ELEMENTS OF AMBIGUITY IN KANURI LANGUAGE: REVISITED

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Abstract
This paper refuted the claim of Gazali and Modu (2010) that structural ambiguity is not a feature of Kanuri semantics. From the analysis of the data collected for this study (i.e. on Yarwa dialect), the study was able to identify three domains within the two major types of the ambiguity (i.e. structural and lexical ambiguities). One domain under structure and the remaining two are under lexis. The one under structure is uncase-marked subject and object in a sentence, while the ones under lexis are homonymic and polysemic words. The study also pointed out that, perhaps homonymic words are lesser in number than polysemic words. In that, polysemous words can be found from words that are related to the parts of the body and from those which are not and from institutionalized names of persons and places (otherwise known as onamastics).

Linguists such as Lyons (1977), Palmer (1996) and Abubakar (1999-2001) believe that, ambiguity is a universal feature of natural languages. Ambiguous statement refers to any utterance that has more than one interpretation. There are two types of ambiguity and these are structural and lexical ambiguities.

Structural ambiguity is that type of ambiguity that manifest in a statement due to the syntactic ordering of elements in a given phrase or statement. To illustrate this, we use the popular example used by linguists: “Flying aero planes are dangerous”. This is an ambiguous statement. In that, it can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it can mean the act of flying the aero planes…. Secondly, it means the objects - “aero planes” are dangerous. This is, if the word – “flying” is considered as a qualifier to the word “aero planes”. On the other hand, lexical ambiguity refers to a case of single word with several senses. There are two types of lexical ambiguities, viz: homonymy and polysemy. Homonymy refers to a single word that bears several unrelated senses. For instance, ‘bank’ as financial institution and also as side of a river. While, polysemy refers to a single word with different senses that are closely related, generally with one
of the senses as literal and the rest (one or more) as transferred senses. For example, head of a person which controls the body is metaphorically used in phrases like: head of a company, or head of a department etc (Yule, 2000).

Sources of Data

Two sources of data collection were used in conducting this research viz: primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes the researcher’s intuition, techniques of interview (unstructured) and questionnaire (the Swadesh one hundred 100 word list was used to form the questions). The secondary source mainly comprises of printed materials such as Kanuri-English and English-Kanuri dictionaries, textbooks written on Kanuri grammar and as well as textbooks written in Kanuri language such as story books and the rest.

The data collected through the interview (unstructured) method were elicited from discussion with twenty (20) informants selected within Maiduguri metropolis and Jere local government area. The informants were selected irrespective of their educational background and sex, but their ages ranged from thirty (30) years and above. The researcher put open ended questions to the informants during the interview session. The interviews were tape-recorded.

The data obtained through questionnaire method were elicited through distributing one (100) copies of the questionnaire to literate native speakers of the language within the wards selected from both Maiduguri metropolis and Jere local government. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents irrespective of their sex, but their ages ranged from twenty five (25) years and above.

The Domains of Ambiguity

In this study, the researcher has identified three domains within the two major categories of ambiguity. One domain under structural ambiguity and the remaining two are under lexical ambiguity. They are presented as follows:

Structural Ambiguity: Under structural ambiguity we have: Uncase-marked subject and object in a sentence

In this domain, some numbers of sentences which have their subject and object uncase-marked are presented to ascertain their ambiguousness. In Kanuri language, the basic syntactic arrangement is subject-object-verb (i.e. SOV), but the language permits object-subject-verb (i.e. OSV) arrangement though the subject and the object should be case-marked with ‘ye’ and ‘ga’ respectively in order to avoid the case of structural ambiguity (Lukas1937, Cyffer and Hutchison1979, Cyffer1983, Hutchison 1986, Bulakarima 2000 and Mohammed 2012). Now consider the following sentences:
When the above structures are examined, one discovers that each of them has two interpretations and hence each of the sentences is held to be ambiguous. The possible senses of each of the sentence above are presented below:

Sentence (1):
(i)  Tuja beats Karu.
(ii) Karu beats Tuja.

