THE CONFLICT OF HOMONYMS REVISITED[1]

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1. Introduction

Homonyms have been regarded as a weakness of the language by some experts who claim that language would be much more productive, if they did not exist. According to Ullmann a language without homonyms would only not be desirable, but also a more efficient medium (Ullmann 1962: 181; 1964: 78). There are, however, different mechanisms to disambiguate the potential confusion caused by homonyms. We will revise the devices that can be used to remedy the interference by providing both known instances and some new evidence, and discuss the consequences of the conflict, in case it occurs.

2. Devices to remedy the interference of homonyms

The most important device is, no doubt, the context. Every expert seems to agree on the fact that the context avoids any possibility of ambiguity and therefore, helps to remedy the interference due to homonymy.

There are other mechanisms which can be used as therapeutical methods against confusion between homonyms and which can be categorized under the following classification:

— Morphological devices: part of speech
                                   inflexion
                                   set phrases
                                   grammatical gender

— Phonic-graphic devices: spelling
    alteration of the phonetic evolution
— Lexemic devices: modification of the form
    adoption of a foreign word
— Sphere of thought

2.1. Morphological devices

2.1.1. Parts of speech

When two words belong to different parts of speech, they are not likely to be confused, as the word order will not be the same for both of them. The homonymic elements may present different complementation patterns, they will show different collocations, determiners and modifiers. So interference between *knew* and *new* or between *bad* and *bade* does not seem probable.

2.1.2. Inflexion

When two homonyms belong to the same word-class, sometimes they can be made different by inflexion. Verbs like *bare* and *bear* are homonyms just in the infinitive as the first one is regular and the other is not, so complete identity of forms cannot be postulated here.

Nouns can also be distinguished thanks to inflexion, as in *phrase – frays*, where the first one is singular and the second one plural. Thus, if they happen to be the subject of a sentence, in some instances like the present indicative, there will be agreement between the subject and the predicate, being obvious which one is referred to.

2.1.3. Set phrases

Sometimes, set phrases can be used to make clear which word is signified, as when one says *the sole of his foot*, instead of *his sole* so that it cannot be confused with *his soul*.

2.1.4. Grammatical gender

In those languages that have grammatical gender, it turns out to be a good mechanism to distinguish homonyms, like in French: *le vase – la vase*; *le livre – la livre*; *le pendule – la pendule*; in German: *der See – die See*; *der Kiefer – die Kiefer*; *die Mark – das Mark* or in Spanish: *el corte – la corte*; *el pez – la pez*; *el orden – la orden*.

2.2. Phonic-graphic devices

2.2.1. Spelling

Spelling is an efficient device to distinguish a particular type of homonyms: homophones, which are two or more words which, being different in spelling, etymology and meaning, sound alike, such as: *buoy – boy*, *pair – pear – pare*.

2.2.2. Alteration of the phonetic evolution

Examples of phonetic remodelling or alteration can be found in Strang (1970: 30), who states that in her childhood the principal pronunciation for the Norwegian word *ski* was /ʃiː/, though afterwards the form /skiː/ displaced the former one. The displacement could well have been the consequence of a coalescence with the third person pronoun *she*.

Likewise, Barber (1976: 331) claims that in Early Modern English the usual pronunciation of *one* was /oːn/. A dialectal pronunciation, which was adopted in Standard English in the seventeenth century (although regarded as a vulgarism until 1700), accounts for the present-day English pronunciation, because in that way the homophonic clash between *one* and *own* could be removed.

Another well-known example was provided by Smith (1996: 139) following Samuels' view (1972: 142 ff; 1987), who assures that the expected development of the Old English rounded vowel /y/ in the Middle English Midlands dialect is /i/. However, in OE *scyttan* 'shut' we preserve the variant with /u/ nowadays. The reason for this choice is that during the Middle English 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.[2]

Following this trend of avoiding homonymic conflict the word *ass*, which was once pronounced with a long vowel /aː/ modified its pronunciation to /æ/ when preconsonantal /r/ was lost and *ass* sounded like *arse*. This merge accounts for the displacement of the word in the USA, where it has been completely replaced by *donkey*.

