

An account of ambiguity as a feature evident in Ekegusii homograph sets

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Abstract: The paper is based on the premise that any set of homographs in Ekegusii can be ambiguous if their contexts are merely considered during an interlocution. In this regard, limited adherence to the variations in meaning and pronunciation in different sets of homographs in Ekegusii can lead to communication breakdown. In speech for instance, a speaker can have limited knowledge or deliberately omit supra-segmental features that aid in comprehending the variations that exist between different sets of homographs. Therefore, the investigation aims at determining the extent to which ambiguity can be accounted for in Ekegusii homograph sets. The paper utilizes the Generative Lexicon Theory by Pustejovsky (1995). A descriptive research design was adopted. Data collection involved the use of a focus group discussion where six respondents drawn from Bogiakumu location in Kisii County were used as participants. Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants based on their proficiency and how they articulated Ekegusii expressions by making clear and consistent tonal distinctions. A combined data elicitation method from Ekegusii native speakers and the researcher's native speaker intuition was used to collect homograph sets for analysis. It is hoped that, the investigation will aid towards eliminating any prejudices that might render incomprehensibility due to the inability to accurately pronounce or write sets of homographs in the language.

Keywords: Ambiguity, compositionality, homographs, meaning, under-specification

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Introduction

The paper is on Ekegusii, a Bantu language spoken by Abagusii who reside in the regions of Kisii and Nyamira counties of Kenya (Basweti, Barasa & Michira, 2015). However, these counties are known to be the native homelands for most Ekegusii speakers who are now found in different regions inside and outside Kenya which is as far as the diaspora. Furthermore, we also have speakers of Ekegusii language who are not Abagusii since they have learnt it in the course of time and are able to use it for communication. Therefore, ethnologue Maho (2008) classifies Ekegusii into zone JE42 Narrow East African Bantu language.

Studies in Ekegusii such as Aunga (2011), Opande (2018), Omoke, Barasa and Basweti (2018) reveal that Ekegusii is characterized by multiple meaning words which form part of its vocabulary. For instance, Aunga focuses on establishing distinctions between homonymous and polysemous senses in Ekegusii. His study is founded upon the existing controversies whether a lexeme is polysemous or homonymous. His findings established that besides same orthography, polysemous senses are also related by meaning extensions. On the other hand, he established that homonymous senses are related only in orthography. Opande (2018) studied the meaning for Ekegusii polysemes by utilizing a relevance theoretical approach. This study established that, the meaning of a polysemous word is inferred pragmatically. Wherefore, the addressee endeavors to deduce the concept that has been encoded by the speaker. In the same regard, the investigation by Omoke et al. (2018), focused on how antonyms, homonyms and polysemes are gaining new meanings. Therefore, from the insights on the existence of multiple meaning words in the language, there is need to focus on how homographs in Ekegusii can be accounted for by utilizing a Generative Lexicon approach. This is because one of the sources of ambiguity in a language is the presence homographs (Attia, 2008).

Richards and Schmidt (2002) define homographs as sets of words that are written in the same way, but their pronunciations and meanings are different. In other words, sets of words are homographs when they are spelled the same way but have varied pronunciations which denote different concepts. Therefore, variations between homograph sets are in their sound and meaning. In their analysis of English homographs, Gee and Harris (2010) observe that the English language exhibit an aspect of incomprehensibility because many words are spelled the same but have different meanings and pronunciations. Thus, indicating that devoid of context, it is not easy to establish the kind of pronunciation that applies to a homograph set. However, their analysis by Gee et.al is quite different from the current one since they consider homographs as ambiguous words which have the same spelling but different meanings. Nevertheless, their assertion is in consonance with this analysis, however the current paper considers homograph sets as having different pronunciations as well. Otherwise, in Ekegusii there exist words with the same spelling and pronunciation but are different in meaning and this are either polysemous or homonymous senses depending on meaning relations (Aunga, 2011).

Therefore, by considering of the above definitions of homographs, pronunciation, meaning and ambiguity are the notable features. For instance, pronunciations variations between sets of homographs in Ekegusii provides the avenue to establishing their meaning variations. Accordingly, Roach (2009) points out that there is lack of correspondence between English spelling and pronunciation. This is in the same respect with Ekegusii homographs and the major reason that propels such an aspect is the presence of more than one pronunciation for particular word forms which are written the same. This couples with the fact that, a language such as Ekegusii has sounds which share certain articulatory properties. This results into slight pronunciation variations in such sounds like it is the case with the Ekegusii mid-vowels /ɛ/ and /e/, or /ɔ/ and /o/. Therefore, Roach (2009) considers such a phenomenon as being problematic thus suggesting the need to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than graphemes.

