

An analysis of lexically ambiguous words in Hausa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/jolan.vol5no1.417>

Saifullahi D. Usman

Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies, Faculty of Languages, Linguistics and Theatre Arts, College of Humanities,
Bayero University, Kano
usmansds2015@gmail.com

Rabi Y. Adamu

Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies, Faculty of Languages, Linguistics and Theatre Arts, College of Humanities,
Bayero University, Kano
bnzulaiha444@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates and analyzes Hausa words that are lexically ambiguous. In linguistics, ambiguity refers to the phenomenon in which a single word, phrase, clause, or sentence has more than one possible meaning or interpretation. The focus here is on lexical (word-level) ambiguities in Hausa. The study demonstrates that Hausa is particularly rich in such ambiguities, making the language both fascinating and challenging—especially for non-native speakers and learners. The paper is purely descriptive in nature and situated within the field of formal linguistics. Specifically, it examines lexical ambiguity in Hausa through the lens of lexical semantics and describes it from a linguistic perspective. Findings reveal that many Hausa words are open to multiple interpretations, which significantly affects their meaning when considered in isolation rather than in sentences. The study further shows that in some cases, ambiguous words can be disambiguated contextually or pragmatically, depending on the context in which they appear or the situation in which they are used.

Keywords: Lexical ambiguity, Hausa language, lexical semantics, contextual disambiguation, formal linguistics.

Introduction

The phenomenon of ambiguity has been for so long an interesting area of research and a popular topic of discussion for many years among scholars especially Computer Scientists, Philosophers, Psychologists, Linguists, and Logicians among others. From the field of linguistics for example, scholars such as Fillmore (1982), Bature (1983), Baba (1987), Garba (2001), Bello (2008), Irwan (2009), Seewoester (2009), Awwad (2017), Unseth & Unseth (2018), Usman (2023) have conducted various researches on this phenomenon. Moreover, generally in linguistics, ambiguity is usually treated under the field of semantics, a field that is primarily concerned with the study of meaning. Ambiguity simply refers to multiplicity of meaning of a linguistic expression, and it can be at word, phrase, clause, or sentence level. When the ambiguity is at word level, meaning, in a situation whereby a single word is having multiple senses (meanings), so in this case it is technically called ‘lexical ambiguity’. But when the ambiguity is at phrasal, clausal or sentential level, meaning, it is the whole phrase, clause or sentence that is having multiple meanings, so in this regard it is technically called constructional, structural or syntactic ambiguity. However, this paper deals with the latter i.e. lexical ambiguity in Hausa. However, in the analysis of the sample data gathered, the paper employs descriptive approach as its methodology.

The Hausa language

Hausa is a member of the Chadic Language Family, which itself is a constituent member of the Afroasiatic phylum that also includes Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, Berber and Ancient Egyptian. However, Hausa has a few geographical dialects, marked by differences in pronunciation, grammatical formatives and vocabulary (Newman: 2000). In this paper, only the dialect of Kano will be used for sourcing the primary data since it is the dialect that is regarded by most linguists and many other scholars as the ‘Standard Hausa’ (SH).

That is why Newman (2000) further maintained that Standard Hausa essentially represents the dialect of Kano state, a dialect that has become recognized as the norm for the written language (as embodied in books and newspapers) and also for such media as radio and television. This is the dialect represented in the major dictionaries and grammars of the language prepared over the past century and in most pedagogical materials prepared for Americans and Europeans intending to learn the language. This choice of Standard Hausa is necessary because there are different dialects of Hausa with differentiations among them especially in terms of meaning i.e. semantics and pronunciation i.e. phonetics and phonology. For example:

Kano Dialect	Sokoto Dialect	Gloss
Fàaràa	Hwàaràa	Grasshopper
Xaa	Xanxaa	Son
‘Yaa	Xiyaa	Daughter

Now by considering the above three examples, we can clearly see that definitely there are dialectal variations among the various Hausa dialects and it is the reason why we stick to the standard dialect only in order to avoid confusion.

Ambiguity

Etymologically, the term ambiguity is said to be derived from Latin origin *ambiguus* from *ambigere* ‘to be undecided’, which was formed by combining *ambi-* (meaning ‘both’) and *agere* (meaning ‘to drive’). Ambiguity has been defined severally because many researchers such as linguists, philosophers, psycholinguists, scientists and lawyers have been showing their keen interest in the area of ambiguity. For instance Ullmann (1977) expressed that ambiguity as a linguistic condition can arise in a variety of ways. He further explains that ambiguity should be seen as a notion in which there is difficulty in giving a precise meaning to a linguistic expression. It is a representative of doubtfulness, uncertainty and confusion in any human language. It may disrupt the flow of reading and eventually leads to incorrect conclusion or concealment of wrong understanding by addressee.

