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4th Year EFL Iraqi Learners' Pragmatic Failure in Polysemy

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Abstract

This paper is an endeavor to identify the failure of EFL Iraqi learners when they are asked to realize the meaning of polysemous words in their context. The model of analysis is Thomas's (1983) "pragmatic failure"(PF). Polysemous words have different meanings. There are two kinds of polysemy: semantic and pragmatic polysemy. The important part of the study at hand is pragmatic polysemy, which is the pragmatic meaning that results from polysemous words through the intentionality of the speakers, as these words leave a free space for their speakers to pick the meaning they want to communicate. Besides, these meanings may mingle on the part of the listeners in native language speakers and listeners, so polysemous words would, of course, constitute a problem for the learners of English. Again, it is believed that the lack of both linguistic and pragmatic competence is the result of this pragmatic failure.

Keywords: Pragmatic-linguistic failure (PLF), socio-pragmatic failure (SPF), polysemy, homonymy, pragmatic competence.

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الاخفاق التداولي لطلبة الصف الرابع العراقيين في المشترك البوليسي

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المستخلص

هذا البحث هو محاولة لتحديد فشل متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين عندما يُطلب منهم إدراك معنى الكلمات متعددة المعاني في سياقها. نموذج التحليل هو "الفشل البراجماتي" لتوماس (1983). الكلمات متعددة المعاني لها معاني مختلفة. هناك نوعان من تعدد المعاني: تعدد المعاني الدلالي و البراجماتي. الجزء المهم من الدراسة هو تعدد المعاني البراجماتي، وهو المعنى البراجماتي الناتج عن الكلمات متعددة المعاني من خلال قصد المتحدثين، حيث تترك هذه الكلمات مساحة حرة لمتحدثيها لاختيار المعنى الذي يريدون التواصل به. علاوة على ذلك، قد تختلط هذه المعاني من جانب المستمعين لدى متحدثي اللغة الأم والمستمعين، وبالتالي فإن الكلمات متعددة المعاني، بطبيعة الحال، تشكل مشكلة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية. مرة أخرى، يُعتقد أن الافتقار إلى الكفاءة اللغوية والبراجماتية هو نتيجة لهذا الفشل البراجماتي.

الكلمات الدالة: الفشل البراجماتي اللغوي (PLF)، الفشل الاجتماعي البراجماتي (SPF)، تعدد المعاني .

Introduction

'Pragmatic failure' is the inability to understand and appreciate expressed utterances in suitable contexts. 'Pragmatic failure' (PF) may be 'socio-pragmatic failure'(SPF) or pragmatic-linguistic (PLF). In (PLF), the initial mistake may be fixed by grammar. (SPF) happens when there is a disparity between 'first-language norms' and 'second-language standards'. It is believed that learners of English may misuse the word 'polysemy', which refers to the relatedness of meaning or, as Carston (2020:1) puts it, a single linguistic statement having many related meanings. In this situation, pupils would struggle to interpret such phrases without context. This research identifies Iraqi EFL students' polysemous usage errors and seeks to improve their pragmatic competence.

1. Definitions of Polysemy

Semantic polysemy examines meaning linkages (Yule, 2014: 155). Saeed (2016: 61-62) says lexicology traditionally separated homo and polysemy. Only polysemy uses different interpretations of the same phonological phrase when senses are connected. Dictionary

lexicographers must identify homonymous and polysemous senses. Lexicographers assess polysemy by "relatedness". Two groups of senses of hooker on the other hand, as in (2 and 3) below:

1. *“ Hooker 1 /hukə(r)/ n. 1. a commercial fishing boat using hooks and lines instead of nets. 2. a sailing boat of the west of Ireland formerly used for cargo and now for pleasure sailing and racing.*
2. *Hooker 2 /hukə(r)/ n. 1. a person or thing that hooks. 2. U.S. and Canadian slang. 2a. a draft of alcoholic drink, esp. of spirits. 2b. a prostitute. 3. Rugby. the central forward in the front row of a scrum whose main job is to hook the ball.”*

According to Carston (2020: 1), polysemy is mostly caused by pragmatic inference, although certain occurrences of polysemy get conventionalized and embedded in language. Two primary topics need to be addressed: (a) the significant distinctions between regular and irregular circumstances and the potential significance of a "core meaning," and (b) the differentiation between pragmatic polysemy and semantic polysemy.

