THE CONFLICT OF HOMONYMS: DOES IT EXIST?

Isabel de la Cruz Cabanillas
Universidad de Alcalá

SUMMARY: The present article is concerned with the study of the conflict of homonyms. Allegedly the merging of different lexical units under one form can explain a number of linguistic processes, such as the loss of one of the words, the distributional restriction or narrowing in meaning, and the modification of the form of the elements involved. We will assess under which circumstances the interference may occur and conclude that the homonymic clash is not accountable for many of the changes that have been traditionally ascribed to it, since it is not likely to happen due to the disambiguating effect of the context.

RESUMEN: Este artículo se centra en el estudio del conflicto homonímico. Supuestamente, la convergencia de unidades léxicas diferentes en una misma forma puede explicar diversos procesos lingüísticos, como son la pérdida de uno de los términos, la restricción distributiva o la especialización y la modificación de la forma de los elementos implicados. Se analizará en qué circunstancias puede ocurrir la interferencia para concluir afirmando que el conflicto hominímico no justifica muchos de los cambios que tradicionalmente se le habían atribuido, ya que no es probable que se produzca, pues el contexto resolverá cualquier posible ambigüedad.

1. Introduction

It is a long discussed topic whether the conflict of homonyms can be considered the cause of different linguistic phenomena. From the very first studies the proponents of the homonymic theory defended that the conflict existed and had several consequences as a result.[1] But, even if these authors claimed that the conflict of homonyms took place under practically any circumstances, according to most experts, the clash will only take place when both words belong to the same part of speech and to the same sphere of thought.

In my opinion, both requirements must be fulfilled to start with. If just one of them is present, that will not be enough. If they belong to the same word-class, the context in

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1. Probably the first person to advocate the homonymic conflict was Gillièron and his studies on French vocabulary (1915 and 1918). Not completely on the other side, but among those early scholars imposing restrictions was Menner (1936).

the first place will avoid any confusion between them. And even if two homonyms belong to the same word-class and occur in the same speech act, the interference is not likely to happen, unless they belong to the same sphere of thought. So ambiguity between pairs of words like *peace- piece* or *beach-beech* does not seem probable.

If these two conditions are met: two homonyms which belong to the same part of speech and whose semantic field is alike, interference between them may exist, although it is difficult to find homonyms which are also related semantically.

2. Some new evidence

I have studied a special group of homonyms: homophones or lexical units which are spelled differently but sound alike. The initial corpus, selected from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), comprised one thousand seventeen British RP groups of homophones. However, some were not valid for the research and were excluded on the applying of different criteria, such as diatopics. The study was based on RP and therefore no other variety could be taken into account. There were also criteria related to lexical register. The research was supposed to take into consideration the standard register, so neither slang nor vulgar registers were acceptable and finally criteria adduced by the *OED*, like obsolete or archaic words or terms which are not homophonous according to the *OED*. Nevertheless, the most important group of criteria were related to the functioning of the linguistic system, either at the phonographic level (a, b, c), the morphological level (d, e) or the lexemic level (f, g):

a) Two allographs for the same word. Although they may seem to be two different semantic units, they are just two ways of spelling the same word, such as *jail-gaol*, *sergeant-serjeant* or *spright-sprite*.

b) Asymmetric phonographic relation. One of the words may be spelled as the other element of the pair, so in this case the definition given above would not apply to them, as they are homonyms, but not homophones. That is the case of words like *checker- chequer/checker* or *storey/story-story*.

c) The stress of the word is relevant. The phonemes of the words are the same, but not the stress, as, according to the *OED*, the function of the stress is to show that the word is disyllable rather than monosyllable, as it may appear, like in *buyer-byre* or *tiar-tier-tyre*.

d) Heterofunctioning words from the point of view of the grammar. Words belonging to different parts of speech were discarded, as any interference between them is quite remote, like *bard-barred*, *baron-barren*, *cede-seed*, *father-farther*, *him-hymn* and many others.

e) Terms which belong to the same word-class, but whose morphological features enable us to distinguish them, such as *chews-choose*, *clause-claws*, *find-fined* or *rouse-rows*.

f) Not assimilated borrowings. Some of the following items were borrowed from other languages, but they have not been assimilated into the English language, such as the first elements of the following pairs: *boule-bull*, *bloc-block* or *troupe-troop*.

g) Abbreviations and contractions were also excluded, like *aide-aid* or *spec-speck*.