Usman (2023) described ambiguity as a situation in which a single word, phrase, clause or sentence has more than one meaning or is open to more than one interpretation. Similarly, Shultz & Pilon (1973) viewed that a number of psycholinguists have begun to study ambiguity in the hope of understanding the processing and interpretation of language. On the other hand, Bussmann (1980) maintained that “ambiguity in natural languages is a property of expressions that can be interpreted in several ways, or, rather, that can be multiplied specifically in linguistic description from lexical, semantic, syntactic and other aspects.”

Lobner (2002) asserts that “many words have more than one meaning and even complete sentences may allow for several readings. The technical term for this phenomenon is ambiguity: an

expression or utterance is ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way. The notion of ambiguity can be applied to all levels of meaning: to expression meaning, utterance meaning and communicative meaning”. However, according to Denham & Lobeck (2010) “ambiguity can occur both at lexical and syntactic levels and a sentence is said to be ambiguous if it has more than one meaning.

Some types of ambiguity

Generally, there are several identifiable types of ambiguity in natural languages. They are as follows:

- a. Syntactic Ambiguity e.g., the young men and women have arrived.
- b. Lexical Ambiguity e.g., bank (shore of a river), bank (financial institution).
- c. Morphological Ambiguity e.g., saw (past of see), saw (cutting of wood or the instrument for cutting wood).
- d. Phonetics & Phonological Ambiguity e.g., write, right, rite, wright, son & sun etc.
- e. Pragmatic Ambiguity.
- f. Metaphorical Ambiguity etc.

Lexical ambiguity

Since the main concern of this paper is on lexical ambiguity, among all the types of ambiguity mentioned above, lexical ambiguity is the only type that is going to be briefly explained here as follows: Bussmann (1988) maintains that lexical ambiguity is an ambiguity that results from the use of specific lexemes and its main causes are polysemy and homonymy. Also, Fillmore (1982) describes lexical ambiguity as a situation in which a single word form is associated with two or more semantically distinctive senses. Therefore, in a nutshell, lexical ambiguity occurs when there is a single word that has more than one meaning or which has multiple interpretations. It is important at this juncture to note that Hausa is among the languages that are very rich in terms of lexical ambiguity.

Data presentation and analysis

In this segment of the paper, the main data which were primarily sourced from the Hausa language are going to be presented and analyzed as follows:

Data 1: *Turmii*: in Hausa, this word ‘*turmii*’ is lexically ambiguous because it has multiple senses (meanings) such as the following:

- i. *Turmii* means: mortar
- ii. *Turmii* means: molar/molar tooth
- iii. *Turmii* means: fabric/textile/wrapper (usually five yards)

Now consider the following sentences in order to see how the ambiguousness of the Hausa word ‘*turmii*’ could further be clearly demonstrated.

a. Ya-a tavà turminsa jiyà.
3ms-gen-perf. touch mortar molar tooth wrapper yesterday
‘He touched his mortar/molar tooth/wrapper yesterday’

b. Na-a sayoo *turmii* dà *tavaryaa* jiyà.
I-gen-perf. buy mortar and pestle yesterday
‘I bought mortar and pestle yesterday’

c. Turmi-n haqoori-n-sà ya-a karyèe.
Molar-of tooth-of-him 3ms-gen-perf. break
‘His molar tooth had broken’

d. Sun saacèe turmi-n-àtàmfa-r
3pl.-gen-past steal bundle-of-fabric-rel./det.
‘They stole the bundle of the fabric’

The word ‘*turmi*’ can also be used to mean round in boxing as in the example below:

e. Sun yi turmi biyu ko uku a damben.
3pl.-gen-past do mortar two or three in boxing-ref.
‘They did two or three rounds in the boxing’.

Data 2: *Kúukáa*: in Hausa, this word ‘*kúukáa*’ is lexically ambiguous because it has more than one meaning as we can see below:

- i. *Kúukáa* means: crying
- ii. *Kúukáa* means: complaining

Now consider the following sentences in order to clearly see the ambiguity in it:

- a. [Audù ya-a yi *kúukáa* da malaminsa .]
S
Audù 3ms-gen-perf. do complain with teacher-of-him
‘Audù has complained about his teacher.’
- b. [Audù ya-a yi *kúukáa* da malaminsa .]
S
Audù 3ms-gen-perf. do cry with teacher-of-him
‘Audù has cried [together] with his teacher’.

Data 3: *Kwàaxóo*: in Hausa, the word ‘*kwàaxóo*’ is lexically ambiguous because it has many distinctive meanings as follows:

- i. *Kwàaxóo* means: padlock
- ii. *Kwàaxóo* means: frog/toad

Now consider the following to see how the ambiguity could be clearly demonstrated.

- a. [Audù ya-a jefa *kwàaxóo* a ruwa.]
S
Audù 3ms-gen-perf. throw padlock in water
‘Audù threw a padlock in water’.
- b. [Audù ya-a jefa *kwàaxóo* a ruwa.]
S
Audù 3ms-gen-perf. throw frog/toad in water
‘Audù threw a frog/toad in water’.