According to Leech (1981), ambiguity in linguistics occurs when there is more than one cognitive meaning for the same piece of language. This state is possible when a word, phrase or sentence reveals more than one interpretation or meaning. Leech gives a distinction between lexical and structural ambiguities. Lexical ambiguity is closely related by the semantic meanings of words whereas structural ambiguity is derived

from grammatical and syntactic forms. A glimpse through leech's work provides insight into this paper. A word form attributed to homographic features depict an aspect of lexical ambiguity. This is because such a word form stands freely to any possible pronunciation and meaning that is relevant. Otherwise, ambiguity arises when a single word or string of words is associated in the language system with more than one meaning (McConnell- Ginet, 2000).

Methodology

The paper is descriptively based in design. This is because, descriptive studies are not only restricted to fact finding, but may often result in the formulation of important principles of knowledge and solution to significant problems (Kerlinger, 1969). A combined data elicitation method from Ekegusii native speakers and the researcher's native speaker intuition was used to purposively collect and analyze data. The investigation's data was collected using focus group discussions with six respondents in Bogiakumu location, Kisii County. This follows Krueger and Casey (2000), who recommend that six to eight (6-8) respondents in administering a focus group discussion are sufficient. The choice of respondents was done purposively facilitated by native speaker intuition. Data analysis was done qualitatively and presented in the form of texts.

Results and discussions

The paper aimed at accounting for ambiguity evident in Ekegusii homographs. This investigation is informed by ten sentences which were composed of homographs in Ekegusii. This was purposively done with the aim of establishing how the respondents interpreted sentences that are composed of homograph characters in the language. The deductions under each sentence were provided in line with the reactions given by the participants as shown below;

1. *Emerango ye'ekoroba eria nigo esiekire korwa igoro*
'The doors of that apartment are closed since yesterday/ from up.'

The English translation of the above Ekegusii sentence uses forward slash symbol (/) to indicate the two alternative translations that come as a result of the homograph *igoro*. Therefore, the alternative phonemic forms of the sentence are showing deviation in pronunciation of the homograph are as follows;

- I. /emerango je:koroβa eria niyo esiekire korwa iyɔrɔ/
- II. /emerango je:koroβa eria niyo esiekire korwa iyoro/

The homograph *igoro* in sentence 1 above could mean "yesterday" to denote time or it could mean "up" to denote position. Otherwise, there were varied responses in as far as interpreting the sentence was concerned. Therefore, three of the respondents pronounced the word as /iyɔrɔ/ which denoted "yesterday" while one pronounced it as /iyoro/ which was interpreted as "above". However, two out of the six respondents were able to understand that the word "Igoro" as it appears in the sentence above, could result into two alternative pronunciations and meanings. Hence, providing two alternative interpretations of the sentence as;

- a) The doors of that flat are closed from above
- b) The doors of that flat are closed since yesterday

The varied responses in sentence 1, above indicate that homographs are ambiguous. Devoid of context, the word *igoro* is lacking specification hence, according to Pustejovsky (1995), such a word is underspecified. Therefore, it was argued out that context specific words should be adhered to especially in sentences that constitute of homographs. Hence, the above sentence could not be regarded ambiguous if for instance we added the word *botuko* (provided by one of the respondents) which is translated as "night". Hence, it was

concluded that, the meaning of the above sentence could have been specific if the sentence had been constructed as indicated below;

Emerango ye'ekoroba eri nigo esiekire korwa Igoro botuko.

/emerango je:koroba eri niyo esiekire korwa iyɔrɔ βotuko/

'The doors of that flat are closed since last night.'

This was done to maintain congeniality with Hirst (1992) who asserted that, for word sense disambiguation, one should have knowledge of context, a mechanism to find associations between nearby words, a mechanism to handle syntactic disambiguation cues, a mechanism to handle selectional restriction reconciliation negotiations between ambiguous words and finally, inference. This assertion aided in soliciting to provide the contextual word *botuko* for the sentence. Hence, it was consensually argued out that, the meaning of the sentence had now become clear and specific. Thus, the word *botuko* did not only specify what the sentence means but as well specifying how the homograph *igoro* should be pronounced. Therefore, by linking the above assertion to compositionality principle in GLT, it means structures that are ambiguous can be disambiguated. This can be achieved by first understanding the larger context in which a particular homograph has been used and to facilitate this are the words used. Thus, being appropriate in pronunciation of an ambiguous word per se, result into effective understanding of the message.

2. *Omoibori omuya tabwenereti koraria abana baye mwa'abanto bande.*

'A good parent should not lay/announce his or her children in other people's homes.'

