

Full Length Research Paper

Homonymy as a barrier to mutual intelligibility among speakers of various dialects of Afan Oromo

Amanuel Raga^{1*} and Samuel Adola²

¹College of Social Sciences and Law, Jimma University, P. O. Box 5219, Jimma, Ethiopia.

²Institute of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University, P. O. Box 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Accepted 10 January, 2012

This study intended to scrutinize how homonymous lexical items in Afan Oromo result in misunderstandings and confusions among speakers from differing dialect areas. The data for this study were collected from two groups of informants. The first category of informants consisted of twenty high school Afan Oromo teachers who have acquaintance with the media and people speaking different varieties of Afan Oromo. The second category comprised of ten native speakers of Afan Oromo who have spent their entire lives in one geographical area, and thus have barely heard of varieties of Afan Oromo other than theirs. The primary means of data collection for this study was elicitation. As the study established, homonymy which results from lexical variations among the dialects of Afan Oromo causes misunderstandings between speakers from the various dialect areas. Furthermore, the phonological and morphophonemic differences among the dialects of the language and the convention in the writing system of the language which allows speakers to write expressions as they pronounce also contribute to the communication problems by creating ambiguous homonymy-like lexical items.

Key words: Afan Oromo, dialect, mutual intelligibility, homonymy, communication barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Afan Oromo belongs to the Lowland East Cushitic sub-family of the Afro-asiatic super-phylum. According to Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency (CSA) (2007), it has over 25 million native speakers in Ethiopia. It is also used as a language of inter-group communication in several parts of Ethiopia. At present, the language is spoken in the areas extending from eastern Tigray in the northern part of Ethiopia to the south of Malindi in the southern Kenya and from Wollega in western Ethiopia to Hararge in the eastern Ethiopia. The language is said to have six major dialects, and almost all of the varieties are being used in written materials and the mass media because the language does not have a standard form or variety (Mekonnen, 2002). Studies undertaken on Afan Oromo dialectology point out that the dialects show variation in terms of: vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Such

variations are said to be creating misunderstandings in written communication among speakers of various dialects of the language (Kebede, 2005). A similar view is shared by the Afan Oromo Language Standardizing Committee of the Oromia Bureau of Culture and tourism which states that in effective communication, lexical and phonological variations matter much more than the grammatical variation in Afan Oromo (Wiiirtuu, Vol. 8). This is why the present study emphasizes misunderstandings pertaining to homonymy, a subset of lexical variation. It also discusses some aspects of Afan Oromo phonology and morphophonology that give rise to homonymy-like lexical items. Since the occurrence of the homonymy-like items can be partly attributed to lack of uniformity in writing, the study discusses the last two issues in relation to the conventions in written Afan Oromo. This study generally aimed at identifying and describing homonymous words and other related linguistic phenomena that pose challenges to mutual intelligibility among speakers of different varieties of Afan Oromo and proposed ways through which the problem

*Corresponding author. E-mail: amanuel.raga@ju.edu.et. Tel: +251 913 188268.

can be alleviated.

Specifically, the study aimed at: identifying identical linguistic forms to which differing meanings are attributed (technically referred to as homonyms) in different varieties of Afan Oromo, providing the different senses associated with the linguistic forms in each major dialect, unraveling the morphophonological processes that give rise to ambiguous expressions, accounting for how these phenomena pose challenges to mutual intelligibility in written Afan Oromo and proposing ways through which the problems can be alleviated. The study dealt not only with homonymy proper that poses difficulty to mutual intelligibility among Afan Oromo speakers but also with lexical items whose status as homonymy or polysemy is not easy to determine and thus fall within the boundary between the two. It also discussed homonymy-like lexical items resulting from Afan Oromo phonology and morphophonology in relation to the convention in the Afan Oromo writing system which encourages every speaker to write almost exactly as s/he pronounces rather than imposing rigorous rules of writing that can minimize the misunderstandings facilitated by the sound system. The research therefore dealt with lexical and phonological variations which qualify as barrier to mutual intelligibility, with the exclusion of syntactic variation which is not that problematic in communications among Afan Oromo speakers from different dialect areas. This study is believed to be of great importance to people and bodies who prepare teaching or other materials in Afan Oromo in terms of avoiding or contextualizing/explaining ambiguous lexemes and structures that they use in their writings; it does this both directly and indirectly.

Directly, it acquaints them with homonymous/polysemous Afan Oromo lexemes and other linguistic phenomena that are potentially confusing for the readers; and indirectly it is believed to make the users aware of the potential barriers for mutual intelligibility among speakers of different varieties of Afan Oromo. Moreover, it is hoped to encourage individuals and bodies who want to take farther attempts being made to standardize Afan Oromo. Finally, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding Afan Oromo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section first provides an overview of dialects and then narrows its subject down to the discussion of Afan Oromo dialectology and how the variation negatively affects effective communication. It also presents overviews of researches carried out so far regarding Afan Oromo standardization and the contributions of individuals and organizations in terms of narrowing the communication gaps resulting from regional variations through preparation of dictionaries, grammar books and other materials. Finally, it presents an overview of homonymy and related concepts such as homophones

and homographs.

An overview of dialects

According to Williams (2005: 220), “language varies over time, across national and geographical boundaries, by gender, across age groups and by socioeconomic status. When variation occurs within a given language, we call the different versions of the same language dialects.” Defining a dialect in linguistics, however, is not as simple as this because it is a rather slippery term that covers so much territory. Yet, for ease of discussion, we can construe a ‘dialect’ as a more or less identifiable regional or social variety of the language-distinguishable in terms of vocabulary, syntax and sometimes pronunciation (Finch, 2003: 206). In expounding on this construal of a ‘dialect’, Trask (1999: 49) states that:

“Every language that is spoken over any significant area is spoken in somewhat different forms in different places; these are its regional dialects. Moreover, even in a single community, the language may be spoken differently by members of different social groups; these different forms are social dialects or sociolects.”

