Homonymy

LECTURE 5

HOMONYMY

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1. HOMONYMY AND HOMONYMS

Homomymy is recognized as a language universal. It creates lexical ambiguity in that a single form has two or more different meanings.

Homonyms – the words of one and the same language which are identical phonetically or graphically in all or several grammar forms (and in all or several phonetic and graphic variants) but which have essential difference in lexical or grammatical meanings.

Examples of homonyms:

1. ***bank***, n – a shore
2. ***bank***, n – an institution for receiving, lending, exchanging, and safeguarding money.

3. ***ball***, n – a sphere; any spherical body;
4. ***ball***, n – a large dancing p[arty.

Let’s consider the following sentences:

1. A penny is one **cent**.
2. The soap has a nice **scent**.
3. She **sent** me a letter.

4. The bridge is made of **steel**.
5. Do not **steal**.

Their identical forms are mostly accidental: the majority of homonyms coincided due to phonetic changes which they suffered during their development.

If synonyms and antonyms can be regarded as the treasury of the language's expressive resources, homonyms are accidental creations, and therefore purposeless.

In the process of communication they are more of an encumbrance, leading sometimes to confusion and misunderstanding.

The **pun** is a joke based upon the play upon words of similar form but different meaning (i. e. on homonyms) as in the following:

"*A tailor guarantees to give each of his customers a perfect fit*.«

The joke is based on the homonyms:

I. *fit,* n. — perfectly fitting clothes;

II. I. *fit,* n. — a nervous spasm.

Homonyms proper - the same in sound and spelling

The following joke is based on a pun which makes use of another type of homonyms:

"Waiter!"

"Yes, sir."

"What's this?"

"It's <u>bean</u> soup, sir."

"Never mind what it has <u>been</u>. I want to know what it is now."

Bean, n. and *been*, Past Part, of *to be* are homophones.

Examples of homophones

night, n. — ***knight***, n.;

piece, n. — ***peace***, n.;

scent, n. — ***cent***, n. — ***sent***, v. (Past Indef., Past Part, of *to send);*

rite, n. — ***to write***, v. — ***right***, adj.;

sea, *n*. — ***to see***, v. — ***C*** [si:] (the name of a letter).

Examples of homographs:

to bow [bau], v. - to incline the head or body in salutation

bow [bou], n. - a flexible strip of wood for propelling arrows

to lead [li:d],*v.* - to conduct on the way,

go before to show the way

lead [led], n - a heavy, rather soft metal;

to tear [teə], v.- to pull apart or in pieces by force

tear [tiə], n.- a drop of the fluid secreted by the lacrinial glands of the eye

2. SOURCES OF HOMONYMY

1. diverging meaning development (split polysemy)
2. loan words (borrowings);
3. shortening of words;
4. convergent sound development;
5. word-building (conversion).

Diverging meaning development (split polysemy) of a polysemantic word:

Flower **&** ***flour*** which originally were one word *(*ME**.** flour, cf. OFr. flour, flor, L. flos — florem**)** meaning ‘the flower’ and ‘the finest part of wheat’.

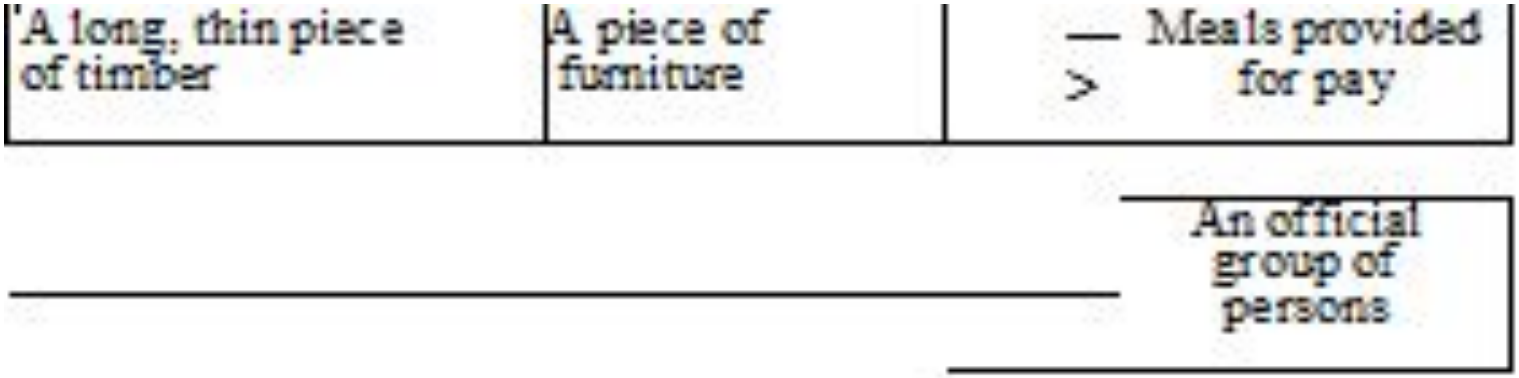
Let us consider the history of three homonyms:

