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A COGNITIVE SEMANTIC STUDY OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN  
SELECTED ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS

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**ABSTRACT**

The current study is an effort to examine and explore forms of cognitive ambiguity that is found in literature in selected poems in order to find out the influence of lexical ambiguity in literature and how it comprises a tension that drives creativity. This study aims at highlighting those ambiguous expressions, which make a complication between the speaker/writer and his/her hearer/reader. These expressions which have multiple meanings shape a trouble and lack of definition on the part of the receiver. It has been discovered that ambiguities come from poets' intentional or unintentional usage of polysemy or homonymy to create tension in their writings. As well, context exceptionally essential and plays a crucial part in deciding the meaning of words. The data in the present study are collected from different literary works in order to achieve the categories of the adopted model.

**INTRODUCTION**

The ambiguity of spoken and written language strongly opposes the learner's ability to understand ambiguous sentences and utterances. This paper attempts to highlight some of the common ambiguities prevailing in English literature, both in the category of intentional and unintentional ambiguity. This study is carried out to deal with this problem and answer the following questions:

1. What are classifications of the lexical ambiguity in English?
2. How are the categories of lexical ambiguities are used in English literature?

This study aims at finding classifications of the of the lexical ambiguities in English. And investigating how these categories of lexical ambiguities are used in English literature.

It is hypothesized that there are different classifications of the lexical ambiguity in English as well as these classification are used in creative way to attract the attention of the readers in English literature. The procedures of the study include firstly, surveying the classifications of lexical ambiguity used in English literature. Secondly, analyzing the types of the lexical ambiguity in selected English literary texts. This study is limited to Investigating the sorts of lexical ambiguity used in English literature. And it is hoped that the present study will be valuable for the researchers within the field of cognitive semantics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Notion of Cognitive Semantics*

The term "cognitive linguistics" refers to many related theories, including: Cognitive Grammar, Construction Grammar, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, etc. that each have their own facts, but principally submit the same general cognitive-functional, usage-based perspective on language. of the basic tenets of these cognitive theories is that language does not constitute a isolated innate faculty of mind (Langacker 1987:13).

Cognitive semantics is a semantic theory and a part of cognitive grammar, that identifies meanings with conceptualization - the structures and processes that are part of the mental experience. This theory emphasizes the status of man experience in conceptualizing. It operates with an encyclopedic vision of meaning and there is no clear boundary between linguistic and general knowledge. Hence, the lexical elements that act as indicators or triggers of encyclopedic knowledge are typically polysemic and are analyzed as a network of related meanings. The theory identifies a numeral processes such as metaphor and metonymy as general cognitive processes rather than purely linguistic devices. The central impression is how conceptual content is "constructed": the interpretation of a lexical element depends on several factors, including the "cognitive domains" in which it occurs (e.g. space, time, color) and variations in Perspective and salience (Crystal ,2008: 80) .

There are two approaches to formal semantics: one realistic and one cognitive. the basic difference concerns what kinds of entities are the meanings of words. As stated by the realistic approach to semantics, the meaning of an expression is something out there within the world. Cognitive semantics, on the opposite hand, recognizes meanings of expressions with mental entities. Realistic semantics comes in two flavors: extensional and intentional. within the extensional kind of semantics, one starts out from a language L, which can or might not be stated in formal terms, and maps the components of L onto a "world." Names are mapped onto objects, predicates are mapped onto sets of objects or relations between objects, etc. By compositions of those mappings, sentences are mapped onto truth values. the most objective of this type of semantics is to limit truth conditions for the sentences in L. A consequence of this approach is that the meaning of an expression is independent of how individuals comprehend it (Gärdenfors , 1999 : 19 ) .

The other part of semantics is cognitivistic , The fundamental clue of this

approach is that meanings of expressions are mental , in which semantics is seen as a mapping from the linguistic expressions to cognitive structures , there are two domains in which are source and target domains . Therefore, Language is seen as part of the cognitive structure, not an independent object. Rather, within cognitive semantics the emphasis is on lexical meaning more than the meaning of sentences(ibid).

