ambiguity in word recognition, and lexical ambiguity resolution (e.g., Haro & Ferre, 2018; Petten, 2006).

A word with various denotations is considered ambiguous for language learners. For example, the word 'pupil' in the sentence: 'She looked at her pupils' can refer to either the pupils of the eyes or the pupils in the class. This type of ambiguity is called 'lexical ambiguity'. According to Patten (2006), such ambiguous words with manifold meanings impede language learners' comprehension. Words of this nature are numerous in English; more than 80% of English words have multiple dictionary entries and some have totally different meanings (Rodd et al., 2002).

When encountering such words, for example, in translating texts, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners need to choose an appropriate meaning that suits the context and matches the author's intended meaning. For instance, the word 'saw' in a sentence like 'He saw how the carpenter was sawing the wood with the saw' is confusing, since it has multiple meanings. Due to their lack of knowledge and exposure to the target language, learners are usually aware of the core meaning of a word, but less likely to know its other, alternative meanings. Unless the word 'saw' is used in a specific context, identifying its exact meaning becomes a challenge for EFL learners. Thus, understanding the meaning of such words and determining their correct usage is highly problematic in an EFL context.

Nevertheless, being aware of all the different meanings of one word is a difficult task that even native speakers might be incapable of. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to review current research on the issue of lexical ambiguity, which is a challenge faced by EFL learners in acquiring and using target vocabulary. In addition, this paper reviews literature on the notion of lexical ambiguity and explains how ambiguous words are learned, processed and resolved by language learners.

There are various forms of ambiguity; however, lexical and structural ambiguity are dominant in the literature. Lexical ambiguity is different from structural ambiguity, which refers to sentences with more than one phrase structure that can be understood in more than one way (Oaks, 2010). The sentence 'Put the block in the box on the table' can have two structures based on whether 'in the box' modifies 'the block' or not. In the 1970s, psycholinguists started to investigate lexical ambiguity to understand how it is processed in the first language (L1). Since then, most of the research has aimed at exploring the meaning of a word that has multiple meanings and developing an understanding of its process in the mind when a learner faces a sentence with an ambiguous word (Beretta et al., 2005; Hino & Lupker, 1996; Klepousnitou, 2002; Klein & Murphy, 2002).

Studies on lexical ambiguity in L1 have explored the effect of three variables: the context (Kellas & Vu, 1999; Martin et al., 1999; Simpson, 1981), meaning frequency (Dopkins et al., 1992; Duffy et al., 1988), and the type of lexical ambiguity (Bretta et al., 2005; Rodd et al., 2002). Then the focus of research shifted to non-native speakers to understand how retrieving these words from second language lexicon is influenced by EFL learners' proficiency level, frequency of meaning and semantic similarity. A few studies have investigated lexical ambiguity in the second language (L2), and most of them focused on ambiguity that results from homonymy (Elston-Guttler & Friederici, 2005; French-Master & Prince, 1997; Love, Mass, & Swinney, 2003). However, Rodd et al. (2002) do not consider lexical ambiguity a fixed phenomenon, since EFL learners will not stop gaining new meanings of familiar words, such as the meanings that are associated with the development of mass media (e.g., post and tweet). Similarly, lexical ambiguity can have varied levels of difficulty in different languages (Bates, Devescovi, & Wulfeck, 2001), which can also affect the learners' progress of acquiring L2 vocabulary. On the issue of learning ambiguous words, there has been a focus on studying ambiguous words where learners are already familiar with one meaning, however, they must learn other new meanings, such as new jargon (Rodd et al., 2016). Based on this approach, research shows that young children do not easily add new meanings to words they are familiar with (Casenhiser, 2005; Doherty, 2004). Other studies have shown contradictory results in which children face no difficulty in assigning new meanings to familiar words in comparison to completely new words (e.g., Storkel, Maekawa, & Aschenbrenner, 2013; Storkel & Maekawa, 2005).

There are two types of lexical ambiguity: syntactic and semantic. Syntactic lexical ambiguity refers to the ambiguity of a grammatical category. For example, 'present' can be either the verb that indicates the action of giving someone a gift or the noun that can be the target of this activity. On the other hand, semantic ambiguity indicates that the ambiguity lies in the meaning of a word and is not related to its grammatical aspects (Vitello & Rodd, 2015). In addition, semantic lexical ambiguity has two types: polysemy, which distinguishes between ambiguous words with related meanings and homonymy, which refers to words with unrelated meanings but similar spellings. Literature has highlighted the significance of these

concepts in relation to the listeners' and readers' ability to recognize these words (Rodd et al., 2002; Klein & Murphy, 2001).