2. Types of Polysemy

There are two types of polysemy: pragmatic polysemy and semantic polysemy.

- a. Semantic polysemy refers to instances when the several meanings of a term are interconnected and may be traced back to a single fundamental notion. For instance, the term "bank" may have several meanings, such as a financial institution, the edge of a river, or a location for storing items. However, all of these meanings are connected to the idea of a "slope" or "inclination" (see to Lyons (1977), Saeed (2016), Carston (2020)).
- b. Pragmatic polysemy refers to instances when the several meanings of a term are not inherently connected but are used in contexts to accomplish diverse communication goals. Take the word "run", for an example. It may signify 'moving swiftly by foot', 'operating something', or 'flowing or melting'. However, the context, in this regard, plays an essential part in understanding what the speakers intend to have been communicating. Pragmatic polysemy is often seen in ordinary language, but semantic polysemy is mostly in technical or specialist terminology. This is because technical terminology is generally more exact and standardized, whereas common language use is more adaptable and reliant on the situation.

According to Carston (2020: 10), the lexical meaning of a word is an abstract and unified schema shared across all its actual uses. This schema is usually not fully specified in terms of various dimensions such as concrete/abstract, static/dynamic, causal/noncausal, etc. These dimensions are typically specified in specific contexts of use. Some polysemous words have certain metaphorical meanings (Namiq and Ali, 2024).

3. Homonymy, Polysemy and Context

Lyons (1977:550) highlights the significance of understanding both homonymy and polysemy. He emphasizes the importance of language speakers who have enough awareness of these two occurrences. This is a result of the lexical ambiguity inherent in these lexical elements. According to Lyons (ibid), Describing the difference between homonymy and polysemy is easier when using common terminology rather than relying on objective and operationally acceptable criteria. Firstly, it is important to inquire about the specific criteria employed by linguists and lexicographers to establish the distinction between lexemes that are homonymous, such as "port 1" (referring to a harbour) and "port 2" (referring to a type of fortified wine), and lexemes that are polysemous, like "mouth," which encompasses various senses such as "organ of the body" and "entrance of a cave," among others. An essential need is the lexicographer's comprehension of the word's historical origin, elucidated in the etymology information added to several dictionary entries. It is widely acknowledged that the lexemes in this vein should be recognized as having developed from lexemes that were previously different in an earlier stage of the language. However, this is not a necessary condition for homonymy. Etymologically formal measurements for formality in Middle English would consider words like "ear 1" (referring to the organ of hearing) and "ear 2" (referring to a portion of grain plants like wheat and barley) as homophones. In practice, the etymological standard does not always have control. Firstly, many terms exist even in English, with a vast collection of written records spanning many centuries. Sometimes, people are unaware of its historical roots. Furthermore, the precise meaning of "etymological relationship" in this situation is not always immediately evident. The term "port!" (meaning "harbour") originates from the Latin term "portus," which is linked to the German verb "fahren" and the present-day English term "ford" when tracing back to Indo-European reconstruction. However, "Port2" is a relatively new term in English that comes from the name of a Portuguese city where the particular sort of wine it refers to was exported (Lyons, 1977: 551).

Both of these lexical associations, when used in practical scenarios, might provide diverse interpretations owing to their distinct meanings. The concept of context is important to consider in this matter. Context may be primarily classified into two distinct sorts. According to Yule (1996, 2014), the co-text refers to the linguistic elements that include the meaning of the words. To comprehend the homonym 'bank', which has two distinct meanings, one must rely on the language context, such as:

3. *She cashed her money in the bank.*

The other kind of context is the physical. In this vein, the meaning of lexical items can be recognized through the physical surroundings.

