

A STUDY ON MORPHO-PHONOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY IN BURA WORDS: A CASE STUDY OF (MIS)INTERPRETATION OF SOME LEXICAL ITEMS

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Abstract

The study on morpho-phonology ambiguity in Bura lexical items looked at the possibilities by which a word can have one or more interpretations (meanings). It sought to determine the extent to which communication gap is created especially in verbal communications, most especially to a second language learner of Bura. Bura is a language endowed with lots of words which are homonymic, homophonic and polysemic. Consequently, second language listeners/users of the language are left with the dilemma to conceptually figure out which of the words the speaker is referring to. To minimise the stress on the listeners/users, the data presentation tried to make distinctions (functionally) between few of such words with the aim to bring to limelight the semantic, morphological and phonological difference that distinguishes the meaning of one word from another. Data were collected from ten (10) native speakers of the language, and were analysed using descriptive method of data analysis. The result of the study showed that some Bura lexical words can function as prefix, it was again realised that Bura has a lot of homomorphic entries. The morphological process *reduplication* is found in the language. Also, some words are homophony; meanings are differentiated by stress, therefore meanings are contextually determined. The Bura language seems not have the gerundive *-ing* suffix. Lastly, the study realised that Bura language has a lot of metaphors in its vocabulary.

Key words: Morpho-phonology, Ambiguity, Misinterpretation, Lexical items, Bura language.

Introduction

Morpho-phonology is a linguistic term that concerns with the relationship that holds between morphology and phonology in linguistics. It pays attention onto how the sound of a word changes when a morpheme is attached to it. In other words, when a word is structurally manipulated owing to the sounds surrounding it, the process is referred to as morphophonemic or morpho-phonology. For example, the vowel alterations that take place in the internal structures of: ran/run/running, sweep/swept, sit/sat/sitting, write/wrote/writing/written, bind/bound; and in consonants: wife/wives, orange/oranges, loaf/loaves, travel/travelled/travelling.

Ambiguity on the other hand, is when a word has more than one interpretation. When a word lacks exactness of meaning, that word is said to be ambiguous. This may results to misrepresentation of the information being passed across. The consequence is that, the listener, in the case of verbal communication may be confused as to what the speaker's intended meaning is.

Ambiguity is a type of meaning in which a phrase, statement or resolution is not explicitly defined; rather, it makes several interpretations. In other words, it is an attribute of any idea or statement whose intended meaning cannot be definitely resolved according to a rule or process. The concept - ambiguity is generally contrasted with vagueness. However, in the latter, specific and distinct interpretations are permitted, whereas with information that is vague, it is difficult to form any interpretation at the desired level of specificity (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>).

Conceptual Framework

The study chose among other frameworks to adopt Cross-linguistic Intervention Concept. Columas (1989) as cited by Oreoluwa (2015) identifies two forms of intervention: conscious and unconscious interventions. He considers conscious linguistic intervention as a deliberate effect exerted on a language that causes changes in the language's internal structure; this happens at syntax and phonological levels. Cross-linguistic interference by unconsciousness is an accidental

intervention that may occur under different extra-linguistic conditions. It arises when the learner of such a chosen language does not really realise that the characteristics of a chosen language can vary from that of another language especially where the learner is not able to contrast with the relevant knowledge of the language.

Skiba (2016) has a similar idea with Columas (1989) as cited by Oreoluwa (2015) concerning this concept when he notes that cross-linguistic interference can be seen as transferring a concept from one language to another at diverse aspects which include vocabulary, sentence construction, linguistic structuring and phrasing, and phonology. Once two distinct languages make contact within an entity, the behavioural characteristic of one of the languages will be identified or transferred to the performance of the other.

This concept fits in with the mission which triggered this study; the consciousness a native speaker employs when words are uttered in a conversation with a non-native speaker who may not be able to identify or differentiate the sound(s) which qualifies same word (orthographically) to have different meanings by simple manipulations in the internal structure of a word.

The Concept of Ambiguity

A word which has the possibility of having one or more meaning for a single word is referred to as ambiguity. An ambiguous word is unclear, confusing, or not certain, especially because it can be interpreted in more than one way. A sentence that employs ambiguous words leads to misunderstand. In other words, if one uses ambiguous words in a sentence, the one who reads or listens to the item may not understand what the message is all about.

