

A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Tone-Induced Homonymy in Kuteb

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Abstract

This research is an analysis of aspects of Kuteb language semantics. Semantics is solely the study of meaning in a language. The aims of the research inclines to conduct a lexical- semantic study of Kuteb language with the objective of investigating the impacts of tone, as it enhances similarities and differences in lexical items of Kuteb language. The investigation is principally narrowed to homonyms. Homonyms are words that sounds alike, they could be spelt and written alike but tends to be different in meanings and it is further divided into homophony and homography. Linguistically homonyms align to the variability of a word to generate multiple and un- related meaning with the help of tones. Tone is a contrastive functional element of a language which assist in determining both lexical and grammatical meaning of a word. The research adopts descriptive research design and contextual theory of meaning, to determine the semantic similarities and differences in lexical items of Kuteb Language. The instruments for data collection are through Swadesh word list, interview and questionnaires. The findings indicate significant homonyms in lexical items of Kuteb Language which, culminate to homonymic clash/conflicts yet, it does not heighten to complexity and semantic nuance that could distort meaningful communication among Kuteb language users. In conclusion the research realises tones as triggers of meaning resulting to prevalence of both hetero tonal and homo-tonal homonyms which therefore situate Kuteb as a tonal language. It further recommends the teaching and learning of homonyms as it develops vocabularies and meanings, which enhances communication and its confusing nature increases variability of tone on word in developing contextual meaning.

Keywords: Homography, Homonyms, Homophony, Semantics, Tone, Tonal sandhi

1. Introduction

Semantics, a fundamental branch of linguistics, investigates how meaning is encoded, expressed, and interpreted through language across the world's linguistic systems. Stayl (2014) describes semantics as the most abstract level of linguistic analysis, while Leech (1981) explains that meaning cannot be recorded as directly as speech sounds. Similarly, Syal and Jindal (2014), Saeed (1997), Löbner (2002), and Kreidler (1998) conceptualise semantics as the systematic study of meaning in language. These perspectives demonstrate that linguistic meaning involves lexical forms, contextual relationships, and the interpretation of messages by language users. Lexical meaning varies across languages, particularly in tonal languages where pitch distinctions can differentiate otherwise similar lexical forms. Blench (2012) identifies tone as a contrastive and functional element that contributes to lexical and grammatical meaning. Lyons (1982) discusses homonymy as a semantic phenomenon involving lexical items with identical forms but different meanings. Abu-Humeid (2010) similarly explains homonymy through the relationship between distinct concepts sharing the same name. Homonymy therefore presents an important area of semantic investigation, especially where tone and context contribute to meaning interpretation.

The theoretical understanding of semantics has developed through different approaches to linguistic meaning. Abu-Humeid and Altai (2010) distinguish logical, lexical, compositional, truth-conditional, and grammatical semantics, demonstrating that meaning can be examined at word, sentence, and structural levels. Ogden and Richards (1923) further explore the relationship between linguistic symbols, concepts, and their interpretation. These perspectives provide a basis for examining how lexical items acquire distinct meanings within particular linguistic contexts. Within the African linguistic context, tonal distinctions are particularly relevant to the description of languages whose lexical and grammatical interpretations depend on pitch. Kuteb, spoken in Nigeria, provides an important context for investigating this relationship. Welmers (1973) identifies tone as a significant component of Kuteb lexical meaning, while Koop (2000) and Yip (2002) discuss tone and prosody as important aspects of linguistic structure. Koop (2000) and Blench (2012) also provide relevant perspectives on tonal organisation and tonal variation. These insights establish a foundation for examining homonymy in Kuteb. The problem motivating this study is the occurrence of Kuteb lexical items that share similar phonetic or orthographic forms but express unrelated meanings, potentially creating ambiguity during communication. For instance, the reported word *kyang* has several meanings, including 'walk', 'things', 'smoke', and 'old', depending on tonal distinctions and context. However, the extent to which tone distinguishes these meanings and the degree to which contextual information resolves possible ambiguity require systematic investigation. Accordingly, the study aims to conduct a lexico-semantic analysis of tone-related homonymy in Kuteb. Its specific objectives are to identify homonyms in Kuteb, examine their semantic similarities and differences, investigate the role of tone in distinguishing lexical meanings, and determine how homonymy affects contextual interpretation and communication. The study is significant because it contributes to the documentation of Kuteb, advances understanding of tone-meaning relationships, and provides linguistic evidence for further research in African language semantics. Its findings may also support Kuteb vocabulary development, language teaching, learning, and effective communication.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Conceptual Review

Homography

Homography refers to the relationship between words that share the same spelling but differ in meaning and sometimes pronunciation. Lyons (1977) examines lexical meaning and the relationships between linguistic forms and their meanings. Crystal (2008) describes

homographs as words with identical written forms but different meanings, often with different pronunciations. Operationally, homography in this study refers to Kuteb lexical items with identical spellings but distinct meanings, potentially distinguished by tone.

