ISSN: 2582-6131

Research Article

LEXICAL AMBIGUITY FACED BY NON-NATIVE LEARNERS LISTENING TO ENGLISH CONNECTED SPEECH

*Abeer Al-ghazali and Reham Ali Almaqtary

University of Kerala, India.

ABSTRACT

Ambiguity refers to the situation in which a word or a phrase can have more than one meaning. Generally speaking, some ambiguities occur in daily communication in which native and non-native speakers get confused to understand what exactly the speaker is referring to. Those are called lexical ambiguities in which the word has the same sound and the spelling, but it is still regarded as two or more different lexemes as it carries various unrelated meanings, a polysemous term, or homophonous term in which two words can have the same sound but different meanings and different spellings. However, the real problems are those faced by the non-native learners when listening to English native speakers, especially concerning the phonological variations that happen in speech production, which create ambiguity. This paper focuses on some lexico-semantic ambiguities caused by connected speech processes that occur naturally in spoken English. That means the ambiguity here is caused by the phonological modifications caused by combining two or more words while speaking, referred to as connected speech processes, resulting in some phonological variations in speech production that in some cases, the same word can be understood in two different ways due to the change that happened while pronouncing it adjacent to the next word. For example, the word 'teen' can be misinterpreted as 'team' when the /n/ is assimilated to a bilabial sound as in 'They were more interested in teen books'. Here, we can get two meanings, 'They were more interested in teen books' and 'They were more interested in team books'. As is the case with all other ambiguities, the solution will always be by providing more details as the meaning depends on the context of the ambiguous words. Therefore, if these are the potential causes of ambiguity to a native listener, they are also to be taken as potential ambiguities to non-native listeners as well. Consequently, if the EFL learners do not have the awareness to expect such ambiguities, they would probably misunderstand the message. However, if they are aware of such processes, they will have fewer comprehension difficulties. This paper suggests that a teacher of English as a foreign language should raise the EFL learners' awareness of such processes and the possible ambiguities so as to avoid them.

Keywords: Lexical ambiguity- connected speech -EFL.

INTRODUCTION

Because English is an active language spoken internationally, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students worldwide are learning English. No matter how motivated the learners can be, they still face problems while learning such a language. Those problems are either related to the linguistic systems of the mother tongue already stored in the learners' brain that interfere with the new input of the new language or by the peculiarities this learned language contains in its system. One of the peculiarities of the English language is called connected speech processes which affect the way in which the sounds of the words are heard when spoken within a phrase or a sentence which may not look the same when a word is spoken individually. This paper aims at investigating the lexical ambiguity that is caused due to the connected speech phenomenon. The fact that most non-native speakers learn vocabulary spoken individually, out of context, is the starting point to argue that those words are stored in a specific form in learners' brains, and therefore when hearing a word with slightly different pronunciation, they may think it is another word while it is the same learned word but spoken in connection to another word resulting in deletion of a speech sound, assimilating a neighboring sound, adding a speech sound, shortening a long vowel and so forth. This creates difficulties to comprehend while listening. As argued by Laoubi (2020), the challenges of EFL learners that make them unable to comprehend a spoken discourse is

not the rate of speech. He states that "…even in low speech rates, learners are still unable to recognize words and segment speech. The reason lies in the fact that spoken language lacks the luxury of the pauses that enable learners to determine word beginnings and endings" Laoubi (2020, p.142)

Ambiguity is of many types. First, when some lexical items have more than one meaning, it is called lexical ambiguity, and sometimes it is referred to as semantic ambiguity or Polysemy. That is, the lexeme itself has different meanings and, therefore, different entries in the dictionary. For example, '*She is waiting by the bank*', the word '*bank*' could refer to two different places, '*the bank of the river*' and '*the place where you save money*'. Sometimes, such ambiguity is used on purpose, as in literary works, puns, or as a part of a joke. The use of such ambiguous words leads to more thinking of what the writer could be referring to. However, in real-life conversations, these ambiguities occur by chance, not on purpose and the reader or listener struggles to find out the intended meaning. Secondly, when ambiguity is created by the structural position of a word or a phrase in a sentence, it is called structural ambiguity, or grammatical ambiguity. That means the different interpretations of a word or a phrase are caused by the structure of the sentence, or the word having different grammatical classes. An example of this is '*Time flies*' which could be understood as an imperative sentence asking someone to '*time the flies'* or a statement that '*time passes quickly'*.

