

NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF HOMOPHONES AND HOMOGRAPHS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract:

The question of meaning remains a central concern among philosophers and linguists, particularly in understanding how language conveys different forms of interpretation. While meaning encompasses a broad range of linguistic elements, there is ongoing debate regarding its precise boundaries. Rather than revisiting abstract philosophical disputes—especially those rooted in structuralist interpretations that link meaning to intangible concepts like beauty, love, or goodness—this paper focuses on a critical linguistic phenomenon: the treatment of English homophones and homographs. These lexical items often present challenges in communication, comprehension, and language instruction due to their surface-level similarities and underlying semantic differences.

This study critiques the representation of homophones and homographs in existing literature and provides a reanalysis grounded in Semantic Theory, particularly drawing from David Lewis's (1983) distinctions between "Use" and "Referential" meaning. By reexamining available data, the paper illustrates how these word types function differently in context, despite orthographic or phonological similarities. The findings highlight a gap in semantic categorization where the nuance of usage and reference is often overlooked. Through this analytical lens, the study reveals the intricate ways in which homophones and homographs complicate meaning in English and underscores the need for a more nuanced, theory-informed approach to their study.

Keywords: Homophones, Homographs, Semantic Theory, Referential Meaning, Linguistic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Meaning is a matter of concern among philosophers and scholars of language. Meaning covers a variety of language aspects, but there is no agreement on the aspects that a particular meaning really covers. It is not the intent of this paper to perpetuate the debate on meaning as an intangible quality, which, according to Structuralists, has something to do with words that denote beauty, love, goodness, etc. The paper specifically critiques the treatment of homophones and homographs in the available literature by reanalyzing the data available. The paper is couched in Semantic Theory (Lewis 1983) where the meaning of *Use* and *Referential* tools is used as the basis of the analysis of Homophones and Homographs.

The confusion among English language learners emanates from what the available literature says about these semantic relations (homographs and homophones) and this has drawn the attention of many scholars of meaning. Though homophones

and homographs are the source of this confusion, the major source of the confusion is in most literatures where definitions of the concepts make contestable generalizations. For instance, describing *affect* and *effect*, *profit* and *prophet* as homophones and *'present* and *prese'nt* as homographs is to encode erroneous information to the readers, thus there is a need to re-visit the treatment of English homophones and homographs in the existing literature.

Previous Literatures

Ibrahim (2018) investigated on homographs and came up with an argument that words with identical spelling and pronunciation, but having different meanings and grammatical functions are homographs. He cited the lexeme 'sow' (verb) – to plant seed and 'sow' (noun) – female pig; and the lexeme bear (verb)–to support or carry, and bear (noun)– an animal, as homographs. However, lexemes of this form are differentiated by suprasegmental or prosodic features and not anything else. This renders Ibrahim's analysis incomplete and misleading.

Verhaar (2006) conceptualizes homonymy as a relation between two or more words which have the same form but different meanings. To him, the term homonym subsumes both homophone and homograph, i.e., homophones and homographs are homonyms. The question is that, does a homonym imply both homograph and homophone? If that is true, does the etymological meaning of the term homonym relate to the two terms? These questions are quite challenging to dictionary writers, readers, and researchers in general, hence demanding clear answers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This work uses the Semantic theory (Lewis, 1970, 1983) which answers the question 'what is the meaning of this word or that expression?' The theory emphasizes that sentences are (typically) true or false, and that their being true or false depends on the information they encode or express. This 'information' is often called 'the proposition expressed by the sentence' (Plato as cited in Lewis, 1970). This theory is used together with the theory of generative semantics, which focuses on the context of situation as a determinant of meaning (Ramadan and Ababneh, 2013). Thus, understanding of the meaning of Homophones and Homographs depends of the lexemes and the context they refer. With this theory, some of the homophones and homographs have proper names by nature as explained in the scope of *Reference Theory*, which indicates words and their referents. It must be noted that the signifier and the signified are not new concepts in the context of linguistic semantics. Thus, though this theory has been criticized as it works in explaining concrete words like *table*, *sun*, *son*, *door* and, *house* and not in explaining abstract lexemes such as *happiness*, it fits well in the current study because it deals with lexical or concrete English Homophonous and Homographic words. It should be noted that *Reference Theory* ought to be used in a restrictive sense, not in the way it is used in the philosophies of language. This is in the sense that homophones and homographs refer to different things or meanings. That is to say, for instance, *sea* (a water body) is different from the *see* (vision), as each implies to a different referent (reference in restrictive sense).

