The Challenges of English Homographic Words to Communication among Nigerian Undergraduates

Faleye, James Oladunjoye and Olaosun, Ibrahim Esan (PhD)

Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Nigeria

Abstract

The English language has a high frequency of homographic words. This linguistic phenomenon often results in phonological and lexical ambiguities as well as delays in lexical and pronunciation decisions by L2 readers, especially those that are not capable of exploring contextual clues in pronouncing the words. This paper investigates this phenomenon among Nigerian undergraduates, using empirical approach. Twenty four selected Nigerian undergraduates were made to read short sentences containing homographs whose pronunciation can only be contextually determined. The study reveals that respondents encountered difficulties in pronouncing correctly words that they do not use in their day to day discourse. It shows further that they were unable to use context clues to identify the grammatical categories of the words before pronouncing them. The paper proposes that students should go beyond social competence to acquiring Cognitive Academic Proficiency Skills (CALPS) in English and deliberate efforts should be employed by item writers in avoiding homographs through the use of synonyms to reduce ambiguities caused by homographs. The significance of this paper lies in underscoring the relevance of pronunciation as a bridge between orthography and semantics.

Key words: Homographs, phonological ambiguity, Phonological and pragmatic contextualization and effective communication.

Introduction

'Improper' or 'incorrect' pronunciation of some English words, chiefly the homographic ones, during reading or speech making has frequently come with its attendant challenges and complexities for speakers of English globally. Earlier scholars who have worked on this phenomenon have based their studies on inter-lingual factors associated with some sociolinguistic chemistry of languages in contact. This contact situation has given birth to many world Englishes (see Kachru 1992, Crystal 1997 and Schneider 2003). But beyond these inter-lingual circumstances, there are some complexities inherent in English which pose pronunciation challenges to speakers of the language in general and second language (L2) users in particular. Bryson (1990) and Soneye (2007) have identified the impact of spelling on the pronunciation of speakers of English. Also, Banjo (1979) and Amayo (1981) have identified the suprasegmentals as the 'unlearnable' aspect of English in an L2 context. But beyond these problems of English orthography and suprasegmental features is that one posed by homographic words to speakers of English generally and to the L2 speakers in particular. The reasons for this are many. English homographic words are words having same spellings but with dual or different pronunciations. This duality of pronunciation often results in what Frost, Feldman and Katz (1990) call lexical ambiguity. For example, 'read' (present tense) is pronounced as /rí: d/ while the past tense form of the same word is pronounced / red /.

Ambiguity is a phenomenon of human language including English. Wherever it occurs, it requires more than one denotation. It manifests at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of language. At all of these levels, the outcome is communication failure or miscommunication. In other words, meaning is obscured and when this happens, defective communication comes about. It becomes very necessary at this juncture to establish the relationship between orthography and phonology on the one hand and phonology and meaning on the other. Frost *et al* (1990:569) express the view that ambiguity can exist in the relation between the orthographic and phonological forms of a word or between the phonological form and its semantic representation. The point of convergence between phonology and semantics is that both help in accounting for meaning. A word is a phonological structure; its phonological representation is its lexical entry. Going by this, each homographic word is given two different entries in order to differentiate it semantically. But English does not have any form of visual marker (as tonal languages do) to differentiate these homographic words and their various pronunciation implications. This often results in semantic ambiguity.

What are the implications of the absence of visual markers on the reading and pronunciation of these homographic words by L2 speakers? How does this linguistic phenomenon affect meaning? These questions are crucial to this paper as it investigates empirically the challenges posed by English homographic words to some students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife with a view to ascertaining their impact on communication among Nigerian undergraduates. It explains the meaning of homographs and identifies some common categories of homographic words. Finally, the paper proposes ways in which L2 speakers can overcome the challenges posed by this linguistic phenomenon in their communication.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Homographs are words that share same spellings but different meanings or pronunciation. David (1993:331) succinctly puts it thus: "two words are said to be homographs if their orthographic representations are identical but their pronunciations are different". Heteronyms are words that are spelled identically but have different meanings when pronounced differently. Heteronyms are specific types of homographs in which the different pronunciations are associated with different meanings. Many heteronyms are the result of one pronunciation belonging to different grammatical categories of words like Verb and Noun. For example: Lead (V) pronounced as /lɪːd/, means to guide. However, lead (N), pronounced as /led/, means a metallic element.

