Homonyms in Jordanian and Kuwaiti Arabic: A Contrastive Semantic Study

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Abstract

Homonyms can present ambiguities at both the lexical and syntactic levels that can cause misunderstandings and serious communication problems among speakers in any language. The present study describes some cases of homonymy in Jordanian and Kuwaiti Arabic and provides a contrastive semantic study between homonyms in these two Arabic dialects. The results show some major similarities and differences between the two dialects' homonyms, while the analysis attempts to disambiguate the meanings that arise from such homonyms by relating each homonym to its social physical context or the original object that its lexeme refers to.

Keywords: semantics, homonymy, lexical level, syntactic level, ambiguity, Jordanian Arabic, Kuwaiti Arabic.

1. Introduction

Any language consists of an inventory of lexical items that have meanings. Lexical items are words that can be any part of speech (e.g. nouns, verbs, adverbs, or adjectives). For example, *run* is a lexical item that can be used as a noun or verb, and *slowly* is a lexical item that is always an adverb.

Homonyms are words of similar forms and pronunciation that have different meanings (Lyons, 1977). In English, the word *bank,* for example, has a similar form with two different meanings (Lyons, 1977). The first meaning is a place for withdrawing money and the second meaning is a place for boating or fishing.

Homonyms are classified into different types based on certain criteria. A common classification divides homonyms into two types: total (also called *absolute*) and partial (Löbner, 2013). Total, or absolute, homonyms are two lexemes that have the same orthography, pronunciation and are of the same grammatical category (Löbner, 2013). For example, the adjective *light* meaning the opposite of *dark* or the opposite of *heavy* is a total homonym. On the other hand, partial homonyms are two lexemes that do not share all of their properties. For example, the past tense verb *read* and the noun *red* share pronunciation but have different orthography and are of different grammatical categories (Löbner, 2013).

Lyons (1977) identified certain conditions that are necessary to classify homonyms as total or partial: the two lexemes, Li and Lj, must meet the following three conditions to be classified as total or partial homonyms:
(i) $L_i = L_j$ (lexemic distinctness),
(ii) $L_i == L_j$ (syntactic equivalence),
(iii) $L_i^* = L_j^*$ (formal identity).

For the purpose of this study, the researchers' classifications are based on Lyon's (1977) classification, as the syntactic equivalence condition clearly determines whether a homonym is total or not. Two lexemes are equivalent syntactically if they belong to the same class (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), and two lexemes are formally identical if they share the same phonological and orthographic forms (Lyons, 1977).

Lexical ambiguity refers to the uncertainty of a word's meaning in a particular language use, and homonyms are a source of lexical ambiguity when they are used in contexts that do not clearly indicate which meaning is intended. For example, the sentence *I went to the bank* is ambiguous because it could mean the speaker either went to a place for financial business or to a place for boating or fishing (Kreidler, 1998).

In Arabic, AL-Ghazali (2016) defined homonymy as "(Al-moStarakallafdi) or (al- motajanisallafdi) or (al-motaSabihallafdi), that means the similarity in pronunciation" (p. 527). Generally, homonyms in Arabic are two words that have an identical form but are different in meaning and may belong to different parts of speech. In the following example, the word *ye-raHa-ay* has two meanings: the speaker's palms and the poet's wounds:
Yerahaay:

abifrukCanlemaadmeCenyeraHaay
Want rub until bloody my palms
"I want to rub my palms until the blood comes out."
Bsababkil-Heentilla Cmenyera Haay
Because every time painful my wounds
"Because every time my wounds are painful" (AL-Ghazali, 2016, p. 528)

Homonyms have been recognized in previous studies on Arabic homonyms. For example, Salim (2013) pointed out a number of homonyms that are used in Jordanian Arabic, such as *sakani*, which has two meanings: *a green color* or *my residence*. Other researchers focused on how the ambiguity of homonyms affects translation (Rabadi 2015), while Almajdoa (2016) investigated how learners access online Arabic lexical items, including homonyms. However, while a number of studies have investigated Arabic homonyms, little attention has been given to the ambiguity found in Arabic homonyms and how this ambiguity could be resolved. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official spoken and written language in many countries, including Kuwait and Jordan. Jordanian Arabic (JA) is the spoken dialect used in Jordan (Sa'aida, 2017), and Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) is the spoken dialect used in the daily conversations between Kuwaitis in Kuwait (Al-Enezi, 2017). These dialects contain homonyms that can result in ambiguities which need to be resolved.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify some common homonyms used in JA and KA and to classify them as either total or partial homonyms. It also intends to determine how to best resolve the ambiguity of these homonyms for each dialect. Finally, it will look at similarities and differences between the homonyms as used in these two Arabic dialects. The homonyms chosen for this study were those that occur in spontaneous spoken conversations among Jordanians and Kuwaitis and that have the greatest propensity for ambiguity. The homonyms were chosen from the common knowledge of the writers, as each is a native speaker of one of the two dialects. The analytical/descriptive approach was used to analyze the data, and translation and transliteration were used to present the data.