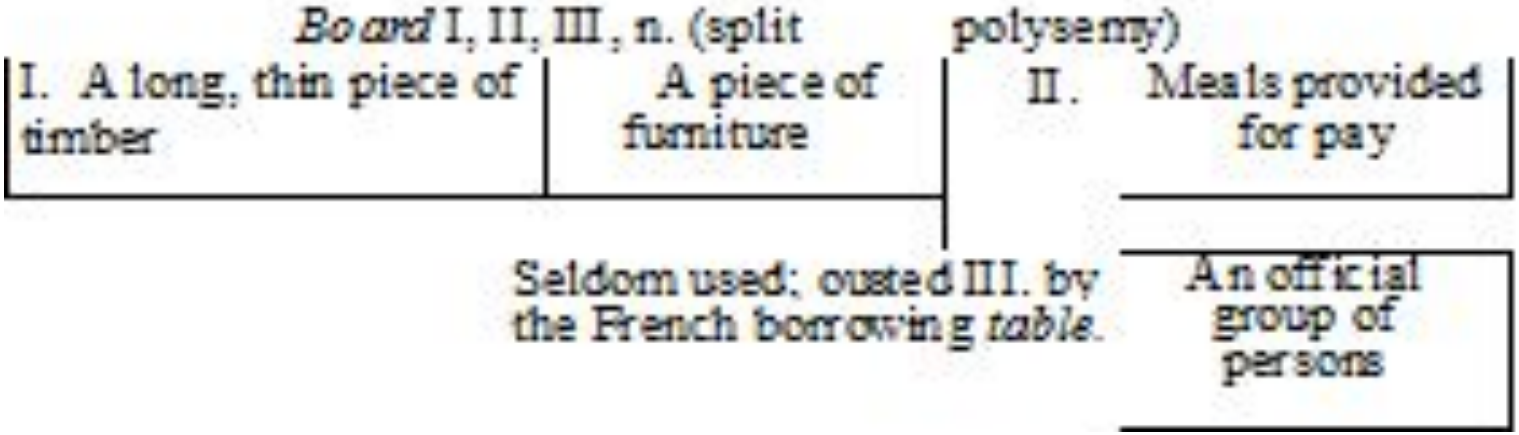
board*, n.* — a long and thin piece of timber

board*,* n. — daily meals, esp. as provided for pay, e. g. *room and board*

board*,* n. — an official group of persons who direct or supervise some activity, e. g. *a board of directors*

***Board*, n.** (development of meanings)





Example of split polysemy:

spring, n. — the act of springing, a leap

spring, n. — a place where a stream of water comes up out of the earth (R. *родник, источник)*

spring, n. — a season of the year.

Historically all three nouns originate from the same verb with the meaning of "to jump, to leap" (O. E. *sprin-gan),* so that the meaning of the first homonym is the oldest.

Loan words (borrowings) which were adapted

to the English standards in their pronunciation and spelling:

fair (a market) (L. *faria*) & ***fair*** (light colour) from '*fæger*';

rite, n. — ***to write***, v. — ***right***, adj. the second and third words are of native origin whereas *rite* is a Latin borrowing (< Lat. *ritus);*

piece, n. — ***peace***, п., the first originates from O.F. *pais,* and the second from O.F. (< Gaulish) *pettia.*

bank, n. ("shore") is a native word, and ***bank***, n. ("a financial institution") is an Italian borrowing;

match, n. ("a game; a contest of skill, strength") is native, and ***match***, n. ("a slender short piece of wood used for producing fire") is a French borrowing.

