

MEANING GENERATION THROUGH MINIMAL PAIRS SITUATIONS IN HAUSA AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The study is aimed at doing a phono-semantic study of minimal pairs in Hausa and English Languages with idea of generating meaning through minimal pairs by means of contrastive analysis. The study is motivated into this investigation by some observed speech features of some Hausa speakers of English in the Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi as they communicate in English. This is observable when, for instance, a Hausa speaker seems to give some English minimal pairs similar pronunciations irrespective of the sound contrast distinguishing them. Therefore, one hears a Hausa speaker of English pronouncing the following pairs of words: peak and pick, caught and cut, goat and gut, etc as if they were the same in spelling, pronunciation and meaning. The study had established the basic factor affecting the Hausa pronunciation of English minimal pairs. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis developed by Robert Lado (1957) was used as theory for analysis. Data were collected through audio-tape recording. The population was drawn from Hausa speakers of English in the Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria. The analysis revealed that most English and Hausa minimal pairs initial and final are consonantal, while medial are vowel based.

Tone played a prominent role in distinguishing two or more lexical items in Hausa language. The study recommended that the Hausa speakers of English (especially those in the study area) should make some effort to become fully aware of their innate tendencies to commit the pronunciation errors identified in this research work, so that they will be able to identify areas of similarity as well as difference between English and Hausa.

Key words: Language, Phonology, Minimal Pairs and Semantics

Introduction

According to Kuiper and Allan, when people know a language, they must know how speech sounds relate to meanings. When speaking, we produce sounds and our hearers hear sounds. Speech sounds are the medium we use to represent what it is we are saying, that is, they represent content or meaning, and both the speaker and hearer normally know the meanings which are conveyed by the sounds produced by a speaker (always provided that both the speaker and hearers speak the same language). But sounds convey meanings only directly. Speech sounds do not themselves have meanings (1-2).

Therefore, language means different things to people. For instance, a philosopher sees language as an imperfect and misleading code for expressing logical ideas; a psychologist, on the other hand, sees language as a key to understanding of the mind. Also, to a literary critic, language is a medium of literature. Although, these definitions of language are not satisfactory enough to the linguist as to what language really is.

Many linguists have attempted to define language. To Kuiper and Allan, language is described as a code for conveying a great variety of information. The linguistic code uses symbols-signals which mean or convey something other than themselves (2). According to Sapir, in his full length treatment of language,

language is defined as ‘purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of system of voluntarily proceed symbols which are auditory and produced by the organs of speech (8). Cruttenden, sees language as a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. This pattern of conventions covers a system of significant sound units (the phonemes), the inflexion and arrangement of ‘words’ (morphology and syntax) and association of meaning with words(semantics)(4). However, all those definitions of language at given in order to understand the fact that language is the foundation in which other linguistic components are building up upon, such as: phonetics, phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and others.

In phonemic, sound contrast is an aspect which covers areas like the phonemes of the language and other aspects of morphophonology, such as zero morph, allomorph, allophone, minimal pairs, free variation etc. But for this study, focuses on minimal pairs in English and how it is mispronounced by the Hausa speakers of English. Minimal pairs as defined by Roach, pairs of words in which a difference in meaning depends on the difference of just phoneme like these: sin /sin/, sing/sinj/ (51 and 53). Put differently, minimal pairs are pairs of word that vary in a single sound segment (which could be at the beginning, medial or final position), and often result in meaning differentiation. It is the research understanding that minimal pair is a phonological term which touches on morphology and results in semantic contrast. Other linguistic component such as: phonology, orthography, morphology and semantics help in the realization of minimal pairs.

Conceptual Framework

Human language has long been said to be abstract in manner unknown to animals. It is not an abstract counter-

attraction of the dictionary makers but something arising out of joys, needs, work, tales of long generations of humanity. It is, most considerably, based on this truism that several linguists and anthropologists have worked interestingly to air out their distinctive views on the concept of language; several linguists see language as the most interesting aspect of human existence. According to Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, “language is a variety of speech or body of words and idioms, any manner of expressing thought or feeling.” Going by this approach to the understanding of the concept of language, it is evident that language contains in it a variety of speech. And speech here is said to be the ability to talk or rather, the activity of talking. For one to talk, he/she must have something in common to get which can not be achieved unless language is used. Speeches are in variety based on the major thing at hand depending as well on the genre. This definition also accounts that language is a body of words. This is to say, every language has in it a number of words or lexical items which come together to make meaning and for the language to be understandable among interlocutors. It is moreover evident in the definition that language is any manner of expressing thought or feeling. This means for an individual to interact in a language speaking community, he/she will have no option rather than to use language for his expression of thought or feelings, or reversely, be expressionless. Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar, defined language as “the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.”