The alternative phonemic forms of the above Ekegusii sentence are shown below;

- I. */omoiβori omuja taβwenereti kora:ria aβa:na βaje mwa:βanto βande/*
- II. */omoiβori omuja taβwenereti koraria aβa:na βaje mwa:βanto βande/*

The homograph *koraria* does not convey a precise meaning for the sentence. As noted by the above phonemic forms of the sentence is that, the sentence has two meanings. Therefore, it was consensually reached by the six respondents that the word is underspecified. What facilitated their understanding that the word conveys more than one meaning is the fact that analysis for sentence 1 provided insight into the nature of homographic words. Therefore, to portray its revelation of ambiguity, the sentence was broken down into two different meanings as provided below;

- a) A good parent is not supposed to announce/expose his or her children to other people.
- b) A good parent is not supposed to lay his or her children in other people's homes.

The above sentences in (a) and (b) are an indication that the sentence revealed ambiguity as it was stated by the respondents. The alternative pronunciations of the homograph *koraria* are; */koraria/* and */kora:ria/* which is meant for "announce" and "lay someone or something", respectively.

However, the sentence can convey a precise meaning if certain words are included in the sentence as it was provided below;

Omoibori onde bwensi tabwenereti koraria amamocho ya' abana mwa' abanto bande.

/omoiβori onde βwensi taβwenereti koraria amamɔʃɔ ja aβa:na βaje mwa:βanto βande/

"No parent is expected to announce/reveal the mistakes of their children to other people."

Despite having the words announce and lay denoting actions (used a verbs), addition of the word *amamocho* which is translated for 'mistakes' makes the meaning of the respective homograph to be explicit. This is because mistakes cannot be laid but can be understood

3. *Tinamaete ing'a esese neite omento.*

'I did not know that tuberculosis/a dog can kill a person.'

The homograph *esese* in Ekegusii is translated for tuberculosis or dog. Therefore, this results into two different pronunciations of the word. Thus, it results into two different phonemic forms that can be depicted by the word *esese* as indicated below;

- I. /tiname:te ŋa εε:ε neite omonto/
- II. /tiname:te ŋa ese:se neite omonto/

The homograph *esese* leads to unprecise meaning in the above sentence 3. Therefore, the sentence can be translated into two alternatives as shown below;

- a) I didn't know that a dog can kill a person.
- b) I didn't know that tuberculosis can kill a person.

According to the responses provided, it was concluded that both a dog and tuberculosis can kill hence the meaning conveyed is not clear. Thus, a reader cannot pronounce the word 'esese' different from how it was intended because the words used together with the word do not favor the realization of its context. That is, if for example we had the sentence as;

Tinamaete ing'a esese no'borwaire bogoita.
/tiname:te ŋa εεεε no:βorwaire βo:yoita/

'I didn't know that tuberculosis is a killer disease'

Therefore, addition of the utterance *noborwaire* translated as 'is a disease' stipulates the context of the word of the initially underspecified word whose meaning has now become clear. Thus, it is pronounced as /εεεε/ to mean 'tuberculosis.

4. *Amariko yo'omong'ina ori nigo are amake mono.*

'The handwriting/ fireplaces of that woman are very small.'

The homograph *amariko* has resulted in two alternative meanings that can be obtained from the sentence. The following phonemic forms indicate how the homograph can be pronounced resulting in two alternative pronunciations and meanings as shown below;

- I. /amari:ko jo:moŋina ori niyɔ are amake/
- II. /amariko jo:moŋina ori niyɔ are amake/

The word *amariko* in the above sentence is a homograph. When its phonemic form is /amari:ko/ then it is denoting 'fonts or handwriting' and when the form is /amariko/ then it is referring to 'the fire place'. Therefore, the above word makes the sentence ambiguous hence resulting into two different translations as indicted below;

- a) That woman's handwriting is too small.
- b) That woman's fire place is too small.

However, despite the alternatives, the respondents argued that the translation in (b) above could be carrying the implied meaning. This is because we tend to associate women to cooking places. This is opposed to aspects relating to handwriting which are seldom associated to women. Nevertheless, from the opinion given by the respondents, a consensus was arrived at and the opinion was that, contextual words that stipulate the pronunciation and meaning of homographs should be given much focus.

5. *Ekebago keru nkeratoka goikera rero.*

'The hoe/thug has not been found to date.'

As indicated by the English translation, the initial word *ekebago* does not clearly indicate whether it is the hoe or thug which is being denoted. Therefore, it results into the following two sentences which stipulate the phonemic forms of the sets that are deduced from the homograph *ekebago* as shown below;

- I. /εκεβayo kerɪ ŋkeratoka yoikera re:ro/
- II. /ekeβa:yo kerɪ ŋkeratoka yoikera re:ro/

The word *ekebago* is a homograph whose meaning, and pronunciation is not precise. The above word has two phonemic forms /εκεβayo/ and /ekeβa:yo/ when referring to 'a hoe' and 'thug', respectively. Therefore, the word *ekebago* has been underspecified because there is neither of the above that is contributing to a precise meaning. Thus, the translations provided by respondents are shown as;

- a) That thug has not been found to date.
- b) That hoe has not been found to date.