Shortening of words

flu, short for ***influenza*** is homonymous to ***flew***, past tense of the verb ‘to fly’;

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fan, n. "an enthusiastic admirer of some kind of sport or of an actor, singer, etc." is a shortening produced from ***fanatic***. Its homonym is a Latin borrowing ***fan***, n. ‘an implement for waving lightly to produce a cool current of air’;

rep, n. ‘a kind of fabric’ (cf. with the R. *penc)* has three homonyms made by shortening: *rep,* n. (< *repertory), rep,* n. (< *representative),* rep, n. (< *reputation)',* all the three are informal words;

During World War II girls serving in the Women's Royal Naval Service (an auxiliary of the British Royal Navy) were jokingly nicknamed ***Wrens*** (informal). This neologistic formation made by shortening has the homonym ***wren***, n. "a small bird with dark brown plumage barred with black”

Converging sound development - the coincidence of two or more words, which were phonetically distinct at an earlier date:

flower & ***flour*** (L. flos – florem);

night & ***knight*** were not homonyms in Old English as in Old English as the initial *k* in the second word was pronounced

A more complicated change of form brought together another pair of homonyms:

to knead (O.E. cnēdan) & ***to need*** (O.E. nēodian).

to write (O.E. writan) & ***right*** (O.E. reht, riht).

sea (O.E. sæ) & ***to see*** (O.E. sēon).

work, n (O.E. wyrkean) & ***to work***, v (O.E. weork)4

I OE. *Ic* & ***eye*** OE. *eaze* – MnE;

race 'running' (ON *ras)* & ***race*** 'a distinct ethnic stock' Fr. *race* - MnE.

Word-building (conversion):

Such pairs of words as ***comb***, n. — ***to comb***, v., ***pale***, adj. — ***to pale***, v., ***to make***, v. — ***make***, n. are numerous in the vocabulary.

Homonyms of this type, which are the same in sound and spelling but refer to different categories of parts of speech, are called **lexico-grammatical homonyms**.: *I need some good paper for my rooms* and *He is papering his room.*

III. CLASSIFICATIONS OF HOMOMYMS

3.1. Homonymy of Words and Homonymy of Word-forms. Full and Partial Homonyms Classification

Full homonyms are identical in sound in all their forms of paradigms of two or more different words:

- ***seal 1***'a sea animal' ***seal2***'a design printed on paper by
- *seals* *seals* means of a stamp'.
- *seal's* *seal's*
- *seals'* *seals'*

The paradigms of these words are identical and gives no indication of whether it is ***seal*1** or ***seal*2.**

- Compare the paradigms of ***seal***$_1$ and ***(to) seal***$_3$:

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seal$_1$ ‘a sea animal’ ***(to) seal***$_3$ ‘to close tightly’

seal	*seal*
seal’s	*seals*
seals	*sealed*
seals’	*sealing*, etc.

Although some individual word-forms are homonymous, the whole of the paradigm is not identical.

Partial homonymy

- is homonymy of individual word-forms:

to find	***to found***
found	*founded*
know	*no*
knows	*nose*
knew	*new*

Partial homonymy is possible within one part of speech:

Lie (lay, lain) — ‘to be in a horizontal or resting position’ and ***lie*** — ‘to make an untrue statement‘.

It is partial homonymy as only two word-forms [lai], [laiz] are homonymous, all other forms of the two verbs are different.

Full homonymy may be found in different parts of speech

E.g. ***for*** **[**fo:] — preposition,

for [fo:] — conjunction,

four [fo:] — numeral,

These parts of speech have no other word-forms.

CLASSIFICATION OF HOMONYMS OF PROF. A.I. SMIRNISTKY

By the type of meaning homonyms are classified into:

1. **Lexical homonyms** have no link between their lexical meanings and belong to the same part of speech: ***fair – fare; ear*** *(ухо)* – ***ear*** *(колос);*

Lexical homonyms differ in lexical meaning.

2. **Grammatical homonyms**:

a) belong to different parts of speech and have link in their lexical meaning: ***milk – to milk; practice – to practise; advice – to advise***.

b) have different word-forms of one and the same word: ***brother's – brothers; asked*** *(PS)* – ***asked*** *(PP)*.

3. **Lexico-grammatical homonyms** have no link between their lexical meaning and they belong to different parts of speech:

tear (n) – tear (v);

bear (n) – bare (adj);

seal$_1$ – seal$_3$.

In ***to find*** and ***to found*** the homonymic word-forms: ***found*** — Past Tense of ***(to) find*** and ***found*** — Present Tense of ***(to) found*** differ both grammatically and lexically.

The classifications of **full** and **partial homonymy** and **lexical, lexico-grammatical** and **grammatical homonymy** are not mutually exclusive.

1. **full lexical homonymy :** ***seal*$_1$** *n* ***seal*$_2$** *n*,
2. **partial lexical homonymy:** ***lie*$_1$** *v* and ***lie*$_2$** *v*,
3. **partial lexico-grammatical homonymy :** ***seal*$_1$** *n* and **seal$_3$** *v*.

