Lexical Ambiguity in Flannery O'Connor's Short Story "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

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ABSTRACT:

The study is devoted for investigating and analyzing homonymy and polysemy words that are found in Flannery O'Connor's short story whose title is *'A Good Man is Hard to Find'*, as a study data, in terms of Kreidler's lexical ambiguity divisions (1998). The study is a descriptive qualitative method. As a reader, some words are possible to create a lexical ambiguity in their interpretations since their mental lexicon meaning differs from their meanings in specific text contexts. In this case, the reader finds a difficulty to comprehend and understand the events of the story. Moreover, it causes confusion and raises problems on his/her part. To fill up this gap, the current study aims to show how these words contribute to form a lexical ambiguity that has a great impact on the level of the reader's comprehension and understanding. Plus, it aims to identify the frequency of these words utilized in the O'Connor's short story. The results proved that homonymy and polysemy words are significantly utilized with different rates. The writer used homonymy words more than polysemy ones in the short story. Accordingly, he managed to make his language more efficient through the utilization of lexical ambiguity.

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1. Introduction

Ambiguity as a concept is a linguistic phenomenon that is associated with the hearer/ reader's interpretation. It requires a precise observation and attention. Gause and Weinberg (1989:5) prospect two ambiguity sources which are deficiency in information and errors in communication. The former may arise from skills of poor observation, generalizing or ignoring important information. Moreover, a failure in communication can happen between the speaker/ writer and the hearer/ reader leading to create a gap between them. Empson (1977: X) asserts that ambiguity stems from the hearer/ reader's thought which is often either complicated or doubtful while the speaker/writer's thought is direct. For Quiroga- Clare (2003: n.p.), ambiguity is defined as a word, a phrase or a sentence that is possible to be understood in two or more unrelated meanings or interpretations. Ambiguity is a crucial component of language; it is usually considered to be an obstacle if it is ignored for people to communicate with each other. Language ambiguity is vastly utilized in literature, psychoanalysis and computational linguistics since it has a vital role in enhancing its efficiency. She sums up that for being a very complex phenomenon, language should exist with ambiguity. According to Aniya (2007:37), ambiguity consists of three types: syntactic ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity. Kreidler (1998:156) specifies three types of ambiguity: lexical, referential and syntactic ambiguities.

Context plays a critical role in comprehending and understanding language. Nunan (1993: p.7) identifies context as "the situation giving rise to the discourse, and within which the discourse is embedded". Linguistically, the interpretations of words do not depend on only their meanings but they can be highly influenced by the contexts in which they are occurred. Johnson (1974) asserts that the information provided by the context and a linguistic unit is an exchangeable one in communication. One should not ignore that both of them simultaneously provide meaning. Accordingly, the context is very important in determining the linguistic unit meaning when it has two or more senses or meanings.

The current study is devoted for a lexical ambiguity in terms of Kreidler's lexical ambiguity division (1998). It is represented by the utilization of homonymy and polysemy words that are found in Flannery O'Connor's short story *'A Good Man is Hard to Find*', which is the study data that will be analyzed.

2. Literature review
2.1 Related Studies to the Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is tackled as a study by many scholars and researchers for its significance. It can be found in speech as well as in writings. Thus, a number of these studies can be summarized as follows:

A study conducted by Niladri Sekhar Dash, in 2010, was entitled "Polysemy and Homonymy: A Conceptual Labyrinth " which identified salient traits of distinctions that were between the polysemy and the homonymy linguistic words theoretically and practically within the boundary of relevance phenomenon. By following the particular method formation, the finding was that it was possible to overcome the word meaning problems of disambiguation.

"Ambiguity in News Headlines: A psycholinguistic Study" is the second study written by Reham Khalifa in 2018. She dealt with all ambiguity types: lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ones. She analyzed a set of ambiguous headlines, nearly 25 ones, linguistically and psychologically. A questionnaire in two folds has been applied to 100 participants who were the readers of "Al-Ahram Weekly". The results showed that the most difficult ambiguity kind was the syntactic ambiguity and the pragmatic ambiguity was easily interpreted.

