



## A CRITICAL COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS OF NOMINAL HOMO-TONAL HOMONYMS IN YORUBA LANGUAGE: A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Rabiu Ridwan Akinkunmi<sup>1</sup>, Abiola Olutope Lawrence<sup>2</sup>,  
and Aiyelabegan Nafisat Bolanle<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and Linguistics, Kwara State University, Malete.

Email: [ridwan.rabiu@kwasu.edu.ng](mailto:ridwan.rabiu@kwasu.edu.ng); Tel.: +2349060070668

<sup>2</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree.

Email: [olutopeabiola@ospoly.edu.ng](mailto:olutopeabiola@ospoly.edu.ng); Tel.: +2348034007555

<sup>3</sup>Department of English and Linguistics, Kwara State University Malete.

Email: [nafisat.aiyelabegan@kwasu.edu.ng](mailto:nafisat.aiyelabegan@kwasu.edu.ng); Tel.: +2348137232696

### Cite this article:

Rabiu, R. A., Abiola, O. L.,  
Aiyelabegan, N. B. (2025), A  
Critical Communication  
Analysis of Nominal Homo-  
Tonal Homonyms in Yoruba  
Language: A Pedagogical  
Approach. International  
Journal of Literature,  
Language and Linguistics  
8(1), 72-90. DOI:  
10.52589/IJLLL-9NH7DD0U

### Manuscript History

Received: 2 Nov 2024

Accepted: 8 Dec 2024

Published: 12 Feb 2025

### Copyright © 2025 The Author(s).

This is an Open Access article  
distributed under the terms of  
Creative Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial-NoDerivatives  
4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND  
4.0), which permits anyone to  
share, use, reproduce and  
redistribute in any medium,  
provided the original author and  
source are credited.

**ABSTRACT:** *The main thrust of this work is to examine and classify nominal homo-tonal homonyms in Yoruba language. This paper investigates the role of homo-tonal homonyms in the teaching and learning of core linguistics areas in Yoruba language, most especially for second language learners. The theory adopted for this research is the usage theory championed by Wittgenstein (1953). Data needed for this research were gathered from both formal and informal sources, which include direct observation involving different classes of language users and appraisal of existing literature on homonyms. Through this work, it was observed that homo-tonal nominal homonyms could be used for the teaching and learning of different aspects of linguistics to facilitate effective communication. In addition, it was also discovered that intuitive knowledge, mutual contextual belief and context of situation and culture can help disambiguate homo-tonal homonyms derived from lexical ambiguity in the language and thus enhance effective communication. Furthermore, it was discovered that there are two types of homonyms in the Yoruba language; these are hetero-tonal homonyms and homo-tonal homonyms. In conclusion, research into lexical relations such as homo-tonal homonyms will help to preserve the language for posterity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Lexical Semantic; Communication; Homonym; Pedagogical; Homo-tonal.



## INTRODUCTION

Language is defined as the most important unique property of man which distinguishes humans from other creatures. It is what makes man a whole being. Chomsky, in Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p. 3) and in Lawal (2004) explains the importance of research into languages when he states that “when we study language, we are approaching what some might call the ‘human essence,’ the distinctive qualities of mind that are so far as we know unique to man.” What this means is that language research is the most important aspect of human existence because language is what distinguishes human beings from other animals that cannot communicate verbally but through signs; it is also through language that growth and development are made possible. Language is the most valuable possession of the human race. Lawal (2004) corroborates Chomsky’s claim when he states that:

Language in its narrow verbal sense is one of the unique attributes of mankind and is perhaps the closest phenomenon to man. Since language is closely related to thinking. It is also fundamental to human existence and survival.

What this clearly shows is that the principal factor that distinguishes humans from other lower animals is their ability to use verbal language to communicate. Arokoyo (2019) also explains the importance of language to human existence when she says:

Language is life. It permeates our beings and makes us who we are. When a language is lost, we lose an entire system of knowledge, communication and belief. More importantly, still, we lose our identities.