2. Homonyms in JA and KA

As mentioned previously, there are two types of homonyms: total, or absolute, homonyms and partial homonyms. In JA and KA, there are both types of homonyms. Eleven homonyms were chosen for analysis, *seven* from KA and *four* from JA. First, total homonyms will be presented, followed by partial. Each homonym type will be analyzed for ambiguity, followed by suggestions as to how the ambiguity can be resolved.

2.1. Total (Absolute) Homonyms

Of the 11 homonyms chosen to analyze, there were four total homonyms, two in JA and two in KA. The following two pairs of sentences (a and b) are examples of this type of homonym in JA:

a.   Ya ductor bidi ʔʃeel *el mararah*. 'Doctor! I want to remove ***the gallbladder***.'
      batilit ʔʃʕur bi *el mararah* eli baʕiʃha bi ħlħaia. 'I am no longer experiencing ***bitterness*** in my life.'
b.   Qareet l *rai*. 'I read ***Al-Rai***.'
       smʕna *rai* il ahel. 'We have taken into account ***the family's opinion***.'

In the above examples, the words *el mararah* and *rai* are both absolute homonyms. In each example, these two lexemes are syntactically equivalent because they are both nouns, and their orthography and pronunciation are the same—only the meaning is different. In example a, there are two sentences with the homonym *el mararah* with two possible meanings.

Using Lyons' (1977) classification system, in the first sentence the homonym is the lexeme *el mararah* (Li), a noun meaning gallbladder, an organ in the body. In the second sentence, the homonym is the lexeme *el mararah* (Lj), a noun meaning bitterness. In example b, there are two sentences with the homonym *rai* with two possible meanings. The first homonym is the lexeme *rai* (Li), a noun meaning a newspaper. The second homonym is the lexeme *rai* (Lj), a noun meaning an opinion.

The homonyms in these examples can be ambiguous, but their ambiguity can be resolved in many ways. In the first sentence in example a, there must be reference to the social and/or physical context, and in this example there is. In the first part of this sentence, it is clear that there is a speaker, unknown, and an addressee, *doctor,* as preceded by the vocative particle *Yaa*. The word *doctor* implies that the addressor has a medical condition. The doctor as a participant in this discourse gives hints that the meaning of *el mararah* in the first sentence is gallbladder, an organ in the body. In the second sentence, *el mararah* seems to be related to an emotional status through the use of the verb, *ʕiʃha* meaning 'to experience.' This means that there is shared knowledge between people in respect to the context that one may suffer from a current painful state associated with 'bitterness'.

Similar cases were found in KA where absolute homonyms occurred. The following two examples show this type of homonym as used in KA:

c.   *ʕe:ni* itʕawirni. '**My *eye*** hurts me.'
     inta *ʕe:ni* bilmika:n. 'You are **my *spy*** in the place.'
d.   *ra:s* ilwalad ṣɣi:r. 'The kid's ***head*** is small.'
     uhwa *ra:s* ilmiʃkila. 'He is ***the reason*** that causes the problem.'

In the above sentences, the words *ʕe:ni* and *ra:s,* are absolute homonyms. Each pair of lexemes is syntactically equivalent as they share the same grammatical category, the first two (examples c and d) are all nouns. In c, the first homonym is the lexeme *ʕe:ni* (Li), a noun meaning *my eye*, an organ in the body. The second homonym is the lexeme *ʕe:ni* (Lj), a noun meaning *my spy*. In the second example (d), there are two homonyms with two possible meanings. The first homonym is the lexeme *ra:s* (Li), a noun meaning *head*, a part of the body. The second homonym is the lexeme *ra:s* (Lj), a noun meaning *reason*, the cause of a problem.