### *Some Tenets of Cognitive semantics*

#### *Semantic Structure Is A Conceptual Structure .*

Cognitive semanticists demand that the meanings associated with linguistic units such as words, for example, form only a subset of possible concepts. On balance, we have many thoughts, ideas or feelings than we can conventionally encode in language. Langacker (1987:60) mentions we have a concept for the place on our faces below our nose and above our mouth where moustaches go. The benefit of having such concept is to understand that the hair that grows there is called a *moustache*. Though, there is no English word that conventionally can encode this concept (at least not in the vocabularies of everyday language). The semantic units conventionally associated with linguistic units such as words is only a subset of the full set of concepts in the minds of speaker-hearers.

#### *Cognitive Models Are Mainly Perceptually Determined (Meanings Are Not Independent Of Perception).*

Since the cognitive structures in our heads are connected to our perceptual mechanisms, directly or indirectly, it follows that meanings are, at least partly, perceptually grounded. This, again, is in contrast to traditional realistic versions of semantics which claim that since meaning is a mapping between the language and the external world (or several worlds), meaning has nothing to do with perception.

#### *Meaning construction is a conceptual process*

Language itself does not encode meaning, words and other units are only ‘inspire’ for the construction of meaning. Hence, meaning is made conceptually. Meaning construction is equated with conceptualization, whereby linguistic units attend as stimuli for the selection of conceptual operations. So, Meaning is a process rather than a distinct ‘thing’ that can be ‘packaged’ by language.

#### *Cognitive Models Are Primarily Image-Schematic (Not Propositional) Which Are Altered By Metaphoric And Metonymic Operations .*

Johnson (1987:45) argues that schemas such as “container,” “source-path-goal” and “link” are among the most fundamental carriers of meaning. They also claim that most image schemas are closely connected to human experiences.

### ***Concepts Show Prototype Effects (Rather Than Obeying The Aristotelian Paradigm Based On Necessary And Sufficient Conditions).***

In cognitive semantics, one should think of prototype effects of concepts. A concept is often represented in the form of an image schema and such schemas can show variations just like concepts normally do. This kind of phenomenon is much more complex to model using traditional symbolic structures.

#### ***Definitions of Ambiguity***

Empson (1973: 1) refers to ambiguity, in ordinary speech, as something which is very obvious, and as a rule witty or deceitful”.

Ambiguity lexically means " The probability of being understood in more than one way." (Oxford word power, 2006: 24). Ambiguity occurs when a form has two or more meanings. There are two kinds of ambiguous language, lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity that can affect the meaning of words, phrases or sentences (Hudson, 200:313,314).

Lakoff (1970:357) tries to make the term of ambiguity more precise by presenting a test which could be used to identify the ambiguity of a sentence (Lakoff’s tests were meant to provide a way for distinguishing ambiguous sentences from undefined ones.) Pinkal (1995:90) refers to ambiguity as:

"a sentence that is semantically indefinite if and only if in certain situations, despite sufficient knowledge of the relevant facts, neither “true” nor “false” can be clearly assigned as its truth value".

#### ***Significance of Semantics in Resolving Ambiguity***

Semantics stress the importance of meaning since it relies heavily on conceptuality. Leech (1974: 1) asserts that Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* offer a list of about twenty-two definitions for 'meaning'. which reflect the misperception and false impression caused by some terms as meaning. Which will led to ambiguity.

Kimpson (1977: 180) reveals that '*Ambiguity is however a semantic phenomenon.*' Semanticists' concern about the word meaning and sentence meaning with their relatedness to objects and the real world. On the other hand, it deals with their relatedness to each other according to some semantic notions. In addition, Palmer (1981: 32) suggests that semantic theory should consider since it establishes an area of controversy between generative semanticists and interpretive semanticists regarding the status of the lexical aspect.

