

The Question of absolute homonymy : A study

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This paper aims to find out the difficulties in formulizing the concept of homonymy. examples from both hindi and english languages have been studied. The discourse arives at the conclusion that hindi language does have absolute homonyms where as english language appear to have partial homonyms.

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Among the different kinds of relations existing between lexical items-derivation, inflection, compound formation, items belonging to the same semantic field - the relations of homonymy and polysemy obtaining between lexemes have proved the most baffling and the most difficult to identify and formalize. The problem is crucial for the lexicon because its structure is bound to be affected by whatever mode of treatment a theory adopts for explaining homonymy and polysemy. For this reason any adequate explanation of the phenomena must reflect the principles of economy of organization of learned material, and a language user,s ability to make maximum use of a limited repertoire of semantic concepts. The problem assumes additional importance because it is claimed that in some cases homonymy might lead to lexical ambiguity in sentences although, as we shall show later, this is rarely the case in actual usage.

A great deal of discussion has been generated by the question of whether absolute homonymy exists in any language. Lyons (1977 : 560) has set out the following conditions for absolute homonymy :

- (1) $L_i = k \quad L_j$ (lexemic distinctness)
- (2) $L_i = k \quad L_j$ (Syntactic equivalence)
- (1) $L_i = k \quad L_j$ (Formal identity)

With reference to these conditions he show that, in English at least, all cases of so-called homonymy are only instances of partial homonymy, that absolute homonymy is just a fiction. This view is theoretically attractive because it upholds the faith in the principles of the organization of language, which do not permit the existence of two identical items which nonetheless function as two different words. The concept of absolute homonymy would also be counter-intuitive in the sense that it would hamper communication and lead to irresolvable linguistic ambiguity can always be found.

In this paper, we will show that in Hindi also no cases of absolute homonymy exist and that the case of homonymy as a theoretical principle for organizing the content of the lexicon is altogether too weak to be given serious consideration.

We have elected to choose examples from Hindi because Hindi follows a phonetic system of orthography and thus avoids any disagreement over whether the items concerned are both homophonous and homographic. In Hindi, homophonous items are automatically homographic hence any dispute over whether the two items are formally identical in the

phonic and graphic medium is avoided.

We shall first discuss some simple examples of apparent homonyms which fail to satisfy criterion (2). (Criterion (3) is the most elementary condition which has to be met if the question of the distinction between homonymy and polysemy is to be raised at all). For instance, a speaker of Hindi will always judge *sone* to be a homonymous lexeme : *sona*1 'gold' and *sone*2 'to sleep' because of the formal identity of the word, associated with the two different meanings. He will, however, always judge the lexeme *sima* to be polysemous in constructions like : *bevakufi ki sima* 'limit of stupidity' and *bharat ki sima* border of India'. He will justify his judgement in the latter case on the grounds that the two different uses of *sima* are related in meaning, that they share a common sense-element, or that it is a case of semantic transfer.

In most cases, it is seen that a speaker's intuition guides him correctly in judging whether two items are homonymous or polysemous (although there are quite a few borderline or controversial cases): it is the linguists' task to posit a set of criteria to explain this judgment. Such a set has yet to be evolved.

Claims of homonymy leading to lexical ambiguity are unfounded since context is sufficient to resolve any potential ambiguity, e.g. *kapde almari mei tan do* 'hand the clothes in the cupboard'. Here *tan* means 'hang' or 'suspend', and by no stretch of the imagination could it be taken to mean 'leg', which is the other meaning associated with the same lexeme. In this case, another reason for the clear-cut judgement could be the fact that the two formally identical lexemes are syntactically non-equivalent, i.e., they fail to meet criterion (2).

i.e. $tan_1 - V$; $tan_2 - N$.

In Hindi, there exist many such cases of apparent homonyms that do not share a syntactic class, i.e. they fail to satisfy criterion (2). Examples of such syntactically non-equivalent homonyms are -

I.	i)	<i>man</i> _{oN}	'Parting of hair'
		<i>man</i> _{oV}	'to ask'
	ii)	<i>khoya</i> _N	'milk product'
		<i>khoya</i> _{Adj}	'lost' as in <i>khoya hua mal</i> 'goods that are lost'.
	iii)	<i>mana</i> _N	'banN' <i>mana</i> V 'cajole, sooth' and
		<i>mana</i> _V	'to celebrate' as in <i>diwali mana li</i> 'celebrated Diwali?'