And in accounting for the origin of dialects and that of the regional dialects in particular, Trask (1994: 36) points out that they are the result of language change and geographical separation and that “if no unifying force intervenes, dialects may diverge from one another without limit.” For him, language is always changing in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, meaning, and to some extent in spelling and that a single language does not change everywhere in the same way. “When a language is spoken over any significant stretch of territory, changes which occur in one area do not necessarily spread to other areas. As a result, with the passage of time, differences slowly but steadily accumulate among the regional varieties of the language” (Trask, 1994: 58).

Classification of Afan Oromo dialects

Despite the claim that a language has both regional and social dialects, literature on *Oromo dialectology* does not indicate the existence of Afan Oromo sociolects. Even regarding regional dialects, there appears to be no detailed work, and as a result there are no clearly defined dialects and isoglosses. A few works however make suggestions regarding Afan Oromo dialect areas. The first is Bender and Mulugeta (1976: 1-2) which classifies Afan Oromo into eight dialects. These are Macca, Tuulama, Wallo, Raayyaa, Arsii, Gujii, Boorana and Hararge. The other is Gragg (1982: 12-13) which points out that Afan Oromo spoken in Ethiopia might be

classified into four dialect areas, namely: Western (Wallagga, Iluu Abbaa Bor, Jimma), Central (Shawaa), Eastern (Hararge) and Southern (Arsii-Baale, Gujii and Boorana). The Baate and Raayyaa of Wollo and Tigray, respectively, however, have not been included in this classification. In Kenya, Heine (1981: 15) recognizes two major dialect areas, 'Central Afan Oromo' and 'Tana Afan Oromo'. A still other work, though not detailed is that of Lloret (1994: 6) which divides the various dialects of the language into Western and Eastern Afan Oromo groups with the former encompassing Raayyaa, Baate, Macca and Tuulama, and the latter including Harar, Arsii, Boorana, Gabra, Orma and Waata.

Kebede (2005) on the other hand suggests a classification of Afan Oromo into five major dialect areas: 1) Waata, Orma, Borana of Ethiopia and Kenya, and Arsii, 2) Tuulama and Macca, 3) Raya, 4) Hararge, and 5) Baate. Finally, drawing on studies on variation within Afan Oromo, Banti (2008) classifies the main known dialect groups of Afan Oromo spoken in Ethiopia into: 1) Northern Afan Oromo (Baate and Raayyaa), 2) Western Afan Oromo (Macca), 3) Highland Shawan Afan Oromo (Tuulama), 4) Eastern Afan Oromo (Hararge), 5) Central Afan Oromo (Gujii and Arsii), and 6) Southern Afan Oromo (Boorana). This study, in line with that of Banti (2008) suggests that in Ethiopia, Afan Oromo has six major dialects. Among the various varieties of Afan Oromo, we can observe variations in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Regarding this, Crystal (1997) points out that variation in language is significantly observable at three structural levels: phonological, morphological and semantic or lexical levels. In the 8th issue of *Wiirtuu* (1999: 200), the Afan Oromo Language Standardizing Committee in explaining about its endeavors in publishing *Caasluga Afaan Oromoo* (Afan Oromo Grammar, 1995/1996/1998) states that there are of course variations in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation among different varieties of Afan Oromo. It further states that variations pertaining to the first and the last are much more problematic than the last one. As we have been able to observe, the variations can be more problematic if users fail to be cautious of the way they communicate using written Afan Oromo. This observation can be further accentuated by Kebede (2005: 134) who argues that such variation in Afan Oromo "is usually pointed out as creating misunderstanding in the written communication."

Owing to this fact, this study takes into consideration problems that the conventions of written Afan Oromo could contribute to mutual intelligibility among speakers of different varieties of the language. In order to narrow the gap between the writer and the audience, Kebede suggests that preparation of standard dictionaries and reference grammars that provide information regarding a dialect situation is essential. It is as a result of this same observation that we have undertaken this research on homonymy and related issues that qualify as barriers to

mutual intelligibility with the objective of acquainting the users with areas that are potentially confusing for the audience, when the writer and the audience are from differing speech communities. Our study, however, cannot be an end in itself-it needs to be taken up by individuals and organizations that are/feel responsible for standardizing (or seeking solutions for) the linguistic barriers we have identified. The objective of this study coincides with that of the Afan Oromo Language Standardizing Committee of the Oromia Bureau of Culture and Tourism. In its 7th issue of the annual *Wiirtuu* journal (1995: 179-190), this committee presents an article that compares shared basic vocabulary across eight dialects of Afan Oromo, namely: Boorana, Gujii, Arsii-Baale, Hararge, Wallo (Baate), Raayya, Tuulama and Macca. The committee did the comparison based on the 100 Swadesh (1909-1967) basic word list. The article stresses that such an investigation of shared basic vocabulary can significantly contribute to the process of standardizing the language.

What is more, in its 8th issue of *Wiirtuu* (1999: 201), this committee prides itself on its preparing a comprehensive material on Afan Oromo dialectology that it said was near completion. The material was said to present 1258 linguistic items of Afan Oromo drawn from 26 kebeles of 13 woredas that represent all the major dialects. The committee further states that a datum from one woreda (two kebeles) has already been juxtaposed (compared and contrasted) with that of the remaining woredas, and that it was about to finish the task of putting the commonalities and differences in terms of figures. The committee believes that the book will have adequate answers for any question that may arise regarding Afan Oromo dialects. Yet, despite the optimism expressed confidently four years ago in the 8th issue of *Wiirtuu*, this committee has not come up with any material on Afan Oromo dialectology. The 9th issue of the journal, however, presents 161 standardized words. If the committee were to publish the promised material in the near future, the results of the present study could be incorporated in it to enrich their work. We believe we can make use of this chance to make our work available for the users.

On the standardization of Afan Oromo

The primary function of language is facilitating communication and effective communication requires the uniform use of a language. But language has the natural tendency of developing into varieties. Thus, there is a sort of contradiction between language change and the importance of language uniformity for communication. This fact necessitates efforts to control or reduce language variation through the process of standardization. With its six or so dialects and as a language that lacks a standard form while being used in

the spheres of education, judiciary, mass media, and administration, Afan Oromo also needs to be standardized in order to enhance effective communication. A few researches have been undertaken on Afan Oromo standardization, some of which make suggestions as to how the process can be carried out. To begin with, Baye (1994) in his article entitled *Lexical Development in Afan Oromo* states that the current role of the language as a medium of instruction and its use for official and judiciary purposes make the need for practical efforts towards standardization. In this article, Baye discusses borrowing, extended meaning, compounding and derivation as some of the mechanisms that can be used in developing Afan Oromo lexemes and suggests what should be done to introduce new terminology in the language.