The homonyms shown in these sentences have the potential to be ambiguous, but their ambiguity can be resolved in many ways. In example c, the first sentence that uses the noun *ʕe:ni* makes it clear that it refers to an organ of the body because the verb *hurting* is used, a verb that describes what this organ can do in our bodies. However, as in the case of the JA homonym, *el mararah*, the ambiguity of *ʕe:ni* in KA, the second sentence in example c, cannot be resolved without referring to the social or physical context. In other words, this homonym takes its meanings from the contexts and events in which it occurs. The same noun refers to another noun, *spy*, when it is used in a context that would make it unlikely to be referring to an eye, as in the second sentence. In the second sentence, it cannot literally mean *my eye*, as eyes cannot occur in a place where the body is not present.

In example d above, the noun *ra:s* refers to a human head in the first sentence. However, it may also refer to a reason for something, as in the second sentence in example d. This meaning requires *ra:s* to occur in a social physical context, like in *uhwa ra:s ilmiʃkila* above. It means the main reason which can be referred by *ra:s*, as being the first reason of something with the highest potentiality as the head is the highest organ in the human body, so it takes its meaning from one characteristics of the original meaning of the lexeme.

In sum, the ambiguity of absolute homonyms in JA and KA can be resolved through the social physical contexts—situations, events, or emotional status. In KA, on the other hand, homonyms take their additional meanings from one or more characteristics of their original referent.

2.2 Partial Homonyms
As mentioned before, partial homonyms may occur in any dialect. While they have the exact phonetic and orthographic form, they are syntactically not the same; for example, one may be a noun while the other a verb. This section presents the seven partial homonyms that were found in the eleven selected, two from JA and five from KA. The following two examples show the JA partial homonyms:

e.   Allah bi *ʕunak* ya *ʕun*. '***May Allah help*** you, ***Aun***.'
f.   Ya rab ʔyamak *χadhrah* ya Abu *χadhrah*. 'Wishing you ***prosperous days***, Abu *χadhrah*.'

In these sentences, the words, *ʕun* and *χadhrah,* are partial homonyms. In the first sentence, they are not syntactically equivalent as one of them is a noun and the other is an adjective. In *Allah bi ʕunak ya ʕun*, *ʕun* could be: *ʕun* a verb meaning 'giving help', *ʕun* a noun meaning 'a name of a male boy.' In the last sentence, *χadhrah* could be: *χadhrah* an adjective meaning 'prospering or flourishing'; *χadhrah* a noun meaning 'a name of a female girl.'

These homonyms are ambiguous and their ambiguity can be resolved in the following way. In the first sentence, the ambiguity is resolved through the context. In the first sentence (e), we as readers or listeners can understand that the expressions like *Allah bi ʕunak or Allah bʕeen* are used in the Jordanian culture in order to comfort someone in a difficult situation. Therefore, it can be understood that this sentence is a part of conversation where the addressee is *ʕun.* In addition to the previous expression that forms a part of the Jordanian culture, the expression 'ʔyamak χadhrah' is culturally relevant and used to show the speaker's wishing for the addressee for best hopes for something. Moreover, in the Jordanian culture married men are named by the vocative particle Ya followed by their first child. Therefore, it can be understood that *χadhrah* in ya *Abu χadhrah* is a name—a female name. This type of homonym (partial) is also found in KA. In fact, KA is rich with partial homonyms and uses many nouns as adjectives with extremely different meanings to refer to referents. Five examples of this type of homonym in KA are given below to illustrate this:

g. ṭajiraw iljo:m *ṣa:ru:x*. 'A **rocket** was launched today.'
   ʃu:fi:ha *ṣa:ru:x*. 'Look at her; she is **very beautiful**.'
h. ha:ða *iʃa:ði* isɣi:r. 'This is a small **monkey**.'
   ja *iʃa:ði*. 'The **very ugly person** came.'
i. griṣatha *ħaja*. 'He was attacked by **a snake**.'
   ihja *ħaja.* 'She is **a snitch/backstabber**.'
j. ha:ða *gu:ṭi*. 'This is **a can**.'
   uhwa *gu:ṭi.* 'He is **very stupid**.'
k. ha:ði *nisra*. 'It is **a female eagle**.'
   ihja *nisra*. 'She is **a trouble maker.**'