There are, however, several cases of so-called homonyms that do share a syntactic class, but in this case the homonymy can be explained in terms of the different derivational histories of the lexemes

concerned.

ii.	X ₁ forms		X ₂ forms	
	<i>sina</i> ₁	'chest' :	<i>sina</i> ₂	'to sew'
	<i>sona</i> ₁	'gold' :	<i>sina</i> ₂	'to sleep'
	<i>khana</i> ₁	'food'	<i>khana</i> ₂	'to eat'
	<i>jina</i> ₁	'landing (of staircase)	<i>jina</i> ₂	'to live'

In the above cases *x1* and *x2* forms are both Nouns. But in all cases *X1* is a single, underived lexeme entered as such in the lexicon, whereas *X2* are all nominalizations from the underlying verb forms, formed by a process that can be roughly characterized as -

V + na - N

This nominalization rule is highly productive one and is equivalent to the English gerundive and infinitive transformations, since in Hindi the infinitive and the gerundive have the same form :
mujhe sona hai 'I want to sleep'
zyada sona accha nahi hai 'excess sleeping is not good'

The above cases of homonyms then would seem to be cases of accidental identity : the *X2* forms being explainable on independent syntactic grounds. A similar type of apparent homonymy is also present in Hind :

<i>Khilana</i>	- <i>khana khilana</i> ₁	'feed food'
	- <i>bachon ko khilana</i> ₂	'make children play'
<i>manaya</i>	- <i>tyohar manaya</i> ₁	'celebrated festival'
	- <i>ruthe balak ko manaya</i> ₂	'cajoled a sulking child'.

In both cases *X1* and *X2* forms are derivatives formed by the same rules. In the case of *khilana* however the root is different, being *kha* 'eat' in *X1* and *khel* 'play' in *X2*. In the case of *manaya* the root is itself homonymous.

In the case of II and III then, the homonymy can be explained on independent syntactic grounds and the derived forms are not listed separately in the lexicon. Any formal identity (condition (3) for absolute homonymy in the sense of Lyons (1977 : 560-563) in the case of III. i.e., that the related lexemes be associated with the same set of derived forms, is explained in terms of their different root forms.

I and II (some case) do not display such formal identity and hence fail short of criterion (3), because *X1* and *X2* lexemes are associated with different sets of inflected word forms, word forms typical of nouns and verbs in Hindi :

a)	<i>mang</i> _N	:	<i>mago</i> (oblique case),	<i>mage</i> (plural)
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	mang,		magana (infinitive),	magane (oblique infinitive), mago (imperative)
b)	sonē _N	:	sonē (ka)	(oblique ase),
			sunahra	(derived adjective)
	sona Nom	:	sulana (Ist causative),	
			soya (past tense), other forms from	
			so (verb)	

Another point to be noted in the case of II is that, though the lexemes display broad syntactic equivalence in that both X1 and X2 forms are nouns, further classification into syntactic subclasses would not uphold such equivalence.

In the light of the above discussion, then, we agree with Lyons, conclusion that is is generally the case in Hindi as well as in English, that syntactic non-equivalence of lexemes implies formal non-identity (1977 : 561). That is, most cases of so-called homonymy are only instances of partial homonymy.

However, there is one truant case in Hindi that deserves mention *manaV*. We mentioned three forms earlier but *manaN 'banN'*, is already syntactically distinct and hence can be eliminated from the discussion. But *mana1 'cajole'*. and *mana2 'celebrated'*.. are both syntactically equivalent in that both are verbs and are lexemically distinct on semantic grounds. Further they display formal identify in being associated with the same set of inflected word forms :

mana1 and 2 : *manaO*, (imperative?)
manaya (past tense), *manana* (infinitive)
manal (past tense + feminine).

It may be questioned whether *mana1* occurs with X1. This depends on whether or not the following forms are considered grammatical :

ladki manai gai 'the girl was cojole'. and
ladki manal (ya nahi) ha 'cajole the girl (or not) ha"

If these sentences are accepted, this seems to be an isolated case of absolute homonymy according to Lyons since it apparently escapes criterion (2) and (3), but strangely it does not lead to any grammatical ambiguity. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that total syntactic equivalence does not obtain between them since *mana1* takes a dative object and *mana2* an accusative object. Hence the normal forms for these sentences are :

ladki ko manaya gaya.
holi manai gai.