Language, according to these scholars, is an ingenuity property of man that he does not and cannot share with other creations. The branch of linguistics that studies meaning in language is semantics which will be our focus in this work. Semantics is defined as the study of meaning in isolation. Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of words and sentences in isolation. It is the aspect of linguistics whose sole aim is to make meaning out of language. Semantic is a contextual communication element that shows meaning in an expression.

The branch of semantics that will be the focus of this work is homonyms, which are words that share all segmental and supra-segmental properties but differ in meaning. This work aims to use Yoruba nominal homo-tonal homonyms as a pedagogical instrument to teach both native and non-native speakers of Yoruba the distinctive and phonemic features of word usage in the context of the language and other areas of linguistics. In addition, Dingemanse (2006, p. i.) gave credence to these researchers’ assertion that there is dearth of research works on Yoruba nominal homonyms in particular and on semantics as a branch of linguistics as a whole. He opines that:

Over the last one hundred and fifty years, Yoruba has benefited from a lot of linguistic attention mainly in the area of phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax. As with many African languages, however, investigation of semantics issues has remained behind.

The focus of this research will be to document, examine and analyse Yoruba homo-tonal homonyms using Wittgenstein usage theory of meaning as the theoretical framework.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Homonyms involve two or more words that are similar in spelling and pronunciation but differ in meaning. Crester (1997) explains homonyms as “terms used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but differ in meaning.” This form includes all phonological representations. Leech (1981, p. 228) also defines homonyms as “roughly two or more words having the same pronunciation and/or spelling but different in meaning.” Louwrens (1994, p. 75-76) in Mojela and Limpopo (2007, p. 435) explains that there are two types of homonyms, most especially in tonal languages. This is because the tone is phonemic and can bring about change in the meaning of words that share the same vowels and consonants. Louwrens (1994, p. 75-76) in Mojela (2007, p. 435) asserts that “if two or more words are spelt the same, the tonal pattern must also be taken into account: hetero-tonal homonyms have different tonal patterns while homo-tonal homonyms have the same tonal pattern.” Mojela (2007, p.435) gives examples of hetero-tonal and homo-tonal homonyms from the Sesetho Sa Leboa language to buttress their claim. The examples are:

- 1a. fòlà /fòla/ (HL) ‘cool down’
- b. fòlà /fòla/ (LL) ‘line-up’
- 2a. mogolo /mo,ɔbɔ/ (LLL) ‘salary’
- b. mògòlò /mo,ɔbɔ/ (LLL) ‘throat’

It was observed by these researchers that while Examples 1a and b are examples of hetero-tonal homonyms, Examples 2a and b are examples of homo-tonal homonyms. These researchers observed that literature abounds on hetero-homonyms as well as verbal homonyms in the Yorùbá language. Some of the earliest researchers on this in the Yorùbá language include Babarinde (2018) who adopts the reordered access model to examine Yoruba verbal homonym derived ambiguity in Yorùbá language. He gave the example of the verb “pa” having different meanings in the language. These researchers observed that while the verb “pa” is homonymous and has different meaning in the language, none of the examples used by Babarinde (2018, p. 269-270) can be referred to as ambiguity. This is because they are used in clearly defined contexts.

Furthermore, Adegoke-Elijah et al. (2018) also examine and analyse Yorùbá verbal homonyms. The main objective of their research work is to resolve the problem of ambiguity in relation to Yorùbá verbs using a reverse method where the object of the verb rather than its subject determines its meaning. They classify Yorùbá object nouns for ambiguous verbs into ten groups: liquid, animate, vegetable, food, properties, inanimate, places, abstract, body parts and musical instrument. Oloso (2022) also carried out a pedagogical analysis of homonyms in Yorùbá language using the lexical field theory as a theoretical framework. These researchers observed that Oloso’s data on homonyms in Yorùbá language rely heavily on Yorùbá verbal homonyms just like Babarinde, (2018). This is because out of twenty Yorùbá homonyms examined in her work only three were nouns. Other research works on Yorùbá verbal homonyms include Aina (2023) who describes lexical verb ambiguity as “ambiguity that refers to the potential for multiple interpretations of units of speech in languages that renders it difficult or impossible to understand a lexical item without additional information.” These researchers observed that what Aina (2023) examines in his



work are Yorùbá hetero-tonal verbal homonyms, that is, verbs that have the same segmental representation but different tonal representations.