Homographs differ across languages. They occur with low frequency in some languages like Spanish but occur with high frequency in other languages like English (Gerald & Scarborough, 1989). English can correctly be described as a language with a high frequency of homographic words. David (1993:331) identifies one thousand three hundred and eighty three (1,387) entries of homographic words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
There are two large sub-groups of English homographs: The first group deals with common words that have same spelling and pronunciation, but very different meanings and/or origins. They have what Frost *et al* (1990: 569) call "unambiguous phonological representation". Common examples of these are:
 (i) Bear (N) - a kind of animal   (ii) bear (V) - to carry

(iii). Hide (N) - Animal skin   (iv) Hide (V) -to conceal

Words in this category pose no pronunciation challenges to speakers generally due to the sameness of pronunciation (see Kroll & Schweickert, 1978). Words that are not homographic pose no reading miscues that often lead to slow lexical decisions like hesitations and repetition leading to self correction when such words are pronounced during reading exercises (see Feldman and Turvey, 1983). The context of use helps in bringing out the semantic import of such items.

The second group represents homographs with the same spelling, but with different pronunciations and meanings. They are referred to as words with 'ambiguous phonological representations' by Frost *et al* (1990:569). These homographs pose serious challenges in terms of pronunciation and correct meaning elicitations to participants in communication situations, especially among second language users. Here are a few examples:

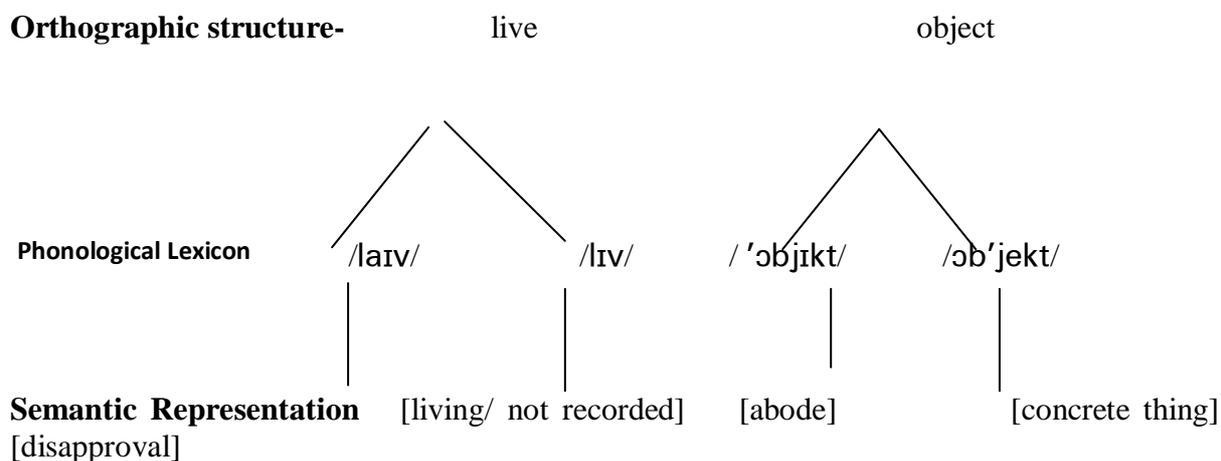(i) a. Lead (verb) realized as [lɪːd]

    b. Lead (noun) realized as [led]

(ii)   a. Wind (N) realized as /wɪnd/,

     b. Wind (V) realized as /waɪnd/

These homographic words have double entries which lead to phonological ambiguities. The diagram below aptly illustrates how homographs lead to double meanings.

Fig 1: Relationship between Orthography, Lexicon and Semantics

Orthographic structure-   live   object

Phonological Lexicon   /laɪv/   /lɪv/   / ˈɔbjɪkt/   /ɔbˈjekt/

Semantic Representation   [living/ not recorded]   [abode]   [concrete thing]
[disapproval]

From fig.1 above, the words, 'live' and 'object' exist at the orthographic level as only one word each. But the ambiguities inherent in them manifest at the phonological level of representation. This leads to different meanings at the semantic level of representation.

There equally exist words with same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings due to different stress placement. The position of stress changes for the noun and verb forms of these words; word stress also differentiates a word's part of speech-more specifically whether the word is a noun or a verb. There are many examples of words

whose noun form takes their stress on the first syllable, but they are stressed on the second syllable in their verb form. The following words illustrate this category: REcord (N) - reCORD (V),   PROgress (N)-proGRESS (V), INsult (N) – inSULT (V). It is not permissible to say "Mary wants to REcord a REcord one day," but rather, "reCORD a REcord."