Temesgen (2001) also discusses the 'what' of standard language and the importance of standardizing and harmonizing a language. Unlike that of Baye (1994), however, his article-'Standardizing the Oromo Language' does not provide the methods and criteria on how the practical process of standardization can be affected. Further, Mekonnen (2002) discusses lexical standardization in Afan Oromo in terms of the four categories of the process of standardization, namely: selection, codification, the elaboration and implementation and proposes the all varieties as a base for the standardization of Afan Oromo. In addition, Mekonnen concludes the possibility to codify words of different varieties on the basis of such criteria as the number of speakers, frequency of occurrence, originality, productivity, economy, semantic transparency and acceptability, written documents, electronic media and current status of the variety. Regarding the methods of lexical elaboration, he makes the conclusion that blending, semantic extension, compounding, derivation and borrowing can be used in developing the lexical adequacy of Afan Oromo in expressing scientific, technological and other concepts. Finally, to implement the proposed standard form, he explains that we can expect much from governmental institutions like the education bureau, the mass media, a language academy/committee, and a non-governmental organization such as that of the missionaries, individuals and the speech community itself. In stressing the role of the speech community and the need to prescribe a standard form of the language, Trask (1999: 163) argues that people should be willing to speak other varieties; "otherwise, if people insist on using their own particular varieties, the result will be confusion and misunderstanding."

Girma (2008) discusses some facts that necessitate efforts to standardize Afan Oromo and makes some recommendations. As Girma points out, some individuals and bureaus of Oromia Regional State have been observed to have been coining new words for office use and this has resulted in inconsistency in the use of

terminology. Regarding this, Girma makes the suggestion that individuals who do not have qualification in language and linguistics should not be involved in coining new words and in codification because speaking the language alone is not enough to do researches on the language. So, the responsibility should be left to Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau. Otherwise, individuals interested in researching the language and organizations such as the education bureau, the mass media, and universities should work in collaboration with each other and with the Oromo Language Standardizing Committee (Girma, 2008: 187-221).

In addition to the above researches that focus on the methods and criteria for standardization and that make suggestions on how it can be carried out; there are also organizations and individuals who have engaged themselves in the area of implementing the process of standardizing. A committee notable for this is the Afan Oromo Language Standardizing Committee of the Oromia Bureau of Culture and Tourism through its annual issues of *Wiirtuu* journal (Vol. 1-9 so far). Ethiopian Languages Research Centre (ELRC) which formerly known as the Academy of Ethiopian Languages is the other body that has made some contributions in introducing new vocabulary through its dictionary (1996) and other published materials. Furthermore, individuals engaged in the implementation process include dictionary makers like Abdulsamad (1994), Tilahun (1995), Mahdi (1995) and Hinsene (2011).

An overview of homonymy and related concepts

Homonymy refers to a linguistic phenomenon wherein a single phonological form (lexeme) denotes two or more sharply distinct meanings. In linguistics literature, the oft-quoted example of homonymy is the word 'bank' whose form is fairly easy to identify, but whose meaning is difficult to determine because it has two senses, namely: 'a financial institution' and 'the edge of a river' which are far apart from each other. Such lexemes whose pronunciation and spelling are identical but whose meanings are unrelated are called homonyms.

Classification of homonymy: absolute and partial

Given the treatment of homonymous words as separate entries in dictionaries, homonymy can also be understood as different words with the same form. When the homonymous words are syntactically equivalent, the phenomenon is referred to as absolute homonymy, and when they belong to different syntactic categories, it is called partial homonymy. According to Kreidler (1998), homonyms commonly fall within the latter category. The words '*club*', 'a heavy stick' and *club*, 'a social organization' can be examples of absolute homonymy

because they both belong to the syntactic category noun. On the other hand, lexemes like *'rung'* 'the past participle of the verb 'ring' and *'rung'* 'a step of a ladder' which belong to different syntactic categories-verb and noun respectively-can be instances of partial homonymy.

Homonymy and polysemy

Lexicographers and semanticists sometimes have to decide whether a form with a wide range of meanings is an instance of polysemy or of homonymy. A polysemous lexeme has several (apparently) related meanings. The noun 'head', for instance, seems to have related meanings when we speak of the head of a person, the head of a company, head of a table or bed, and a head of lettuce or cabbage. If we take the anatomical referent as the basic one, the other meanings can be seen as derived from the basic one, either reflecting the general shape of the human head or, more abstractly, the relation of the head to the rest of the body. Dictionaries recognize the distinction between polysemy and homonymy by making a polysemous item a single dictionary entry and making homophonous lexemes two or more separate entries. Thus, 'head' is one entry and 'bank' is entered twice. Producers of dictionaries often make a decision in this regard on the basis of etymology which is not necessarily relevant, and in fact separate entries are necessary in some instances when two lexemes have a common origin. The form *'pupil'*, for example, has two different senses, 'part of the eye' and 'school child.' Historically, these have a common origin but at present they are semantically unrelated. Similarly, 'flower' and 'flour' were originally 'the same word,' and so were the verbs to poach (a way of cooking in water) and to poach ('to hunt animals, on another person's land'), but the meanings are now far apart and all dictionaries treat them as homonyms with separate listing.

The distinction between homonymy and polysemy is not an easy one to make. Two lexemes are either identical in form or not, but relatedness of meaning is not a matter of yes or no; it is a matter of more or less.

Lexical ambiguity

When homonyms can occur in the same position in utterances, the result is lexical ambiguity, as in, for example, "I was on my way to the bank." Of course, the ambiguity is not likely to be sustained in a longer discourse. A following utterance, for example, is likely to carry information about depositing or withdrawing money, on one hand, or, on the other hand, fishing or boating. Quite often, homonyms belong to different lexical categories and therefore do not give rise to ambiguity.