Ambiguity can come from either spoken or written language. Whichever means it comes to the reader; one may read a write up and find it difficult to understand what the speaker or writer means. Ambiguity can occur in any part of speech: noun, verb, adjective and adverb. Whatever part it occurs, it is obvious that it interferes with the lexical, syntactic, and semantic meaning of the word or phrase. This

may result into distortion of idea if not handled with accuracy, (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>>20 Dec 2023/æm.bi'gju:ə.ti/ C2).

Ambiguity is a phenomenon that occurs when a word or phrase can have more than one interpretation or meaning. It is a common feature of language and communication and can occur at various levels; including lexical, syntactic, and semantic. Ambiguity can be intentional or unintentional, and it can have significant implications for communication, leading to misunderstandings, confusion, and conflicts, Huang (2020).

Types of ambiguity

There are different levels at which ambiguity can occur in any form of communication: Lexical, syntactic and semantic ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity comes from morphemes which are basically content words, they are categorised as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. These classes of words can stand independently and still express sense and meaning unlike the functional or grammatical morphemes. Hence, lexical ambiguity is potential for multiple interpretations of spoken or written language that renders it difficult or impossible to understand without some additional information.

<https://www.thoughtco.com>>what... Lexical ambiguity is obvious when two words have the same form (homonymy or homophony), or when a word has more than one meaning (polysemy). For example;

- i. **Bank** in the sentence: I went to the bank. The ambiguity here is which of the banks? Is it the river bank or bank the financial institution? In this sense, additional information has to be added in order to specify which of the banks the speaker is referring to.
- ii. **Bat** in the sentence: I saw a bat. The question the listener needs to ask is: is it the flying bat or bat a wooden club?

- iii. **Plant.** The word plant could either mean something that grows in the ground or a facility that makes something, such as a power plant. (<https://study.com/learn/lesson>).

Lexical ambiguity is not just a problem to semantic analysis, it is one of the chief causes of structural ambiguity, and this creates an issue with which syntactic analysers must contend as well. Lexical ambiguity is problematic because it deals directly with words which are independent and which form the body of every writing or conversation. Therefore, resolving its problems is like solving language issues.

There are three types of lexical ambiguity: homonymy, homophony and polysemy.

Homonymy: these are different words that sound the same. It is a situation of identical spelling or pronunciation but with different unrelated meanings. Such words usually create problems of ambiguity. Such as:

Ball (noun) – an object for play

Ball (noun) – a type of dance

Faint (adjective) - something not sharp or clear

Faint (verb) – to lose consciousness

Plain (adjective) – clear or straight-forward

Plain (noun) – open or flat land space

Fast (adjective) – quick or firm

Fast (verb) – to abstain from food

Homophony: are words with same sounds and pronunciation, though their forms or spellings differ and have different meanings. Examples as follows:

Meat- meet

Bear- beer

Pale- pail

Flour- flower

Eight – ate

Axe - ask

Polysemy: A situation of polysemy arises when one form of the word has multiple meaning which is related by extension. Words that are

polysemous have single entries in the dictionary. However, there are numbers that suggest the list of possible meaning- as shown below:

Foot 1- of a person
2- of a bed
3- of a mountain

Head 1- of human
2- of department
3- of prefects

Arm 1- of a government
2- of a man
3- a weapon

Lexical ambiguity is the presence of two or more possible meanings for a single word. This creates the difference to syntactic ambiguity, which is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a sentence or sequence of words.

Syntactic ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity is when the role a word plays in a sentence is unclear. It occurs when there are many other interpretations that correspond to the same sentence. Similarly, structural ambiguity occurs when there are two or more meanings within a sentence or phrase, (<https://www.microsoft.com>writing>).

Syntactic ambiguity in many instances is implored for the fun of it. This, therefore, entails that people may use it purposely; speakers or writers like to use ambiguous words or expressions because they feel they puzzle their readers by constraining them to search for the appropriate meaning. For example:

*I have never tasted chicken cooked that way before! The ambiguity the listener is left to puzzle is the intended meaning of the speaker. Does he/she mean to say the chicken was good or bad?