Another study entitled "The Application of Lexical Ambiguity in Advertising English" was conducted by Ling Zhou in 2021. The study focused upon discussing how the lexical ambiguity application was employed in advertising English from different angles, specifically meaning, expression and application meaning. The study concluded that excessive ambiguity pursuit or the utilization of some inappropriate jokes in lexical ambiguity created confusion to understand the advertising language on the part of readers.

Ayu B. Retnomurti conducted a study, which is the fourth one, entitled "English Homonym and Polysemy Words through Semantic Approach: Novels Woy & The Dancer" in 2021. The objective of the study was to analyze certain words that were similar in pronunciation and spelling, but they were either different or similar in meaning. The study was a descriptive qualitative one. The results were that there were ten homonym examples and five polysemy ones in "Waiting on You" and "the Dancer".

Most of the previous studies above tackled ambiguity, including lexical ambiguity type, as the main topic; however, the current study is devoted for the lexical ambiguity only. The analysis that had been utilized, varied, (i.e.) news headlines, advertisement, and a novel, but the current study deals with Flannery O'Connor's short story *'A Good Man is Hard to Find'* to be analyzed in terms of Kreidler's lexical ambiguity division (1998), namely homonym and polysemy words. In other words, the study centers on analyzing homonymy and polysemy words that form two or more different interpretations/ meanings causing confusion and misunderstanding the story events on the part of the reader. Thus, the current study contributes to increase the reader's knowledge of the lexical ambiguity and to enhance his/her contextual understanding in specifying word meanings so as to create effective communication.

3. Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon that can be found in speech as well as in writings. It is related with meaning and interpretation to carry on the communication between the speaker/ writer and the hearer/ reader. Scheffler (1979: 13) identifies lexical ambiguity as the matter of word denotation and its use diverges from one occurrence to the other one. Trask (1999:8) considers it as the simplest ambiguity type in comparison with the others. It is defined as a word that possibly has more than one different meaning or interpretation as in the following example " The sailors enjoyed the port". The word 'port' is a lexical ambiguity since it has two unrelated interpretations. It is either "fortified wine" or "city by the sea."

3.1 Kreidler's division of lexical ambiguity (1998)

According to Kreidler (1998:52), two lexical relations, namely homonymy and polysemy, can create ambiguity. It is related with the meaning and interpretation of certain words. In other words, some words have two or more senses, that are different from one's mental lexicon meaning, in specific contexts. These two types of lexical ambiguity are widely elaborated as follows:

3.1.1. Homonym

To identify it, homonym has two words that are similar in pronunciation and spelling but with different meanings, 'bank ', as an example, means either 'a financial institution' or 'the edge of a stream,'. There are two types of homonym. The first one is words that have similar in pronunciation but they differ in spelling as 'steak' and 'stake' showing difference in the form of phonology and it is called 'homophone'. The second is called 'homograph' which means two words having various pronunciations but their spelling is the same, for example, the word 'bow' that rhymes with 'go' which refers to "an instrument for shooting arrows" and 'bow', that rhymes with 'cow', indicates to " a bending of the body as a form of respectful greeting" (Kreidler, 1998:52).

3.1.2 Polysemy

In polysemy, a word may consist of a number of related meanings like the word 'head', as a noun, has several related meanings: the person's head, the company's head, the table or bed's head, the lettuce or cabbage head (Kreidler, 1998:52).

4. Methodology
4.1 Data Collection

The study data is drawn from a short story collection written by an American author Flannery O'Connor and its title is *'A Good Man is Hard to Find'*. It is chosen to analyze words having more than one interpretation on the basis of Kreidler's lexical ambiguity (1998) which is represented by homonymy and polysemy words. Two online dictionaries are used to assist in the interpretations or meanings of homonymy and polysemy words, **Merriam-Webster Dictionary and** the Cambridge dictionary**.** Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/citation, and the Cambridge dictionary, retrieved from https:// dictionary. Cambridge.org

4.2 Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the data analysis below will conduct to interpret the lexical ambiguous words. Table (1) shows the analysis of homonymy story words which are written in bold.