For instance, 'seen' is a form of the verb 'see' while 'scene' is an unrelated noun; 'feet' is a plural noun with concrete reference, 'feat' is a singular noun, rather

abstract in nature; and so on.

Homophones and homographs

In English, numerous pairs such as 'steak' and 'stake' have identical pronunciation but different spelling. This reflects the fact that the words were once different in their phonological form and such incidents are called homophones. English also has pairs of homographs, two words that have different pronunciations but the same spelling; for example, bow/bəʊ/ which rhymes with 'go' and refers to an instrument for shooting arrows, and bow/baʊ/ which rhymes with 'cow' and indicates a bending of the body as a form of respectful greeting (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bow>).

Fortunately, there are no homophones and homographs in Afan Oromo because the phonemic nature of its orthography prevents their occurrence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the study of language, meaning and linguistic variation are commonly studied independently. Constrained by their specific focuses, semanticists and dialectologists thus use different methods of data collection; and any attempt to study linguistic meaning in relation to regional differences, as is the case with the present research, therefore, inevitably meets challenges in terms of finding appropriate, time-tested methods. We thus had to pick and combine some methods from both areas as follows. First, we listed down a few homonymous words from introspection, and then used these as examples to explain to our informants the specific type of information we wanted from them. The first category of informants from which we elicited a large linguistic data involved 20 high school Afan Oromo teachers who have acquaintance with the media and people speaking different varieties of Afan Oromo. Specifically, this group consisted of people from Banti's (2008) six major dialects that is the Northern dialect (Baate and Raayyaa), the Western or Macca dialect (Iluu Abbaa Booraa and Jimmaa), the Shawan (Tuulama) dialect, the Eastern (Harargee) dialect, the Central dialect (Arsii, Baalee and Gujii), and the Southern (Booranaa) dialect. Accordingly, at least two informants were selected from: Dambii Doolloo, Shaambuu, Hurrumuu, Aggaaroo, Fiichee, Kamisee, Mehonnii, Agaarfaa, Haramayaa, Adoolaa and Yaaballoo as representatives of the six dialects of Afan Oromo. The second category consisted of ten native speakers of Afan Oromo who are from the same geographical areas of the first group of informants. These informants have spent their whole lives in their respective geographical areas, and thus have barely heard of other varieties or never had any contact with people speaking a variety other than their own.

To gather the data, we first went to the 20 Afan Oromo teachers who teach the language in the ten geographical areas. The data elicited from this category of informants consisted of not only homonymous words but also homonymy-like lexical items that give rise to lexical ambiguities. While eliciting the data and making preliminary analysis, we came to observe that the Afan Oromo writing system also gives rise to some ambiguities mainly because the convention allows the speakers to write almost exactly as the way they pronounce the forms. Then, we used the teachers' good knowledge of the writing system to collect more data through group discussions. Then, we took the data collected from the first category of informants to the second category of informants to see whether

they had problems understanding the expressions we had elicited. Since the knowledge of this category was limited to spoken Afan Oromo, they helped us only in providing information regarding the homonymous words that are confusing in speech. The informants in this category helped us a lot not in providing more data but rather in discarding some of the expressions from the data by pinpointing that they are not as such problematic.

To organize and analyze the data, first based on their linguistic nature we categorized the 200 lexical items and some 150 expressions which were collected from the six major dialects as lexical, phonological or morphophonemic. Then we analyzed and discussed how homonymy or homonym-like lexical items create confusions or misunderstandings among speakers of the various dialect of Afan Oromo.

HOMONYMY AS A BARRIER TO MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY IN AFAN OROMO

As stated previously, languages show variation in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and sometimes spelling. These differences, however, are not equally problematic in all languages. As indicated in Wiirtuu Vol. 8, for example, the most problematic aspects of variation in Afan Oromo pertain to vocabulary (lexemes) and pronunciation (morphophonology). This section therefore explores how homonyms resulting from lexical and phonological variations can challenge mutual intelligibility and how Afan Oromo morphophonemics and the convention of written Afan Oromo contribute to the occurrence of some homonyms and homonymy-like forms that result in misunderstandings and confusion.

Homonyms resulting from lexical variation

This subsection deals with the analysis of the typical homonyms arising from lexical variation in Afan Oromo and of the related phenomena, namely polysemy and lexical ambiguity without which our account of homonymy would be incomplete. Though, typically homonymous lexical items are ubiquitous in Afan Oromo, the discussion that follows has been limited to the ones that result in misunderstanding and confusion among speakers of different varieties of Afan Oromo. Let us begin our discussion with the following phonological forms that have distinct meanings in different dialects:

- 1a) bukkee 'beside' vs. 'hermaphrodite'
- b) geeba 'cup' vs. 'penis'
- c) kushee 'vagina' vs. 'pair of shorts'
- d) sagalee 'food' vs. 'voice, sound'
- e) hojjaa 'height; lower part of the leg' vs. 'work; coffee mixed with butter'
- f) ballaa 'wide, broad' vs. 'blind, lost'

The word bukkee in (a) denotes hermaphrodite in Central, Eastern and Northern dialects, but in the Macca dialect, it encodes the sense 'beside, by the side of'.

Despite the offensive meaning associated to it by the

majority of the speakers, Ethiopian Bible Society has used the word in the revised version of Onesimos' Afan Oromo Bible (1997). For example, on Mark 10:46 of this book, we find '...namichi jaamaan tokko, karaa bukkee taa'ee in kadhata ture'. The same can be found on Luke 8:5 and many other verses. The form geeba in (b), on the other hand is used in the eastern and northern dialects of Afan Oromo to denote the object 'cup', but in Macca dialect this same form denotes the male sexual organ. The funny thing about this word is that until very recently, it has been one of the frequently used words on TV and radio broadcast, especially by sports journalists. Similarly, the word kushee encodes the sense 'vagina' in some parts of Macca, but people from the central dialect use it in the expression of 'a pair of shorts'. What is more, in the Southern dialect, the form sagalee encodes the sense 'food', but this same term is used in the rest of the dialects to denote 'voice, sound'. The word hojjaa on the other hand has such senses as 'height' and 'lower part of the leg' which are common in southern, Tulama and Macca dialects, while 'work' and 'coffee mixed with milk' are the meanings of the term according to speakers from Central and Eastern dialects. Finally, the word 'ballaa' is used to express both 'blind' and 'broad, wide' in Southern, Central, Eastern, and Northern dialects, but in Macca and Tulama, the form denotes the latter sense only, that is 'broad, wide'.