#### ***Classification of Ambiguity***

Ambiguity classified according to Ullmann (2009: 116) as: phonological, grammatical and lexical ambiguities.

### *Phonological Ambiguity*

In the level of phonology, ambiguity arises from the sound of the word. Sometimes people speak fast and make the others people feel hesitation about the meaning the word and this may lead to wrong interpretation which means that phonological ambiguity occur from the similar sound of language uttered As in: *I scream* (I skri:m) or *Ice cream* (ais krim:m) .

### *Structural Ambiguity*

It occurs when certain phrase or sentence produce ambiguity because of their structure could have more than one interpretation. like lexical ambiguity. As in:

The chicken is ready to eat. This sentence either means the chicken is cooked and can be eaten now or the chicken is ready to be fed... However, the readers may interpret in different ways.

### *Lexical Ambiguities*

We can find in English numerous words have different meanings. Multiplicity of meaning is a very general characteristic of any language (Palmer, 1981: 70-71). Hudson (2000: 313) affirms that lexical ambiguity is ambiguity that occurs in a morpheme or a word.

### *Homophones Ambiguity*

A homophone is a same pronunciation with two or more connotations. Like:

flour / flower  
right / write  
sent / cent  
sight / site  
to / too / two.

A number of homographs are as well homophones such as “read” which could be [ri:d] the present tense form “read” or [rɛd] the past tense form “read” ( ibid : 313).

Ambiguity occurs in the spoken language because of the sound structure of the sentences. and it can be solved by using the Supra-segmental features, such, juncture, stress and intonation (Ulman ,1962: 156).

For instance:

There are **two** women by the red car and there are **too** others by the blue one.

### *Homonyms Ambiguity*

This kind of lexical ambiguity " occurs when one structure (written or spoken) takes two or more distinct meanings". As in the following:

bank (of a river) bank (financial institution)

bat (flying creature) bat (used in sport)  
 mole (on skin) mole (small animal)  
 pupil (at school) pupil (in the eye)  
 race (contest of speed) race (ethnic group)  
 (Yule, 1996 :120)

Homonymy ambiguity makes a confusion in selecting the right meaning and leads to ambiguity in whole words and sentences like:

*I will see you near the bank.*

The ambiguity in this sentence is a result of the multiple meanings of the word "bank" as mentioned above, but the ambiguity can be solved by measurement of certain context such as:

*I will see you near the bank to have some cash.*

So, the ambiguity is clarified by making a reference to the commercial institution. So, "Homonyms including words that have different histories and meanings, but have accidentally come to have precisely the same form." (ibid:120).

### ***Polysemy Ambiguity***

polysemy leads to lexical ambiguity because of the difference of word meaning. Kimpson (1977: 65) states that it is not easy to deal with the sameness of meaning, therefore, there is no complete synonymy. Polysemy signifies the phenomenon that one single form has several diverse meaning. For example:

flight - (passing through air)  
 flight - (power of flying) flight - ( air journey )  
 flight - ( unit of the Air Force ) (Al-Sulaimani, 2010 : 218 )

Polysemy (' one word having two or more senses') we identify polysemy in the case that the sense concerned are related , But if we ask about the 'related' means, so there are two answers, one could be historical and the other is psychological, which do not essentially overlap (Leech, 1974 : 228 ).

### ***Synonymous Ambiguity***

Lyons (1995: 60) states that when two expressions with the same meaning it is said that they are synonymous. Even if there are no two words ever have closely the same meaning, but you can find the word that could express your ideas as in the following sentences:

*He is sitting on the sofa.*  
*He is sitting on the couch.*

Though the words "sofa" and "couch" are synonymous since they matching the same meaning; these words contain different pronunciation's forms (Fromkin

and Rodman, 1988: 181).