Homonyms

Lyons (1981) discusses homonymy as a lexical relationship involving identical linguistic forms with unrelated meanings. Crystal (2008) defines homonyms as words that share the same form but differ in meaning. Homonymy may involve similarity in spelling, pronunciation, or both. In this study, homonyms refer to Kuteb lexical items that share the same form but express unrelated meanings, with particular attention to the role of tone and context in distinguishing them.

Homophony

Homophony occurs when two or more words have the same pronunciation but different meanings and spellings. Lyons (1977) discusses such relationships within the study of lexical meaning and sense relations. Crystal (2008) identifies homophones as words pronounced alike but differing in meaning and often in spelling. Operationally, homophony in this study refers to Kuteb words with identical or similar pronunciations but different meanings, where tonal contrasts may contribute to their semantic distinction.

2.3 Empirical Review

Nwafor (2023) steered an investigation on polysemy within the Umumba Ndiagu dialect of Igbo language in Enugu state Nigeria in order, to discover the extent and nature of polysemy predominant in the dialect as such polysemous lexemes were analysed by adopting quantitative method and Wittgenstein's 1933 theory for the analysis of meaning. Interview and semantic inventory serve as method of data collection in order to investigate different senses such meaning was able to invoke. The findings indicate less ambiguity because lexemes are interpreted based on context and concluded that the study enhances human communication and expansion of Igbo lexicon and therefore recommended further exploration of polysemy in more dialects and languages. Nwafor's study investigated polysemy of Igbo language while this research is an investigation on homonyms of Kuteb and the finding illustrates tone as triggers of meaning in both words and some sentences in Kute language. Both researches adopted the same theory. Abubakar and David (2025) study is an onomastic semantics which investigated personal names in Mumuye language and illuminate the meaning inherent while our research considers the homonyms of Kuteb language. Both researches adopted Interview, Abubakar and David considered focal group methods of data collection and the personal names were grouped in to emergent themes, while in our research the lexical items were grouped into the two types of homonyms which includes homophone and homograph. Their finding recognises significant linguistics forms as basis of meanings which reflects diverse realities of life including circumstances of birth, time and place of birth, manner and other of birth, which enhance both denotative and connotative meaning of names as well as cultural and religion significance, while our finding recognised the differences in lexical items based on homophones and homograph. Moreover. This research adopted the usage theory by Wittgenstein (1953) and referential theory of meaning and the approach of Sense Relation by Ogden and Richard (1923) to determine the various way tones influence multiple meanings in a word.

Although previous studies examine polysemy in Igbo and personal-name semantics in Mumuye, limited attention is given to tone-related homonymy in Kuteb. This study fills the gap by investigating how tonal variations distinguish homonymous lexical items and influence contextual meaning, ambiguity, and communication in Kuteb words.

Theoretical Framework

Wittgenstein's 1933 theory. The usage theory by Wittgenstein (1953) and referential theory of meaning and the approach of Sense Relation by Ogden and Richard (1923). The referential theory referred to sign as concept. The concept is the reference which referred to some objects in the real world called the referent. The theory further categorizes words and sentences as linguistic items, in the sense that the relationship between the linguistic items, and non-linguistics world of experience is considered as a relationship of reference. The relationship between two words is regarded as 'Sense Relation' which is principally geared toward intra-linguistic relations. In other words, it focuses more on the relationship within the system of a given language such as similarities and differences between words as well as inclusion and presupposition (Humeid, 2010). It was the knowledge of sense relation that spouted out word structures such as; Homonyms, polysemy, synonyms. However, this relationship depends on the way people in a given environment conceptualize an object which could be to others, for example in Kuteb language, cwu means grinding stone, cwu means palm nut, cwu means vomit and cwu equally means death. It is possible to notice some differences between sentence and meaning derived from utterances due to 'Tone' and other suprasegmental features which can easily change the meaning of the word. Also, sentence comprises of both lexical and grammatical meaning as such, it could further be interpreted in form of functions such as, declarative, imperative, interrogative, rhetoric, wish, warning as well as presupposition and entailment. Contextual theory of meaning explains the process by which a meaning of a word is derived through the context in which it is being used (Firth, 1957). Context situation is relevant in derivation of meaning. Halliday (1978) functional approach determined meaning of a sentence is derived and understood according to the real word context. This theory interprets and attach meaning based on context of occurrence and usage which is equally adopted in this research.