Sentence (2):
(i)  Fati saw Modu.
(ii) Modu saw Fati.

Sentence (3):
(i)  Musa abuses Ali.
(ii) Ali abuses Musa.

Sentence (4):
(i)  The man chases the mad person.
(ii) The mad person chases the man.

Sentence (5):
(i)  Fanna touches Fanta.
(ii) Fanta touches Fanna.

Careful observation of the above structures shows that, in the first interpretations of each structure, the words: Tuja, Fati, Musa, the Man and Fanna are subjects of the sentence they appeared in, while in the second interpretations, they appeared as objects. The cause for this structural ambiguity in these sentences is the absence of case-markers (i.e. ‘ye’ and ‘ga’ respectively) for subject and the object in each of the sentence. Therefore, to disambiguate these ambiguous structures, we case-
mark the subject and the object of each structure using either subject-object-verb (SOV) or object-subject-verb (OSV) word order as follows:

Sentence (1):
- Tújaye kárùga bákcìn. or
- Kárùga Tújaye bákcìn.
• Tuja beats Karu.

Sentence (2):
- Fátiye Módùga sürúnà. or
- Módùga Fátiye sürúnà.
• Fati saw Modu.

Sentence (3):
- Músàye Alìga lánjìn. or
- Alìga Músàye lánjìn.
• Musa abuses Ali.

Sentence (4):
- Kâmdəye Zolídəga dújin. or
- Zolídəga Kâmdəye dújin.
• The man chases the mad person

Sentence (5):
- Fánnaye Fántàga léjin. or
- Fántàga Fánnaye léjin.
• Fanna touches Fanta.

However, it is worth mentioning here that, some sentences under subject-object-verb (SOV) syntactic word-order can stand as unambiguous even without case-marking the subject and object. Consider the following sentences:
- Dálà tóji cúwúna.
• Dala bought a torch.
- Yáin bəri déjin.
• My mother cooks food.
- Téla gəmáje sutudîn.
• A teller sews a cloth etc.

Each of the above sentence has only one meaning as interpreted above, for it does not make any sense to interpret them as: ‘Tóji Dálà cúwúna’ (A torch bought Dala.), ‘Bəri Yáin déjin’ (food cooks my mother.), ‘Gəmáje Téla sutudîn’ (A cloth
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sews teller.), Though they can be accepted as grammatical, yet senseless to the Kanuri speakers. This is because, the words ‘tóji’ (torch), ‘bəri’ (food) and ‘gəmâje’ (cloth) in the above sentences are inanimate objects and items ‘cúwúna’ (bought), ‘déjin’ (cooks) and ‘sutudín’(sews) are verbs that normally require an animate subject. However, the words considered as object in each of the above sentences are selectionally restricted to the object position. Therefore, to case-mark the subject and object of the above sentences (and the like), can render the case-markers as redundant features in the sentences.

Lexical Ambiguity: Under lexical ambiguity we have:

Homonymy

Under this lexical ambiguity (i.e. homonymy), some number of words that are spelt and pronounced in the same way but having different unconnected senses are considered. Consider the following sentences:

1. Kəmdə dəredoro ngáji cìna.
   - The man gave to the policeman granules (of grain/corn)/bribe.

2. Bálṣa gəmâje kəlî səmünà bìkka.
   - Balsa wore a wet/green shirt yesterday.

3. Ndú dágələdə gózə.
   - Who took the ladder/monkey?

   - The old man is feeling urine/cold.

5. Dálə kəmù səriro sərəgonə.
   - Dala likes a beautiful/young woman.

   - Kunduli’s wife stumble (and fell)/miscarried yesterday.

7. Málə ngángərá máshèdìro sàdin.
   - Mala takes a lute/coffin to the mosque.

   - Ali bought a new table/shovel.