Effects of Semantic Ambiguity in English Homographs

Simpson (1984) identifies some of the effects of semantic ambiguity on visual word recognition. Since words in this category have double entries, the probability of encountering one of them is greater than the chance of detecting single entry. When bivalent words are read as two different entities, they lead to delay decision in correct pronunciation as readers take time to match pronunciation with meaning. Unfortunately, this is not a blanket rule, and there are plenty of English words which sound the same both as verbs and as nouns: 'travel' (He works in a *Travel* Agency and he hopes to *travel* by air to Abuja), 'picture' (He remembered taking the *picture* at a studio but could not *picture* precisely which studio.) are a few examples. These set of words are both phonologically and semantically unambiguous. The context of use usually determines the actual communicative implications of such lexical items.

In an L2 context, when a speaker pronounces 'REcord' instead of 'reCORD', it leads to miscommunication which, in another parlance, can be called noise. In any communication encounter, there is the need for feedback. The effectiveness of the feedback is dependent on the ability of the listener/reader to correctly decode the actual messages conceived by the speaker/writer at both the intra and interpersonal levels of communication. The sending of the message in oral communication depends on the correct pronunciation of words in the language in question. When words are not properly pronounced, especially homographic words, they constitute noise. Noise, in this case, is presented as anything that interferes with, slows   down,   or   reduces   the   clarity   or   accuracy   of   communication   (see http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/noise.html).   One easily-noticed effect of mispronunciation is ambiguity with its attendant duality of meanings in the mind of the listeners/readers.

How do L2 learners respond to challenges posed by these English homographic words? Homography as a linguistic phenomenon is not totally strange to Nigerian speakers of English. This phenomenon exists in the various indigenous languages spoken by them. However, these languages are tonal in nature as a result of which words with similar spellings are marked or pronounced differently due to the diacritic signs placed on them. These signs help in indicating the phonological contextualization that allows for correct elicitation of the word as intended by the encoder in a written text. Tone marks on some words in Nigerian languages, like Yoruba for example, help in making the meaning of words specific. This function of tone is referred to as 'semantic phonemicity' (Atoye, 1989:48). For example, the following Yoruba homographic words are made distinct with the different tone marks on them: 'Obe' (knife) with the tone mark LM is made distinct from 'Obe' (soup) with the tone ML. This phonological contextualization permissible in Yoruba language is missing in English. L2 speakers of English with this type of background are introduced to different types of homographs without any hint of phonological contextualization. Since English does not mark out stress placement on words in a normal text except in broad or narrow transcriptions, L2 learners are expected to rely on pragmatic contextualization before written texts can be read and appropriate meanings decoded by them. This task of pragmatic contextualization requires higher level of language awareness on the part of L2 readers. Words that are phonologically ambiguous are not problematic to skilled readers but are so to infant and

unskilled readers who decode a string into more than one possible phonological realization that maps into more than one word in their lexicon.

This paper therefore employs the form-based Semantic Theory for the analysis of the data collected for this research. The theory provides a framework to specify word meaning and helps in explaining the composition process leading to sentence information. This theory further helps us to account for how to disambiguate or provide a mechanism for selecting the intended information from the large number of linguistically possible interpretations (see Pinkall & Koller 2005:3).

Research Hypotheses

The study is premised on the following hypotheses:
i.   L2 speakers can correctly select English homographic items in sentences.
ii. Subjects access only one meaning out of the dual meanings of homographic words when they appear in sentences.
iii. L2 speakers' pronunciations activate only the meaning associated with the homographic items within their context.

Methodology

The subjects were made to read some semantically biased sentences containing some homographic lexical items (see appendix A). The subjects' readings were recorded and analyzed. Twenty four undergraduates of English language of the Obafemi Awolowo University were used as the subjects for this study. Six subjects made up of three students each from Yoruba and Igbo extractions were drawn from part1 to 4. They were so selected because they fall within the catchment areas of students' admission policy, unlike the Hausa counterparts that are not available in the department. Also, they are doing their graduate work in English. They are presumed to have a reasonable high level of fluency in their L2, in this case, English, to warrant correct articulation and pronunciation of homographic words. The collected data were subjected to phono-semantic analysis.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

For the purpose of clarity, the collected data were analyzed under two categories:

(i)   Words with Ambiguous Phonological Representations

Words treated under this category include 'lead', 'wind', 'wound', 'live' 'and 'read' as represented in sentences 3, 4, 6 and 11. The performance of the students in the contextual recognition of these homographs is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: **Words with Ambiguous Phonological Representations**

S/N	Spelling	Phonological interpretation	Semantic interpretation	Score	%
1	lead	/lɪːd/ (V) /led/ (N)	Go before or with Metallic object	24 06	100 25