*Call me a taxi please. Now, what is it does the speaker mean to say? Asking someone to hail him/her a taxi or to be called a taxi?

Considering these examples, it is expected that a speaker use context clues to uncover the true meaning of a sentence or phrase uttered.

In syntactic analysis, the problem of lexical ambiguity does not only mean choosing the correct sense of a word but, rather, the correct part of speech. Word-sense ambiguity usually entails part-of-speech ambiguity as well, (<https://www.microsoft.com>writing>).

Semantic ambiguity occurs when the meaning of a sentence is unclear or open to much interpretation. For example, the sentence "I saw her with a telescope" can be interpreted in two ways: either the speaker saw the woman with a telescope, or the speaker saw the telescope with which the woman was looking for.

Scholars have extensively studied the phenomenon of ambiguity in language and communication. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed that metaphors and idioms can be ambiguous, as they rely on context and cultural knowledge to be interpreted correctly. Frazier et al (1982) investigated how readers resolve syntactic and semantic ambiguities in real-time during reading comprehension, (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>wiki>). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) examined how cultural differences in communication can lead to ambiguity and misunderstandings.

This study looks at lexical ambiguity and the role of morphology and phonology in differentiating the meaning of a word from another with the view to resolve the issue of misrepresentation of ideas and meanings of Bura words. The survey of literature conducted showed that many scholars have worked on ambiguity and its misrepresentations by receivers or listeners of the message conveyed. However, none of the works was carried on Bura lexical ambiguity; it is on this ground that this study is conducted; to present some of the Bura ambiguous words which may be confusing to second language learners or researchers.

The essence is to point out some of the morphological manipulations and phonological insertions in the structures of words

which perform the functions of separating the meaning and grammatical class of one word from another as obtained in other languages, English in particular. This implies that the gap this study intends to bridge may not apply to the works done by other scholars although it deals with ambiguity since the study is on Bura language and not a comparison with any language.

Methodology of Data Collection

The Participatory and Conversational Listening method of research was adopted for the study. This method allows the researcher to learn about the subjects under study by participating in their activities, particularly by meeting them in their natural setting, DeWalt and DeWalt (2002). This can be achieved by establishing rapport with the subjects. The participatory method requires the researcher to study the peoples' mode of interaction and their choice of vocabularies. In this method, the listener communicates in a transactional context, and the goals and processes are unique, as interpersonal communications are simultaneously carried out between a speaker and a listener. This technique therefore provides a reliable and valid measure of one's cognitive conversational listening capacity.

Ten (10) Bura native speakers were involved in the study, each of them offered ten (10) words (data) which analytically have the tendency of being linguistically ambiguous. The data collected were analysed employing the descriptive method.

The following are some of the ambiguous words which may be confusing to a second language learner of Bura.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data presented below are some of the ambiguous Bura words and their English meanings.

S/N	Words	English meanings
1.	Shar	Canoe, ship, courgette spoon, squirrel, loom shuttle, somebody with great wisdom

2.	Vi nzi-nzi/vi nzi	A place of domain/residence, stool/chair - (vi nzi nzi), cult - (vi nzi), where nzi is not reduplicated it means a form of cultism.
3.	Digka	To pound, to beat
4.	Sa	Drink (fluid/ liquid), sniff powder, drunkard
5.	Shabar	Cold, wind, storm, irresponsible /wayward person - (bzir shabar).
6.	Mbwi	Tie, imprisoned
7.	Ndasa/ndasimnya /ndasi	Swallow-(ndasa), swallowed - (ndasimnya), lust/desire - (ndasi)
8.	Nkwa	Daughter, number - six (6)
9.	Khidla	Chase after, hunting, corn stalks
10.	Mpila/'mpila/mp i'la or mpili	Tell (by way of unveiling) - mpila, loose - ('mpila or mpili), a traditional kettle - (mpi'la)
11.	Wula	Take care/caution, see/look
12.	Tsi	My hand, put off, kill, spend (money)
13.	Nki/n'ki	House - (nki), to catch/fell something down - (n'ki)
14.	Msi'ra/'msira	Delicious/nice-(msi'ra), escape/relieved/freedom - ('msira)
15.	Hu-hw'i/hu-whi	Run - (hu-hw'i), a type of wild fruits - (hu-hwi).
16.	Ha	Song, pass onto/over to
17.	Sukwar	Cooked soup of any kind, uncooked meat
18.	Bara	Hunting, search for, wants/ need/desire/hustling.
19.	Mwabulu	Hyena, greediness, great strength (personification)
20.	Pumta	Pour out, discard, forgive in a way of forgetting
21.	Jaka	A new born child to a family, promotion, add some more to something measurable which was bought
22.	Mwabi	Animal of all kinds, insult (personified to be senselessness)
23.	Sura	Clan/family name, name of a tree, moul/ecdysis