3.3. GRAPHIC AND SOUND-FORM CLASSIFICATION OF HOMONYMS BY W.W.SKEAT

1. **Homonyms proper (perfect homonyms)** - are words identical in their sound-form and spelling but different in meaning:

Club (n) an association of persons meeting periodically - *Club* (n) a heavy staff for use as a weapon.

Light (adj) not heavy - *Light* (n) illumination

*Bank (*n) a financial institution - *Bank* (n) a raised area of land along the side of a river

2. **Homophones** - are words with the same sound but different spellings and different meanings:

Piece (n) part separated from smth. - *Peace* (n) a situation in which there is no war between countries;

Knight (n) [nait] in the past, a European soldier from a high class - *Night* (n) [nait] the part of each 24-hour period when it is dark

Read – red; pair – pear; know – no; write – right etc.

3. **Homographs** are words different in sound-form and in meaning but identical in spelling:

Bow (n) [bou] a weapon for shooting arrows - *Bow* n [bau] a forward movement of the body or head to show respect;

Lead (v) [li:d] to conduct - *Lead* (n) [led] a soft heavy grey metal

Row [rou] a line of smth. – *row* [rau] – a quarrel, *tear* [tiэ] – *tear* [teэ].

IV. Formal criteria. 1. Distribution

Distribution - the position of a word in relation to other words.

Distribution is effective in cases of homonymy:

paper n — *(to) paper* v.

In this homonymic pair the noun may be preceded by the article and followed by a verb;

The verb can never be found in identical distribution.

2) The criterion of spelling

Homonyms differing in graphic form, e.g. such lexical homonyms as ***knight — night*** or ***flower — flour*****,** are easily perceived to be two different lexical units as any formal difference of words is felt as indicative of the existence of two separate lexical units.

3. The semantic criterion of related or unrelated meanings.

case$_1$ – ‘event’: in *several cases of robbery;*

case$_2$ – ‘container’: *a jewel case, a glass case;*

case$_3$ – ‘legal matter for court’: *the case will be tried in the law-court*

V. Polysemy and Homonymy

- With polysemy a single word has several connotations while with homonymy different words coincide in form.
- In case of homonymy different meanings of words are mutually independent. There is no connection between such words as *write* & *right, night* & *knight, sea* & *see*.

Homonymy as well as polysemy creates lexical ambiguity in that a single form has two or more meanings, e.g.

- *Waiter, what's this?*
- *It's **bean** soup.*
- *I can see that. But what is it now?*

Summary and conclusions:

1. Homonyms are words that sound alike but have different semantic structure. The problem of homonymy is mainly the problem of differentiation between two different semantic structures of identically sounding words.

2. Homonymy of words and homonymy of individual word-forms may be regarded as **full** and partial homonymy.

   Cases of full homonymy are generally observed in words belonging to the same part of speech.

   Partial homonymy is usually to be found in word-forms of different parts of speech.

3. Homonymous words and word-forms may be classified by the type of meaning that serves to differentiate between identical sound-forms.

   Lexical homonyms differ in lexical meaning, lexico- grammatical in both lexical and grammatical meanings, whereas grammatical homonyms are those that differ in grammatical meaning only.

4. Lexico-grammatical homonyms are not homogeneous. Homonyms arising from conversion have some related lexical meanings in their semantic structure. Though some individual meanings may be related the whole of the semantic structure of homonyms is essentially different.

5. If the graphic form of homonyms is taken into account, they are classified on the basis of the three aspects — sound-form, graphic form and meaning — into three big groups: homographs (identical graphic form), homophones (identical sound-form) and perfect homonyms (identical sound-form and graphic form).

6. There are some sources of homonymy:

1) diverging meaning development of a polysemantic word;
2) loan words which were adapted to the English standards in their pronunciation and spelling;
3) shortening of words;
4) convergent sound development of two or more different words;
5) conversion.

7. The most debatable problem of homonymy is the demarcation line between homonymy and polysemy, i.e. between different meanings of one word and the meanings of two or more phonemically different words.

8. The criteria used in the synchronic analysis of homonymy are:

1) the semantic criterion of related or unrelated meanings;

2) the criterion of spelling;

3) the criterion of distribution.

There are cases of lexical homonymy when none of the criteria enumerated above is of any avail. In such cases the demarcation line between polysemy and homonymy is rather fluid.

9. The problem of discriminating between polysemy and homonymy in theoretical linguistics is closely connected with the problem of the basic unit at the semantic level of analysis.

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