In the above sentences, the words: ‘ngáji, kəlî, dágəl, namusə, zəriro, tálzənə, ngángərá, and téwur’ are the sources of the ambiguity. Consider the interpretations of the sentences:

   Sentence (1):
   - The man gave granules of millet to the policeman.
   - The man gave bribe to the policeman.
Sentence (2):
- Balsa wore a wet shirt.
- Balsa wore a green shirt.

Sentence (3):
- Who carried the ladder?
- Who carried the monkey?

Sentence (4):
- The old man is feeling urine.
- The old man is feeling cold.

Sentence (5):
- Dala likes a beautiful woman.
- Dala likes a young woman.

Sentence (6):
- Kunduli’s wife stumbled (and fell) yesterday.
- Kunduli’s wife miscarried yesterday.

Sentence (7):
- Mala takes a lute to the mosque.
- Mala takes a coffin to the mosque.

Sentence (8):
- Ali bought a new table.
- Ali bought a new shovel.

The whole idea behind analyzing these words as totally different in the above sentences is the fact that, they have no any semantic relation whatsoever. However, it is imperative to point out here that, it is not in all environments that the above words (and the like) become ambiguous. Consider the following sentences:

1. Kândbye dáredoro ngáji tasa fál cîna.
   - The man gave one measure of granules of (grain/corn) to the policeman.

2. Balsa gómáje láunó kółiye səmînə.
   - Balsa wore a green coloured shirt.

   - Who made this ladder?
4. Càrìđọ ngàngàdîlán namusajîn.
   • The old man urinates in the toilet.

5. Kàmùđọ fàskaro zàíro.
   • The woman has beautiful face.

6. Tàdà àdò tàlzə sùkùrùnà.
   • This child stumbled and fell.

7. Màlà ngàngùrà zàjìn.
   • Mala plays a lute.

   • Ali collects sand with shovel.

The words: ngáji, kọfì, dàqàl, namusà, zàíro, tàlzə, ngàngùrà, tèwùr, are not ambiguous in the above context. This is because, there are some additional information that are provided by some words in the structures, like: ‘tasa fàl’ (one measure), ‘làunò’ (colour), ‘sàtànda’ (made) ‘namusajîn’ (urinates), ‘fàska’ (face), ‘sùkùrùnà’ (fell), ‘zàjìn’ (plays)’, and ‘kàttì sùlórìn’ (collects sand) which are used to disambiguate the ambiguous senses of the words Fagge (2004).

The following are some examples of homonyms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Senses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jê</td>
<td>rope/thread, jail term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngúdì</td>
<td>Guinea worm (disease), destitute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kókó</td>
<td>Frog, padlock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sà</td>
<td>Time, luck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ládọ</td>
<td>Sunday, inner hole in a grave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bôli</td>
<td>Excreta, lie/false statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hàiyà</td>
<td>Truth, sacrifice of an animal during naming ceremony of a newly born baby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>káré</td>
<td>(Of ground) solid not sandy, type of a game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bakta</td>
<td>Beating, printing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bîr</td>
<td>Pillow, a stick in form of a needle use to thatch huts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kòlí</td>
<td>Clapping, a wooden mallet use for pressing dyed cloth (by hitting)/drying caps and expanding shoes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fôr</td>
<td>Horse, rope made like a ladder use by well-diggers as a device for entering and coming out of a well/deep hole, a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>káshi</td>
<td>Oath, pocket money/provisions carried alone on a long journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yasara</td>
<td>To cough, to believe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zúrtə</td>
<td>To thrash (corn), to swear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karwâ</td>
<td>Wind, devil (a wicked evil spirit).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zártə</td>
<td>To stab, to beat a drum, to score in a game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zâr</td>
<td>Root (of a plan/tree), vein, capital (of a business).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>káfi</td>
<td>Locust, bow (weapon).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karáa</td>
<td>Bush, extra marital activity (sexual intercourse).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dəlá</td>
<td>Jackal, a traditional music performs by women during marriage ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>njî</td>
<td>Water, scorer (in a game), period of mourning for a woman whose husband died, interest (for borrowed money).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Polysemy**