METHODOLOGY

The article employs a qualitative research approach whereby words, phrases and sentences were analyzed. Qualitative research explains data descriptively in the form of written or oral words from a person or activity being researched (Moleong, 1991). A critical literature analysis was used to gather data. The author read and evaluated written documents about homophones and homographs and made judgments based on reason (Cf. Mingers, 2000). Here, the researcher read keenly the written documents to identify what is true from what is not true about English homophones and homographs. This was done by evaluating the information and making judgments in order to arrive at a logical conclusion.

Presentation of the findings English Homophones

To the best of my knowledge, these are words with the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings. The same is conceived by Bratiwi, (2019:3) who is of the opinion that a 'Homophone is a word that is pronounced the same as another word but has a different meaning or spelling or both'. With this definition, words qualify to be homophones if they have the same pronunciation but different spellings. This definition would not cover the following words which are thought to be homophones in some literatures. See sample 1 below:

1. (a) Ate

(b) Eight

The above English lexemes have been described by different scholars (cf. Ibrahim, 2008) as homophones. With reference to our definition of homophones as lexemes having the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings, in this context, the claim made by Ibrahim and other scholars who have written on the topic under discussion is untrue. *Ate* and *eight* are pronounced as /eit/ as these scholars have described them, thus they seem to be homophonous words. Yet, *eight* is pronounced as /eit/ (especially by American speakers) while *ate* is pronounced as /et/ (especially by British speakers). This means that the pronunciation of the former takes a long duration, with a *fortis* in it while the pronunciation of the latter takes a short duration with a *lenis* in it. The same understanding of the same author underlies the treatment of *affect* and *effect* as homophones. See Sample 2 below:

1. (a) Affect

(b) Effect

The data above are usually treated as homophones, but based on the definition of homophones offered above; they do not qualify to be homophones since they differ in pronunciation. *Affect* is pronounced as /ə'fekt/ and while *effect* is pronounced /ɪ'fekt/. The understanding of the writers who describe these as homophones is probably influenced or misled by the interpretive theory of meaning (cf, Lakoff, 1974), which takes into account the context of a *situation*, for instance social status, politeness, formality to mention but a few. Scholars who believe in this tool of analysis tend to generalize homophones as it has been observed (cf. Ibrahim, 2008). The same applies to the data below, which are claimed to be homophones:

2. (a) Accept

(b) Except

The data in 3 are not homophones for they are not pronounced in the same way and they have different spellings and meanings. The lexeme *accept* is pronounced as /ək'sept/ while its counterpart *except* is pronounced as /ɪk'sept/. These data (Cf. 1-3) are in justification with the tool of analysis, the Semantic Theory, as used in this paper. The case is a different phenomenon in 4 below:

3. (a) Sea

(b) See

The data in 4 prove that the words *see* (of vision) and *sea* (of water) are pronounced the same way as /si/ though they have different spellings and meanings. In that case, these lexemes qualify as homophonous English words. The treatment of the data in 4 has much to do with generative semantics theory, which attributes meaning to the context of situation (Ramadan and Ababneh, 2013). This means that the context of 4(a) differs from the context of 4(b), thus understanding each one's context makes it simple for the learners or readers to differentiate homophones from words that are not homophones.

There are other data given by Ibrahim (2008:9) which deviate from what is true about homophones. Ibrahim gives us the following English examples when he defines homophones as words having different spellings and there is nearness in their pronunciation and meaning. See the data in 7 below:

4. (a) Prince Vs prints

(b) Presence Vs present

(c) Tense Vs tents

The data in 7 are clearly identified as lexical words which are be considered as homophones less commonly. However, even before transcribing them, the fact that the lexemes in each pair have different pronunciations is quite plain. For example, *presents* cannot be pronounced in the same way as *presence*. Therefore, these words are

not homophones. Within the framework of semantic theory, homophones are having their own meanings (Lewis, 1970), but confusion about their semantic scopes (Cf. 7) is triggered by a person's paradigmatic understanding and not by the words' themselves.