These researchers observed that hetero-tonal and verbal homonyms are infinite in Yorùbá language and have been fully studied and documented by many researchers. To the best of these researchers' knowledge, little or no work has been carried out comprehensively on the documentation and analysis on Yorùbá nominal homo-tonal homonyms. Oloso (2022, p. 169) corroborates this claim when she explains the lack of scholarly contributions to the study of lexical relations and other aspects of semantics in the Yoruba language. She opines that:

Semantic relations of the synonymy, antonymy, polysemy and homonymy types in standard Yorùba have not received much scholarly attention. Arising from the dearth of such scholarly attention in an environment where the language of education is different from the language of the home is the learner's inability to draw a connection between grammatical concepts between their L1 and L2.

For this reason, our effort in this work will be solely on Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms, most especially the noun class of this category. This is because most Yorùbá verbs are homonyms in nature. The focus of this work is on homo-tonal homonymic nouns, which are nouns that share the same segments (vowels and consonants), supra-segmental (tone) and pronunciations but differ in meaning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories are instruments of language analysis that are used to analyse and dissect all the properties of a language. Ajiboye (2021, p. 6) explains that:

Theory as applicable to language comprises a system of ideas intended to explain a language problem. Such ideas are based on general principles that are independent of the problem(s) to be explained.

There are different theories of meaning but this research work will adopt the usage theory championed by Wittgenstein (1953). Other proponents of this theory include J. Firth, M.A.K. Halliday, etc. Sankaravaluyuthan (2019) explains that this theory was elaborated upon by M.A Halliday. The usage theory is also referred to as the contextual or operational theory of meaning. The major motivation or thrust of this theory was fear that the meaning of certain classes of words could be lost if meanings were treated as just entities. According to the theory, the meaning of a word or an expression is determined by the context of its use. It is the effect created by a linguistic unit within a given context that expresses its full meaning. Taiwo, Chidi-Onwuta and Iwe (2022, p. 19) explain that:

This theory is also known as the structuralists' theory of meaning. It states that the meaning of any word is actually consisted by the totality of relationships this word has with other words in the language. To understand the meaning of a word, we have to understand how it functions together with and in contrast to other related words.

What this means is that context plays a pivotal role in meaning dissemination and it helps in making communication among the addressee and the addresser.



## RESULTS

In this section, Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms will be presented and analysed descriptively. Our focus will be on Yorùbá nominal homo-tonal homonyms that start with vowels. For this reason, the scope of the researchers data will be Yorùbá oral vowels /a, e, ɛ, i, o and ɔ/. This is because the high back rounded vowel /u/ and all nasal vowels cannot start a word in the Yorùbá language but only in some of its dialects.

### 3. /a/

i. Àáró - A community-based joint age group practice that is “àṣà iran ara ẹ̀nilowó” that is practiced among Yorùbá adult males to carry out physical labour such as tilling of the land, planting of crops, weeding, harvesting of crops, building of houses, etc. most especially in traditional Yoruba society.

Àáró - To miss someone dearly.

ii. Àbàtà - A species of kolanut which is known as “obì” in Yorùbá language. Kolanut is very popular among the Yorùbá people of South-western Nigeria, where it is majorly cultivated, and among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, where it is consumed in high proportion.

Àbàtà - Stagnant water. It is also known as “ẹ̀rẹ̀fọ̀” or “pòtòpótò” in the Yorùbá language.

iii. Afàrá - Bridge. This shows in Yorùbá popular saying that “a ti gòkè odò kí afàrá tó ó já,” that is, “we have crossed the river before the bridge collapsed.”