We have so far elucidated different kinds of partial homonymy, shown how they can be

systematically explained, and that they rarely lead to any ambiguity. Instances of homonymy in any language are comparatively fewer than instances of polysemy, and this is only to be expected since homonymy does not reflect any basic psychological process; not is it the product of any operative principle of language. Polysemy, on the other hand, is the product of metaphorical creativity and as such can give rise to lexical ambiguity, thus providing plenty of scope for punning and playing on words.

But as we pointed out earlier, a formal distinction between homonymy and polysemy is notoriously difficult to make. The only basis for recognizing the two phenomena being the informal native-speaker intuition, which is based on relatedness versus unrelatedness of meaning between two homophonous (in Hindi) items. Lexemic distinctness seems to be the only operative criterion, and even this is not infallible, as we shall show, since there are many controversial cases.

jal	'burn; jealous"
muh	'mouth" used in the senses: khana muh me dalna 'put food i the mouth" and botal ka muh 'mouth of bottle"
kat	'cut" as in kapRa katna 'cut cloth" and 'interrupt" as in bat katna 'interrupt speech".
ghanta	'hour: bell" where common semantic element is + time.

Few speakers would consider these items as homonymus, and nearly all would instinctively look for some kind of semantic relation between them to justify considering them the same word.

Intuitions might clash in these cases although some common semantic element can be identified in all cases; but in the following examples there can be no doubt of the lexemic identify of the underlined forms; yet there is a subtle difference in meaning which prohibits the deletion of the second occurrence of the same lexeme :

i)	wo subah holi khela aur sam ko tas (khela) 'in the morning he played holi and in the evening he played cards".
ii)	we kabhi skul k ghanti bajata hai aur kabhi sitar bajata hai. 'some times he rings the school beel and somtimes he plays the sitar.
iii)	we kabhi madhur tan ceRta hai aur kabhi laRkiyo ko ceRta hai. 'Some time he strums sweet melodies (on string instrument) and some times he teases girls".

Distinctions of sense can be multiplied almost indefinitely in the case of lag or lagna and its associated inflected forms :

iv)	mujhe laga ki	'it seemed to me"
v)	tel lagaya	'applied oil"
vi)	wo pice laga hai	'he is following"
vii)	pice dum lagi ha	'tail is attached behind"
viii)	dil lagaya	'emotionally involved/hattached"
ix)	mar lagana	'administer a beating"

Posting a separate lexical entry for each different sense, in accordance with the lexicalist theory, would lead to a lot of redundancy in the lexicon. It would be better to follow the example of traditional dictionaries and maximize polysemy - that is, all the related senses of an item being associated with the same lexical entry. Since there are many more cases of polysemy than homonymy in any language, such a solution would have the added advantage of reflecting the ability of the native speaker to extend the sense and denotation of lexemes by a process of metaphorical or semantic transfer.

At this point, it is relevant to bring in the notion of "transfer" of meaning", which forms the basis of the process of metaphorical extension - a process which systematically generates polysemous items. In other words many lexical items are polysemous in nature because of the native speaker's ability to extend the literal meanings of items to new non-characteristic cond. This he does by extracting one or more "central" features of the items in question and transferring them to the new context, thereby setting up a componential configuration which is different from) by virtue of the connotations it acquires from the new contest) yet obviously related to, the central lexeme.

Let us look at some more polysemous items and see how they can be explained by means of transfer of meaning :

For example, words like simmer, burn, flame, fume are all terms from the process of heating and all are also used to refer to some kind of non-tranquil emotion :

- a flaming raw
- burning with jealousy
- fuming with rage
- simmering with anger.

Similarly, in the corresponding Hindi usage:

jai "burn, jealous"
ag (lagna) "(catch) fire"

"man me ag lagi hai 'there is fire in the heart".

Words like hot, could, cool, warm are entered in the lexicon in terms of their literal meaning as expressions of temperature range, but they also have a parallel reference in descriptions of personality, like:

a hot - tempered person
a cold women
a warm nature.

Apart from such parallel patterning in two domains, it is also possible to predict the meaning of related terms in one semantic domain, when they are transferred and used in the parallel domain (Lehrer, 1978 : 96).

e. g. (1) thanda mija j' . mujhe to burfila malum hota hai.

'A cool nature; personally I find it ice - cold".

