

A Pragmatic Study of Multiple Meanings of Some Nouns in Jordanian Arabic

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Abstract

This study investigates the multiple meanings of some nouns in Jordanian Arabic (JA). The study focuses on the multiple meanings of these nouns as acquired recently, and the context of their use. The sample of the study consists of thirty-eight nouns commonly used in everyday conversations in Al-Mafraq City, Jordan. The findings provide information about the spread of multiple meanings of nouns in JA. The meanings of nouns are divided into two types: dictionary meaning and other possible meanings, which are of four categories, namely opposite meaning, polysemy, sarcasm, and metaphor. The findings of the study show that multiple meanings of nouns are widespread in JA, and Jordanians use these meanings frequently in daily life conversations, thereby illustrating once again the flexibility of human language and its ability to become adapted to new situations.

Keywords: Jordanian Arabic; None, Multiple meaning, Al-Mafraq city.

Introduction

Multiple meanings of nouns, i.e., nouns used to convey more than one meaning, are widespread in Jordanian Arabic (JA). Jordanians tend to use nouns multiply in their daily life conversations to the extent that the real meaning of these nouns might disappear. For example, the word "*jeex*" (English: *greybeard*) has several meanings in Jordanian Arabic : (1) an old man, (2) the leader of a people or clan, (3) a respectable person, (4) a scholar, (5) a teacher or a professor, (6) an imam, (7) a man of wealth. This study aims to investigate the multiple meanings of some JA nouns as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon.

Language has been viewed as a living organism. Over time, it grows, prospers, and revives. Changes also occur at various linguistic levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic. (Holmes, 2001). According to Clark (1996), language for communication undergoes many social constraints and is affected by the culture of the speakers, so it has been studied under the field of pragmatics considering it a socio-pragmatic issue. Social context is a major factor that drives our language choices.

Linguists agree that semantics is the study of meaning while pragmatics is the study of the ways in which context contributes to meaning. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as "the study of the speaker meaning, it is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)".

Arabic is spoken all over the Arab world. Habash (2006) confirms that Arabic dialects are loosely related to Classical Arabic. He notes that these dialects are the result of the interaction between different ancient dialects of classical Arabic and other languages that existed in what is today the Arab world. He divides the Arab world geo-linguistically as follows: Levantine Arabic (Jordan is included), Gulf Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, North African Arabic and Maltese Arabic.

Jordanian Arabic (JA) is a variety of Levantine Arabic which is spoken by nearly 6 million Jordanians. Jordanian Arabic refers to three main dialects spoken by Jordanian people: Urban, Rural and Bedouin (Habash, 2006).

The present study deals with a mixture of bedouin and rural JA as spoken in Al-Mafraq city in north Jordan. Al-Mafraq is characterized by a population of mixed bedouin and rural origin, hence this speech variety of JA.

A noun is a word used to name a person, animal, place, thing, and abstract idea. Nouns can be singular or plural (Kleiser, 2010). In English, a noun can function in a sentence as a subject, a direct object, an indirect object, a subject complement, an object complement, an appositive, or even a modifier.

Multiple meanings or polysemy is common in language. There are many words in English that have more than one meaning. For example: "get" has 72 meanings, and "face" has 32 meanings as a noun and 12 as verb. Language allows both polysemy and homonymy because humans are very context-sensitive, unlike a machine translator (Tripp, 1976). "In polysemy a particular word exhibits variations of its sense depending on the context of its use" (Fellbaum, 2000:52).

Polysemy is a term used in traditional semantics for a word that has multiple meanings. Also, polysemy means that one word can have more than one sense (Salim, 2013).

One of the problems with using dictionaries to find the meaning of words is that many words have a number of different meanings. If you select the first meaning you find in the dictionary without thinking about the context in which the word appears, you may choose the wrong definition and misunderstand the text (LaQuay and LoGiudice, 2005).

For example: "Body" has three meanings:

1. "A person's or animal's whole physical self".
2. "A dead person or animal".
3. "The main physical part of a person or animal" (Merriam-Webster).

Recognizing and using more than one meaning for the same word demonstrates not only richness of the quantity and quality of someone's vocabulary but also the flexibility of that vocabulary (LaQuay and LoGiudice, 2005).