24.	Waksha	Clan/family name, local powdered tobacco container, a form of dance steps, costume, an art of drumming
25.	Kalkal	Equal, correct
26.	Sika	To guard/watch/ wait
27.	Khrata	To study, read, to investigate
28.	'Shagur/sha'gur	Shade/ shadow/shelter - (shagur), a human figure protector - (sha'gur)
29.	U'u	light, fire, a tough/difficult/ hard or harsh person
30.	Hyel/hye'l	Supreme God, anything at a zenith position, anything one trusts/ beliefs/ leans/ holds unto - (Hyel), intestine (hye'l)
31.	Fi	Cheat, longevity
32.	Bzirdiffu/ bzir diffu	Grief, fury, sadness - (bzirdiffu), a child after one's heart - (bzir diffu)
33.	Mara	Rival, to sharpen
34.	Gari/ga'ri/gar'i	Talk - (gari), men's big gown - agbada - (ga'ri), cassava product (gar'i)
35.	Mabbu	Mud, mortal body
36.	Msimnya	Announce, to leak/eat up
37.	Matsikar	Left, negativity
38.	Manjivar	Scar, in memory of negative event which has less or no effect anymore
39.	Dəla	Wooden pestle, wooden prongs
40.	Hya	Early morning, full to the brim, run out of patience
41.	Tsaha	To caution, to nail something
42.	Diffu	Heart, anger, centre/ middle of something,
43.	Mthlaku	Almighty, ownership, placenta
44.	Sal	A male figure, someone courageous or fearless, an expert in doing something
45.	Nuwa	To follow someone/something, obey/abide by an order /rules, worship/followership
46.	Tsawa	Lock, order/command

47	Shari	To reverse/ postpone/ unstitch
48	Mbwa/mbw'a	Foamy texture, fume/anger, Boil - (mbwa), room (mbw'a)
49.	Thlawa/thlwa'a	Cut into half - (thlawa), to greet someone or go on a visit
50.	Nama	Make, to correct/change a person's behaviour, adjust, reconcile
51.	Pwarzdi	Escort/ see someone off, to eat together
52.	Hathla	Grind, a rhymed body movement preformed by the women at the sound of locally made guitar
53.	Mhya	Talk, mouth
54.	Vi	Place, surrender something, put down
55.	U'uwa	Breast, breast/ fresh milk, yoghurt/can milk
56.	Thym	Ear, name of (persons, animals or objects)
57.	Hirra	To love, peel, a type of cactus plant
58.	'Thlara/thlar'a	Help/ support - ('thlara), a type of shrub - (thlar'a)
59.	'Pira/pi'ra	Bathe, twist a rope on something, to be converted to another belief or religion - (pir'a), to branch to a place - (pira)
60.	Khæcha	Wash, menstrual period, council by way of insulting
61.	Kæla	Dog, prostitution/womanising
62.	Sili	My leg, shame/shy
63.	Hyni	Sleep, sediment
64.	Thlata	To stand, to be strong/resilient
65.	Ghiranta	A person's name, to stress up
66.	Bubuha	To cover up or conceal something, cover against something
67.	Hyipa/hyip'a	Teach/learn - (hyipa), a type of wild fruits - (thyip'a)
68.	Faku/fak'u	Farm land - (faku), dry season- (fak'u)
69.	Thi	Lies, to cut a portion of something