Speech is a universal feature of human language. Other members of the animal kingdom could communicate through vocal noises or cacophonies, but are limited and restricted in nature. Through speech sounds, emotion, feelings, thoughts, and

ideas are expressed in a meaningful manner inspiring joint operation with a group of people. Human society can not exist without a comprehensive system of reciprocal communication among its residents. Life as it is now would be impossible meaninglessly and obviously impracticable without the use of language. It is, therefore, an indispensable factor in human life because it is all about expression of ideas and/or thoughts based on the two approaches.

According to Cruttenden (4) “language is a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community.” From the definition, it will be noted that language is a system of generally accepted signal used for exchanging ideas and it is therefore seen as an abstract phenomenon because it follows what is done and accepted by the society or a whole community. Similarly, Sapir (193), another renowned linguist seems to capture more precisely what language is when he states that language is “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.” Central to Sapir’s definition, language is a purely human act, just as birds have wings, man has language and this language gives expression to man’s intelligence, passion and is based on reasoning that enables man to communicate his views, feelings, ideas and his perception of the world he is living in. Sapir’s notion of language being human and non human instinctive method of communication is in line with Barber. It is opined that language is a necessity for all human beings because it is the medium through which human beings communicate. And that though animals communicate with one another either through cries or postures, but these various means of communication according to Barber (1) differ in important ways from human language. This is so because animals’ cries are

not articulate which can be interpreted to mean that they lack structure.

John Lyons (4) quoting Block and Trager (5) that “a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.” This means that members of a society interact in terms of their culture in totality only via the means of language. Cooperative socio-economic-cum-socio-political co-existence will not be possible if language is not in use among members in a language speaking community. The scholars have not only looked at language as arbitrary but revealed also that it is interwoven with culture.

Phonology as a linguistic component is the scientific study of speech sounds of a particular language. Put differently, it is a component of language which studies the rules governing the sound system in a given language. Alagbe says “Phonology is the study of how speech sounds behave in a particular language or languages generally” (82). Also Kuiper and Allan define phonology as the study of the function and organization of sounds in a particular language, or in language in general (24). Phonology is therefore divided into two parts: Segmental, which is the lesser part that covers the treatment of speech sound: Vowels and Consonant and Suprasegmental, the larger part which covers: stress, syllables, tones and intonation, allophone, elision, diacritic, morphology among others.

Minimal pairs are sets of words that are distinguished by a single sound. Put differently, minimal pairs are set of words that vary only in a single sound segment which often results in meaning differentiation. For instance read /ri:d/ and rid /rid/ are set of words that are distinguished by a segment: vowel sounds /i:/ and /i/ which often result in meaning differentiation. As a sound contrast, minimal pair can actually be seen as an aspect of

morphophonology. Morphophonology is a branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between morphology and phonology.

Every minimal pair or minimal set relates a range of meaning differentiation. This is where semantics is brought to play. Therefore, it is believed that the meaning of gut is obviously different from the meaning of get. The difference is due to sound contrast in single sound segment on each pair of words presented result in semantic contrast as well. This aspect of semantic contrast marks the end-product in this study of every minimal pair situation. These set of minimal of pairs with similar pronunciation are sometimes being misspelled and mispronounced which alter the meaning of such set, this is where the problem of mispronunciation comes about in this study. Therefore, the next term to be treated is pronunciation.

Semantics is simply the study of meaning. According to Kearns, she says “semantics deals with the literal meaning of words and the meaning of the way they are combined, which has taken together from the core of meaning, or the starting point from which the whole meaning of a particular utterance is constructed”. She proceeded to sight an example to back up her definition of semantics thus: ‘I forgot the paper’, here, semantics provides the literal meaning of the element I, forget past tense, the paper, and the meaning drawn from the order of words giving very approximately ‘the person who is speaking at that time before the time of speaking forgot a particular item which is a paper (1). In other words, semantics is the study of the meaning of words and sentences.

Saeed sees semantics as the study of meaning communicated through language. However, this language could be written or spoken (1). He further says ‘that a person’s linguistic abilities are based on knowledge that they have. It is believed that speakers of a language possess different types of linguistic

knowledge, which includes: how words being pronounced, how sentences are constructed and how meanings are derived from words and sentence (1). One can however say that semantic knowledge helps speakers to know words that are similar, contradicting, ambiguous and entailment. It is in sentences that all or most aspects and components of meaning related concepts (which exhibit formal properties of words and sentences) are treated with the aim to investigating into what aspect of meaning is imbedded in the morphological entities known as words, or in syntactic structures such as sentences.