In daily life language, nouns can be used to convey more than one meaning. In JA, people use nouns to convey either the same meaning as the dictionary or to convey other related meanings.

In English, the meaning of "teacher" in the dictionary is a person who teaches in a school. But in colloquial JA the noun *m3allim* may have other meaning such as a guide, a person who is smart in his field, boss, mechanic, builder, carpenter, expert, chief, etc.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

No study has discussed the multiple meanings of nouns as a linguistic phenomenon despite its widespread use in Jordanian Arabic. Besides their dictionary meaning, nouns in JA may have other, sometimes, contradictory meanings when used in everyday life. Such meanings cannot be understood unless put in certain contexts as they are affected by several factors like speaker, addressee, gender, age, and situation. Finding out the various meanings of a sample of nouns from JA and the factors influencing their meanings represents the problem the present study deals with.

1.6 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate the multiple meanings of nouns as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon and aims to answer the following questions:

1. How widespread are multiple meanings of nouns in JA?
2. What are the different meanings and functions served by this use?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The importance of this study stems from several reasons. First, the multiple meanings of nouns in Jordanian Arabic has not been studied yet to the best of the researcher's knowledge. Second, this study will provide a way for understanding multiple meanings of nouns in JA. Speakers of other varieties of Arabic might find some difficulty in understanding these meanings of nouns, and this may lead to miscommunication. So this study is an attempt to lessen misunderstanding between speakers of different dialects of Arabic. Finally, since Arabic is a known world language, many foreigners study it in Jordanian universities; hence, the findings of this study may help these foreigners to understand the multiple meanings of nouns in JA. The study is also significant because it represents a modest contribution to the field of socio-pragmatics in Arabic studies.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study has the following limitations:

1. The population of the study is limited to native Jordanian Arabic speakers living in the city of Al-Mafraq. It does not include other people like Syrian refugees.
2. The sample of the study consists of a limited list of nouns used by adult native Jordanian Arabic speakers and referring only to people or animals.

1.9 Population and Sampling

1.9.1 Population

The population of the study consists of all nouns used by adult Jordanian native Arabic speakers in multiple meanings.

1.9.2 Sampling

The sample of the study consists of thirty-eight nouns used by adult Jordanian speakers living in Al-Mafraq City. The nouns were randomly selected and refer to people or animals only.

1.9.3 Data Collection

Multiple meanings of nouns depend highly on the cognitive and social aspects of the context. So the researcher collected her data through direct observations of naturally occurring speech in family or friends gatherings and by overhearing people talking in university campuses, buses, or streets.

1.9.4 Data Analysis

The sample of the study consists of thirty-eight nouns used in everyday language. Each noun is presented in at least two examples; the first example gives the dictionary meaning of the noun while the second example shows other possible meanings of the noun in different contexts.

Multiple meanings of nouns are a socio-pragmatic phenomenon. Through analyzing the data, the researcher highlights the following:

1. The different meanings of nouns.
2. The different functions that lie behind such use.

Review of Related Literature

The study of polysemy, or of the “ multiplicity ” of meanings of words, has a long history in the philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, and literature. The complex relations between meanings and words were first noted by Robins (1967). He observes that a single concept can be expressed by several different words (synonymy) and that conversely, one word can carry different meanings (polysemy).

Levickij et al. (1999) analyze the correlation between the number of meanings of a polysemantic word and its other characteristics, namely, the belonging of a word to (1) a certain grammatical class (verb, noun, adjective); (2) a certain grammatical subclass (masculine, feminine, neuter gender of the noun, strong and weak verbs); (3) a certain semantic class (22 classes of the verb, 23 classes of the noun, 17 classes of the adjective); (4) a word-building subclass (simple, derivative, and compound words).

Beretta et al. (2005) examine the neural correlates of semantic ambiguity by measuring changes in MEG recordings during a visual lexical decision task in which the properties of ambiguous words were manipulated. Words that are ambiguous between unrelated meanings (like *bark*, which can refer to a tree or to a dog) were accessed more slowly than words that have no unrelated meanings (such as *cage*).