Table (1): The Analysis of Homonymy Words

No.	Homonymy Word	Page(-s)	Homophone /homograph or both	The First Interpretation	The Second Interpretation
1.	**Ate**/eight	10,11	Homophone	"the past form of 'eat'"	"The number after seven "
2.	**Be**/bee	6,8,13,14,15,17,18,19,22, 23,24,25, 26,28,29,30, 31	Homophone	A verb	"An insect name"
3.	**Beat**/beet	13	Homophone	"To repeated strike to someone"	"A type of plants"
4.	**Been**/bean	6,7,11,22,27, 30,31,32	Homophone	"Past tense form of 'be'"	A type of leguminous plants
5.	**Board**/bored	12	Homophone	A piece of wood used in transporting	"Lacking interest or engagement"

6.	**Book**	9	Both	"A set of pages putting together inside a cover for reading", or "money record"	"arrange to have a seat for travel ", "accuse", or "attend a performance in a specific time in the future".
7.	**Box**	10	Both	"A square container with a lid, a small place "," a small evergreen tree"	" a type of sport" or "the box content"
8.	**Break**/brake	31	Homophone	"Smash or separate into pieces"	A device in a vehicle"
9.	**Butt**	24,26	Both	"The end of cigarettes", "bottom", or "the rifle end"	"container used to store liquids", or" a person joking about"
10.	**By**/buy	10,11,21,22,24,26,27,28, 29, 30,31	Homophone	"Next to or nearby"	"purchase"
11.	**Can**	14,23,25,28, 29,30,31	Both	"able to"	"a metal container"
12.	**Cent**/sent	14	Homophone	"A metal coin"	"Past form of 'send'"
13.	**Close**/	26,27,32	Both	"To be near"	"To lock or shut"
14.	**Counter**	12,13	Both	A table surface, or "small objects in some games used in a board".	"a reaction punch in boxing"
15.	**Course**/ coarse	30	Homophone	"Study program"	"Rough, rude"
16.	**Except**/ accept	10,30	Homophone	"Not including, other than"	"Agree to receive or undertake something"
17.	**Fair**/fare	10	Both	"Beautiful"	"equitable"
18.	**Father**/ farther	16	Homophone	"Dad"	"Comparative form of 'far'"
19.	**Flu**/ Flew/ Flue	28	Homophone	"Influenza " or "Past tense form of 'fly'"	"Duct or pipe for smoke"
20.	**For**/four	6,7,8,11,13,15,17,18,19,2 0,21,22,27,28,29,31	Homophone	"If someone receives something, if something is done for a reason"	The number that comes after 3 and before 5.
21.	**Funny**	6,11	Both	"Humourse, cheating, offending someone", or "slight illness"	"difficult to explain."
22.	**Groan**/ grown	17	Homophone	"The sound of pain "or "sadness"	"The past form of grow"
23.	**Hair**/ hare	7,7,12,21	Homophone	A part of head referring to its skin for human or to animals' whole body.	a wild rabbit
24.	**Hear**/here	6,26	Homophone	"Perceive sound with ears"	"In, at, or to this place or position"
25.	**Him**/ hymn	10,12,14,21,23,24,26,27,2 8,29,30,31,32	Homophone	a male object pronoun	" Religious song to praise God"
26.	**Hoarse**/ horse	19	Homophone	An animal for riding	a rough voice
27.	**Hole**/ Whole	23	Homophone	A ground gap	"Total"
28.	**Hour**/our	8,12	Homophone	"Period of 60 minutes"	A determiner