4. *I picnicked beside the bank.*

The context is what clarifies such uncertainty. Polysemy is linked to the context in which language is used. There is also a very close convergence between speech acts and polysemy. A polysemous word's meaning is not static but contingent upon contextual use. Take the word "bank" as an example. It may have two different meanings: a financial organization or the edge of a river. However, the specific meaning is determined by the context in which it is used. When someone mentions going to the bank to withdraw money, they most likely refer to a financial institution. However, if someone mentions sitting on the bank and watching the river flow, they are most likely referring to the side of a river.

Context plays a crucial role in clarifying the meaning of words with several interpretations, known as polysemous words. The scope of use encompasses the immediate linguistic surroundings, such as the words before and following the term with several meanings, and the social and cultural surroundings, such as the speaker's personal characteristics, the audience, and the environment. Nevertheless, the correlation between polysemy and environment is not always direct. Occasionally, a word having several meanings, known as a polysemous word, might have several plausible interpretations even in the same context, making it difficult to determine the intended meaning. If the listener or reader fails to deduce the intended meaning from the context accurately, it may result in pragmatic failure or misunderstanding.

Hence, it is crucial to include sufficient context and clues to clarify the intended interpretation to communicate successfully with words with several meanings. These strategies may include using modifiers or qualifiers, providing examples or explanations, or using non-verbal indicators such as facial expressions or tone of voice.

5. The Pragmatics of Polysemy

Carston (2002: 374) examines the pragmatic implications of polysemy in English. There is a significant dispute over the appropriate approach to dealing with polysemy. Aside from the pragmatic approach and the ambiguity or 'sense enumeration' approach, there is also the intriguing 'generative lexicon' account proposed by Pustejovsky (1995). Pustejovsky highlights that a diverse range of instances of polysemy are systematic, as they occur in various languages. For example, the word 'enjoy' has different meanings, as in (6) below:

5. *“(a). Mary enjoyed the novel. [enjoyed reading/writing]*
- (b). Mary enjoyed the beer. [enjoyed drinking]*
- (c). Mary enjoyed the conversation. [enjoyed listening to/taking part in]”*

But this account of polysemy was under attack by (Fodor 1998). However, Carston (2002) seems very interested in the pragmatics of polysemy. The very possible stance on lexical ambiguity that could be taken into account is the notion of polysemy, which states that the word "not" can have two or more related meanings. Since certain fundamental meanings

or uses of words may be extended in fairly predictable ways due to universal properties of conceptualization, polysemies may appear fairly systematically across languages. Therefore, whether the situation calls for polysemy or monosemy (one general sense with multiple pragmatic manifestations in use), the translation argument cannot differentiate between the two. This eliminates a potential roadblock in the ambiguity case, assuming the ambiguity is willing to consider a polysemy analysis instead of a homonymy. Therefore, it is evident that the use of such lexical elements is noteworthy and deserving of investigation. Even native speakers may exhibit this phenomenon. How does it work for non-native learners? Employing words with many meanings may lead to a breakdown in communication among English learners, known as (PLF) (Carston,2002).

Polysemy and speech act theory are closely linked because the intended interpretation of a word with several meanings is under the influence of its linguistic context and the speaker's communicative objective or speech act.

Speech act theory is a linguistic theory that elucidates how individuals use language to execute various behaviors or speech acts, such as soliciting, commanding, pledging, expressing appreciation, etc. Every speaking act serves a distinct communicative objective or illocutionary force transmitted via language (Mahmoud, and Al-Thalab, 2024). The illocutionary forces or speech actions conveyed by "run" might vary depending on the context and the speaker's communicative intent. Below are a few illustrations:

"Run (Hasten) to the store and acquire some milk." The word "run" is used in this context as an imperative or command, carrying the illocutionary function of making a request or issuing an order.

The river is flowing rapidly. In this context, "run" is used as a descriptive action, conveying the illocutionary intention of describing or declaring a fact. "I enjoy engaging in the activity of running in the park." In this context, "run" is a verb denoting personal preference or want.

The interpretation of "run" in each case is affected by the speaker's communicative purpose, illocutionary force, and the linguistic environment. The word "run" may have many functions and convey different meanings depending on the kind of speech act it is employed in. It can function as a command, descriptive, or verb of choice.