The study of Langemets (2010) aims to identifying the systematic patterns of noun polysemy with a further perspective to elaborate on the principles to encode and represent systematic polysemy of nouns in the database of the (one-volume dictionary of Estonian to appear in 2015) and in the (= EELex) dictionary management system of the Institute of the Estonian Language.

Falkum (2011) also investigates the phenomenon : a single lexical form with two or multiple related senses (e.g. catch the rabbit/order the rabbit; lose a wallet/lose a relative). He developed a pragmatic account of polysemy within the framework of Sperber and Wilson’s (1982) relevance theory, where new senses for a word are constructed during on-line comprehension by means of a single process of *ad hoc* concept construction, which adjusts the meanings of individual words in different directions.

Emanatian (1991) explores grammatical polysemy, the phenomenon whereby multiple, related functions are expressed by a single grammatical morpheme or constructions. He investigates the ways in which the functions of polysemous grammatical markers are related to each other, and whether these relationships parallel the kinds of relationships among the polysemous lexemes.

Abdel Nasser (2013) deals with the meaning of Arabic prepositions which is a complex issue due to their polysemous nature that they intentionally alternate with one another for rhetorical purposes.

Al-Tamimi (2014) investigates the multiple use of adjectives in Jordanian Arabic from a socio-pragmatic perspective. The study’s main concern is three-fold: the multiple meanings of adjectives in JA, the functions that lie behind such use of adjectives and the effect of some socio-linguistic variables on the use. The

results of the study show that the multiple use of adjectives is widely spread in JA with nearly 96% of the adjectives used in meanings other than their dictionary meaning.

This study on the other hand, investigates the multiple meanings of some nouns in JA and showing the different meanings of nouns used in daily life conversations by adult Jordanian native Arabic speakers.

Findings and Discussion

Noun uses in JA are of two types: 1. a use to mean the dictionary meaning, 2. a use to mean other meanings which are of four types: 1. opposite meaning, 2. polysemy, 3. Sarcasm, 4. Metaphor.

1. Dictionary Meaning

The first category contains 5 nouns that are used to convey the dictionary meaning. Some examples are listed below:

1. *zbuun/zbuunah*: customer

Context (A girl is telling her friend about a shop)

A: *bti3rafi innu fi fir3 la maħal Smail bil-mafrag?*

Do you know that there is a branch for Smile Shop in Al-Mafrag?

B: *?aah ba3rafana zbuunah hnaak.*

Yes, I know. I am a **customer** there.

2. *nafmi*: a brave helpful person

Context (Two men are talking about Syrian refugees)

A: *ba3a0it musaa3adaat lil-laadz?iin issuuriyyiin.*

I sent aids to Syrian refugees.

B: *wallah inta nafmi.*

You are a **helpful person**.

The above examples show that some nouns are used to mean the same as the dictionary meaning. Throughout many observations, it was found that Jordanians used these nouns to mean only the dictionary meanings in their daily life conversations.

2. Other Meanings

The second type contains four categories and each category has its own function and related meanings for each noun. They are analyzed and discussed in the following subsections.

2.1. Opposite Meaning

The first category contains four nouns used to mean the opposite of the dictionary meaning. The meanings depended on the context where the noun was used.

1. *zalamah*: a man or a gentleman

Context A (Two men are talking about a fight caused by a cousin of one of them)

A: *fufi ilhoofah illi 3imilha ibn 3ammak, walla innu 3aglu zYiir.*

Did you hear about the fight that your cousin made? Indeed, he has a small brain.

B: *?ah fufi ilhamdillaah inni mad-daxalit.*

Yes, I did. Thanks to God, I did not get involved.

A: *walla innak zalamah.*

By God, you are a **real man**.

Context B (Two friends are talking about graduation)

A: *txarrajit min aldzaam3ah ya Ahmad?*

Did you graduate from the university, Ahmad?

B: *la. ma txarradzit.*

No, I did not

A: *mafaAllah zalamah.*

How wonderful, you are a **man** .(**you are not a man**).

The two examples show that the noun *zalamah* can be used either to mean the dictionary meaning (context a) or to mean the opposite meaning (context b). In the first example, *zalamah* means that the man is a gentleman because he refused to get involved in a fight caused by his cousin, but in the second example, the noun means the opposite of manliness, that he is irresponsible and careless.