Semantically speaking, two words having different meanings may differ only in one sound. Take, for example, the two words '*cat*' and '*cap*.' These are two unrelated words with different meanings. However, when the word '*cat*', for example, is pronounced in the

*Corresponding Author: Abeer Al-ghazali,
University of Kerala, India.

sentence, '*The kid was delighted to have found her cat by the door*', the final sound /t/ would assimilate with the bilabial /b/ of the next word in terms of place of articulation. Therefore the word 'cat' would be misunderstood as 'cap'. Therefore, such ambiguity might cause misunderstanding to the non-native speakers, especially those who are unaware of the concept and processes of connected speech.

The problem of the study:

In the listening practice, learners of English are likely to face difficulties concerning comprehending a spoken message, especially with regards to some ambiguities that arise due to phonological variations that happen in speech production, which cause ambiguity. In this paper, the problem of ambiguity is to be examined, particularly when a word has two meanings caused by a phonological process while producing connected speech.

Objectives of the study:

This paper aims at describing to what extent connected speech processes could lead to ambiguity. It has two objectives:

1. To investigate the lexical ambiguity caused by linking.
2. To investigate the lexical ambiguity caused by assimilation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When speaking about ambiguity, both natives and non-natives face a problem called semantic ambiguity, in which a word may have more than one meaning, and the context is responsible for making the meaning clear. For example, the words 'saw' and 'bat' have more than one meaning each. That is, they are polysemous words. A sentence as 'Joe saw three bats in the backyard' could have multiple meanings, (Stone,2017), 1) Joe used a tool with a sharp blade to cut three baseball bats in the backyard, 2) Joe used a tool with a sharp blade to cut three flying animals in the backyard, 3) Joe viewed three baseball bats in the backyard, and 4) Joe viewed three flying animals in the backyard. However, this is not the focus of this paper. Previous research on ambiguity focuses on the homographs, homonyms, homophones, and polysemous words that make ambiguity. This paper tackles only the ambiguous meanings caused due to changes that happen because of the connected speech processes.

According to Nokes and James (2018), connected speech exists in all registers in the English language and all speech rates. Therefore, a learner listening to the news or watching a movie gets confused and less able to comprehend the message due to the fact that some process that occurs in connected speech result in phonemes changing; they get minimized, or eliminated, or assimilated or another additional phoneme gets inserted. This makes learners fail to recognize the phonetic shape of a known word. According to Field (2003), the problem of ambiguity lies not only in the listeners' inability to mark the pauses between words in connected speech, but also in the fact that connected speech processes, especially elision, reduction, and assimilation, affect "the points at which the listener needs unambiguous information - namely word beginnings and endings", (Field, 2003, p.7).

Connected speech processes:

Connected speech processes refer to linking, assimilation, liaison, weak/reduced forms, and elision. To start with, linking happens at word boundaries where two sounds combine while keeping their phonetic qualities, Alameen. (2014).That is the last sound of the first word links to the first sound of the second word. Linking can be categorized into three main types:

1. …C] + [V… The final Consonant is pronounced with the initial Vowel of the second word, as in 'An apple', [a- napple], 'come in', [co- min], 'found out', [foun-dout], 'is it', [i- zit] and 'not at all', [no-ta-tall/ no-dad-all].

2. …C] + [C… same consonant makes a prolonged consonant, that is , no change to the original sounds as in: 'nice summer', 'some money', etc.