Polysemy refers to a word that has many related meanings in relation to the context in which it is employed (Makni, 2013). For example, the two meanings of the word 'head' are similar in the following sentences: 'My head hurts' and 'He is the head of the department'. Many studies have examined the acquisition of polysemous words by EFL learners from different linguistic backgrounds (Maby, 2005; Kim & Cho, 2015; Wei & Lou, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2015). Although acquiring polysemous words by Arabic EFL learners has received little attention, several studies have investigated the teaching of English polysemous words (Makni, 2013). Other studies have explored the problems that Arabic EFL learners encounter in translating polysemous words (Hamlaoui, 2010; Salem, 2014). In addition, the role of Arabic EFL learners' proficiency level and the ability to differentiate among the various meanings of polysemous words has also been studied, and results indicate that such learners have "little awareness of polysemy in English" (Abdul, 2017, p.112).

Homonymy, on the other hand, refers to different unrelated meanings that have the same form of a word (Cruse, 1986). For instance, the two uses of the word 'ball' in 'She was dancing at the ball' and 'The boy was playing with the ball'. The former means a kind of party while the latter refers to a piece of equipment used in sport or games. Although research in the field of psycholinguistic shows that words with multiple and unrelated meanings influence lexical choices, studies have also found that homonyms are not always ambiguous, and they can facilitate the process of word recognition in SLA. Thus, ambiguous words may have an advantage of being processed faster than unambiguous or single-meaning words (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marselen-Wilson, 2002). These contrasting findings may be due to the use of unfamiliar words or confusing variables, or "the approach employed to select ambiguous words across studies" (Haro & Ferre, 2018, p. 679). Moreover, this advantage of ambiguous words is based on the type of the task (Kawamoto, Farrar, and Kello, 1994), however, Klepousniotou and Baum (2007) found that it depends on how related the meanings are to each other (this was the case in polysemous words and not homonymous words). Therefore, in learning ambiguous words, polysemy is easier to learn than homonymy (Barak et al., 2019). The two types are mentally represented in different ways; words with related meanings act as a facilitator while words with unrelated meanings hinder lexicon learning (Rodd et al., 2002). Some studies have indicated that accessing homonymous words is not directed by the information of the context (Love et al., 2003; Elston-Guttler & Friederici, 2005). However, this finding cannot be generalized since the L2 learners in these studies were speaking European languages which have similar orthography.

In an EFL context, most learners can give at least one appropriate interpretation of a polysemous or homonymous word depending on their semantic knowledge. The meaning

of a polysemous or homonymous word must be determined by its context, since the surface form of the word is not enough to understand its intended meaning (Dash, 2008). Since both types have the same surface form (i.e., the spelling), it is possible to confuse one type with the other. However, homonyms are more confusing than polysemous words, which facilitate communication by adding more richness to learners' vocabulary. Learners who face lexical ambiguity usually lack the required knowledge of polysemous and homonymous words. Consequently, ignoring lexical ambiguity may cause various complications for EFL learners: it restricts recalling the meanings of ambiguous words, negatively affects their lexical choices and leads to incomplete interaction (Kidd & Holler, 2009). Hence, this problem can be solved by investigating the multiple meanings of these words and understanding the practice of distinguishing between the two types in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, lexical ambiguity can be resolved by using several models which have been introduced in the literature. For instance, "the ordered model, the exhaustive access model, the multiple access model and the contextual model" (Petten, 2006).

In the Saudi EFL context, no studies have been found that explore lexical ambiguity of EFL learners except a few related to polysemy that were mentioned earlier. However, there are studies in other contexts that mainly discuss ambiguity in the Arabic language. For example, in the Jordanian context, a study has identified structural ambiguity in relation to translation and the negative affect of ambiguity aspects in the Arabic language (Rabadi & Althawbih, 2015). Similarly, in the Kuwaiti context, a study assessed the translation strategies in translating polysemous words in Quran (alQinai, 2012). Another study tried to solve the ambiguity of Arabic words by using Arabic Word Sense Disambiguation (WSD) (Elayeb, 2019). The most recent study in the Saudi context in the field of Arabic language ambiguity investigated the causes of lexical ambiguity in information retrieval applications in Arabic (Omar & Aldawsari, 2020).

In this paper, literature on the phenomenon of lexical ambiguity, its types and how it is processed and resolved in native and non-native learners has been discussed. Furthermore, how ambiguous words are learned and their effect on EFL learners has been highlighted. Finally, examples of the few studies that have been conducted in the Saudi context and other studies that examine the effect of lexical ambiguity on the Arabic language are presented briefly. Research on lexical ambiguity is significant for non-native speakers in general and EFL learners in particular since it would contribute to our awareness of the process of retrieving multiple meanings from L2 vocabulary. Such knowledge would have implications for educators and teachers in designing curricula, modifying teaching procedures and assessing learners' use of vocabulary. Since lexical ambiguity can hinder communication, resolving such ambiguity should be the concern of linguists and SLA scholars.