The two sentences reveal that the sentence in example 5 is ambiguous because it is not clear-cut whether it is a hoe, or it is a thug who has not been found.

6. *Kora egasi yago omanyē koragera.*
'Finish/do your work before eating.'

As indicated below, the homograph *kora* in Ekegusii means either "finish" when the vowel phoneme /o/ is prolonged, or it could as well mean "do" when the same phoneme is not prolonged during articulation. Therefore, the resultant phonemic forms of the sentence are as indicated below;

- I. /ko:ra eya:si jayo omaŋe kora:yera/
- II. /kora eya:si jayo omaŋe kora:yera/

Accordingly, the word *kora* in the above sentence does not convey a specific meaning. It results into different interpretations as outlined below;

- a) Do your work so that you can eat.
- b) Finish your work before eating

According to the responses given, the word can mean 'do' and 'finish'. However, no word has been used in the sentence to favor the conveyance of a specific meaning since work can be done as well as finished so that one can eat. Nevertheless, the sentence can be disambiguated by adding words that can work mutually with the homograph 'kora' so as to convey a specific meaning. Thus, one of the respondents provided the following sentence;

Kogokora egasi eyu ogache kera egentō.
'When you finish that work, ensure you keep all tools.'

By adding the phrase 'keep all tools' implies that the sense denoted is 'finish' and not 'do'. Therefore when the intended meaning is 'do', the expected phonemic form is /kora/ and when it is attached to finish, the phonemic form is /ko:ra/.

7. *Tinaraire buya ase eng'encho yo'obororo naigwete.*
'I did not sleep well because of the pain/ fowl flea that I felt.'

The homograph *obororo* is distinguished on the basis of vowel type to give two alternative phonemic forms as shown below;

- I. /tinaraire βuja ase enje:nɸo jo oβororo naiywete/
- II. /tinaraire βuja ase enje:nɸo jo ɔβɔrɔrɔ naiywete/

The homograph *obororo* as it appears in the above sentence reveals ambiguity. This word refers to 'pain' and 'fowl flea' all of which can be felt as seen in the following translations.

- a) I did not sleep comfortable because of the pain that I felt.
- b) I did not sleep comfortable because of the fowl fleas that I felt.

However, it was argued that because fowl fleas can be felt moving through the skin as opposed to pain, then the sentence can be modified to be specific like the one below;

Tinaraire buya ase eng'encho yo'obororo naigwete bogontaraa.
/tinaraire βuja ase enje:nɸo jo ɔβɔrɔrɔ naiywete βoyonta:ra/
'I did not sleep comfortable because of the fowl fleas that were moving'

Though orthographically presenting two different concepts, the word *obororo* has now been specified hence can be pronounced as /ɔβɔrɔrɔ/ which is meant for 'fowl-flea'.

8. *Omogeni ochire.*

'The visitor has come/gone.'

The homograph presented in the above sentence is *ochire* which means either come or gone depending on how one pronounces it. However, because no word which facilitates its precise meaning, the following phonemic forms were deduced for the entire sentence;

- I. /ɔmɔyeni oɸire/
- II. /ɔmɔyeni oɸi:re/

The above sentence presents the homograph *ochire* which means either 'He/she has come' or 'He/she has gone' whose phonemic forms are /oɸire/ and /oɸi:re/, respectively. The two alternative pronunciations are an indication that the homograph results to ambiguity. However, it was argued that the sentence can be modified by adding words which can specify the meaning. This can be for instance as indicated in the sentence below;

Omogeni ochire sobo.
/ɔmɔyeni oɸi:re so:βo/
'The visitor has gone home.'

Addition of the word *sobo* (home), stipulates how the word *ochire* ought to be pronounced so that it conveys the intended meaning.

9. *Teri boronge gotacha amariba atereime ande onsi.*

'It is not right to step/fetch dirty water that has stagnated anywhere.'

The homograph *gotacha* in the above sentence is meant for step or fetch as shown I the above English sentence. Therefore, lack of precise meaning results into two phonemic forms of the sentence as shown below;

- I. /teri βoronge yotaɸa amariβa atere:ime ande ɔnsi/

complex or rather ambiguous expressions like homographs. Therefore, there is no communication breakdown when homographs are composed in a manner that specifies the context. This is because, native speaker intuition guides in comprehending how a homograph set should be pronounced guided by the context in which it occurs.

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