3.…V] + [V… When two vowels meet, an additional consonant appears in between, usually the glides /j and w/ or /r/ in some British accents. In the literature, this process is sometimes referred to as liaison. According to Laoubi (2020), the liaison process involves an addition of sounds in between words to ensure an easy and smooth transition between them. This occurs to smooth the transition between sounds or to facilitate pronunciation as in: 'The idea of', [Theyidearov], 'The apple', [the-yapple] ,'The idea', [The-yidea], 'Say it', [sa-yit], 'Go away', [go-waway], and 'they always', [they-yalways].

Assimilation refers to the process by which the final sound of a word changes some of its features in word borders. The phonological environment influences features as the place of articulation, manner of articulation, nasality, and voicing. For example, the voiceless dental plosive /t/ becomes velar in an environment where it is followed by a velar sound/k/ as in '*that kite*', [thak kite]. Here, the /t/ undergoes a complete change in the place of articulation to share that of the adjacent sound /k/ but the plosive manner, as well as the voicing aspect, remain the same. In '*good girl*', [goog girl], the voiced dental plosive /d/ becomes velar when followed by a velar sound /g/. The same happens to /t/ in '*that place*', [thapplace], in which the /t/ remains voiceless plosive but changes its place of articulation into bilabial. Other examples of place assimilation can be found in '*this shop*',[thish shop] in which the dental voiceless fricative /s/ becomes post-alveolar/sh/, and the dental nasal /n/ becomes bilabial as in '*ten boys*', [tem boys].

Palatalization which is a type of a reciprocal assimilation that occurs in connected speech, as stated by Seong, (2008),"when the /t/, /d/, /s/, or /z/ phonemes are followed by a /j/ phoneme and combine to become /tʃ/, /dʒə/, /ʃ/, or /dʒ/ respectively", (Seong, 2008, p. 58). Other examples of palatalization can be seen in the following combination of an auxiliary followed by 'you' as in :can't you /kæntʃə/, won't you /wontʃə/, aren't you /arntʃə/, haven't you /hævntʃə/, did you /dɪdʒə/, could you /kudʒə/, and would you /wudʒə/.

Reduced Forms / Weak Form soccur when phonemes of a language are changed, minimized, or eliminated in order to make pronunciation easier, (Alameen, 2014). This is common with function words in English as in one-syllable determiners, pronouns, prepositions, and auxiliaries as in: 'Can you go' [kənya go], 'Some of', [səməv], 'Out of', [outa] and the phoneme /h/which gets deleted in the pronouns 'he, him, them, and her' as in: 'Tell him', [tellim],'call them',[callem], 'killed her',[killder],'Did he come',[did e come], and also in contracted forms as in : 'I have',[I've], and 'He has',[he's].

The phoneme /t/ gets deleted when preceded by /n/ as in the short form of not as in: 'Did not'(didn't), [didn]. And in the case of an American accent, the /t/ is not released in /nt/ combination as in: 'interview', 'internet', while it changes into a glottal stop when followed by a consonant in the British accent, as in: 'great book', [greaʔbook].
Previous research on connected speech focuses on two main points, how the EFL learners suffer comprehending connected speech, that is diagnosing the problem as in Laoubi (2020), and ways to improve the listening and/or the speaking skill based on connected speech instruction as in Rahimi and Chalak, (2017) and Alameen, (2014). Much effort is made to improve both the EFL learners' comprehension and intelligibility using different methods and activities to help them; however, a few research tackled the possibility of

assimilation to cause lexical ambiguity as in Gaskell & Wilson (2001) and their examples as 'run picks' versus 'rum picks' and the '*tulips*' versus '*two lips*' by (Gow, 2001).The findings of Gaskell & Wilson, (2001) and Gow,) 2001) reveal that the native listeners of English sometimes misinterpret words other than those intended by speakers. A little research is done with the learners taken in to account. In the book, *English Pronunciation In Use*, Hancock (2003) discusses the linking process and gives some examples of how another meaning is created when words get connected together. A phrase like [gɒtʌpæteɪt] would be heard as [gɒ təpəteɪt], 'got up at eight' which may confuse the learners of English. To cite his examples, let's look at these pairs of expressions which get different meanings but sound the same:

pets enter	pet centre
stopped aching	stop taking
ice-cream	I scream
known aim	no name
called Annie	call Danny
clocks tops	clock stops
missed a night	Mr Knight