From the forms discussed earlier, geeba, kushee, sagalee, hojjaa and ballaa can be good examples of absolute homonymy in that the different senses attributed to them in the different dialects fall within one syntactic category, which is Noun. The form 'bukkee' however is an instance of partial homonymy. This is because the form which has the sense 'beside' belongs to the category of 'preposition' and the one which encodes 'hermaphrodite' falls within the syntactic category Noun. As can be observed from the aforementioned discussion, the homonymous words are characterized by two or more sharply distinct meanings that are attributed to a single string of words. In situations where context does not guide the reader, the homonyms can give rise to ambiguities, the simplest of which, according to Trask (1999: 7) is lexical ambiguity. This can be observed in Afan Oromo, as can be evidenced by the following examples:

- 2a) Alaa dhuftee? 'Did you come from outside?' vs. 'Did you come alone?'
- b) An mana ballaa keessa hinjiraadhu. 'I do not want to live in a wide/big house' vs. 'I do not want to live in a blind person's house'.
- c) Barruu kee natti agarsiisi. 'Show me your palm' vs. 'Show me your design'.

As can be understood from the glosses, the words 'alaa', 'ballaa' and 'barruu' in the aforementioned sentences have given rise to two distinct interpretations

each. For example, in the sentence in (2a), the word 'alaa' has resulted in the meaning 'from outside', a sense common to all dialects, and 'alone', a sense which is known only to speakers from the eastern dialect. The word 'ballaa' in sentence (2b), on the other hand is ambiguous between the sense 'blind' which is attributed to it by speakers from the southern, central, eastern and northern dialects, and the sense 'broad, wide' which is common to all dialects. In the sentence (2c), the form barruu denotes 'palm' and 'writing' in most dialects, but in Borana, it encodes the senses 'spotted, designed and colored'. In modern Afan Oromo, however, it has come to encode the sense 'writing' through semantic extension.

There are also instances that fall within the boundary between homonymy and polysemy. The following are a few of such words in Afan Oromo. The differing senses of these words can be attributed to metaphorical and metonymic extension:

- 3a) reebuu 'to chase' vs. 'to beat'
- b) abaaruu 'curse' vs. 'insult'
- c) furmaata 'solution; feeling of relief' vs. 'rain shower'
- d) baddaa 'forest' vs. 'temperate climate'
- e) qorii 'wooden bowl' vs. 'fried barley mixed with/soaked in butter'

To begin with, the form reebuu (3a) is used to express the act of chasing in all dialects except Macca where it has the meaning 'to beat'. This sense of the word is common in Macca as can be observed from its use in the (1997) version of Onesimos Nesib's Afan Oromo Bible which reads "Nama Roomaa tokko, firdiin kan itti hinfaradamin reebuun seeraa ree?" (Acts 22: 25). Given Kreidler's (1998) account that the distinct senses of a homonymous lexical item can be historically related, and given the path of Oromos' expansion in the 16th century and afterwards, it can be argued that the original meaning of this form was 'to chase' and that Macca Oromo who are found in the western part of the country (as opposed to the South east which is claimed to be the origin of Oromo) must have extended the act of chasing to the actual beating, and forgotten the original one through passage of time and absence of contact with the other speakers. Since the two senses are not that much far apart, the word can be argued to be falling within the grey area between homonymy and polysemy.

As to the two senses of 'abaaruu' provided in (3b), namely 'to curse' (used in all dialects except Tuulama) and 'to insult' (used in Tuulama), it can be argued that the former is the original and the latter is its extension since the two senses fall within one category, that is 'harmful utterance'. The curse sense is the original one because in most parts, the word 'arraba' 'tongue' or 'arrabsoo' and 'arrabsuu' 'to tongue' are used to express 'an insult' and the act of insulting, respectively. The sense 'feeling of relief' of the word 'furmaata' in (3c) is so common to all dialects that we can take it as the original meaning from

from which speakers of the southern dialect have extended the sense 'rain shower' which indeed can relieve any community that lives in arid areas. In modern Afan Oromo, the range of the word's usage has been extended in such a way that it includes the notion 'solution'-after all, one of the causes of relief is finding solution to a problem. Regarding the word 'baddaa' in (3d), it can be argued that the sense 'forest' which is used in the southern dialect is the original one because the concrete, spatially rooted meaning of a given word is often considered as the basic or central sense. The abstract 'temperate climate' which is used in Macca and Tuulama and in written Afan Oromo can thus be said to be an extension of this central meaning. Lastly, it can be said of the word 'qorii' in (3e) that its original meaning is 'wooden bowl' because it has this same sense in all dialects except Macca whose speakers have extended its sense to 'fried barley mixed with butter'. Even today, the bowl is being used as a container for different kinds of food in many areas of the South and South eastern Oromia. In Western Oromia, however, one can barely find this utensil.

In western part of the region, therefore, it can be argued that through the passage of time, the function of the bowl was confined to holding fried barley, and then they abandoned its use altogether only retaining the thing it holds which ultimately took after the name of the container. In sum, since the different meanings associated with the forms are not very far apart, but are results of metaphorical extension, and since it is not so easy to decide their status, we can conclude that they fall within homonymy and polysemy. Our account of these words evidences that the variation in the senses attributed to them make them potentially confusing to the reader who is not familiar with all the senses of the lexical items.

Homonyms resulting from phonological and morphophonemic variations

This section deals with phonological and morphophonemic variations that result in homonymy-like linguistic forms which in turn pose challenges to effective communication among speakers of different Afan Oromo dialects.