2	wind	/waɪnd/ (V)	twist	11	46.8
		/wɪnd/ (N)	moving air	24	100
3	read	/red/ (v+ed)	Perused	20	83
		/rɪːd/ (V+0)	Peruse	24	100
4	wound	/waund/ (V)	Twisted/turned(V)	05	20.8
		/wund/ (N)	Injury(N)	24	100
5	live	/lɪv/ (N)	abode	23	95.8
		/laɪv/ (ADV)	as it happens	24	100
6	deliberate	/dɪ'lɪbərət/(Adj)	purposeful	24	100
		/dɪ'lɪbereɪt/ (V)	discuss	18	75

In item 1, the phonological ambiguity inherent in the word 'lead' manifested greatly in the readings of the subjects. Only 6 respondents out of 24 representing 25% were able to take cognizance of the pragmatic contextualization provided with the cue 'his', a possessive adjective, which qualifies nouns. This enabled them to pronounce /led/ (see sentence three). The remaining 18 respondents pronounced /lɪːd/ twice thereby distorting the semantic value of the utterance. Such pronunciations produced this type of meaning' he could "go before me' if he would get him his' go before me' (instead of his 'metallic object' /led/). Similarly, the same trend manifested in the realization of 'wound' in sentence 7 which, contextually, should sound as /waund/. But the v+ed form of the verb 'wound' was realized as /wund/ which is the noun form of the word. The majority of the subjects failed to distinguish between the grammatical categorizations due to the sameness in the orthography of the two different words. The effect of this is communication failure. Only 5(20.8%) of the subjects realized correctly the v+ed form of the verb as /waund/. The rest pronounced /wund/ thereby reducing the fidelity of the message as intended by the context of the message. The effect of wrong pronunciation is represented in sentence 7 below:

'He '/wund/ *(instead of /waund/)* the tape back to the beginning in spite of the /wund/ in his fingers.'

Also, the word 'wind' in sentence 4 created problems for the subjects. The word has dual pronunciations. It can be pronounced as / waɪnd/ representing the present tense form and /wɪnd/, representing the noun form. The respondents were unable to realize /waund/ as only 11 respondents, representing 46.8% pronounced it correctly. Majority (13) realized it as /wɪnd/ without taking cognizance of the grammatical contexts (to + wind) of the different phonological representations of the word. Though there were some misrepresentations of other homographic words in this section, they were minimal when compared with 'wind' and 'wound'.

One commonly noticed trend in this study is that in homographs, only one form of the phonological representations is correctly pronounced. The correctly pronounced forms represent the words that occur frequently in the linguistic repertoire of the subjects. They are words that commonly occur in the day-to-day discourse of the participants. These words pose

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less difficulty (see words like 'read and live' in the appendix). These common words pose no problem of recognition to readers and they have no difficulty in taking decisions about their pronunciation. The statistics shown in Table 1 above attest to this fact. The respondents scored 100% in the pronunciation of 'wind' (N)/wɪnd/, 'wound' (N)/wund/, 'read' (v+0)/rɪːd/ and 'live' (adj)/laɪv/ respectively. They do not pose much pronunciation difficulty as 'wind'/waɪnd/ (V), 'wound'/waund/, 'read' (red/ etc. The low percentages for these categories of words suggested that they are problematic for L2 readers. Words in this category are those they rarely use in their written and spoken communications in English. When these words are pronounced wrongly, meaning is impaired thereby leading to miscommunication or failed communication.

(ii)   Stress Induced English Homographs

As earlier discussed, words with same spelling can be pronounced differently to produce different meanings due to a change in the placement of stress on syllables. Words in this category pose little or no problem to readers. These are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Stress Induced Homographs

S/N	Spelling	Phonological reps.	Meaning	Score	%
1	produce	PROduce (N)	products	24	100
		ProDUCE (V)	create	22	91.6
2	refuse	reFUSE (V)	decline	22	91.6
		REfuse(N)	rubbish	22	91.6
3	present	PREsent (N)	now	24	100
		preSENT (V)	give	24	100
		PREsent (N)	gift	24	100
4	invalid	INvalid (N)	A disabled	23	95.8
		InVALID (ADJ)	unacceptable	07	29.1
5	subject	subJECT(V)	put	22	91.6
		SUBject(N)	matter	24	100
6	minute	miNUTE(ADJ)	small	07	29.1
		MInute(N)	short time	24	100

As shown in Table 2 above, the subjects scored 100% in pronouncing 'present', and 91 % and above in 'refuse', 'subject'' deliberate' and 'produce'. However it was observed that they scored poorly in placement of stress on 'minute' (adj.) and 'invalid' (adj.). These words therefore serve as the greatest source of ambiguity. The subjects' pronunciations failed to distinguish between INvalid (N) and inVAlid (adj.). In sentence 8: 'inVAlid' as an adjective was pronounced as 'INvalid' (N). The movement of the stress from the second syllable to the first syllable has brought about a change in meaning. It should be stressed that stress does not ordinarily mark semantic phonemicity (see Atoye, 1989) but very few of them do. By putting this mispronounced word into the sentence, it will yield this semantic sense: 'The INvalid *(disabled person)* entered with an INvalid *(disabled person)* ticket.'