Hancock (2003, p. 84)

It is important to note that these are not homophones, which means, they only got homophonous when they were linked together. That's what might cause ambiguity, unless the context makes it clear.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims at investigating to what extent connected speech features could lead to ambiguity. Here, I present twelve sentences, and every two sentences will be analysed phonetically in order to illustrate how another meaning appears due to a linking or an assimilation process. To investigate whether assimilation and linking lead to ambiguity, a recording of a native speaker saying the first sentence of each pair was given to 61 learners of English. All the participants were postgraduates. They were asked to firstly listen to the recordings, and then pick the sentence that they heard. After hearing each pair, they were asked, 'What did you hear?'. In the test, the sentence that they heard was always the second sentence, option (B), the sentence which contained assimilation or linking. The misleading sentence was always option (A). A third option (C) was given, which stated that options A and B were correct. If the EFL learners choose option (A), which wasn't really the spoken sentence they had listened to, this means they got another meaning due to ambiguity, and if they choose the second option, (B), that means they got the intended meaning said by the speaker. However, if they choose (C), this means both the sentences could be understood as they sound the same, which means they are ambiguous. Here are the examples:

1. They were more interested in team books.
2. They were more interested in teen books.
3. First, click on old documents. Then, find your file.
4. First, click on All Documents. Then, find your file.
5. He drew a picture of some beams.
6. He drew a picture of sunbeams.
7. That means, I am going to pay alone.
8. That means, I am going to pay a loan.
9. Get Autav here.
10. Get out of here.
11. Tom bought some ham bags.
12. Tom bought some handbags.

Analysis:

Let's start with 'teen books' and team books'. In the first pair, '*They were more interested in teen books*' and '*They were more interested in team books*', two meanings can be understood by these sentences although, phonetically, they sound the same. This is because the nasal dental /n/ assimilates with the first sound of the next word, the bilabial /b/, and becomes bilabial nasal. So, 'teen' would be heard as [teem]. The context allows both meanings to be present. They are interested in books related to teens or teams.

As is shown in Figure (1) below, the EFL learners chose the three options, with different percentages, of course, but this simply means they did find ambiguity. Fifty-nine percent of the participants chose the correct answer; however, the first answer was selected only by 19.7% of the participants. What is to be noticed is the third option which shows that the two sentences can be produced the same and this option was chosen by 19.3% of the participants.
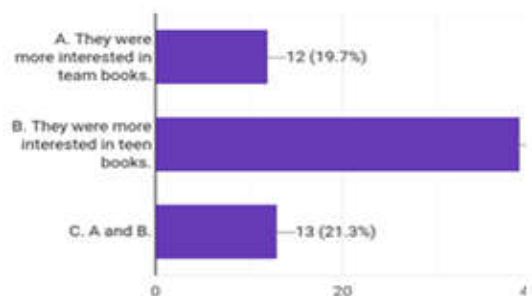

Figure (1) 'team books' and 'teen books'

As for the second and third examples, '*First, click on old documents. Then, find your file*', and '*First, click on All Documents. Then, find your file*', the combinations '*all documents*' and '*old documents*' do not have an exact similar sound, yet when spoken, they can create some ambiguity.
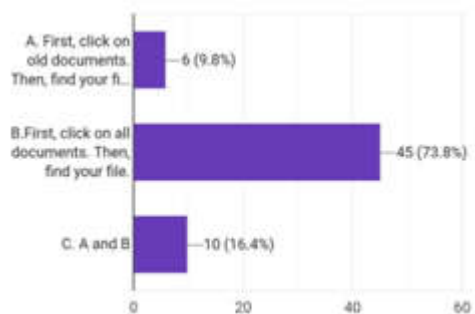