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[2] For a recent view on the controversial merger, see Platzer (1996: 69-82), who rebates the arguments discussed in Lass (1980: 75ff.) and implied in Samuels (1972: 142ff.) by providing some new evidence on the subject and demostrating their view of avoidance-of-homophones is not tenable in this particular case.

2.3. Lexemic devices

2.3.1. Modification of the form

Another way of solving the conflict of two words merging under one form is by modifying the original form of one of the two items involved. The falling together of *gate* < OE *geat* and *gate* < ON *gata* was the reason why the latter disappeared in classical English. It could, however, be preserved in some dialects, because the first word was turned into *yate, yett*.

2.3.2. Adoption of a foreign word

When two native elements merge into one form, the adoption of a foreign item can be an effective method of remedying the merging. In this way, when OE *ēage, ēge*, meaning 'eye', and *ǣg* 'egg' became alike, the selection of the Scandinavian word as the common denomination for 'egg' turned out to be a positive way of solving the confluence.

Likewise, the wish for avoidance of ambiguity which may arise from loss of phonetic distinctiveness seems to account for the displacement of the native Old English forms of the third person plural pronoun by their Scandinavian counterparts (*Þei/Þai, Þeir/Þair, Þaim*).[3] The adoption of this foreign set served to re-establish clear distinction between the forms of the pronouns of the third person singular and plural. In this way, the replacement of a conflicting word by another turns out to be an effective device to remedy the semantic ambiguity derived from the merging of different lexical units.

The entering of new words, nevertheless, may have different effects on the recipient language: a positive one as in the examples we have just examined, but very often leads to the loss of a great deal of native words, even when there is no homonymic merging.

2.4. Sphere of thought

Even if two homonyms belong to the same word-class and occur in a same speech act the interference is not likely to happen, unless they belong to the same sphere of thought. So confusion between pairs of words like *peace – piece* or *beach – beech* does not seem probable.

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

I have studied a corpus of about nine hundred and fifty British Received Pronunciation groups of homophones, of which four hundred and eighty-three pairs or sets of words belong to the same word-class.[4] Nonetheless, I have found very few that can be classified as belonging to the same semantic field. Regarding the field 'animal denominations', I discovered *auk – orc* and *daw – dorr*. It seems impossible to confuse a bird with a cetacean, or a bird with an insect in the second case, as 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.

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 homonym adjectives *glary* 1) dazzling and 2) smooth and slippery (US), and its homophone *glairy* 'viscid, slimmy'. Again the *OED* tells us how *glairy* is mainly limited to Pathology, as in 'A glairy secretion is poured out from numerous immersed glands.'

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 will never be so relevant as to exert influence on the other word.

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 attached to it. Thus, 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*, that derive from the same source and are treated as homonyms).

The conflict may occur, though and have different consequences as a result. It is a much debated issue whether the influence exerted is accountable for the following consequences and some of the examples usually associated with homonymy need a further revision, since the reasons why one of the items was given up can be still regarded an open question as Platzer (1996: 76) suggests in the case of Old English verbs *scītan* and *scyttan*.

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[3] Different manuals deal with the great variety of dialectal forms in the Middle English pronominal system and the progressive adoption of Scandinavian elements. See, for instance, Mossè (1952: 55) and Roseborough (1970: 70).

[4] For further details on how the original corpus was compiled and the criteria to select the final corpus, see De la Cruz (1996: 129-136).