Cool and ice-cold are related in the temperature domain, but though ice-cold is not used regularly in the personality domain also, its meaning here is quite clear.

That is, in all these multiple senses a common semantic element can be identified; e. g. in the case of the several senses of lag, the semantic element ASSOCIATION (of something ha someone with something) can be said to be the underlying semantic element. or, in the case of the two or more meanings of thikana 'house; shelter" :

E. g.

- (2) apna koi thikana banao
"make a house ha shelter for yourself".
- (3) uska koi thikana nahi, wo kare ya na kare
"there is no relying on him, he may or may not do it".

When a native speaker looks for similarity in the meaning, he will probably come up with : just as a homeless person lacks a fixed base, similarly a whimsical person will act only according to fancies, regardless of what is expected of him. That is, the notion of 'fixedness, stability; inherent in the meaning of thikana has been extended in the metaphorical usage.

It is the identification of common semantic element which justifies grouping such polysemous items under one lexical entry, but this common element must not be a high-order, universal one like Human or Animate. It should be what Katz called a 'distinguisher', one that sets aside that word from all other words, establishes its lexemic distinctness. Either this component as such, or any one of other components that serve as attributes or units in the definition of the lexical item can be utilized by the native speaker when he is coining a metaphorical usage. e.g bachelor refers to 'unmarried adult male: but the meaning of my bachelor aunt; is none theless clear to a native speaker because the significant common feature which has been metaphorically used is not the sex of

Continued on Page no. 92

शिवनारायण तक एवं कबीर पंथ से लेकर शिवनारायणी पंथ तक का बारीकी से शोध अध्ययन किये जाने की आवश्यकता है जिससे कि शिवनारायणी पंथ की विशालता एवं उनसे जुड़े तमाम महत्वपूर्ण पहलुओं को उजागर किया जा सके, जिनकी वजह से हिन्दुओं के एक बड़े तथा निम्न वर्ग ने इसे अपनाने का साहस जुटाया।

लेख के अंत में पिथौरागढ़ के ग्राम बजेठी (जनपद-पिथौरागढ़, उत्तराखण्ड) स्थित धामघर का छाया चित्र प्रस्तुत है जहाँ पर पंथ के लोग एक साथ बैठकर संगत करते हैं। यहाँ पर यह बताना अनन्त ही आवश्यक है कि संगत के समय वर्ग विशेष के अलावा किसी अन्य का प्रवेश व छायाचित्र लेना वर्जित होता है।

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Continued from Page No. 18

the subject but the state of 'being unmarred'.

- (4) She fathered her child.
- (5) He mothers his child.

Here the nouns father and mother have been used as verbs and we see that in the case of father the male feature in the Noun has been retained. But in the case of mother the selection restriction has changed and the verb can take both + Female and - Female subjects. How then is 'mother' to be entered in the TG lexicon? With clashing features or as two different entries?

The latter solution would mean that the item is being treated as a case of absolute homonymy, and we have seen that this is a counter - intuitive notion. Besides, the N and V forms are very obviously semantically related and it is the lexicologists; task to bring out this relationship. We can attempt to do this in terms of semantic components. 'Fathering' a child has a very specific meaning and hence very specific selection restrictions. But to be a 'mother' to a child inherently encodes the feature BE LIKE (a) MOTHER and it is the presence of this feature which makes the grammaticality and acceptability of (5) possible.

Metaphorical creativity, thus, is an integral part of a speakers' competence and the theory should reflect this principle of metaphorical extension by finding some way to show how different senses of a homophonous (or homographic) item are related. This is, polysemy will need to be maximized and systematic account of it will have to be given in terms of transfer of semantic features.

A significant implication of maximizing polysemy is that theoretical priority is given to a speaker's ability to recognize relatedness of sense more readily than unrelatedness of sense. The alternative approach of maximizing homonymy, apart from other serious methodological disadvantages, would be counter- intuitive in that it does not reflect any basic psychological process- and this is only to be expected for the principles of organization of a language will not readily tolerate the existence of identical forms which can create irresolvable ambiguity.

Maximizing polysemy has the added advantage of considerably reducing the amount of idiosyncratic information to be relegated to the lexicon, thereby lessening the amount of learned material and aiding the process of easy and natural recall.

Notes- Weinreich (1966) too, has briefly dealt with the notion of transfer of features, but his treatment of it differs somewhat from the scheme we have outlined (cf. Biswas (1981) for further discussion).

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