Also, the ambiguity initiates when someone does not differentiate the meaning of 'couch' that means 'sofa' too. There are many samples of polysemous that are synonymous in one or more, but not all their meanings.

*'They live in a big / large city.*

The two adjectives are normally synonymous. but, '*I will tell my big brother*' is lexically ambiguous, by the quality of the polysemy of 'big' in a way that *I will tell my large brother.* is unrelated in this case (Lyons, 1995: 61) .

As well, Lobner (2013:44) classified lexical ambiguity into two types which are Homonymy and Polysemy. He classified Homonymy into:

1- Totally homonymous: Two lexemes with unrelated meanings, but share all other constitutive properties as in, The adjectives light and *light*. Let us talk of (light1) if the adjective is taken as the opposite of *dark*, and of *lightA2* if it is the opposite of *heavy*...

2- Partially homonymous: Two lexemes with unrelated meanings, but coincide in some of their grammatical forms. e.g., the verbs *lie1* (*lay, lain*) and *lie2* (*lied, lied*). Partial homonyms can give rise to ambiguity in some contexts (*don't lie in bed!*) but can be distinguished in others (*he lay/lied in bed*) (ibid).

He refers to Polysemy lexeme which has two or more interrelated meanings or meaning variants. An example of polysemy is the word light which refers to different things such as a certain sort of visible radiation, electric lamps, traffic lights or illuminated areas.

### ***The Lexical Ambiguity Within Cognitive Semantics.***

Meanings are mental entities in conceptual space, according to the central assumption of Cognitive Semantics. Meanings are internal to people's brains rather than external entities, as in objectivist theories, or internal linguistic relations, as in structuralist models. Some members of the Cognitive school of thought contend that lexical items do not 'have' meanings, but rather serve as clues for drawing inferences that aid in proper reasoning and comprehension (Cruse, 2002: 22).

When lexical items are used in various constructions in text and speech, they elicit specific conceptual structures, and lexical meaning is the relationship between lexical items and the part of the use potential profiled on the occasion of use (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáez & Mairal Usón, 2007:33). Lexical meaning emerges from encyclopedic information, conventionalized mappings between lexical elements and concepts, conventional ways of thought in various contexts, constructions, and situational frameworks, and is controlled by them (Cruse, 2002; Paradis, 2003).

.Homonymy and polysemy frequently result in ambiguity, and context is crucial

in determining the meaning of utterances. Consider the following example from Lyons (Lyons 1977:397), in which the two phenomena appear together:

***They Passed the Port at Midnight.***

This statement has a linguistic ambiguity. However, in most cases, it would be evident which of the two homonyms, port ('harbour') or port ('type of fortified wine'), is being used in a specific context, as well as which sense of the polysemous verb 'pass' ('go past or 'give').

By contrasting polysemy with homonymy, we discover that while both cause lexical ambiguity (two or more meanings associated with a term), the nature of the ambiguity differs in each situation. Polysemy is a lexical phenomenon in which a word is frequently connected with two or more meanings that appear to be related in some way. Consider the following examples containing the English preposition *over* (Evans and Green, 2006 :36)

- a. The picture is over the sofa. ABOVE
- b. The ball landed over the wall. ON THE OTHER SIDE
- c. The car drove over the bridge. ACROSS

Each of these occurrences of *over* is associated with a slightly distinct connotation or sense (as indicated on the right), yet they are all related in some way. This demonstrates that polysemy is present in *over*. Polysemy differs from homonymy, which refers to two distinct words that share the same sound (homophones) and/or written form (homographs). The word *bank*, for example, is connected to two different words with dissimilar meanings:

"Financial institution" and "river bank." Not only are these two senses synchronically unrelated (in contemporary usage), but they are also historically unrelated. The word *bank* meaning 'side of river' has been in the English language for much longer, and is related to the Old Icelandic word for 'hill', while the word *bank* meaning 'financial institution' was borrowed from Italian *banca*, meaning 'money changer's table' (*Collins English Dictionary*) (ibid:326).