3. Consequences of the conflict of homonyms

3.1. Loss of one of the words

Samuels advocates interference existed in the following examples and led to the disappearance of the second item of the pair because of the confluence with the other word (1972: 69; 1987: 247):

(1)   ME *bidde* 'to bid' < OE *biddan* and 'to pray' < OE *gebiddan*
(2)   ME *brede* 'bread' < OE *brēad* and 'roast meat' < OE *brǣde*
(3)   ME *dare* 'to dare' < OE *durran, dearr* and 'to fear' < OE *darian*
(4)   ME *here(n)* 'to hear' < OE *hēran* and 'to praise' < OE *herian*
(5)   *knot* and *not* meaning 'to clip or cut short' as a verb, not used since the seventeenth century due to the loss of initial /k/, which may have been lost earlier, but it seems not to have been accepted in the London area till then.

This is quite a controversial topic whether homonymy was accountable for the loss of so many words as it has often been claimed. The following cases are usually associated with homonymy as being the reason for the loss of one of them (or both, even if this case is rare):

(6)   OE *āddle* 'rubbish' and OE *ādl* 'disease'
(7)   OE *bera* 'bear' and ME *bere* 'barley'
(8)   OE *buc, bucca* 'buck, he-goat' and OE *buc* 'belly, tummy'
(9)   OE *cwen* 'queen' and OE *cwene* 'quean'

The rising of the two Middle English long front *e* vowels (half-open /ɛ:/ and half-closed /e:/) into /i:/ made these two distinct words homophonous; due to this identity the latter is hardly ever used. Nevertheless, the fact that both items were preserved in Scots even if they were homophones made Görlach (1990: 141) state that the evidence is not so clear as it was thought.

(10)   OE *ēa* > ME *e* 'brook, river' and OE *ǣ(w)* 'law'
(11)   OE *groetan, grētan* 'to greet' and OE *grǣtan* 'to cry, to weep'
(12)   OE *lǣtan* 'to allow' and OE *lettan* just kept in the phrase without *let and hindrance*
(13)   The *OED* shows four different entries for the verb *to list*: one is quite modern from the French noun *liste* meaning 'to make a list of'; the second one was adopted through OF *lister*, 'to put a list' and finally two native forms *list* 'to please' < OE *lystan* and *list* < OE *hlystan* 'to listen'. The last two have been lost in modern use.
(14)   OE *rum* 'room' and OE *hrum* 'soot'
(15)   OE *Þencan* 'think' and OE *Þyncan* 'to seem', which is nowadays preserved in *methinks*

In this sense, Jespersen (1922: 285) already pointed out that the following words became obsolete due to the phonetic identity with others existing in the language: *breech, lief, meed, mete* (adj.), *weal, wheal, ween*.

Nevertheless, most scholars claim that the conflict will only apply to cases when two words belong to the same word-class and to the same sphere of thought. However, even though these two requirements must theoretically be fulfilled, on some occasions, a word has been lost even if there was no potential risk of being confused with another, and in some examples the word was replaced by a more prestigious item available in the language at the time, like the replacement of *herian* by *praise*.[5]

Sound-change brought about coalescence of some forms and along with it the possibility of being confused. The two terms were clearly distinguished at some period of the language, but when they happened to evolve in the same direction simultaneously falling together under one graphic or phonetic form, the distinction did no longer exist and the subsequent identity in sound might have made one of them fall out of use.

The *OED* does not provide any information on why these words (rather than their counterparts) became obsolete and stopped being used. Whether coalescence in sound was the real reason for these words to disappear cannot categorically be stated. In the same way, the reasons why some lexical items tend not to be affected by this process are still obscure. And what is also 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).[6]

Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether these words died out as a result of a potential annoying misunderstanding between the items involved. We can always find favourable arguments and objections to this statement and it is hard to see why it was one word the one that disappeared rather than the other. And the fact that many of them were replaced by borrowings from other languages, mainly French, makes it possible to establish a correlation between the loss of a word and the adoption of a foreign one which will eventually occupy its place. Thus, this is another factor we must bear in mind when considering why some words were lost, as there may be other reasons that can be accountable for it.