A polysemous word refers to a word that has different senses with one of the senses as literal and the remaining (one or more) as transferred senses (Lyons 1977, Palmer 1996, Yule 2000, Abubakar 1999-2000). Under this type of lexical ambiguity, some numbers of sentences are considered to see how a polysemous word is used in Kanuri. Consider the following sentences:

1. Kólô kûlônzə ngáwo balaben.
   - Kolo has a farmland on the outskirt of the town.
   - Ali plays on a river bank.
3. Tûjâ kâlə kâskâberô zôwâna.
   - Tuja climbed the top of the tree.
4. Kôso têlin garûbedô farâjîn.
   - Koso cleans the cobwebs.
5. Ndû yə adashêbeda?
   - Who is the leader of the contribution?

The words: ‘ngáwo, têlin, kâlə, cî and yə’ in the above sentences have transferred/extended senses. This is because, the word ‘ngáwo’ literally refers to (back), têlin (phlegm), kâlə (head), cî (mouth), and yə (mother). But in the following phrases, the above words mean something different as: ‘ngáwo bôlabe’ means out skirt of a town, ‘têlin garûbe’ means cobwebs, ‘kâlə kâskâbe’ means top of the tree, ‘cî kûmûdûwube’ means river bank, ‘yə adashêbe’ means leader of an organized
contribution. Therefore, the above words are held to be ambiguous (i.e. polysemous). The following are some list of polysems that are related to the parts of the body:

**Table 2: List of Polysems (1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Core meaning</th>
<th>Extended usage</th>
<th>Transferred meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kəla</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>kəla njimbe kəla hawârbe</td>
<td>Roof headline of news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Músko</td>
<td>Hand</td>
<td>músko gəmâjebe músko agogöbe</td>
<td>shirt sleeve hand of clock/watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cî</td>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>cî bəlabə cî kəmudūwube cî kasūwube</td>
<td>out skirt of a town river bank market area/square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Səmo</td>
<td>Ear</td>
<td>səmo farbe səmo kəskäbe</td>
<td>equality (especially between competitors) one of the double-pronged pole (of wood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dâwû</td>
<td>Neck</td>
<td>dâwû mûskobe dâwû shîbe dâwû gəmâjebe</td>
<td>wrist ankle neck of a jumper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fəska</td>
<td>Face</td>
<td>fəska kûlwûbe</td>
<td>design of a gown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kəńza</td>
<td>nose</td>
<td>kəńza sûnöbe kəńza lâyabə</td>
<td>strap of a slipper a hole for thread on the tip of an amulet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngáwo</td>
<td>Back</td>
<td>ngáwo fājarbe ngáwo fâtöbe</td>
<td>after the down-break back-yard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sûró</td>
<td>Stomach</td>
<td>sûró bəlabə sûró shîbe</td>
<td>town centre foot-arch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dəmər</td>
<td>buttocks</td>
<td>dəmər kəskäbe dəmər bâkâtîbe</td>
<td>bottom of a tree bottom of a bucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tîmi</td>
<td>Tooth</td>
<td>tîmi jânâbe tîmi sùwûrambe</td>
<td>blade of a knife the grooves on a key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shîm</td>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>shîm argəmbe shîm shîbe shîm njîbe</td>
<td>a grain of millet ankle bone spring water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tələm</td>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>tələm kânnûbe tələm kəmâdūwube</td>
<td>flame the mouth of the river</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following are list of polysemic words that are not related to the parts of the body.