However, sometimes the pragmatic contexts do help in disambiguating such lexically ambiguous words especially by the help of either linguistic or non-linguistic clues, when they are added in the expressions as in the following examples:

a. [Audù ya-a jefa kwàaxóo a ruwa **da-ransa**.]
S

Audù 3ms-gen-perf. throw padlock in water alive
'Audù threw a padlock in water'. Or

c. [Audù ya-a jefa kwàaxóo **da mukullinsa** a ruwa].
S

Audù 3ms-gen-perf. throw padlock with key-of –it in water
'Audù threw a padlock in water'.

The above examples (a & b) are clear, straightforward and unambiguous ones, because the additional contextual information in them is what changed them entirely from being ambiguous sentences to unambiguous ones.

Data 4: *Maigida*: in Hausa is a lexically ambiguous word which could refer to many meanings such as:

- i. *Maigida* means: boss
- ii. *Maigida* means: husband
- iii. *Maigida* means: house-owner
- iv. *Maigida* means: head of household

Now consider how the word '*maigida*' is used in the following Hausa sentences:

a. Maigidan Binta zai iso gobe.
The-boss-of Binta will arrive tomorrow

b. Maigidan Binta zai iso gobe.
The-husband-of Binta will arrive tomorrow

c. Maigidan Binta zai iso gobe.
The-house-owner-of Binta will arrive tomorrow

d. Maigidan Binta zai iso gobe.
The-head-of-household-of Binta will arrive tomorrow

From examples (a – d) above, a single Hausa word '*maigida*' is used in each one of them. But it connotes or denotes different meanings. This testifies that the word on itself is lexically ambiguous

in Hausa and thus causes difficulty in an attempt to assign a meaning to it especially when it appears or comes in isolation. However, sometimes the context may disambiguate it as in the following examples:

- a. Maigidan Binta ya-a sake ta saboda ta zagi mahaifiyarsa.
The-husband-of Binta 3ms-gen-perf. divorce her because she insult mother-of-him
- b. Maigidan Binta ya-a kore ta daga aiki-n saboda sata.
The-boss-of Binta 3ms-gen-perf. sack her from job-ref for stealing

The above examples a and b are clear and unambiguous ones as a result of the context they appeared.

Conclusion

In this research paper, an attempt has been made by the authors in studying, examining and analyzing some lexically ambiguous words in Hausa. In the findings of the paper, it has been clearly established that there are plenty lexemes/words that are lexically ambiguous in Hausa. The analysis of the paper has also shown that, some of these kinds of ambiguities can be simply disambiguated or amicably resolved in a linguistically, contextually/pragmatically methods or through other methods. But the best way of resolving them is either through pragmatic context or through linguistic clues as opined by Denham & Lobeck (2010). But still there are some ambiguous words that are very difficult to be resolved or disambiguated even if they appear in contexts.

Reference

- Awwad, M. 2017. Perception of Linguistic Ambiguity. *European Scientific Journal*. Vol. 13 No. 20.
- Baba, A. Y. 1987. *Phenomena of Ambiguity in Hausa Language*. Unpublished B.A Project, Department of Nigerian Languages, Bayero University, Kano.
- Bature, A. 1983. *Some Phenomena of Ambiguity in Hausa*. Departmental Seminar. Department of Nigerian Languages, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.
- Bello, F. A. 2008. *The Hausa Ambiguous Words and Sentences*. Unpublished M.A Thesis, Department of Nigerian and African Languages. A.B.U Zaria.
- Bussmann, H., 1988. *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. New York: Routledge.

- Denham, K. & Lobeck, A. 2010. *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction*. USA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Fillmore, C. J. 1982. *Frame Semantics*. Elsevier. New York Press.
- Garba, R. 2001. *Analysis of Hausa Ambiguous Sentences: Thematic Approach*. Unpublished M.A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Nigerian Languages, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.
- Irawan, W. B. 2009. *An Analysis of Ambiguity in the Articles of the Jakarta Post*. Unpublished B.A Thesis, Sebales Mares University, Indonesia.
- Lobner, S. 2002. *Understanding Semantics*. UK: Hodder Arnold Education.
- Newman, P. 2000. *The Hausa Language: An Encyclopedic Reference Grammar*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Seewoester, S. 2009. *Linguistic Ambiguity in Language-based Jokes*. Unpublished M.A Thesis, College of Communication, De Paul University, Chicago, Illinois.
- Shultz, T. R., & Pilon, R., 1973. *Development of the Ability to Detect Linguistic Ambiguity*. Canada: McGill University.
- Ullmann, S. 1977. *Semantics: An Introduction to Science of Meaning*. Basin Blackwell.
- Unseth, P. & Unseth, C. 2018. Analyzing Ambiguity in Orthographies. *Notes on Literacy* 65:35–52. See also: Unseth and Unseth 1991 (in *Bibliography (Literacy)*). © 2018 SIL International.
- Usman, S. D. 2023. *A Study of Constructional Ambiguity in Hausa*. Unpublished PhD Thesis Submitted to the Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies, Bayero University, KanoNigeria.