Figure (2) 'All documents' and 'old documents'

The second couple of examples brought together two words that could be heard similarly while they actually do not sound the same. The /d/ of the first word links to the next word and makes the word '*old*' seem like '*all*', as the /d/ moves to be linked to the adjacent word. That results in the ambiguity between '*all documents*' and '*old documents*'. When the EFL learners listened to the sentence '*First, click on All Documents. Then, find your file*', they responded as follows. As shown in Figure (2), 9.8% of the participants chose the option (A), a wrong answer, 73.8% chose the correct answer, and 16.4% were confused that both the sentences could be heard the same. This confirms that linking results in ambiguity.

The next two examples focus on connecting the two words that contain assimilation. The two sentences, '*He drew a picture of some beams*' and '*He drew a picture of sunbeams*' could be heard the

same because when the last sound of '*sun*', a dental nasal /n/ is linked to the first sound of '*beams*', a bilabial /b/, it assimilates in the feature of the place of articulation, resulting in '*sun beams*' and '*some beams*' being heard the same.
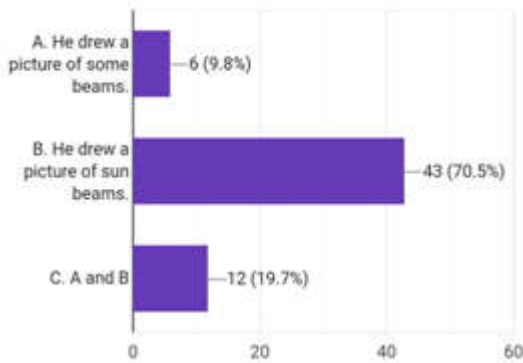

Figure (3) 'sun beams' and 'some beams'

As seen in Figure (3) above, the answers to the third question was answered as follows: 9.8% of the participants chose option (A), a wrong answer, 70.5% chose the correct answer (B), and 19.7% were confused that both the sentences could be heard the same.
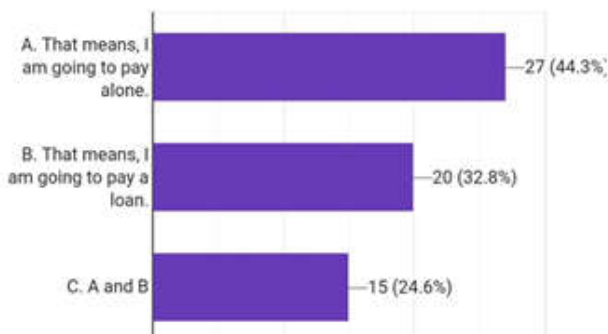

Figure (4) 'pay alone' and 'pay a loan'

In the 7th and 8th examples, '*That means, I am going to pay alone*' and '*That means, I am going to pay a loan*', both '*alone*' and '*aloan*' sound similar as the article '*a*' gets linked to the word '*loan*' which leads to ambiguity. Most of the participants chose the wrong answer (A), 44.3%, and the option (C), 24.6%, which means they got confused, as the meaning was ambiguous. This could mean, they didn't know the meaning of the word '*loan*' which is the one intended in the recording, or perhaps the word 'a *lone*' is more common.
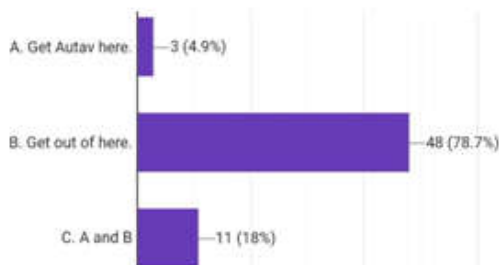

Figure (5) 'Autav' and 'out of'

In connected speech, the function words usually get reduced, as in '*out of*' becomes [*outav*]. As the participants listened to the following two sentences, '*Get Autav here*' and '*Get out of here*', only 4.9% chose (A) which contained a proper name, and majority chose the correct answer (B), 78.7% and those who found it ambiguous were