29.	**I** /eye	6,9,13,14,16,17,19,21,22,23, 24,25, 27, 28, 29,30, 31	Homophone	" Used by a speaker to refer to himself/herself"	An organs for seeing
30.	**I 'll**/ isle/aisle	17,24,26,30	Homophone	"short form of 'I will' or " a small island"	"Passage between two rows of seats"
31.	**Knew**/new	15,21	Homophone	"The past form of 'know'"	"Modern, not old"
32.	**Know**/no	8,13,14,16,17,23,23,23,25 ,30	Homophone	" To have knowledge"	"Opposite of yes"
33.	**Made**/maid	8,12,15,23	Homophone	"The past form of 'make'"	"Unmarried young woman"
34.	**Marry**/ merry	11,11	Homophone	"To have a wedding"	"happy"
35.	**None**/ known	12,14	Homophone	"Nobody or thing"	"famous"
36.	**Oh**/owe	9	Homophone	"A marker for pain or surprise"	"To repay something for something received "
37.	**One**/own	5,7,10,11,12,13,14,15,17,18, 19,20,25, 29,30, 31, 32	Homophone	" The number that comes after 0 but before 2"	"The past tense of 'win'"
38.	**Open**	2, 22	Both	"Ready to present a service"	"Not closed"
39.	**Organ**	19	Both	"A body part"	"A musical instrument"
40.	**Pen**	6	Both	"A long, thin object used for writing" or "enclosed space"	"a female swan"
41.	**Play**	10,16,12, 13	Both	" to take part in a game", or " to perform music on an instrument"	"a piece of writing that is intended to be acted in a theatre ", or "movement"
42.	**Pray**/prey	26,27,28, 29,30	Homophone	To worship	To hunt an animal
43.	**Real**/ reel	32	Homophone	True	an object containing film, wire, etc.
44.	**Red**/read	11,12,13,14,15,18,19,20,2 1, 23,32	Homophone	"A type of colour "	"The past form of 'read'"
45.	**Right**/ write	9,14,20,22, 28,30,31	Both	"Correct or to make words"	"Opposite of left"
46.	**Rose**	18	Both	"A flower"	To have gotten up
47.	**See**/sea	5,6,14,15,16,20,21,23,26, 28, 30	Homophone	An action performs by the eyes	water
48.	**Sun**/son	23.29	Homophone	A star or the source of light and warmth	A boy related to his father and mother
49.	**Some**/sum	5,8,20,25,31,32	Homophone	"A part of things or persons"	"Amount of money"
50.	**Star**	6,7,9,10,11,12,13, 16,19, 22	Both	"A large body in the sky"	"A famous or important person"
51.	**Soul**/ Sole	14	both	"immortal part of a human"	"Variety of marine flatfish"

52.	**Sound**	30	both	"to make noise ", "seem", "water passage", or " depth",	"defeat severe", "good", or "healthy".
53.	**Stand**	9,15,19,23, 26	both	"to be in a vertical state"	"to accept", or "to have an opinion".
54.	**Table**	5,12,13	both	"furniture", or discussion",	"information", or "arrange data"
55.	**Time**/thyme	7,9,15,17,26,27	homophone	the measured period for certain action	"Type of aromatic herb."
56.	**Their**/they're/ there	8,9,12,14,16,18,8,20,21, 22,25,,27	homophone	Possessive pronoun or a contraction of 'they are'	An adverb
57.	**Through**/ Threw	9,16,26,30,32	homophone	"Moving in one side and out of the other"	"Past tense form of 'throw'"
58.	**Two**/to/too	6,10,13,14,15,20,21,31	homophone	A number or a preposition	also
59.	**Way**/weigh/ Whey	15,30,31	homophone	Method or a road or a scale for the object weight	Liquid insulation
60.	**Wait**/weight	24	homophone	Hold on	It is a scale for things or persons
61.	**Week**/weak	13	homophone	"7 days"	"Opposite of strong"
62.	*Where***/wear/ware**	6,7,10,15,16,17,20,22,26, 32	homophone	Question word asking for a place or put on clothes	product items
63.	*wind*	10,26	both	"to follow a course that is not straight"	"a gust of air"
64.	**Which**/ witch	15	homophone	a relative pronoun or a question word	A woman with evil magic power.
65.	**Wood**/ would	11	homophone	"Small forest", or "material from trees".	The past form of 'will'
66.	**You**/ewe/ yew	5,6,,7,8,9,13,14,15,,16,17,21, 22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30, 31,32	homophone	"people being addressed" or "Female sheep".	" Type of evergreen tree
67.	**You'll**/Yule	30,	homophone	3.A short form of 'you will'.	Old word for Christmas.