In order to get an accurate understanding of the intended meaning and communicative impact of a word with several meanings, it is essential to grasp the connection between speech act theory and polysemy for effective communication.

6. Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure

The importance of cross-cultural pragmatic divergences across different cultures. Two individuals with distinct cultural backgrounds may engage in occasional conversation, but

it is certain that there will be disparities and challenges. A contributing factor to cultural disparities is the potential for an individual to use a term in an unsuitable context yet believe it to be acceptable according to the customs and norms of their native language. Context and the pragmatic appropriateness of a phrase inside it are crucial in cross-cultural pragmatics (Mey, 2001: 263). Interpreting across languages effectively will be tough due to the cultural disparities in these contexts of use. An apology, according to the Arabic language and customs, is quite different from an apology in the English language and conventions. Instead, this will be expressed by explaining and expressing gratitude by saying "thank you" (Yule, 1996).

(PF) refers to the incapacity to comprehend the importance conveyed by the notions as mentioned earlier. It refers to the inability to comprehend the speaker's intended message without being expressly stated. This suggests that comprehending the suggested meaning of spoken words is challenging, particularly for those who are learning English (Thomas, 1983: 1). According to Leech (1983: 231), (PF) is the result of cross-cultural communication as contrasted between two languages in the process of education. Languages are compared and differentiated across different cultures and linguistic contexts, specifically in relation to their use, cultural norms, and usage patterns.

It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of context, whether physical or linguistic since there are several indirect speech actions that listeners or learners may need to be made aware of. Context is important and vital in comprehending several conversational implicatures and indirect speech acts. For instance:

6. *You left the door open.*

Physical and verbal context are important in (8). Typically, (8) in cold weather. Conversational implicature is more difficult because it requires more common knowledge (Rushdi et al., 2022: 65). Learners who are unfamiliar with such terms will fail pragmalinguistically. The students who may do (PLF) would have been expected to do the following:

“a. if the listener recognizes the utterance of the speaker as stronger or weaker than the speaker would have intended.

b. The listener mingles two speech acts, and he interprets a request as a command.

c. in the time where the speaker is careful that there is nothing controversial about his or her statement, the listener interprets it otherwise.

d. The speaker thinks that the listener is able to specify the influence of what they say based on what they know and their ideas” (Thomas, 1983: 94).

7. Research Methodology

7.1 Participants

The participants set consists of college students at the University of Tikrit. The University's current enrollment of 4th-year students is 123. A random sample of 50 4th-year students from the College of Education (humanities) for the academic year 2023-2024 was chosen. These students were then subjected to two exams. The first assessment is conducted before explaining polysemy, the pretest. The subsequent assessment, known as the post-test, follows the explanation of polysemy to figure out the (PF) resulted.

7.2 Instrument

The instrument used in this research comprises a test aimed at visualizing the significance of polysemy and expressing it in coherent words. A pre-test and a post-test are given to a group of students before and after explaining polysemy (post-test). The data acquired from the accessible sources has been used to formulate the examination.

7.3 Description of the Study

The test has fifteen pairs of sentences that exhibit polysemy. Before elucidating the concept of (Pre-test), the students need to ascertain the definition of polysemy and articulate it cohesively. After a two-hour lecture on the concept 'polysemy', the same exam is administered to the same set of students as a post-test. In addition, the students must identify the meaning of the given items in the pre-test without any explanation and clarification of the contexts of the items given in the pretest. The test participants generate the responses independently. The post-test is given to the students, with the items containing polysemous words put in their contexts with a full explanation and clarification of their contexts in order to see whether knowledge of context will have a positive or negative effect. The assessment is unbiased. A sample of fifty 4th-year students was chosen to evaluate the two exams. A statistical correlation is built between the two test results and an external criterion to acquire effective criteria, given that these tests indicate the average.