Table 3: List of polysem (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Core meaning</th>
<th>Extended usage</th>
<th>Transferred meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngwul</td>
<td>egg</td>
<td>ngwul shmbe</td>
<td>eye ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ngwul fatlabi</td>
<td>lampshade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fwu</td>
<td>Front</td>
<td>fuwu kambie</td>
<td>Vagina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yâ</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>yâ kaskâbe</td>
<td>trunk of a tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tâlin</td>
<td>phlegm</td>
<td>tâlin garûbe</td>
<td>cobwebs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Àda</td>
<td>culture</td>
<td>àda kàmûwábe</td>
<td>menstruation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kârî</td>
<td>dog</td>
<td>kârî kànnûbe</td>
<td>spark of fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>kârî kôlàbe</td>
<td>strand of hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kàmû</td>
<td>calabash</td>
<td>kàmû gôrobe</td>
<td>one hundred kola nuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keké</td>
<td>Machine</td>
<td>keké dutobe</td>
<td>sewing machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>keké ruwobe</td>
<td>typewriter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kûlûm</td>
<td>ring</td>
<td>kûlûm shmbé</td>
<td>Cataract (disease that causes eye defect).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kà</td>
<td>stick</td>
<td>kà cibe</td>
<td>lip(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>kà karassibe</td>
<td>steam of sorrel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Táda</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>táda kasuwübe</td>
<td>business man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>táda kaskâbe</td>
<td>fruit of a tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fâr</td>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>fâr karagbe</td>
<td>extreme anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fâr fatâlabe</td>
<td>A handle use for lifting the lampshade of a lamp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenyí</td>
<td>ladle/scoop</td>
<td>jenyí kaâbe</td>
<td>dragon fly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngærêgê</td>
<td>hand bag</td>
<td>ngærêgê külwübe</td>
<td>The open side of a gown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasháá</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>sâla lashâbe</td>
<td>The last prayer of the day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Onamastics

Another form of polysemous word is onamastics and it simply refers to institutionalised names of persons or places. Onamastics are considered as polysemous words because they acquired transferred meanings (Abubakar 1999-2001). In this study, it has been observed that, Kanuri people name some objects and places after some prominent personalities who frequently use the objects or stay in the places and some objects assume the name of the places they are made or brought from. The following are list of some objects and places named after some personalities and places:
Table 4: List of Onamastics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Extended reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ajá/Hájjá-ame</td>
<td>Hajja Amne (female name)</td>
<td>A name given to a style of Kanuri woman’s dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajá-ajá/Hájjá-hájjá</td>
<td>Hajji</td>
<td>A name given to a women veil made in Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aji/Aláji</td>
<td>Hajja</td>
<td>A name given to a cap made in Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aminarawarám (short form Rawarám)</td>
<td>Amina Rawaram</td>
<td>A name given to a locally handmade Borno cap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bwárbolóri (short form Bolori)</td>
<td>Bukar Bolori</td>
<td>A name given to a locally made perfume in Borno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cáina</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>A name given to a textile material made in China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

From the analysis of the data collected for this study, the author was able to identify three domains within the two major types of the ambiguity. One domain under structure and the remaining two are under lexis. Under structure, uncase-marked subject and object in a sentence is considered as a cause of structural ambiguity in Kanuri, while under lexis, there are homonymous and polysemous words as responsible for the ambiguity at the word level.

Under structural ambiguity, some structures are generated which clearly show the case of structural ambiguity and therefore refuted the claim of Gazali and Modu (2010) and it is clearly demonstrated that, some structures under svo word order can remain unambiguous even without the case-markers (i.e. –‘ye’ and –‘ga’ respectively). Under lexical ambiguity, some number of homonyms and polysems are considered. In the case of homonyms, it is established that, they can be disambiguated through careful choice of word and use of additional redundant information. With regard to polysems, several examples are generated from words that are related to the parts of the body and as well as from those that are not related. It is also observed that, another form of polysemous words known as onamastics (i.e. institutionalised names of persons and places) exist in Kanuri. Therefore, one concludes that, Kanuri language is one of the natural languages that have both types of ambiguity as its feature.
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Recommendation

There is enough room for further research in this field (semantics) in Kanuri language. Therefore, the researcher recommends that any interested researcher should endeavour to venture into research in this field in order to exploit and enrich the field of Kanuri semantics.

References