This will mean 'a disabled person entered with a disabled ticket'. A ticket cannot be a disabled.' Ticket' an inanimate object has been animated with this mispronunciation. It has therefore led to mis-communication. If the sentence was read properly it would have

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elicited the meaning 'the disabled entered with an illegal ticket'. Furthermore the respondents produced /mɪnɪt/ instead of /maɪˈnjuːt/ in sentence 10. By that token, the meaning inferred becomes 'a very short time error was committed within a very short time'; this brings about wrong interpretation and ultimately miscommunication. Only 7 respondents pronounced /maɪnjuːt/ correctly, others, 14 (58 3%), pronounced / ˈmɪnɪt/. These two words represent perfect examples of how inaccurate word stress can cause communication problems.

Proposal for Overcoming Problems of Homographic Words

From the foregoing, it is evident that homographs present a special challenge to L2 learners of English as well as to sight readers such as broadcasters. The following steps are suggested as a way of reducing the challenges this linguistic phenomenon constitutes to readers:

(i)   The level of competence of Nigerian University undergraduates in reading should go beyond what Cummins (1980) calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) needed for everyday discourse to the mastery of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALPS) needed in copping with the rigours of reading academic texts. The social competence in English is not enough in comprehending the knowledge of academic vocabulary which homographs present.

(ii)   (ii) In furtherance to (i.) above, Jacobson, Lapp and Flood (2007:103) suggest that when reading a text with homographs, readers should define and visualize the words, identify the grammatical structure of each word, use a cloze activity in analyzing the meaning and finally determine the meaning of the sentence. This suggestion, to us, is very instructive in that it will help readers compare new words with one another; enhance the use of personal insights about words, context, pronunciation before meaning can be elicited.

(iii)   In the area of   irregular verbs, the students should strive to achieve grammatical competence in their mastery of those words that pose pronunciation problems like wind (V) pronounced as /wɪnd/ in the present form but as 'wound' /waʊnd/ in its past tense form. The internal inflections of the vowel /ɪ/ to the diphthong /aʊ/ must be mastered before they can reflect this in subsequent pronunciation.

(iv)   More research work should be carried out on this phenomenon and its attendant effects on infant and advanced readers of English in L2 situations on their academic performance. When readers cannot decode appropriate meaning from a text, examination questions and instructions, they are bound to fail.

(v)   Also, deliberate efforts should be made by item writers (authors) to avoid the use of homographs through the use of synonyms or near- synonyms to reduce ambiguity occasioned by homographs.

Conclusion

English homography is one of the sources of mispronunciation and miscommunication among L2 readers. This is partly due to its inherent potentials to

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generate ambiguity and also to the non-availability of phonological contextualization that are available in the indigenous tonal languages of the respondents. The inability of the subjects to pronounce correctly some of these homographs have led to meaning impairment thereby creating 'noise' between the encoder and the decoder. The overall effect is communication failure. This paper therefore underscores the point that orthographical representations are not enough symbols of sending messages correctly but rather the encoder should carefully select words that will not lead to phonological ambiguity and consequently defective communication. Writers should endeavour to use synonyms or near-synonyms to prevent ambiguity among infant and advanced readers. This paper further underscores one basic fact about the relevance of pronunciation as a bridge between orthography and semantics. It is the correct pronunciation of words that sends correct signals to the readers either at the intra or interpersonal levels for effective communication.

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Appendix

1) The farm was used to produce some produce.

2) The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.

3) He could lead if he would get him his lead**.**

4) He tries to wind the wheel in spite of the force of the wind.

5) Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.

6) They have read the paper many times and they promised to read it again.

7) He wound the tape back to the beginning in spite of the wound in his fingers.

8) The invalid passenger entered with an invalid ticket

9) I subjec*t* my friends to pain whenever I discuss the subject of my operation.

10)   A minute error was committed within a minute.

11)   He will live early to watch the football match live on the television.

12)   They made a deliberate effort in resolving the problem. Though, they will deliberate on the next line of action.