8. Results and Discussions

The analysis of two pretest and post-test tests shows that the students performed better in the post-test (58%) than in the pretest (42%). This test aims at examining the students' ability to discern the meaning of polysemous words and correctly use them in entire sentences before receiving an explanation of the notion of polysemy (pretest). The exam has fifteen pairs of phrases. The researcher gathers and computes the number of items, the number of accurate responses, and the number of erroneous answers. The students' replies in this aspect are shown in the following table (2):

Table (2)

Pretest Results

No. of items	No. of Correct answer		No. of incorrect answer	
1	17		33	
2	21		29	
3	15		35	
4	26		24	
5	19		31	
6	16		34	
7	23		27	
8	25		25	
9	14		36	
10	28		22	
11	20		30	
12	24		26	
13	22		28	
14	27		23	
15	24		26	
	321	43%	429	57%

The data shown in Table 1 shows that there were 321 accurate answers, accounting for 43% of the total, and 429 erroneous responses, accounting for 57% of the total. This highlights that students are unfamiliar with the notion of polysemy and need help to accurately recognize the meaning of polysemes while they are given without the aid of context. This may be attributable to one of two explanations. Firstly, the lack of contextual clues hinders the comprehension of polysemy and its integration into a coherent phrase. Secondly, these polysemes are hardly used in their everyday conversations.

The posttest is handed out to the same group of students after providing an explanation of the concept of homonymy. The purpose is to determine whether the students can identify the meaning of homonyms and use them in complete sentences (refer to Appendix 2). The researcher gathers and computes the number of items, number of correct answers, and number of incorrect answers. The results of the students' responses are presented in the table below:

Table (3)

The Correct, Incorrect Answers and Percentage

Posttest

N	N. Correct answers		N. incorrect answers	
1	29		21	
2	31		19	
3	27		23	
4	23		27	
5	34		16	
6	26		24	
7	30		20	
8	32		18	
9	27		23	
10	25		25	
11	37		13	
12	33		17	
13	24		26	
14	29		21	
15	26		24	
	433	58%	317	42%

The data in Table (3) shows 433 accurate answers, accounting for 58% of the total, and 317 erroneous answers, accounting for 42%. This indicates that the students' performance in the posttest is superior to their performance in the pretest. This may be attributed to the influence of signals provided in the posttest, which stimulate their memory.

9. Conclusions

The conclusions arrived at in this research are the following:

1. Students can only understand polysemous words if they get acquainted with the meaning of the words.
2. Most English as foreign language learners need adequate pragmatic competence to help them cope with using these polysemous words.

3. The majority of students make the failure because in the pre-test because they do not have any knowledge of the context, as the items of the pre-test are handed to them without a context.
4. It was found that some of the students' answers were better in the post-test than the same students' answers in the pre-test. As a result, knowledge of the context is an essential factor for reducing (PF) resulting from these polysemous words.
5. Pragmatic polysemy is mainly responsible for the (PLF) in the pre-test and post-test of this study.
6. The students must have memorized and studied the use of polysemy by fortifying and strengthening their pragmatic competence to improve their use of language.

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Appendix

Pre-test

In the following, a list of the polysemous words used in the pretest which is given to the students without their contexts. The students are asked to figure out the meaning of the bold words without their contexts.

1. Jack is on the **run**. (running, managing, explaining)
2. He sat the car beside **bank**. (financial institution, riverside, moved left or right)
3. He **booked** the ticket. (put it inside the book, he bought it, he traveled before buying it)
4. The man used the **hook** to fish the fish. (hanged the fish, hunt the fish, slipped the fish)
5. Mary **began** the new novel. (reading the novel, studying and analyzing the novel, started reading the novel for fun)
6. he put the plate **over** the table. (across the table, directly on the table, putting it across and on the table)
7. Jack is an odd **fish**. (he is like a fish, he likes fishing, he fished a fish)
8. Sarah **pens** the papers. (writing with a pen, pointing-reading by a pen to the lines, using a pen to pin the papers)
9. He liked the **dish**. (liking the glass painting on it, liking the position of it on the table, linking the main meal)
10. Joe **barked** yesterday. (barking to make laugh, shouting because he is nervous, he is a dog).
11. He has **served** his time in prison. (he is a prisoner, he is an officer, he is the manager)
12. The hospital opened the new **wing**. (the wing that can make it fly, the new construction that expands the hospital, the plane that can land on the hospital)
13. Brooke **got** the drinks. (drank them, fetching them, get rid of them)
14. He likes the **drinks**. (the way he drinks it, the content of the drinks, the types of the drink)
15. The student of chemistry knows the solution. (he knows the solution degree, he knows the correct answer, he knows chemistry well).