We might conclude that polysemy and homonymy are not limited to word meaning but rather a fundamental property of human language and a key to generalization across a variety of 'different' events, and that polysemy exposes essential fundamentals in the production of lexical meaning.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

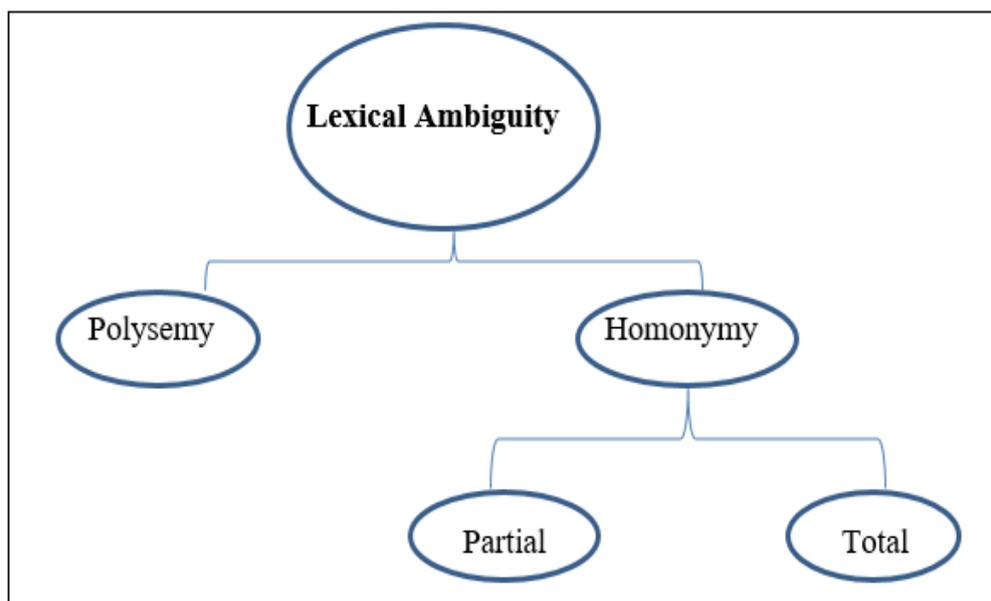
### ***The Model and The Data***

This section presents the analysis of lexical ambiguity of the selected data according to Lobner's classification of lexical ambiguity in *Understanding Semantics 2ed* (2013) And then we will draw the conclusion.

The data in the present study are collected randomly from different literary

works in order to achieve the categories of the adopted model.

### *Framework of the Analysis*



**Figure (1).** The Framework of Analysis

### *Lexical Ambiguity*

Lexical ambiguity occurs in ‘lexeme’ since it has more than one meaning. Katz (1972:249) states that when the homonymous can occur in the same position in utterances the result is lexical ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is also known as semantic ambiguity. Semantic ambiguity arises when a word or concept has inherently diffuse meaning based on widespread or informal usage. Lexical ambiguity results in homonymy and polysemy .

### *Homonymy*

Two lexemes are totally homonymous if they have unrelated meanings, but share all other constitutive properties. Two lexemes are partially homonymous if they have unrelated meanings, but coincide in some of their grammatical forms. Homonymy can be related either to the sound forms of the lexemes or to their spellings: homonymy with respect to the written form is **homography**; if two lexemes with unrelated meanings have the same sound form, they constitute a case of **homophony**.

### **Text 1**

" The Heaven vests for Each  
 In that small Deity  
 It craved the **grace** to worship  
 Some bashful Summer's Day ."" (by Emily Dickinson )  
 It craved the **grace** to worship.

This sentence can have different interpretations, which are:

- 1- Grace (Noun) an attractive quality of movement that is smooth, and elegant controlled.
- 2- (Verb) to make something more attractive, to decorate something.