Homographs

Homographs have been confusing English writers as the meaning of the term is sometimes not reflected by the data they present. Etymologically, the term homograph is from the Greek: ὁμός, *homós*, "same" and γράφω, *gráphō*, "write". Thus, homographs are words that share the same written form but they have different semantic scope or meaning. In other words, homographs are lexemes which have the same spelling but different pronunciation and meanings. One should not be confused by the prosodic features that form part of the pronunciation in natural languages of the world. See the sample in 13 below if they qualify be English Homographs:

13. (a) Well

(b) Well (Ibrahim, 2008:13)

The lexemes *well* for 'fine' in 13 (a) and *well* for 'water' in 13 (b) differ in meaning but their spelling and pronunciation are the same. That is to say, both are articulated as /wel/. Considering explanations given earlier, it is clear that these lexemes are not homographs simply because they are not pronounced differently. Richard, (2019) defines homographs are words that have the same spelling but differ in meaning and sometimes pronunciation. The term *sometimes* in his definition is problematic, it means that the pronunciation of homographs can be the same or not in some contexts. Richard gave us the following examples of homographs to reflect his definition:

14 (a) Conduct (Noun)

(b) Conduct (Verb)

The data in (14) are words that have different meanings and pronunciations. Their prosodic features in their articulation should not confuse anyone e.g. conduct (noun) is pronounced as /kɒndʌkt/ and conduct (verb) is pronounced as /kə'ndʌkt/. It must be noted that prosodic features such as stress and tone cannot trigger changes at the vowel or consonant level e.g. x to y or/and [p] > [ʌ] but they can do so at the level beyond segments as explained in suprasegmental phonology (Goldsmith, 1976). With this understanding, the lexeme conduct qualifies to be a homographic word.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Homophonous lexemes are words that are pronounced the same but have different spelling. So, words like *accept* and *except* are not homophones because they are pronounced differently. Likewise, *well* (water) and *well* (fine) found in Ibrahim (2008) are not homophones though they are pronounced in the same way and have different meanings since their spelling is the same: it qualifies to be a homonym. True homophones are words such as *bred* and *bread* (Gorfein, 2008:13) since they are pronounced similarly but their meanings and spellings are different. Homographs also should be treated with care, not all words listed in some documents qualify to be homographs. The definition of homograph should base on phonetic and phonological reasons. Some scholars have offered good definitions of the term homograph. For instance, Palmer (1984:101), Allan (1986:151) Gramley and Pätzold (1991:13) and Richards & Schmidt (2002:241) agree that homographs are words that are written in the same way but pronounced differently and have different meanings. Well known examples of homographs are *lead* (metal) and *lead* (guide). To this point, I agree with them. However, it is to be noted that when a scholar goes on arguing, he or she reaches a point where she/he makes a mistake. This is what Richards & Schmidt have done in some sorts. For example, though their definition of homograph makes sense, Schmidt and Richard (2002:241) argue

that the term ‘homograph’ is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘homonym’, something which is wrong as far as a homograph is all about.

Ibrahim (2008:25-29) presents a list of 8 words that he treats as homographs in his research. These are: *well, sow, fine, evening, second, does and lead*. Within this list, only one lexeme, particularly *lead*, qualifies to be a homograph. The rest do not. However, homographs are being words that have different pronunciations and meanings but their spelling should be the same. See the sample in 15 below:

15. Live

This lexeme is a true English homograph because it is pronounced differently and has different semantic scopes e.g. lives as in /lrv/ classed in the group of verbs and live as in /larv/ placed in the adjective category. Consider the following examples in 15 below:

15. (a) They /lrv/ at Magomen

(b) The match is /larv/ now

The sentences in 15 (a) and (b) attest evidence that *live* /liv/ and *live* /laiv/ are homographs as the two sentences feature the same lexical form *live* but it is pronounced differently and bears different meanings.

As homographs and homophones prove to be confusing, I develop a framework which can help us to know what homophone and homograph are and what are not: This is presented in the figure below.