Homonyms resulting from phonological variation

Under this title we discuss phonological variation such as tonal differences for which written Afan Oromo lacks symbols that represent them, H-dropping/retaining, and DH-avoiding, phenomena that result in homonyms and homonymy-like forms and cause problems in communication between speakers of various dialects of Afan Oromo. Each of these three points is discussed separately as follows:

Homonyms resulting from tonal differences

In Afan Oromo, tone has both lexical and grammatical functions. Lexically, alternations in tone can give rise to tonal minimal pairs or triplets, and grammatically they can give rise to different interpretations of the same construction. These can be evidenced by the following examples from Macca (4, 5) and from Southern (6).

4a) dhúgáa 'drunkard' vs dhùgáa 'truth'.

b) gógáa 'dry' vs gògáa 'skin'.

5a) bítáa 'buyer, ruler' vs bitáa 'left' vs bitàa 'you (pl) buy!'

b) déemáa 'walker' vs dèemáa 'while going' vs déemàa 'you (pl) go!' Habte (2003: 35).

6a) hín-dhufani 'they are coming (~ they will come)'

b) hin-dhúfani 'they do not (~ would not) come' (Banti, 2008).

The examples in (4 and 5) evidence that assignment of high and low tones to Afan Oromo lexemes can result in tonal minimal pairs (4a, b) and tonal minimal triplets (5a, b) (lexical function), alternations between focus (6a) and negation (5b) (grammatical function). For speakers from the same dialect area, this may not be a problem in speech because s/he can hear the pitch variations to decide the intended meaning of the speaker. However, in writing Afan Oromo orthography does not provide symbols that can represent the variations. Here again if the writer and the reader are from the same dialect area, and given the context is clearly provided by the writer, the reader could understand the text fairly easily. What complicates the problem therefore is not tonal variation within a dialect area but tonal differences across Afan Oromo dialects. Regarding this point, Banti (2008) states that all accurately described varieties of Afan Oromo display tonal alternations which the Afan Oromo orthography fails to represent like many writing systems of African tone languages and indeed representing them in the standard orthography is not easy because of tonal differences between regional varieties of Afan Oromo.

The fact that the regional differences can affect effective communication across dialects can be evidenced by the examples in (4b) and (6), repeated in (7a and 7b), respectively.

7a) gogaa 'dry' vs. 'skin'.

b) hin-dhufani 'they (have) will come' vs. 'they would not come'.

In some dialect areas, the word 'gogaa' denotes the sense 'dry' only (its tone being HH) and the speakers are not familiar with the LH tone which denotes 'skin' in some dialects because they use a different form like for example 'raroo' to denote this same sense; and in some dialects, the morpheme hin- denotes negation only (its tone being low), and the one with high tone is alien to them because they use ni- to denote focus; and if a

speaker from an area where 'gogaa' is used for 'dry' and 'skin' and hin- for negation and focus uses these words in writing in the senses unknown to speakers of other dialects, the reader would misunderstand the text or s/he would be confused by its message. A further instance that can explain this phenomenon would be the word 'kalee' given as follows:

8) kálée 'kidney' vs kàlée 'yesterday'.

As can be understood from the two distinct meanings of the word 'kalee' above, alternating the tone on the first syllable between high and low gives rise to two differing readings and not all dialects are familiar with the two senses of the word resulting from the tonal difference. That is, the sense 'yesterday' which results from lowering the tone of the first syllable, for example is new to speakers of Macca because in this dialect, 'yesterday' is commonly referred to by the form 'kaleessa'. And say the sentence 'Kalee bite' is written by a person from eastern dialect to mean 'He bought (it) yesterday'. For the reader from the Eastern dialect, there are two alternative meanings evoked by this expression that can be construed from context or by intuition. Yet, for the reader from Macca dialect, the only available sense is that of 'kidney', and s/he would obviously discern it as denoting: 'He bought kidneys'. As pointed out earlier, failure to indicate tonal alternations is not only the problem of Afan Oromo orthography. English also has problems in terms of representing stresses that result in differing meanings. In talking of the weakness of a written English and written language in general in relation to prosody, Kreidler (1998: 31) makes the following statement. Typically, when speech is represented in print, italics are sometimes used to indicate the accent, but this is done only sporadically and unevenly; our writing system largely neglects this important element of spoken communication. A written transcript of a speech can be highly misleading because it is only a partial rendition of that speech. In speech, there is always an accent in some part of an utterance and placement of accent in different parts of an utterance creates differences of meaning.

In cases such as this one where the orthography fails to provide symbols that represent tonal differences, the writer should take the responsibility of providing clear contexts for the reader as far as his/her aim is to communicate his/her ideas across to others who are not familiar with his/her variety.

Homonyms resulting from H-dropping (or using /ʔ/ instead of /h/)

In Afan Oromo, it is common to drop word initial h's and use the glottal stop /ʔ/ instead or, alternatively, use /h/ and /ʔ/ interchangeably. There are disagreements among researchers as to whether this phenomena represents H-dropping or replacing /h/ with the glottal stop /ʔ/.

Regarding this phenomenon, Raymond (2005: 19-20) points out that a similar phenomenon can also be observed in English in that one of the discrete variations in phonological variation in the English spoken in England involves H-dropping as in for example the two pronunciations of hat, /hæt/ and its variant /æt/. The other phonological phenomenon he gives as an example is that of the r-lessness common in New York City and elsewhere, wherein people drop the post vocalic /r/ as in car /kar/ and its variant /ka/. Here, one may question, “if a similar phenomena is a norm and non-problematic in other languages, what makes that of the Afan Oromo so special? The answer is such differences in speech are not represented differently in written English. That is, even though the word hat can be pronounced /hæt/ or /æt/ and car /kar/ or /ka/, the convention of written English does not allow the readers to drop the /h/’s and /r/’s. Representation in print of these and similar other words in English, therefore, does not result in confusion and misunderstanding. When we come to Afan Oromo, the convention of the writing system allows every user to write the words almost exactly as they pronounce them, thereby resulting in some homonymy-like linguistic forms. Even though dropping initial h’s (or using /h/ and /ʔ/ interchangeably) is common in Afan Oromo in general, speakers are cautious of the instances that result in confusions.