Post-test

What follows is the list of words repeated and put into utterances, in their contexts, which displays the post-test after explaining the context to let the students guess the appropriate answers.

1. (Jack is the manager and he does his job in a good way). Jack **runs** the wisely.
 - a. Running in a campaign held in the firm
 - b. Setting every single detail about the firm systematically
 - c. Running the fuel of the cars of the firms

2. (Joe is going to the refinery station which he doesn't know where it is exactly but he asked a pedestrian to guide him to it). Joe finally **banked** to get to the refinery.
 - a. He picnicked beside the refinery.
 - b. He reached the refinery.
 - c. He put his money in the bank of the refinery.
3. (Sam is trying to get out of the country to study medicine, she bought a ticket to travel by British airways) Sam **booked** the ticket to fly out.
 - a. She studied what is in the ticket and the way she will travel.
 - b. She read it and went on travelling.
 - c. She held on the ticket and had a date of travelling.
4. (The fisher uses this instrument for hunting fish he tried to hang the fish onto the car). The fisher **hooked** the fish and hanged it out of the water.
 - a. The fisher uses a hook to hang the fish after hunting it.
 - b. The fisher uses a hook for hunting the fish.
 - c. The fisher uses a hook for hauling the car.
5. (Sara started studying the new novel because she is a researcher and she is a PhD candidate). Sara **began** a novel.
 - a. Sara is reading a new novel.
 - b. Sara is writing a new novel.
 - c. Sara is analyzing the novel.
6. (Cloe tried to cover the hole in the wall with a picture). Sara nailed the board of the hole **over** the wall.
 - a. The meaning of 'over' is to cover.
 - b. The meaning of 'over' is to make it above.
 - c. The meaning of 'over' is to make it above and across the wall.
7. (Ben talks to himself too much these days). Ben is an odd **fish** these days.
 - a. Ben is a strange person these days.
 - b. Ben likes fishing these days.
 - c. Ben likes eating fish.
8. (Sue is writing a new story). Sue pens the story.
 - a. She writes her new story.
 - b. She types her new story.
9. (the meal consists of omelet which Paul like very much on breakfasts). Paul likes this **dish**.
 - a. Paul likes the object which contains the omelet.
 - b. Paul likes the eggs in the dish.
 - c. Paul likes the all the dinner.
10. (Mark tries to make fun with the kids of his brother). Mark **barks** a lot every morning.
 - a. Mark is resembled to a dog when he wakes up.
 - b. Mark is shouting as a dog.
 - c. Mark is nervous thus he shouts a lot but not resembling a dog.

11. (Martin was involved in a traffic violation, then he was put into jail for certain period because of this). Martin **served** several months in prison.
 - a. He was put into the jail.
 - b. He was managing the jail.
 - c. He is an officer in the jail.
12. (the chopper safely sat on the roof of the hospital because they construct an H-area for ambulance choppers)
A: the **wing** sat on the H of the hospital.
B: Really! That is amazing!
 - a. The wing is the aircraft helicopter.
 - b. The new building which concerns the surgical rooms.
 - c. The wing is that of the birds over the hospital.
13. (Jane is so cautious and when she opened the kitchen-door she found a mouse there and she startled). Jane **got** scared.
 - a. She frightened the mouse.
 - b. She gets consciously scariness and controlled it.
 - c. She was frightened.
14. (Sally is too allergic to orange juice so she cannot drink it). Sally doesn't like the **drink**.
 - a. Was the orange juice drink awful?
 - b. Drinking hurts her because of she doesn't like orange juice.
 - c. She can drink it but she is not favoring it.
15. (Frank is a student of chemistry. He is making an experiment. Afterall he knows the solution he put into the chemical equation). Frank knows the solution he put.
 - a. He knows the material he put.
 - b. He knows the mark of the solution correctly.
 - c. He knows both.