Afàrá - Beehive “afàrá nilé oyin.” The hive is the bee’s home.

iv. Agà - Month of harvest. Evidence of this can be extracted from the Yoruba proverb that says, “iyàwó tí a fẹ̀ lósù agà tí ń fiyán mọ̀lé; yóó ba nìbẹ̀ lorúkọ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ rẹ̀ yóó máa jẹ̀” – “the wife that one married during the month of harvest that is building skyscraper with pounded yam; the name of her son will be regret.”

Agà - Ladder. It is also known as “àkàsọ” in the Yorùbá language.

v. Àgò - A special type of cage that is made of weaving material or metal and is primarily used for hunting and housing different types of birds. The Yorùbá usually say “àgò nì yóó dé adiyẹ̀ gbẹ̀yìn” that is, it is still the cage (àgò) that will house the chicken at the end. Another Yorùbá proverb where this word occurs is “A fi àgò kẹ̀yìn àpàrò; ohun ojú wá lójú ń rí” – “he who uses a metal cage to house a partridge eggs; what he seeks is what he finds.”

Àgò - The traditional way of knocking in Yorùbá land, as in “Àgò onílẹ̀” which means ‘hello’ in the English Language.

vi. Agbe - The act of begging for alms. Beggars are referred to as “alágbe” in Yorùbá language.

Agbe - Great blue turaco bird.

vii. Agbọn - Basket. It is also known as “Apẹ̀rẹ̀” in Yorùbá language.





Agbòn - Jaw. It is used in the derivation of “irungbòn” through the morphological process of compounding which goes as follows: “irun” ‘hair’ + “agbòn” ‘jaw’ ‘irungbòn’ ‘moustache’

viii. Àjà - ceiling.

Àjà - A ferocious whirlwind spirit that usually transports people to the spiritual realm for a particular period of time. For example, “Àjà gbé Adé lọ” – “the whirlwind spirit has taken Adé away.”

ix. Àmọ - It is an example of a structural conjunction in Yorùbá and is synonymous with “sùgbòn” (‘but’) in the language. For example, “ó wá àmọ kò bá mi,” that is, “he came but he did not meet me.”

Àmọ - It is a part of the intestines which the Yorùbá people do not attach much importance to. For example, the Yorùbá people usually say “àmọ ni kì í ẹ ara ẹran,” that is, it is an inconsequential part of meat.

x. Àwùrèbe - A species of ant. The Yorùbá people proverbially say “olúwa ni ó ń ẹ omi tí ikán fí ń mọlé; òun náà ni ó ń ẹ omi àwùrèbe,” that is, “it is God who provides water which termite uses in building its colony; he is also the one that provides water for the àwùrèbe ant.”

Àwùrèbe - It is traditional music that is an offshoot of “wéré” (a genre commonly used during the Muslims’ Ramadan fast to call for Sahur, that is, Muslims’ early morning food). Proponents of this genre of music include the late Alhaji Dauda Àkànmú Epo Àkàrà who commercialised this particular genre of music in Ibadan, Southwestern Nigeria. Adesina et al. (2016, p. 75) corroborate this claim when they opine that “Àwùrèbe is a by-product of Were music developed by Dauda Epo-Akara in Ibadan.”

#### 4. /e/

i. Èèkàn - Nail

Èèkàn - A notable and very important personality in the community.

ii. Ègé - Segment.

Ègé - Dribble. It is a term used in football when a football player skillfully moves the ball past their opponent.

iii. Egbé - This means to disappear. It is derived through the morphological process of prefixation as in e + gbé, where the prefix e- is added to the verb “gbé” (‘carry’) to form “egbé”.

Egbé - It means the wrath of God. It is mostly used by adherents of Islamic religion among the Yoruba people.

iv. Egbò - Wound. The Yorùbá people believe that wounds are not hygienic and, for this reason, must be covered. This is evident in this Yorùbá proverb, “a ò gbòdò ẹ egbò légbò ilé kí a wá má a fí dá óúnjẹ kọjá”. This means that one must be careful with wounds, no matter how close the person carrying the wound is to us.