For example, in such words as hoomacha, ho’uu, handaaqqoo, hafuura and many others, the initial h’s can be left out or be replaced by the glottal stop because the phenomena does not alter their meanings. Yet, some people who are not aware of this potentially misleading pattern which can result in ambiguities simply apply the H-dropping on all instances thereby contributing to the occurrence of homonymy-like lexical items like aaduu, arma, amma and afuu whose meanings are distinct from that of their counterparts haaduu, harma, hamma and hafuu in which /h/ is normally retained. In such cases, the phenomena of H-dropping or retaining gives rise to minimal pairs showing the distinctive nature of the two phonemes. Let us see how these can be problematic in communication among speakers from differing geographical areas. In some dialects, some (not all) people use the form aaduu to denote the senses ‘to moan/groan’ and ‘to shave’, while it is the form haaduu which is commonly used in most dialects to mean ‘to shave’ to distinguish it from the sense ‘to moan/groan’ which is represented by dropping the initial /h/ or in other words by replacing the initial /h/ by the glottal stop /ʔ/. Similarly, some people from Macca speech community use arma to mean ‘breast’, but in other dialects like Harar (Eastern), Arsi-Bale (Central) and Boorana (Southern), the same form stands for the adverb ‘here’ while breast is represented by retaining the initial /h/ that is harma.

Regarding the word arma, say the expression Arma koo na qabe is written by a person from Macca to mean

‘He held my breast’ which a person from the same dialect or acquainted with the same dialect can understand it, though he/she uses harma or both harma and arma to refer to ‘breast’. For a person from Eastern and Southern dialects, however, the expression evokes further inquiry because it means ‘He held me here’. For this person, the body part to which ‘here’ refers is not clear since the expression is not supported by pointing to that specific part of the body. Thus, the intended message of the writer would not be understood by the reader who is not familiar with Macca and Tuulama dialects. It rather confuses the reader because it sounds incomplete to them. What is more, even though the dialects commonly use amma to denote ‘now’ and hamma to represent ‘amount’ (some use hanga, but they are familiar with hamma), some people use the form amma to represent both senses. Further, afuu is commonly used to denote ‘spreading something over some surface’ as in making the bed or the table, and hafuu is used to express the event ‘to be absent’. Yet, some people use the form afuu to refer to both senses.

This dropping of the initial h’s of some words results in homonymy-like forms like the ones discussed so far thereby contributing to the confusions and misunderstandings created by homonymy proper in Afan Oromo.

Homonyms resulting from dh-avoiding in some dialects

The phoneme /dh/ stands as one of the sounds peculiar to Afan Oromo to the extent that people use it to test whether one is good in Afan Oromo or not. Paradoxically, this phoneme is not found in some sub-dialects of Macca and Tuulama. In these sub-dialects, the phoneme is commonly replaced by the glottal stop sound /ʔ/. And though we could not find many instances, we have been able to observe that replacing the typical Afan Oromo phoneme /dh/ with the glottal stop /ʔ/ can also give rise to such homonymy-like linguistic forms as fe’uu. A speaker from Horro area of the Macca dialect or a speaker from Soddo area of Tuulama dialect can use this word to refer to the verbs ‘to load, to choke on something’ or ‘to want/need something’. For speakers from other dialects and even for speakers from the Macca and Tuulama dialect areas who are not familiar with the phenomena, the latter sense is represented only by the form fedhuu, wherein /dh/ is used instead of /ʔ/. Thus, if speakers from Horro in Eastern Wollega or Soddo in South western Shoa use the form fe’uu to mean ‘to want/need’, the others would not get their point. The word fe’uu can therefore be considered as a potentially homonymous lexical item.

Another example is ka’aa which encodes the meanings ‘stand up’ and ‘begging’ for some speakers from Macca and Tuulama, but the latter sense is alien to most

speakers because the form commonly used to denote the sense is *kadhaa* in which we can find /dh/, a phoneme avoided by the aforementioned speakers.

Homonyms resulting from the morphophonemics of some dialects

This part deals with the discussion of homonymy-like forms resulting from the morphophonological processes in some dialects which give rise to miscommunications among speakers from differing dialect areas. This encompasses homonyms resulting from such processes as assimilation, deletion and so forth. Consider the phonological forms *finna*, *hanna*, *ganna*, *haane* and *baanuu* in the following examples, each of which have more than one reading.

- 9a) *finna* 'life' vs. 'we (will) bring'
- b) *harra* 'today' vs. 'we will sweep'
- c) *baanne* 'we carried' vs. 'we spoke/uttered'
- d) *baanuu?* 'shall we go out?' vs. 'shall I utter?'
- e) *haane* 'we threw' vs. 'we dug'

The lexeme *finna* in (a) has the sense 'life' in Southern, Central and Eastern dialects, in addition to the sense 'we (will) bring' which is shared by all dialects. If this lexical item is used in its 'life' sense wherein the root is the form *finna* itself, it can confuse people from the varieties in which the lexeme is used only in its latter sense which follows from the conjugation of the morphemes *fid-n-a* 'bring-1p-imperfective'. Here, the similarity of the two in terms of form and pronunciation is due to the total assimilation of the phoneme /d/ to the following morpheme *-n-*. In (9b), the form *harra* is known in all dialects as denoting the sense 'we sweep', but some people from Macca use it to mean 'today' though most speakers use the form *har'a* for the same sense. If used in this second sense by a person from Macca, the others for example, those who use the form *hadha* (Central and Southern) for the adverbial 'today' will be confused or totally miss the point. The similarity of form between the *harra* of 'today' and the *harra* of 'we sweep' follows from some Macca dialect speakers' tendency to assimilate the glottal stop /ʔ/ to the preceding consonant sound, in our case, the phoneme /r/ in the former whose common form is *har'a* and the total assimilation of the morpheme *-n* to the preceding phoneme /r/ in the latter which conjugates the morphemes *har-n-a* 'sweep-1p-imperfective'.