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical foundation for what became known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was formulated by Lado (1957). In the 1950s, American linguist Robert Lado began to study errors – contrastive analysis. His influential book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (Lado, 1957) in some ways complements Weinreich. Lado has the overall objective of helping language teaching. He describes a system of CA which lays down how to carry out a rigorous step-by-step comparison of the L₁ and L₂ in terms of their phonology, grammar, writing systems, and culture. The fundamental assumption is transfer, “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture” Lado (2). “Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult” Lado (2). Consequently, language teaching should concentrate on the points of differences, “the problems often require conscious understanding and massive practice, while the structurally analogous units between languages need not be taught” Lado (52). In this view, L₂ learning consists largely of the projection of the system of the L₁ on to the L₂. This will be successful when the two languages are the same – called “positive” transfer by some; it will

be unsuccessful whenever the L₂ fails to correspond to the L₁ – “negative” transfer. While Weinreich was interested in interference between two language systems, contrastive analysis hypothesis claims that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system on the second language system and that a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which are problems and which are not

Method of Data Collection

The study collected data through audio-tape recording. A Mobile Cell Phone (Tecno Product) was used as an instrument in recording. This way, the study was able to make scientific judgement through the analysis as to which areas of English minimal pairs pose difficulty and otherwise to the Hausa speakers of English in the Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Method of Data Analysis

The procedure for data analysis follows the pattern of the theoretical model used for the study, that is, the weak version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). Here, the study first displayed a number of English minimal pairs in a tabular form, where the minimal pairs are given alongside their sound contrast, followed by their semantic change. This covered the minimal pairs initial, medial and final in English language. Also, a number of Hausa minimal pairs are also presented in the same way as the English.

Data presentation and analysis

The table below shows some selected words of **English minimal pairs initial**. The table consists of three columns: words, phonemic contrast, and semantic contrast.

Words	Phonemic Contrast	Semantic Contrast
<u>S</u> eal	/s/	[v]To cover or close something
<u>D</u> eal	/d/	[v]To take appropriate action in a certain situation
<u>C</u> ook	/k/	[v]To prepare food by heating
<u>B</u> ook	/b/	[n]a printed pages with cover which you can read
<u>P</u> air	/p/	[adj]An object consisting of two
<u>B</u> ear	/b/	[v]to be able to accept and deal with something unpleasant

The table above shows pair of words with sounds that are contrastive at the initial. The phonemic contrast helps to distinguish the meaning of the pairs that is vary in sound means a difference in meaning. An important thing to be noted from the table above is that the English minimal pairs initial are often consonants.

English Minimal Pairs Medial

Words	Phonemic Contrast	Semantic Contrast
Phone	/əu/	[n] A system for talking to somebody else over long distance
Fun	/ʌ/	[n] a thing that give enjoyment
Rich	/i/	[adj] having a lot of money
Reach	/i:/	[v] to arrive at a place
Haven	/ei/	[n] a place that is safe and peaceful
Heaven	/e/	[n] the place believed to be the home of God

The table above presents pair of words with different phonemic contrast at the middle of the words, which is referred to as the English minimal pair medial. The sounds contrast helps to identify the pairs and their meaning. From the set of words of the English minimal pair medial, it can be deduced that the phonemic contrast are often vowels.

English Minimal Pairs Final

Words	Phonemic Contrast	Semantic Contrast
Of	/v/	[prep] belonging to somebody; relating to somebody

Off	/f/	[adv] away from a place; at a distance in space or time
Bet	/t/	[n] an arrangement to risk money on the result of an event
Bed	/d/	[n] a piece of furniture for sleeping on
Death	/θ/	[n] the end of life
Deaf	/f/	[adj] unable to hear anything

The above table shows the English minimal pair final. The phonemic contrast of these set of words are found at the last sound of the words which alter the meanings and the pronunciation of each word. From the table displayed above, it could be easily deduced that English minimal pair final are often consonant.

Hausa Minimal Pairs Initial

Word Phonemic Contrast Semantic Contrast

<u>T</u> arba	/t/	[v/n] hospitality, reception etc
<u>K</u> arba	/k/	[v/n] collect, accept etc
<u>S</u> ada	/s/	[v] connect, join, put together etc
<u>F</u> ada	/f/	[v] fight, quarreling etc
<u>w</u> uta	/w/	[n] fire
<u>b</u> uta	/b/	[n] kettle
<u>Ƙ</u> wafa	/kw/	[n/v] tutting
<u>G</u> wafa	/gw/	[n] forked stick

From the above table, it is obvious that the Hausa minimal pairs initial have multiple sets with multiple spellings, and the

pronunciations are also related but not similar. Again, the table presented a minimal set of one form with different semantic entries. The varying semantic implications are as a result of the contrast in a single phoneme at the initial positions of the word which then alters both the pronunciation and meaning of each word in each set. Following the patterns in tables 1 and 3, it can also be noted from the tables that the Hausa minimal set initial were consonantal; the affected segments are often consonants.