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[5] Even if some scholars like M. L. Samuels claim the loss was due to coalescence with the verb *to hear*, as seen above, some other experts mention the possibility that the foreign term *to praise*, being a learned prestigious word, could have also played an important role in the selection process and occupy the former's meaning area, as happened in the case of *ordure* referred to above.

[6] Even scholars who traditionally advocated homonymic clash like M. L. Samuels seem to be more cautious when dealing with the topic. In one of their latest articles Kay – Samuels (forthcoming) 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.

Among those supporting the idea of the clash or conflict of homonyms as an essential factor in the obsolescence of words, one can cite Iordan – Orr ([1970]: 183):

> But what is important, surely, is not the number of cases of homonymic clash in a given language, but the principle itself, and would anyone deny that a word may be supplanted, or made to undergo all kinds of modification, if it is identical in sound with another word?

To these linguists the significant fact is the consideration of the conflict of homonyms as a factor capable of causing changes in the affected items and even the possibility of being replaced by other words.

On the contrary, Menner (1936: 231-232) issues a warning about paying heed to such a theory for, even when the conditions of belonging to the same word-class and to the same sphere of thought are satisfied, if one of the homonyms dies out, it is difficult to prove that the loss is due to the conflict of homonyms:

> It is obvious that other and more usual causes of obsolescence must first be ruled out; and this is not easy because they are often obscure and elusive. Some indication of the probabilities may be obtained by a comparison of the chronology of sound-changes and the time of disappearance of a word. If a word is lost or begins to be less frequently used after the sound-change resulting in homonymy takes place, this may confirm a suspicion that phonetic identity was a factor involved. Conversely, if one of two words which would have become homonymous in Modern English is proved by the *NED*'s records to have disappeared as early as Middle English, the influence of homonymy is automatically eliminated. When all these cautions are observed, the influence of homonyms on the loss of words may sometimes be reasonably inferred.

Samuels (1987: 243) maintains his original view in which two different types of pressures ought to be distinguished. The homonymy which brings about immediate and sudden change and the homonymy whose effects can be felt only after a long period of time. The effects caused by the merging of two words include not only the replacement of one of them, but also the loss of one or more meanings or semantic narrowing, changes in the form and shape and changes in the pronunciation. Both Samuels and Williams provide instances of how the conflict affected words throughout the history of the English language. Williams clearly states (1944: 8) that when there is homonymic conflict the substitute word is very often borrowed from another language or dialect. The English language has shown its availability of French borrowings at most periods of its history and loan words were also adopted from other languages.

An additional factor is the speaker's desire to avoid any association with taboo words. In these cases, when the confluence took place, the fact that the other item involved is not neutral, but clearly marked as vulgar and undesirable in polite speech may lead to fall out of use of some words, as Hock assures (1986: 295):

> Interestingly, in the case of some tabooed words, lexical replacement may affect not the tabooed words, but innocent homonyms. This is especially noticeable with many of the "Anglo-Saxon" or "four-letter" words of English which, though tabooed in polite company, are used quite frequently – and with gusto – in more 'macho' and almost deliberately impolite context ... Earlier English had a fair number of words with short vowel in the context [f——k]; cf. (38). Except for the well-known taboo word (not listed in (38)), none of this have survived as independent words, presumably in large measure because they sounded too similar to the tabooed word. (Dates given in parentheses refer to the last attestation of given items) ... (38)
> fuk (a sail) (1529)
> fac 'factotum' (1841)
> feck 'effect, efficiency' (1887) (now only Scot English *feckless*)
> fack/feck (one of the stomachs of a ruminant)
> feck(s)/fack(s) '(in) faith, (in) fact' (1891)

3.2. Distributional restriction

Another effect derived from the merging of homonyms is the narrowing or distributional restriction of some of the words affected. Menner already dealt with this fact (1936: 241-242):

> Another aspect of homonymy which deserves investigation is the kind of semantic interference that does not develop to the point of excluding one homonym from the language, but results only in a limitation of meaning or induces a new division of meanings in the homonyms involved. This possibility is seldom mentioned, presumably because proof of such an influence is difficult.