In (9c), the form *baanne* has two differing verbal roots, namely *baat-* 'carry' which is known in all dialects and *baan-* 'speak' which is used commonly in Southern, Central and Eastern dialects. The formal similarity of the two lexemes thus can be attributed to the assimilation of /t/ to the morpheme *-n-*. Similarly, the form *baanuu* in (d), if used in the interrogative, may mean either 'May I speak?' which is understood only by speakers familiar

with the root word *baan-* 'speak' or it may mean 'shall we go out?' when the root is understood as *ba'-* 'go out' which is common to all the dialects. Here, the formal similarity of *baan-* and *ba'-* is due to the assimilation of the glottal stop /ʔ/ (consonant sound in the latter) to the preceding vowel /a/, thereby lengthening the vowel and giving rise to *baan-*. Finally, in (9e) the form *haane* can be understood either as 'We threw' which is common to all dialects when the root is *ha'-* 'throw' or as 'we dig' which is not known in the northern dialect when the root is construed as *haadh-* 'dig'. The oneness of form thus follows from the assimilation of the glottal stop /ʔ/ in *ha'-* to the preceding vowel /a/ and the deletion of the implosive /dh/ in the root word *haadh-* when conjugating with the morphemes *-n-* and *-e*, 1p and perfective aspect markers respectively.

In sum, in Afan Oromo, homonymous words that result in miscommunications like the ones we have discussed so far can occur due to such phonological processes as assimilation, deletion and so on. In the morphophonemics of some dialects, assimilation is the common process that results in the formation of homonymous expressions and the morpheme that plays a significant role in the process is the first person plural marker *-n-*.

Conclusion

This study has unraveled that lexical, phonological and morphophonemic variations in Afan Oromo can give rise to homonymous and homonymy-like lexical items that pose difficulty to mutual intelligibility among speakers of different varieties of Afan Oromo. Under homonyms arising from lexical variation, over two hundred lexical items have been collected from the six major dialects of Afan Oromo. An account of the homonyms has been made in the study by use of some homonyms. The section on the phonological and morphophonemic variations, on the other hand, dealt with homonymy-like forms arising from phonological variation in Afan Oromo and from the morphophonemics of some dialects. In addition, the notion of tonal difference, H-dropping or using /h/ and /ʔ/ interchangeably at the beginning of words, and DH-avoiding or replacing the phoneme /dh/ by the glottal stop /ʔ/ in some dialects, three linguistic phenomena that give rise to ambiguous expressions have been discussed under phonological variation. Under the morphophonemic variation have been discussed homonymy-like lexical items that result from such processes as assimilation, deletion, etc.

Furthermore, the study has also revealed that the convention in written Afan Oromo which allows speakers to write almost exactly as they pronounce the expressions and lack of standard Afan Oromo are the main reasons for the occurrence of homonymy-like lexical items that contribute to misunderstandings and confusions among Oromo people from differing dialect

areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, we suggest that writers provide a clear context for every potentially confusing (homonymous) word or expression they use in their speech or writing. Otherwise, in a context where there is no standard Afan Oromo and where a comprehensive Afan Oromo dictionary is not available, people can have difficulties understanding some words and expressions that have differing and/or extended meanings in their dialect. And one way through which a writer or speaker could be acquainted with the range of meanings associated with a given word is through provision of an Afan Oromo dictionary that takes into account the various varieties of Afan Oromo. Today, however, written Afan Oromo is mainly based on Macca and Tuulama dialects with some features from eastern Afan Oromo (Greifenow-Mewis, 2001). Thus, responsible bodies (individuals, groups or institutions) should make endeavors to prepare a dictionary that represents at least the major dialects of Afan Oromo. Secondly, for homonymous words like 'gaafa' that have alternative forms in one or the other dialect and for which ELRC's Afan Oromo dictionary (2006: 130) provides two separate entries, we suggest that dictionary makers use gaafa for 'when' and gaanfa for 'horn' so as to avoid the confusion. For words like ballaa we can adopt bal'aa for 'wide' and ballaa for 'blind' because jaamaa which is used in Macca to denote 'blind' and 'ant' may confuse the audience if the latter sense which involves semantic extension is used as in the sentence Jaamaatu na ciniine which may mean 'A blind person bit me' or 'An ant bit me'.

What is more, users should also be made aware of the homonymous words and expressions resulting from dropping of the morpheme /h/ (or replacing /h/ by /ʔ/), the use of the glottal stop /ʔ/ instead of the alveolar implosive /dh/ in some minor dialects such as Horro area of Macca and Soddo area of Tulama so that they can avoid them in writing. Afan Oromo Standardizing Committee of the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau can then take over the responsibility of including such forms in its annual journal called Wiirtuu and make available (dispatch) its copies to the market, to educationalists and people engaged in the preparation of pedagogical materials. The other alternative is that there should be established committees of editors whose members are selected from the major dialect areas of Afan Oromo and which are responsible for editing Afan Oromo materials before they are sent to publishing houses. Furthermore, to alleviate problems arising from Afan Oromo morphophonemics, speakers from the dialect areas where assimilation is very common should take utmost care in writing assimilated words that can confuse or be understood differently by speakers from other dialects. To avoid

confusions, it is advisable to write the expressions in their least assimilated forms. For example, the form baanne which denotes both 'we spoke' and 'we carried' can be made clear by assigning the unassimilated form baatne to the latter in cases where context cannot alleviate the problem.

As to the problems resulting from the weakness of the convention of written Afan Oromo, educationalists engaged in the teaching of Afan Oromo and Afan Oromo Standardizing Committee should come together and decide on issues that matter in writing in Afan Oromo. This will involve the standardization of the forms that result in ambiguities in written Afan Oromo. In order to avoid potentially confusing homonymous words in their speech or writing, users need to be acquainted with the range of meanings associated with the words in each dialect area. In this regard, the Oromo Language Standardizing Committee pointed out in 2006 in Wiirtuu Vol. 8 that the preparation of a material on Afan Oromo dialectology which is expected to address all questions regarding variations in Afan Oromo was near completion though not published to this date. We believe that the incorporation of the results of this study into their material on dialectology would be extremely valuable for the endeavor towards Afan Oromo standardization.

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