Hausa Minimal Pairs Medial

Word	Phonemic Contrast	Semantic Contrast
makarantá	/a/ the high tone	[n] school
Makarantà	/a/ the low tone	[n] students, readers etc
Wuká	/k/	[n] knife
wuyá	/y/	[n] neck
babá	/a/ the high tone	[n] mother
Babà	/a/ the low tone	[n] father

From the above table, it can be observed that the Hausa minimal pairs medial have multiple sets with multiple spellings, and the pronunciations are also closely related but not similar. Hausa as a tonal language with three sets of tones: high, low and falling. The high (´) and low (`) tones are said to occur on all types of syllables. A falling tone usually occurs on CVC syllables or on CV syllables with a long vowel or diphthong. However, the table above presented a minimal set of one form with different semantic entries. The varying semantic implications were as a result of the

contrast in just a single phoneme (s) at the medial positions of the words which then alters both the pronunciation and meaning of each word in each set. Like in table 2, it can also be noted that the Hausa minimal set medial are vowel based; the affected segments were mostly vowel sounds, which could be either single or double in this case.

Hausa Minimal Pairs Final

Word Phonemic Contrast Semantic Contrast

Kunyá	/a/ the high tone	[n] ridge
kunyà	/a/ the low tone	[n] shy
Korá	/a/ the high tone	[n] chase
Korà	/a/ the low tone	[n] infection
Ƙwarí	/i/ the high tone	[n] lake
Ƙwarì	/i/ the low tone	[n] arrow bag
damá	/a/ the high tone	[n] opportunity, chance etc
damà	/a/ the low tone	[v] to steer

From the above table, it is seen that the Hausa minimal pairs final have multiples sets with multiple spellings, and the pronunciations are also closely related but not similar. Again, each of the tables above presented a minimal set of one form with different semantic entries. As noted above in table 5 above that Hausa as a tonal language has three sets of tones: high, low and

falling. The high (´) and low (`) tones are said to occur on all types of syllables. A falling tone usually occurs on CVC syllables or on CV syllables with a long vowel or diphthong. However, the varying semantic implications were as a result of the contrast in a single phoneme at the final positions of the words which then alters both the pronunciation and meaning of each word in each set. Unlike in English counterpart, the Hausa minimal pairs/sets final affect vowels only.

Research Findings

From the analyses in the foregoing, the following have been identified as the research findings:

- i. From the comparative analysis of English and Hausa minimal sets as seen above, it was found that most English minimal pairs initial are consonantal;
- ii. It was also found that most English minimal pairs medial are vowel based;
- iii. The analysis also revealed that most English minimal pairs final are consonantal, just like the initial ones;
- iv. On the Hausa minimal pairs, on the other hand, it was found that most Hausa minimal pairs initial are consonantal;
- v. It also showed that most Hausa minimal pairs medial are also vowel based (not so different from that of the English after all, except for the fact that they are either single or double at the medial position in this case)
- vi. However, it was found that most Hausa minimal pairs final affect both vowels and fairly consonants (totally different from that of the English);
- vii. It was again found that all English minimal pairs affect only one sound/segment in all positions, but the Hausa minimal pairs has dual treatment; i.e. in some positions,

only one sound is affected while in others, two sounds are affected;

viii. It was established that tone plays a prominent role in distinguishing two or more lexical items as demonstrated above;

ix. Hausa is a tonal language while English is an intonation and stress time language.

Conclusion

From the study, the researcher is convinced to draw conclusion that Hausa and English languages do not share exactly the same linguistic properties. Of course, similarities could occur in some areas, but differences abound in many areas, as recorded in the foregoing, it could again be concluded based on the research findings that most Hausa speakers of English are faced with interference problem. Moreover, it could be concluded based on the analysis in the foregoing that most Hausa speakers of English in the Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi do not exhibit exactly the same linguistic habit. Cases of idiolect obviously manifest in whatever area of linguistic demonstration under examination and communicative performance. This is why not all respondents in this study produced the same set of errors; while some had difficulties with all minimal pairs under investigation, others had difficulties in varying degrees. This signifies the fact that differences in English and Hausa minimal pair situations may not be the only factors responsible for the inabilities of the Hausa speakers of English to articulate English minimal pairs appropriately.

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