Examples are provided by Samuels (1972: 73), who explains how *deer* used to mean 'beast, animal', while *hart* was used to designate the male deer and the species as well. So it was employed in compounds like: *hart-skin, hart-hide, hart-leather, hart-marrow, hart's-tallow,* and maybe in *hart-hunting* and *hart-hunter.* But when *hart* collided with *herte* 'heart', *deer* was beginning to be used as a generic denomination and *hart* just in specialized contexts as 'male deer'.

There are numerous instances of the phenomenon provided by Williams: the first one refers to *gait* which meant 'way, road' has been narrowed to 'manner of walking or stepping' due to its homonymy with *gate* (1944: 68). Another one is that of *ax*, meaning 'axle, axis', which is now only used in some farming communities. According to the *OED* it is obsolete, as it has not been attested

since Old English, but in compounds like *ax-nail* or *ax-tree*. According to Williams (1944: 10), it is highly probable that the identity between *ax* 'axle' and *ax* 'tool' may have been the reason for the restriction of the former, which was replaced by a longer word coming from the Scandinavian languages.

In my opinion, distributional restriction is more likely to happen than the complete disappearance of a word. In the same way one lexical item 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 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 /ɛːt/ 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 idea I have revised the use of *eat* versus *did eat* not only in the Authorized Version, but also in seven other Bibles of the Renaissance period. The results can be read in the following table:

Table 1. Use of *ate* and did *eat* in the Renaissance Bibles

	ate		*did eat*	
	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, as 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 1611 Bible, 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 Authorized Version is conditioned by the homonymy of forms, as there will be no explanation for the other cases where both clearly coexist or *ate* even prevails.

3.3. Alteration of the graphic form

When two forms are alike, this likeness may cause confusion. The speaker can use some kind of compound to make clear which word (s)he is referring to. Likewise, the two adjectives *light* can be employed as *light-weight* and *light-coloured*, in order to avoid ambiguity.

The potential conflict may have as a result the changing in the form of the words involved. This modification can be carried out by using adjectives to make clear the meaning, as in the above example, or by other alternative ways which might be useful to distinguish the words in conflict.

In this way, the existance of *pail* 'bucket' and *pale* noun coming from French *pal* 'stake', was probably the reason for the failing of *pale* 'shovel', related to French *pale*. However, *pale* found a place in the English language through its diminutive *pallet, palette*. Though there was already another noun *pallet* 'straw bed, mattress', the confusion between these two words seems less probable than the one that could have risen between *pale* and *pail*.

4. Final Remarks

Homonymic clash 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, like loss of words. It is not easy to determine whether the elimination of one lexical unit is due to the identity with another. Some facts can be inferred if we compare the chronology of the sound changes and the time when the word is supposed to have been lost. If a word began to be less frequently used after having merged with another, we can probably conclude that was because of the homonymy with another, although there may be others factors involved.

Nevertheless one must be cautious when the facts are not so certain and take other aspects into consideration, such as: cultural factors and other linguistic factors. In the first place, every event which had an influence on a people had it also on its language: wars, religion, legal, scientific or educational innovations, changes in the ordinary way of life or in the systems of thought. Many words entered the language as a result of one of the above mentioned causes and replaced others already existing in the language and likewise, other linguistic

processes can be responsible for the loss of a given item. To sum up, there are both extralinguistic and intralinguistic correspondences that must be born in mind.

Homonymy, as suggested, must also be studied from another point of view: not only as the reason for the elimination of words, but also as the cause of other possible changes like modification of the graphic form of the words or as a reason for distributional restriction. In addition, homonymy must be approached from a multifactorial perspective and mechanisms operating in the language must be taken into account as well as effective devices to remedy the possible interference due to homonymic conflict.

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