On the other hand, Table (2) shows the analysis of polysemy words with their interpretations.

Table (2): The Polysemy Word Analysis

No.	Polysemy Word	Page(-s)	The Interpretation
1.	**Blue**	8,18,19,20, 21,24,28	" colour", "sad ", or "cooking meat still red"
2.	**Bring**	14,35	"Towards a place", "to cause or produce a state," or forcing to do something by himself.
3.	**Box**	10	"A square container with a lid, a small place " or "the box content".
4.	**Bright**	19,28	"Shining light", "strong in colour ", "intelligent", or "cheerful."
5.	**Butt**	24,26	"The end of cigarettes", "bottom", or "the thick end of rifle ".
6.	**Can**	14,23,25,28,29,30,31	"Being able to"," to be allowed to", "possibility", "a closed metal container", or " prison."
7.	**Count**	14	"the act of counting" or "to have value or importance", or "a scientifically measured amount of something".
8.	**Cry**	22	"Producing tears", "a shout", or "the birds' noise."

9.	**Face**	6,10,13,18,19, 1,31,32	"The front part of head, a gesture"," an object surface, or the "outward appearance."
10.	**Fair**	10	"Just, beautiful, pale or gold skin or hair", " large number/amount", "good(idea/ chance)", "pure", or "large event."
11.	**Fast**	9,13	"Quick movement or happenings", or " fixed in a firm way".
12.	**Foot**	12	"The bottom part of the body", "a measurement unit", or "the object bottom".
13.	**Good**	23,25,30	"Satisfactory/interesting, well", "a high quality or level"," praise", or successful."
14.	**Head**	6,7,8,11,12,19,20,22, 26,28,31	"The top part of body", "a unit for a person or an animal", "the top part of plant, mountain, …etc.", or " the river upper part"
15.	**Get**	14,15,17,22,24,25,27,29, 30	"obtain something", "procure," "become," or "understand."
16.	**Last**	13	"The only left piece", "the one before the present one", or final.
17.	**Make**	9,22,23,29, 30	"to cause", "to become", "to appear", "to get", or "to perform."
18.	**Man**	11,14,21,22,23,24,25,27, 29,31	"the human race", or "an adult male."
19.	**Mean**	22	"not generous", "not kind", or "poor, dirty or bad quality"
20.	**Move**	18,24,26	"an act of moving", "to change the job", "to go to a different place", "to make progress" or "to sell quickly."
21.	**Pale**	32	"To describe a skin", or "to become lighter in colour "
22.	**Panel**	15,16,17	"A group of people giving their opinions or advice", " a pa of wood, metal, cloth, etc., that fits into or onto something large
23.	**Paper**	6,10,28,30	"A material which is thin and made of cellulose pulp", "a number of questions in the exam", or "an article or a newspaper"
24.	**Run**	12,17,21	"go quickly", "travel", "operate", "flow", "become", "show ", or "take".
25.	**Service**	27	"public need", "dealing with costumers", or "work".
26.	**Set**	10,11,27	"position", "condition", "establish", "get ready", or "fix".
27.	**Tap**	12	Faucet, or "hitting something gently
28.	**Way**	9,15,22,30,31	"route" or "a distance"
29.	**Wood**	11	"hard material as a fuel', "group of trees" or "a type of golf club with rounded wooden end".

4.3 Results and Discussion

After conducting the processes of analysis, (96) examples are counted as the total of the homonymy and polysemy words above, certain results can be explained in the following:

Homonymy words are highly found in the text and they create a lexical ambiguity. After the investigation of homonymy words, (67) examples, (i,e), (70%), out of the total of the homonymy and polysemy words, are existed in the text, each one gives two or more interpretations and a number of them can be illustrated as in the three following examples.