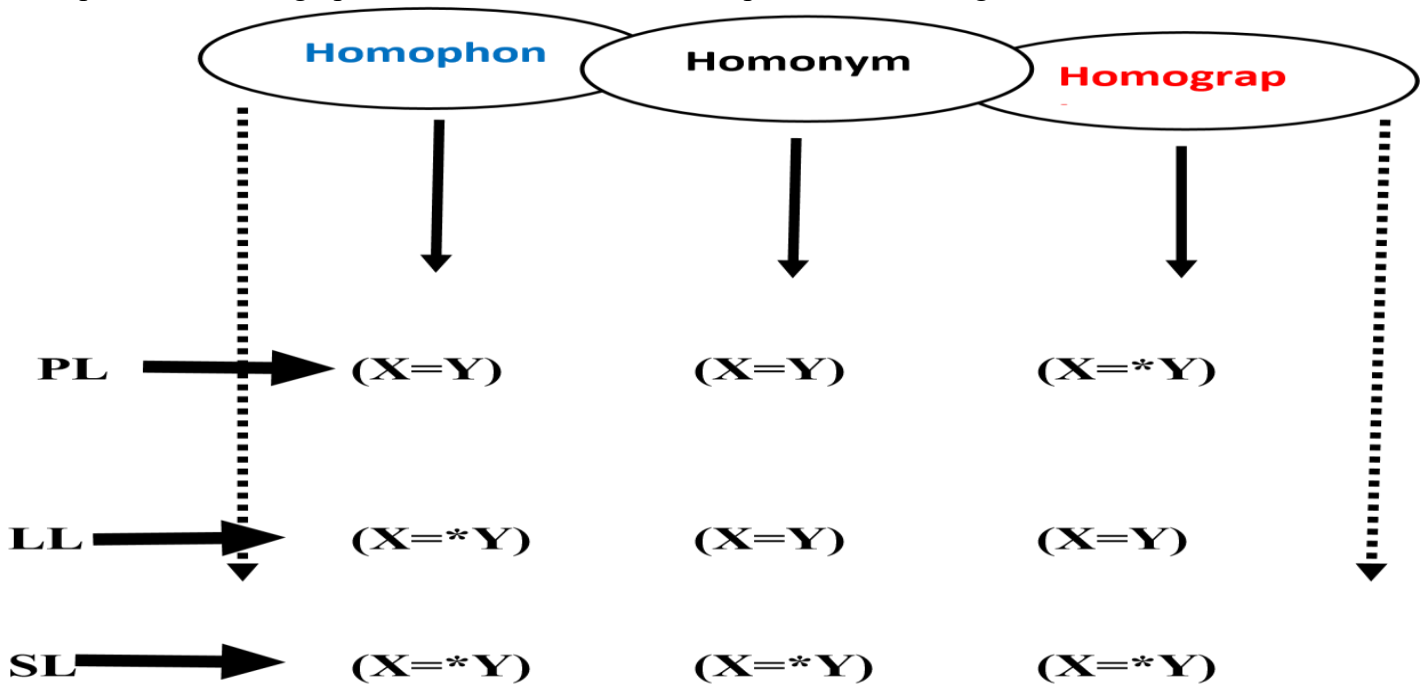


Figure 1: The meaning of homophone, homograph and homonym

The figure above indicates the three concepts and their specification of meaning. For the case of homophones X=Y stands lexemes that are similar at the phonetic level (articulation) hence forth (PL), but different at the semantic level, i.e. X=*Y (SL) means that their meanings are different. For the case of Homonym, X=Y implies that sounds are articulated in the same way and have the same spelling at the lexical level (LL). This means that the word has the same phonetic and lexical forms though having different meaning while X=*Y implies that the way sounds are articulated is not the same but the morphology or orthography of the lexeme is the same.

CONCLUSION

The paper has made a critique on English Homophones and Homographs with reference to morphophonological /or and lexical analysis. It has been observed that various scholars confuse homophones and homographs in their definitions and the data they cite as examples. Thus, it is common for them to treat 'conduct' (VERB) and 'conduct' (NOUN) as homophones though there is pronunciation difference that is triggered by lexeme itself. However, prosodic features should not be referred to in the definition homographic English words since they are not part and parcel of the segments.

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