3. Method of Data Collection

Descriptive research design was adopted in the study. The data used in this analysis were Semantic inventory of Kuteb language culled from 400 Swadesh word list translated and transcribed using phonetic extension supplement in micro soft office Ado (2025) and the data collected through questionnaire and interview.

4. Results and Discussion

Below is example of some Homonyms of Kuteb language;

S/N	KUTEB	GLOSS
1.	Ta	Three
2.	Tā	Hill
3.	Kun	Ice
4.	Kūn	Smell
5.	Kŭn	Hen
6.	Kūng	un-ripe
7.	ku'ng	Fake

8.	Cwu'	grinding stone
9.	Cwu	palm nut
10.	Cwũ	Vomit
11.	Cwū	Death
12.	kyâng	Old
13.	Kyang	Smoke
14.	Kyāng	Walk
15.	kya'ng	Things
16.	kyeên	full, satiate.
17.	Kyeen	house fly
18.	Wum	Corn
19.	Wũm	heat season
20.	Wūm	Arise
21.	wu'm	Dry

Context Level

S/N	KUTEB	GLOSS
1.	Ami si ti nyisu ta	I have three children.
2.	Fu'u jabci te kun?	Do you sell ice-block?
3.	Ami fyeen kūn tashi	I am smelling beer
4.	Kūn wuni natso kin wu	The hen is laying on it eggs.
5.	Mi roka sha cwu wuni wa ta we kween	I searched for this grinding stone on the hill overthere.
6.	Cwu' wuni gbag	The palmtree is strong
7.	Mbawu shan ti u cwũ	The child wants to vomit
8.	Ndewu cwū yaka	The man died last year
9.	Tigba wuni kyân pu	This wrapper is old.
10.	Kyâng sam pum yip	Smoke has entered my eyes.
11.	Afu kyāng woti ruruin?	Can you walk long distance?
12.	Jab nam kya'ng tiyang.	Buy good thing for me
13.	Ami roka pwa wum cweer	I am going to grind corn tomorrow.
14.	Shean wũm gbob timam be	Heat season is uncomfortable.
15.	Wūm tifu yang kyang.	Arise and sing the song.

16.	Ti chi wuci, iye ami kyeên pum	Let' eat food, no Iam satiate
17.	Kyeen kife woni.	House flies are plenty here.
18.	Wundauni sit e kyee'n.	This lady has a long hair.

Homonyms are categorised based on sounds, spellings or broader category which includes: Homographs having the same spelling but, different meaning and often different pronunciation/sound. Eg lead metal, lead guide. Bark sound of a dog and bark the back of a tree. Homophones having the same sounds and spellings but different meaning. Eg bank for money and river bank.

S/N	GLOSS	ENGLISH
1.	Cwu	grinding stone
2.	Cwu	vomit/ regurgitate
3.	Cwu	palm nut
4.	Kyang	Walk
5.	Kyang	Smoke
6.	Kyeen	Satiate

Homograph: is having same spelling but different sound it is made up of a sub set called Heteronyms or heterophone They are pronounced differently but they tend to have the same spelling, example of English word tear/cry and tear/ri

The result of the analysis contained in the research further identified the followings;

Homophones has different meaning, identical pronunciation with no care for the spelling. Bow and bough are homophones even as their spelling is different. Homophones: having same sound, but different spelling and meaning. In English eg pair/pear, to/two/too

S/N	KUTEB	GLOSS
1.	Feen	Feet
2.	Feen	Listen
3.	Fyeen	Two
4.	Teen	Hometown
5.	Teen	Tears is

Sentence Level

S/N	KUTEB	GLOSS
1.	Ame tom wu tom.	Iam farming
2.	Ame tõm wu tõm.	I sent him on errand
3.	Awu te nyaa	He is running
4.	Awu te nyaâ	Him and his relativie
5.	Awu té nyaa.	He is escorting his relative.
6.	Ndam ukwuab	Give me a hoe
7.	Nde u kwüab	The man tried