### *Analysis*

“grace” has two interpretations; it is called Total homonymy lexical ambiguity because the word grace is ambiguous. It is not clear about which sense is intended. Therefore, they share the same form but have different meanings .

### *Text 2*

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,  
 And Will to boot, and Will in over-plus;  
 More than enough am I that vex thee still,  
 To thy sweet will making addition thus.  
 Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,  
 Not one vouchsafes to hide my will in thine?  
 Shall will in others seem right gracious,  
 And in my will no fair acceptance shine?  
 The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,  
 And in abundance addeth to his store;  
 So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will  
 One will of mine, to make thy large Will more.  
 Let no unkind ‘No’ fair beseechers kill;  
 Think all but one, and me in that one Will  
 Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,  
 And Will to boot, and Will in over-plus;  
 More than enough am I that vex thee still,  
 To thy sweet will making addition thus.  
 Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious, (sonnet 135 by Shakespeare )

### *Analysis*

The passage contains the majority of will conceptual frameworks: Will is a noun that means "want, wish, capacity to do something, determination," as well as a verb that has the same meaning and can be used as an auxiliary to express future tense, so we have ambiguity of Total homonymy.

### *Text 3*

The shops in **mourning**, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now. (Thomas's radio play Under Milk Wood)

*Analysis*

this example represents the Partial homonymy when " *mourning*" could be conceptualized or heard as mourning or morning, because morning and mourning share the same pronunciation and have a different form.

*Text 4*

**Sole** owner am I of this sorry **soul** ...  
**pour** out corruption's slag from every **pore** —  
**whole** slates scrape clean! they leave no gaping **hole**.  
 (Where Truth's Wind Blew By Venicebard)

*Analysis*

The highlighted words (sole, soul – pour, pore – whole, hole) refer to the process of using Partial homonymy which means that the poet uses different words with different forms meanings but have the same pronunciation, Through their similar pronunciations but entirely different meanings, they produce different conceptual images for the readers or hearers.

*Polysemy*

According to Lobner (2013: 44 ) polysemy is the case when a word has two or more interrelated meanings and it results from a natural economic tendency of language.

*Text 5*

O **Rose** thou art sick.  
 The invisible worm,  
 That flies in the night  
 In the howling storm:  
 (The Sick Rose by William Blake)

*Analysis*

The speaker uses polysemy to compares the ambiguity to the word the rose, a symbol of nature, beauty, and fragility to a woman's innocence or chastity , so the hearer or reader will have different conceptual images to comprise the real meaning of the rose .

*Text 6*

**Clora**, come view my soul, and tell  
 Whether I have contrived it well.  
 Now all its several lodgings lie  
 Composed into one gallery;  
 ( The Gallery by Andrew Marvel)

## *Analysis*

This poem, which is another example of how polysemy used to draw ambiguity in the poem by using double meaning, speaks of love and obsession. In it, the speaker describes a mental gallery of images that he has painted for his object of affection, Clora.

## **CONCLUSION**

Polysemy and homonymy present a challenge that has attracted a lot of interest in semantic analysis. Typically, polysemy is considered in connection with homonymy. Homonymes are lexical elements that are either lexically separate meanings or semantically unrelated meanings. If, the meanings are associated by metaphorical extension, so mot ambiguities are resulted from the intended or unintended use of polysemy or homonymy by the poets in literature to create tension in their writings.

The researcher discovered that looking for the core meaning is the most acceptable strategy for detecting homonym and polysemy words. Although looking up what a word means in a dictionary is sufficient, but the context is the best way to determine the intended meaning.

In addition, Multiple interpretations leave the reader confused to the true meaning. To gain the appropriate interpretation. Once a sentence context is provided, only one meaning will be possible for the situation, then readers and listeners are able to make use of executive function control processes to select the most likely meanings, and if necessary, we can reinterpret utterances in the light of subsequent information.

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