2.2. Polysemy

3. The second category contains nouns that carry more than one meaning. The use of these nouns is widespread in JA contexts.

1. *m3allim*: teacher, (experienced) mechanic, carpenter, boss

Context A (Someone is asking a man about his work)

A: *fiu tifta ʔil ya Layθ?*

What do you do Layth?

B: *m3allim bil-madrasah.*

I am a school **teacher**.

Context B (A man is asking about his car)

A: *Sho ʔaar bsayaarti?, ʔallahitha?*

What happened to my car? Did you repair it?

B: *?aah ʔallahitha w omuurha ful el ful.*

Yes, I did. And everything is fine with it.

A: *tislam inta ahsan m3allim.*

Thank you, you are the best **mechanic**.

Context C (Yazan is asking his brother Zaid about a carpenter)

Yazan: *biddi ?afaʔsel taxt zʔiir la ibni.ti3raf hada fuʔluh mrattab?*

I want to have a small bed made for my son. Do you know someone whose work is perfect.

Zaid: *?a3raf waahid ismuh Ali. Huwwa ?afʔar m3allim bil-balad.*

I know someone called Ali. He is the smartest **carpenter** in the city.

Context D (Two employees are talking about their boss)

The first employee: *ilim3allim ?a3Taani idʔaazah ma3 innu fii Ðaʔit fuʔul biʔfirkah.*

The boss gave me a vacation although there is work pressure in the company.

The second employee: *wallah inno m3allim muhtaram w biʔham.*

By God, he is a respectable and smart **boss**. (the manager).

The four examples show that *m3allim* can have other meanings beside the dictionary meaning. In context A, it has the dictionary meaning which is a teacher. As for context B, *m3allim* means a good mechanic; in context C, it means a carpenter, and a boss in context D. Jordanians use the noun *m3allim* with different meanings that differ with the context and the situation.

2.3. Sarcasm

Sarcasm is using words to mean the opposite of their real meanings or to add sardonic sense (Barbe, 1995). In daily life conversations, Jordanians use sarcasm and it is highly associated with their culture (Alzoubi, 2013). For example:

1. *xaruuf*: lamb

Context A (Two friends are talking about a man)

Ahmad: *rann 3alai xaalid w bihkiili innu it3arraʔ 3ala bint w ?axðat kul maʔaariih.*

Khalid called me and told me that he met a girl who ended up taking all his money.

Sufyaan: *ya zalamah xaalid xaruuf.*

He is a **lamb** (sheep).

In this example, *xaruuf* is not used to mean the dictionary meaning. It is sarcastically used in the above conversation to mock Khalid, comparing him to a naive weak animal.

2.4. Metaphor

“Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). Metaphor is common in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system is mainly metaphorical in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

1. *3antar*: Antar (a brave strong person)

Context A (A man is telling his friend about what he will do with a problem)

A man: *wallah rah aaxuð haggii bi ?iidi.*

I will take my right by myself.

A friend: *wallah innak 3antar.*

By God, you are **Antar (a brave strong person)**

3antar is used metaphorically to mean that this person is a brave and strong one. *3antar* was a person born in 525. He was in the period before Islam and a famous knight and hero. So, Arabs relate the noun *3antar* with strength and courage.

Conclusions

This study has investigated the multiple meanings of some nouns in JA, focusing on the multiple meanings of nouns and the functions of such use. The findings are presented in order to answer the questions of the study. The findings provide information about the spread of multiple meanings of nouns in JA. The study

divided the meanings of nouns into two types: the dictionary meaning and the other possible meanings, which includes four categories, and each category has its own function and related meanings for each noun.

The study has shown that multiple meanings of nouns are used extensively by Jordanians. It has revealed four categories of multiple meanings of nouns: opposite meaning, polysemy, sarcasm, and metaphor. The meaning of each noun depends on the context and the situation. Numerous examples have been given to illustrate words' meanings in specific contexts.

A generalizable conclusion is that polysemy and multiple meanings are characteristics of most syntactic classes of human languages. It has been shown in this and other studies that verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and metaphorical expressions carry a variety of meanings depending on speakers and contexts and possibly gender and age.

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