1.   "The children exchanged comic **books**."(p. 9)

According to Kreidler (1998), the word "books" is a lexical ambiguity one whose type is a homonym (homophone and homograph) since it provides the receiver two or more interpretations: the children exchanged books for reading or for reserving tickets or they

accused one another about certain things, or they referred to a comic performance will happen in the future, or a group of sheet papers having a cover. For the reader, it is necessary to match the ambiguous word with the paragraph topic and the word context so as to get the suitable interpretation of the sentence.

2. "I believe I have injured an **organ**," said the grandmother, pressing her side, but no one answered her. "(p. 19)

In this example, "organ" is a homonym word which means either the grandmother had injured her body because of the car accident or she broke "a musical instrument" due to the accident. Thus, lexical ambiguity can be found in such context on the part of reader.

3. " "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal **Pen** …."(p. 6)

The word "pen" here is a homonymy word giving two interpretations: The Misfit was described as a tool for writing or as "a female swan". So, different interpretations make a lexical ambiguity. What is important here for the reader is to pay more attention to the sequences of the story events in order to avoid lexical ambiguity.

As a lexical ambiguity, polysemy words are also utilized in this short story, there are (29) examples, (i. e) scoring (30%), out of the total words which are (96) ones. Various interpretations can be shown by the utilization of polysemy words. Some of these words are possible to be interpreted as follows:

1. "The Tower was a part stucco and part **wood** filling station and dance hall set in a clearing outside of Timothy". (p.11)

The word "wood" is a lexical ambiguity since it has a variety of interpretations. It may refer to "hard material as a fuel' or tree group.

2. "Red Sammy was lying on the bare ground outside The Tower with his head under a truck while a gray monkey about a **foot** high, …." (p.12)

The polysemy word "foot" is capable of being interpreted as "a measurement unit" or the body bottom or the object base. All these interpretations make lexical ambiguity on the part of reader.

3. "There was a secret **panel** in this house." (p.15)

"Panel" is a polysemy word; it has two related interpretations. It is either a team of people giving advice or a wood/ a metal part "that fits into or onto something larger."

5. Conclusion

Ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon that is found not only in speech but also in writing. It has a communicative effect between the writer and the reader about the text events. The reader may face this phenomenon in all types of texts. Lexical ambiguity, as a type of it, is a part of semantics, it is represented by homonym and polysemy. It makes more than one interpretations

for the reader in a specific context. Thus, the reader should comprehend and understand the texts deeply to carry on actively with the story events. Moreover, the context is very crucial element to specify the right interpretation. In other words, it helps the reader avoid the lexical ambiguity while he/she reads any type of texts.

الغموض الدلالي في القصة القصيرة "من الصعب العثور على رجل طيب" لفلانيري أوكونور

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ملخص البحث:

خصصت الدراسة لبحث وتحليل التجانس وتعدد المعاني للكلمات الموجودة في القصة القصيرة لفلانري أوكونور بعنوان "الرجل الطيب يصعب العثور عليه"، كبيانات دراسة، من حيث أقسام الغموض المعجمية عند كريدلر (1998). الدراسة هي طريقة وصفية نوعية. كقارئ، من الممكن أن تخلق بعض الكلمات غموضًا معجميًا في تفسيرها نظرًا لأن معناها المعجمي العقلي يختلف عن معانيها في سياقات نصية محددة. وفي هذه الحالة يجد القارئ صعوبة في استيعاب وفهم أحداث القصة. كما أنه يسبب له الارتباك ويثير المشاكل لديه. ولسد هذه الفجوة تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى بيان مدى مساهمة هذه الكلمات في تكوين غموض معجمي له الأثر الكبير على مستوى فهم القارئ واستيعابه. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تهدف الدراسة إلى التعرف على تكرار هذه الكلمات المستخدمة في قصة أوكونور القصيرة. أثبتت النتائج أن الكلمات المتجانسة وتعدد المعاني تستخدم بشكل كبير وبنسب مختلفة. استخدم الكاتب الكلمات المتجانسة أكثر من الكلمات المتعددة المعاني في القصة القصيرة. وبناء على ذلك، تمكن من جعل لغته أكثر كفاءة من خلال الاستفادة من الغموض المعجمي.