These sets of words were grouped according to the number and sort of causes they were excluded by, that is to say, those excluded just due to one of the criteria, those because of two, three and so on, up to a total of five different causes. The exclusion of one of the elements of the set due to the criteria mentioned above implies that pair is not apt to be taken into account for further study. After this selection the actual number of pairs or sets of words was five hundred and twenty three.[2]

A summary of several aspects of the study can be seen in the following table. When consulting the data, however, the reader must take into consideration the fact that, on some occasions, the initial group was made up of four or five items and just one or two of them were discarded, but the other elements were valid for further study. That explains why the resultant groups beginning with the letter <o> in the final corpus are 3, for instance, even if in the original corpus the sets were 8, of which 6 contained elements belonging to different word-classes from the other items in the same set. There is no contradiction in it; some of the words have not been taken into account, but there must still be a remaining pair in the final corpus. In a similar way, on some other occasions, the groups or some words within the group where excluded on the applying of the other criteria.

The saliency of criterion d) is obvious for several reasons: on the one hand, because of the large amount of sets of words which are affected by this criterion. Although the following criterion is also relevant, the number of elements that have distinctive morphological features, even if they belong to the same word-class, is not so significant. In fact, belonging to a different grammatical category was the factor which triggered the exclusion of most of the items. On the other, as I was interested in studying the possible interference between them, I selected those which were of the same word-class, even if some of them are really infrequent. For instance, *sea-see*: I could not include *see* as a verb, but as a noun meaning either 1) 'the office or position indicated by sitting in a particular episcopal chair; the position of being bishop of a particular diocese' or 2) 'to have a look (at); used as a colloq. replacement for look'. As it can be presumed, there are not many occurrences where these two lexical items (*sea-see*) can be interchangeable and cause some kind of potential confusion. Even more, the interference is completely disregarded in the case they belong to different word-classes.

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2. For further details on how the original corpus was compiled and the criteria to select the final corpus see de la Cruz Cabanillas (1996 and 1999).

TABLE 1. CORPUS OF HOMOPHONES BASED ON THE *OED*

	ORIGINAL CORPUS			FINAL CORPUS		
	N° of groups of homophones compiled	Word-class		N° of groups of homophones	Groups containing more than 2 elements	
		Different	Same, but with grammatical distinction		3 elements	4 elements
A	48	14	1	24	1	0
B	95	30	10	47	8	1
C	145	41	5	85	9	3
D	46	16	2	24	0	0
E	27	7	0	20	0	0
F	60	12	10	32	1	0
G	51	10	5	22	0	0
H	40	18	5	20	2	0
I	13	3	0	10	0	0
J	3	0	1	2	0	0
K	16	3	1	10	0	0
L	54	16	5	25	5	0
M	63	19	5	30	2	0
N	9	4	2	3	0	0
O	8	6	0	3	0	0
P	75	20	9	40	4	0
Q	7	1	1	2	0	0
R	55	10	4	35	7	1
S	82	22	1	47	2	0
T	54	17	3	23	2	0
U	1	0	1	0	0	0
V	7	1	0	3	0	0
W	53	27	7	14	1	0
Y	5	3	0	2	0	0
TOTAL	1017	300	78	523	44	5

If we concentrate on the statistics on the final corpus, we can see how most of the groups of homophones are pairs. Out of 523 sets of homophones, just 44 sets were made up of 3 elements and only 5 contained four elements. Focusing on these 523 groups, I tried to find cases where both elements (or three or the four of them, in the 49 instances just mentioned) could be classified as belonging to the same semantic field. However, the outcome was revealing, as practically the only occurrences were the following: Regarding the field 'animal denominations', I discovered *auk - orc* and *daw - dorr*. It seems impossible to me to confuse a bird with a cetacean, or a bird with an insect in the second case, since a word will no be uttered on its own but within a certain speech act which will enable us to understand which animal we are talking about. So again, the context will work as a disambiguating element.