18%, those who chose (C) as shown in Figure (5) above. The last couple of examples focused on assimilation, too. The sentences '*Tom bought some ham bags*' and '*Tom bought some handbags*' could sound the same if the dental nasal /n/ assimilates the place of articulation of /m/ the bilabial nasal.
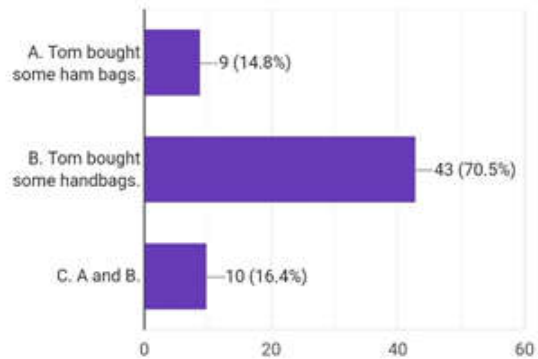

Figure (6) 'ham bags' and 'handbags'

As shown in Figure (6), the majority of the participants chose option (B), 70.5%, while those who got confused chose (A), 14%, and (C), 16%. This simply means, there exists an ambiguity due to the assimilation.

Discussion: As was clear from the above examples, the EFL learners would get confused because they learn words separately and when they hear them in a context, they get confused. When the participants chose the third option, that was an indicator that they got confused and they got the two meanings, which is the lexical ambiguity, due to the processes of linking and assimilation. Therefore, it is clear from this study that EFL learners are expected to face lexical ambiguity when they listen to English.

Recommendations:

It is highly recommended to include such features into the teaching syllabus of EFL programs and help learners connect words and comprehend connected words as well. The teachers are supposed to raise the learners' awareness of those processes and how they create ambiguity, and provide them with more real-life examples that contain connected speech processes.

Limitations of the study:

This study was conducted on a small sample of Connected Speech Processes and on a small sample of EFL learners. The number of participants was61 and the number of the sample examples was only 12 sentences that contained assimilation and linking processes only. All the participants were postgraduates specializing in English majors. A better understanding of ambiguity faced by the EFL learners that is caused by connected speech would include a variable collection of examples that cover all the processes, and a wider group of participants including fresh students and high school students, and postgraduate students who study other majors than English.

REFERENCES

Alameen, G. and Levis, J. (2014). Connected Speech. Retrieved from: http://www.academia.edu/13720506/Connected_speech Sept. 2021

Field, J. (2003). Promoting Perception: Lexical Segmentation in L2 Listening. ELT Journal. Vol 57/4. Oxford University Press.

Gaskell, M. G., & Marslen-Wilson, W. D. (2001). Lexical ambiguity resolution and spoken word recognition: Bridging the gap. Journal of Memory and Language, 44(3), 325–349. https://doi.org/10.1006/jmla.2000.2741

Gow, D. W., Jr., & Gordon, P. C. (1995). Lexical and prelexical influences on word segmentation: Evidence from priming. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 21(2), 344–359. https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-1523.21.2.344

Hancock, M. (2003). English Pronunciation in Use. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Laoubi, M (2020). Listening to Connected Speech: Students' Problems, Strategies, and the Effectiveness of Direct Instruction: The Case Study of Second Year Students, University of Mohamed Boudiaf-M'sila. (Doctoral Dissertation, Ministry of Higher Education).

Nokes and James. (2018). Whaddya Call That Again? Materials For Teaching Connected Speech. Second Language Studies, 36(2), Spring 2018, pp. 27-153 Retrieved from:

http://hdl.handle.net/10125/67840

Rahimi, M. & Chalak, A. (2017). The effect of connected speech teaching on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research, 4:8 280-291.

Seong, Y. (2008).Evaluating an Instrument for Assessing Connected Speech Performance Using Facets Analysis. Second Language Studies, 26(2), Spring 2008, pp. 45-101

Stone, M.(2017) Lexical Ambiguity: Definition & Examples - Video & Lesson TranscriptStudy.com

****