Homonyms in Kuteb language can be classify into three; Homonymic words that have two meanings, Heteronym/heterograph words that have multiple meanings and Homonymic words that have relation in meaning these types of words are actually known as polysemy in English also, there is a unique homophony with same pronunciation and different spelling furthermore, the research discovered Lexical ambiguity because, Kuteb is a tonal language as a result, it necessitates word that can have the same spellings with different meaning due to differences in tone. The research also observed Full homonyms which coincide in both sound and spelling but they have different meaning likewise, there exist Homophone words that are similar in

sound but different spelling and meaning in addition, there is a perceptible evidence of Homograph, words that are identical in spelling but have different sound and meaning.

Discussion of Findings:

This research is pertinent in the study of Kuteb language, one of the major discoveries is; homonyms can be an impediment to both the speaker and the communication process at large. The result indicates homonyms is remarkably evident in Kuteb language and it occurs more in one- syllable word. the findings further confirm Kuteb semantic reflects tonal modification as such, some of the homograph can be distinguish as a result of supra- segmental features especially the tone, thus tone becomes an eminent trigger of meaning in Kuteb language.

In- addition, the finding proof homonyms can create ambiguity which is referred to as homonymic clash or homonymic conflict but the findings show speech in context, intuition as well as tone can help both speakers and learners of Kuteb language to, disambiguate a sentence and enhance effective communication however, the result persuaded to the fact that; apart from the tone, it is appropriate to understand the cultural and social context in which a word is used and how it effects changes in the meaning. The study further indicates the prevalence of five distinct tones in Kuteb language the fifth is contour a sandhi tone. Usually identified as, Low (unmarked). Mid marked with a macron (ˉ). High marked with an acute accent (´). Falling marked with a circumflex (^). Rising marked with a caron (ˇ). The theoretical frame work assists in determining meaning in the research. Because, the relationship between two words is regarded as ‘Sense Relation’ which is principally geared toward intra- linguistic relations. It fucuses more on the relationship within the system of a given language such as similarities and differences between words through the supra-segmentary features. Similarly, tone is one of the Supra-segmentary features. In this research the differences in meaning of the words investigated were derived through changes in tone. For instance, the word, Cwu palm kernel, Cwu’ Grinding stone, Cwū Vomit, Cwū death. It further identified how homonyms can deepn the knowledge of figurative language and poetic devices for instance pun. The word jwu nda jwu. Jwu means hand thus, the meaning of the statement is ‘a hand gives a hand’ which figuratively means giver never lack. Likewise, ‘Nda tin nda’ Nda’ means giving, so the statement means ‘giving a give’ this statement is used contextually to indicate the practice of thiting in christianity to determine the giving of 10% out of the 100% total income of a person.

5.Conclusion

This research mainly thrust on lexical and contextual interpretation void of pragmatic equivalent because, analysis of proverbs was not contained in the investigation rather, the study is a comprehensive exploration on the semantic analysis of homonyms of Kuteb language using tone. The research realises the prevalence of both Hetero tonal Homonyms and Homo tonal Homonyms in Kuteb language although, Homonyms create both lexical and syntactics ambiguity but in Kuteb language it does not culminate to complexities that could make learning and communication in Kuteb language cumbersome.

Recommendation

- i. The study of homonyms should be encouraged as it enhances the tracking of historic meaning of word and the changes that occur in the process of language development. It promotes critical thinking which enable learners to decipher intended meaning through the use of level tone and contour tone.
- ii. Teacher and lecturer should broaden the knowledge of their student toward the various synonymy and linguistics concepts that are semantically identical such as homograph, heteronyms and hetero tonal homonyms means the same.
- iii. Stake holders needs to elucidate the study of homonym in the curriculum because it

also upsurges learners voca-data through multiple meaning and contextual clarity which foster communication and creative writing and improved comprehension.

Contribution to Knowledge

- i. The study helps linguists distinguish homonyms, homophones, and homographs.
- ii. It supports research on how words change over time.
- iii. It also helps computer systems interpret word meanings correctly. The study assists teachers in teaching Kuteb vocabulary and meaning.
- iv. It improves translation and communication skills.
- v. It also helps learners understand multiple meanings of words, avoid confusion, and use words correctly in different contexts.

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