70.	Tuwa/tuw'a	Cry - (tuwa), repay/ revenge - (tuw'a)
71.	Ntawa/ntaw'a	Divide into half - (ntawa), a type of wild fruits - (ntaw'a)
72.	Dikəl	Throne, a type of bed
73.	Ntsa	Ripe, to push or manage a situation
74.	Hərta	Moulding, cause confusion or trouble.
75.	Nthla	Backslide (religiously), fall down, to be satisfied (with food or a situation)
76.	Ndata	Surprises, to mix into liquids
77.	Kili	Wean a child, meet someone up, put down
78.	Hwada/hwad'a	Mates/ equals - (hwada), groundnuts - (hwad'a).
79.	Bua/bu'a	Cook something (bua), to beat (bu'a)
80.	Mwardzi	Friendship, in a relationship (courtship)
81.	Bang	Concubine, a child strapping on the back
82.	Tasa	Trash out (grains), castrate (an animal), severe beating, dish.
83.	Mtathla	Chill or cool something , fever (malaria common among last born children)
84.	Fazda	To rub onto, to fabricate, entangle or blackmail
85.	Pukthl'a/pukthla	Flower or nectar - (pukthl'a), to crush into pieces or excessive beating (pukthla)
86.	Mhyabwa	Door or entrance, family lineage or tree
87.	Laku/lak'u	A passage, a word of comfort to the bereaved - (laku), to dig a hole - (lak'u)
88.	Fa'a/fa	Long life - (fa'a), carry (away) - (fa)
89.	Pinju	Ashes, mosquitoes
90.	Teipir	Elbow, wall gecko
91.	Mbthlawi	Cat, a reference to someone who likes delicacies
92.	Hyni	Sleep, sediment
93.	Khithlir	Work, to carry out a surgery
94.	Kwatam/ kwa'tam	Princess - (kwatam), wooden dish - (kwa'tam)
95.	Abwari	Light-skinned, Fulani - (tribe)

96.	Chiwar	Elephant, excessively large, clan/family name
97.	Kidl'a/Kidla	Wild-game hunting - (kidl'a), stalk~ (kidla)
98.	Fadza	To smear, to fabricate a lie/image tarnishing
99.	Ncha	Eye, point, show off
100.	Thili/thil'i	Thirst, fast - (thili), erect - (thil'i)

From the data presentation, one will notice that there is morphological and phonological relationship interwoven in one word. This is evident in words such as: laku and lak'u, puk'thla and pukthl'a, hwada and hwa'da, thlawa and thla'wa and so on; where stress plays a vital role of differentiating a meaning from another. This further explains that the internal structures of many words are morphologically manipulated to produce different sounds of same words, but with different meanings.

Data Analysis

From the data presentation, it can be said that many Bura words have multiple meanings which create ambiguity and (mis)representation or interpretation; utterances are contextually determined by the listeners. Also, Bura words can have dual functions, as a subject as well as a verb. Unlike in English, Bura verbs can change their grammatical class without compromising to function as gerund.

This may be because the language does not have the *-ing* form of suffix; consequently, verbs are made to function as subject of a sentence without promulgating it to behave as gerund. It is for a reason such as this that the meaning of an expression is contextually and semantically captured. The data presentation showed that many Bura words are personified to animals, abstract entities and objects. Words such as; *shar* -squirrel, *mwabi* – animal of all forms, *mwabulu* – hyena are personifications from animals; *shabar* – wind/cold personification of an abstract entity, *mbwa* - fume, personified from objects.

Many Bura nouns and verbs are structurally and phonologically same; only differentiated by a stress pattern. The stress sometimes determines the change in tense. For example; bu'a (beat) as glossed below:

1. ya bu'a nga

- I will beat you (future tense).
2. I bu'a ni
I had beaten him/her (past perfect)

The *to*-infinitive is also attached to verbs as obtained in the English language. It also appears before the verb as can be seen in the data presentation in numbers 49, 57, 66 and so on. Some words in Bura do not only double the consonant as in English when a word ends with consonant sounds, but triple the consonants even at the beginning of a word, as in: *mtlaku*, *mbthlawi*, *bukchi*, *pukthla* and so on.

The morphological processes: affixation and reduplication are evidently active. The phonological symbol (') *stress* plays active role in shaping the structure of a word to alter its meaning.