Some other times, like in *gelid - jellied*, even though both could be used to describe an object, the fact that *gelid* belongs to a higher register makes it unlikely to appear in the same context as *jellied*. A similar example is that of *sack- sac*, the latter meaning 'any natural bag-like cavity', which is restricted to scientific uses and will not occur in everyday speech, or the case of the two homophonous adjectives *glary* 1) 'dazzling' and 2) 'smooth and slippery' (US), and its homophone *glairy* 'viscid, slimmy'. Again the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us how *glairy* is mainly limited to Pathology, as in 'A glairy secretion is poured out from numerous immersed glands'. *Gelid, sac* and *glairy* belong to a more formal register than their counterparts and the context will make any possible confusion vanish.

It is true that some interference may arise between *cwm* and *coomb*, as both apply to a geographical feature, but the speaker may even feel them as variants of the same semantic unit, as *cwn* is the Welsh equivalent to the OE *cumb* 'coomb'. All in all, if the interference might happen, it will never be so relevant to make one of the words disappear.

There are some instances when the ambiguity is easy to arise, like in *confectionary - confectionery*, but these would not be considered proper homophones by some authors, as they are just derivations of the same word-stem with different suffixes. They do not have a distinctive etymological origin, which is considered to be crucial to classify items as homonyms (although they are some exceptional cases like *draught - draft*, which derive from the same source and are treated as homonyms).

There are some cases, however, when this conflict might have occurred and had different consequences as a result. This is a much debated issue whether the influence exerted is accountable for the following consequences and we will deal with some of the examples below.

3. The consequences of the conflict revisted

3.1. Loss of one of the words

Scholars who traditionally advocated homonymic clash, like M. L. Samuels, seem to be more cautious when dealing with the topic now as in one of his latest article on the subject written with Ch. Kay. They admit that the process of replacement is slower when a taboo word is not involved and the evidence is often not so clear-cut as we would like, but they still propose other cases where homonymy is accountable for the loss of some words.

The results of my study cannot be considered conclusive, but cast a little bit of light on the subject. What seems to be still a mystery is the great number of homonyms which have lived throughout the history of the English language without having undergone any changes regarding semantic restriction or loss, either presenting identity in sound (homophones) or in the graphic form (homographs). If the effects of the merging of two words under one form had been so disruptive, there would be no explanation for the hundreds of homonyms that exist in English. The only possible explanation to me is that the clash will only have a devastating effect in those cases where both items can be considered members of the same semantic field and then be interchangeable in the same paradigmatic slot.

Following this view, M. Görlach (1997: 114-115) claims that homonymy will be accountable for word loss only when 1) homophones cannot be disambiguated in some context, 2) the date of the phonological merger can be dated, 3) the terms tend to be used less frequently after the merger, 4) there is an increasing use of alternative expressions after the merger and 5) the set exists in dialects where the merger did not take place.

3.2. Distributional restriction

In my opinion, distributional restriction is more likely to happen than the complete disappearance of a word. In the same way one word is adopted from another language and the whole system must be readjusted as a result of the entering of this new element, so when two forms become identical, one of them may be affected and limit its significance as long as there is potential for clash between them. Otherwise I would say there is no interference at all, as can be proven by the large number of homonyms and homophones existing in English.

An interesting case of restriction of use due to homonymy is discussed by Samuels (1972: 174). According to him, the strong verbs of classes IV and V presented homonymy in the present and preterite forms which entailed the use of the periphrastic *do* to avoid confusion. He suggests *eat* is a special case to be singled out: 'especially noticeable is the verb *eat*, which had the same form /e:t/ for both present

and preterite in the 16th c. (cf. the exclusive use of *did eat* in the 1611 Gospels)'. In order to confirm this thesis I have revised the use of *eat* versus *did eat* not only in the King James Bible, but also in seven other Bibles of the Renaissance period. The results can be read in the following table:

TABLE 2. USE OF *ATE* AND *DID EAT* IN THE RENAISSANCE BIBLES

	<u>ate</u>		<u>did eat</u>	
	OT	NT	OT	NT
TYNDALE'S BIBLE	30	22	1	13
COVERDALE'S BIBLE	75	39	1	2
GREAT BIBLE	0	0	72	31
T. MATTHEW'S BIBLE	47	3	24	9
BISHOPS' BIBLE	3	1	80	29
RHEIMS BIBLE	1	0	86	33
GENEVA	11	10	72	17
KING JAMES	2	1	79	29

Leaving aside Tyndale's Bible, which cannot be fully considered due to the fact that he only translated the Pentateuch, Jonah and the New Testament, the most significant fact is that, apart from Coverdale's and T. Matthew's in the Old Testament, all the other Bibles preferred the use of periphrastic *do* rather than the simple past with *ate*. Nevertheless, even if it is true that there are just three instances of *eat* in the Authorized Version, we cannot conclude that this is due to homonymic conflict. If that were so, we should have expected no occurrences at all or if we focus on the data provided by Coverdale's and Thomas Matthew's Bibles the overwhelming tendency is towards the use of *ate*. We cannot discard interference, but not to the extent to state that the usage made in the 1611 Bible is conditioned by the homonymy of forms, as there will be no explanation for the other cases where both clearly coexist or where *ate* even prevails.

3.3. Using a variant

Proponents of the homonymic theory usually claim that one of the therapeutical methods after the clash is the use of a variant already existing in the language.

A well-known example was provided by J. Smith (1996:139), following M. Samuels's view (1987), who assures that the expected development of the OE rounded vowel /y/ in the ME Midland dialect is /i/. However, in OE *scyttan* 'shut' we nowadays preserve the variant with /u/. The reason for this choice is that during the ME period the word *ordure* was introduced in English from French. The adoption of the foreign item made *shit* restrict its original neutral meaning to the sense we know as 'excrement, dung'. This constraint made the homophony between *shut* and *shit* unbearable and the phonetic variant was preferred. This is not a simple case of homophony, but one where a taboo word is involved, so there is usually a desire on the part of the speaker to avoid any association with the unpleasant word.[3]

This could have happened in *ass-arse*, as well, as Barber (1976: 331) suggested, but in my opinion, it is the pressure of the taboo word what causes the displacement of the item rather than homophony. In the same way, *gay* 'light-hearted, exuberantly cheerful, sportive, merry' tends to be replaced by another synonym due to its other meaning: 'homosexual' and there is no homonymic conflict involved in it. And even so, some scholars claim *gay* as an example of 'functionally motivated homophone avoidance' must be considered an exception rather than the rule (Lass, 1997: 29).[4]

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3. For a recent view on the controversial merger, see Platzer (1996), who rebates the arguments discussed in Lass' (1980: 75ff.) and implied in Samuels' (1972: 142ff.) by providing some new evidence on the subject and demonstrating their view of avoidance-of-homophones is not tenable in this particular case.

4. In this specific case, Lass refers to homophone meaning 'homonym', as there is identification of sound and spelling.

4. Concluding remarks

Homonymic conflict does not seem to happen inevitably as some scholars claim, so it cannot be considered the obvious reason which explains many of the changes that take place in the language. The potential for clash will only be real when two homonyms belong to the same word-class and to the same sphere of thought. These two conditions are very rarely met at the same time, as has been proven from the analysed corpus.

In other cases, there might be some kind of interference, but the conflict will not be pernicious, unless both requirements are fulfilled. As it is difficult to find a pair of homonyms (at least homophones) which shows both, there will be no risk of word displacement. This conclusion can be easily drawn, if we take into account the great number of homophones that are in proper use in present-day English (1017 groups in my initial corpus).

Homonymy, as suggested, must also be studied from another point of view: not only as the reason for the elimination of lexical units, but also as the cause of other possible changes like changes in the graphic or phonetic form of the words or as a reason for distributional restriction. However, no real confusion will arise out of it, as the context will always work as a disambiguating factor.

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