In these examples, the words *ṣa:ru:x, iʃa:ði, ħaja, gu:ṭI,* and *nisra* are partial homonyms. In all the sentence pairs, they are not syntactically equivalent, as one is a noun and the other is an adjective with a very different meaning. For example, in the first sentence in example (g), the first homonym is *ṣa:ru:x* (Li), a noun meaning *rocket*, while in the second sentence, *ṣa:ru:x* (Lj) is an adjective meaning *very beautiful*. In the second example (h), in the first sentence, the homonym *iʃa:ði* is a noun meaning *monkey*, while in the second sentence it is an adjective meaning *very ugly*. In the third example (i), the meanings of *ħaja* are a noun meaning *snake* (first sentence) and an adjective meaning *snitch* or *backstabber* (second sentence). In the fourth example (j), *gu:ṭi* is first a noun meaning *a can*, while in the second sentence it is an adjective meaning *very stupid*. In the last example (k), the first sentence uses *nisra* as a noun meaning a *female eagle*, while the second uses it as an adjective meaning a *trouble maker*.

These homonyms can be ambiguous but their ambiguity can be resolved from the contexts or situations in which they occur. All the given lexical items are nouns and refer directly to their original referents in the first sentences of each example and refer to a different referent (i.e., have a different meaning) in the second sentences, each mostly taking their new meaning from one or more characteristics of the noun in the first sentence. They are partial homonyms because their syntactic class differs; they are either nouns or adjectives. Although their meanings are very different and often seem unrelated, *ṣa:ru:x*'s meaning of *very pretty* as an adjective is possibly taken from the power of the rocket, its meaning as a noun. The *very ugly* adjectival meaning of *iʃa:ði*' could be taken from the noun meaning *monkey*, as some may consider the animal ugly. At the same time, the *snitch* or *backstabber* meaning of the adjective *iʃa:ði* is possibly taken from how humans feel towards snakes (its noun's meaning), while *very stupid* could be inferred from the noun meaning of *gu:ṭi* (a can) because cans can be empty (i.e., an empty brain). Finally, *nisra* as a *trouble maker* is possibly taken from its noun meaning of a *female eagle*, a wild bird. Similar to absolute homonyms, the partial homonyms in KA take their meanings from the contexts in which they occur. Moreover, they also take their meanings from their original meaning, such as one characteristic from the meaning of the original referent of the lexeme.

In sum, the ambiguity of partial homonyms in JA and KA can be resolved through the social physical contexts—situations, events, or emotional status. In KA, these homonyms can also take their meanings from one or more characteristics of their original referents.

3. Conclusion

This paper presented a contrastive study of absolute and partial homonyms in JA and KA. It showed that these homonyms can result in lexical ambiguity.

It also discussed how this ambiguity might be resolved, which seems to differ between the two Arabic dialects in some cases but is the same in others. The paper indicated that the ambiguity of total homonyms is resolved though the social physical context in both JA and KA, as is the ambiguity of partial homonyms in JA. On the other hand, ambiguity occurring in KA consistently requires resolution through the context, event, or situation in which it occurs, with one homonym taking its meaning from some or more aspects of the other homonym's referent.

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List of Phonetic Symbols

Consonants	
Symbol	**Description**
/h/	voiceless glottal fricative
/ʔ/	voiceless glottal stop
/ħ/	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
/g/	voiced velar stop
/ɣ/	voiced uvular fricative
/q/	voiceless uvular stop
/x/	voiceless velar fricative
/ð/	voiced dental fricative
/θ/	voiceless inter-dental fricative
/ʕ/	voiced pharyngeal fricative
/k/	voiceless velar stop
/ʃ/	voiceless post-alveolar fricative
/tʃ/	voiceless palato-alveolar affricate
/d ʒ/	voiced palate-alveolar affricate
/r/	voiced alveolar liquid
/j/	voiced palatal glide
/z/	voiced alveolar fricative
/s/	voiceless alveolar fricative
/S/	voiceless alveolar emphatic fricative
/d/	voiced dental stop
/t/	voiceless dental stop
/T/	voiceless dental emphatic stop
/f/	voiceless labio-dental fricative
/b/	voiced bilabial stop
/m/	voiced bilabial nasal
/n/	voiced alveolar nasal
/l/	voiced alveolar lateral
/w/	voiced labio-velar glide

Vowels		
/i/ high front short unrounded		/ii/ high front long unrounded
/e/ mid front short unrounded		/ee/ mid front long unrounded
/o/ mid back short rounded		/oo/ mid back long rounded
/u/ high back short rounded		/uu/ high back long rounded
/a/ low central short unrounded		/aa/ low central long unrounded