Affixation is a process in word formation when discussing morphology. However, in Bura, it is not only a process but some of them form part of the lexical items. For example; *ndasimnya* – (swallowed), where as *ndasi* – (swallow) is the base and *mnya* becomes the suffix as well as the past perfect tense of the verb. In another formation, *simnya* can stand alone as a verb to mean announcement, in this case, *nda* becomes a prefix to *simnya*. Also, the symbolised letter - 'a functions as a suffix as well as a sound in Bura, it forms part of the orthography of many words but acts as an affix in another function. For example; the vowel sounds: /a/, /i/. and /u/ behave as sounds and affixes to words such as: fa'a, pukthl'a, hwad'a, gar'i, hwi-hw'i, lak'u, fak'u and so on.

The morphological process *reduplication* is found in the language. Reduplication in Bura takes place at two levels: word and morpheme levels. At word level, reduplicated words are seen in words such as: hwi-hw'i, vi nzi-nzi, wulwula, taktar, whatwhatu, thluthluari, khacikhachari, kukuwa, and so on. At the word level, the second reduplicated word takes a suffix as can be seen above. Whereas the morpheme level include: u'u, u'ua, and so on; they are reduplicated for greater impact. However, the word vi nzi-nzi seizes to function as

domain or seat to become a form of traditional cultism practiced by certain group of Bura speakers when *nzi* is not reduplicated.

It can again be deduced that Bura like the English language has some phrasal verbs in its expressions. For example: *bzir shabar* and *bzir diffu*. However, *bzir* in these formations are contextually different.

1. Bzir shabar
Child (male) wind or cold.

In this construction, *bzir* functions as a prefix to the base *shabar*.

2. Bzir diffu
A child (male/ female) heart

The function of *bzir* in this formation is different from that in item one above. Here, it combines with *diffu* to form a phrasal verb. This explains why the grammatical structure of Bura is uniquely different and can sometimes be ambiguous or misinterpreted by non native speakers. The data presented further explains that the language has a lot of homonymic, homophonic, polysemic and homomorphomic words. Meanings are contextually determined making it difficult to understand by non native speakers. The verb *whi* means (run), and *whi-whi* also means (run faster). Here, the main verb is reduplicated to serves as an intensifier. This, however, indicates that some Bura verbs can function as intensifier as well as the verb of the sentence. Also, the same word *whi* in another sense means *shift, leave a place or give way*. This may be confusing to a second language learner because the speaker's intention may be obscure, the listener may wonder whether to run, shift or give way.

Findings

1. The morphological processes *reduplication* and *affixation* are found in the language.
2. Some Bura lexical words function as affixes.
3. There are words which have same orthography with their meanings differentiated by a stress pattern.

4. The Bura language has a lot of metaphors in its vocabulary, .such as mwabi (animal; to refer to someone who behaves senselessly), cat (someone who loves delicious meals).
5. The language lacks tone-marking to differentiate identical words which cause ambiguity since Bura has a lot of homomorphic entries. That is, words with the same spelling or form, but have slight difference in pronunciation and difference in meaning. For example; hwada - hwad'a, pukthla -pukthl'a, laku - lak'u, kidla - kidl'a, thili - thil'i. The difference with English homomorphy is that, in English, the stress classifies the word to either noun or verb, as in: 'import (noun) and im'port (verb); but in Bura, the stress does not classify the word, it remains in its original word class either as a noun or verb.
6. It was established that many Bura words are homonymic, homophonemic, homomorphic and polysemic; making it difficult for a language learner to grab meanings effortlessly.
7. The Bura language does not have the *-ing* suffix in its morphology therefore, converting a verb to gerundive noun is not possible. Rather, verbs function as gerunds without compromising.

Conclusion

Ambiguity is a common feature in communication that has significant implications for understanding and interpretation. It can be used for rhetorical or humorous purposes, it is generally important to seek for clarity and precision in communication to avoid misinterpretations. From the study, it was understood that Bura lexical words can be confusing to a non native speaker or a second language learner as meanings of some words are differentiated by stress. Also grammatical classes of words are converted without derogating the base to function as appropriate; consequently, meanings of many words can better be understood contextually.

It can be recommended that this area of the Bura language needs intensive research since language development emanates from its

structure, morphology, semantic and phonology. These entirely put together builds up a language.

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