Egbò - Root of a tree. This term is common among traditional medical practitioners and sellers of Yorùbá local herbs popularly called “eléwé-omọ,” that is, one who sells herbs.

v. Égbon - Lice.

Égbon - Locust beans. This is another name for “irú” in Yorùbá. This is commonly used in Yorùbá proverbs. For example, “irú lóun ò tẹ rí à fí ìgbà tí ò n dé ilú kan tí wón pe òun légbon.” This means that the locust beans said it had never been embarrassed until it reached a town and it was called “égbon”.

vi. Ègbodò - Cooked yam.

Ègbodò - Another word for “Ikun”, which is ‘mucus’ in the English language.

vii. Eré - A relay race.

Eré - The act of playing or performing either on stage or through audio-visual tape.

viii. Erée - Another name for beans. It is synonymous with “ẹwà” in Yorùbá.

Erée - A type of a snake that is called boa constrictor in the English language.

ix. Èrò - Thought. This word is derived morphologically through the process of affixation, that is, the prefixation of the morpheme è- with the verb “rò” (‘think’) to form the noun “èrò”.

Èrò - Passenger.

x. Ewú - Grey hair. This is the whitish or grey hair that usually grows on older people’s heads but is sometimes found on young people’s heads.

Ewú - This is “pouch rat.” It is also called “òkété” in Yorùbá language. It is forbidden to see a pouch rat during the day. This is why the Yorùbá usually say “a kii réwú lósàn-án.” It is a taboo to spot a pouched rat in the daytime.

## 5. /ɛ/

i. Èbẹ - Apology. This word is derived morphologically through the morphological process of prefixation which involves adding the prefix “ẹ” to the root word “bẹ” (‘beg’) to form the noun “èbẹ”.

Èbẹ - Soothing balm/ointment. This is used to massage any part of the body that aches.

ii. Ẹbu - This is a local refinery where different products such as “epo pupa” (‘palm oil’), “ọṣẹ dúdú” (‘traditional black soap’) and “aró” (‘dye’) are produced.

Ẹbu - This is slang for fake materials or products. It is mostly used by the younger generation in the Yorùbá society. Another word for this in Yorùbá is “ayédèrú” or “bàrùfù”.

iii. Èbùrú- A short-cut road. Other words for this in the Yorùbá language are “kòrò” and “àbùja”.



Èbùrú - It means plenty or excess. For example, the Yorùbá people used to praise God as “Èlẹ̀bùrú iké,” that is, “one who controls enormous and infinite wealth.” There is also a Yorùbá personal name that is derived from the word “èbùrú”. The name is “Èlẹ̀bùùbọ̀n”, that is, “o-ní-èbùrù-ibọ̀n” which means “the owner of plenty guns.” This changed to “Èlẹ̀bùùbọ̀n” through phonological processes of vowel elision of the high front vowel /i/ in “ibọ̀n” (‘gun’) and consonant deletion of voiced alveolar sound /r/ in “èbùrú” (‘plenty’).

iv. Èdà - Duplicate.

Èdà - A female fertility disease that can be classified into two, that is, “èdà òró” and “èdà ibú.”

v. Ègbà - These are bangles or bracelets that people use to adorn or beautify their wrist and neck. For example, we have “ègbà ọwọ̀” wrist bangle/bracelet and “ègbà ọrùn” ‘necklace’.

Ègbà - Infirmary. This is a state of being weak in health or body.

Abimbola (1976) in Adeyemi (2017) explains that “ègbà” is one of the “ajogun” ‘evil forces’ that can be used against man. Abimbola (1976) explains that “The most important of them are “ikú” (‘death’), “àrùn” (‘disease’), “òfò” (‘loss’), “ègbà” (‘infirmary’), “ọ̀ràn” (‘case’), “ẹ̀wọ̀n” (‘snare’) and “ẹ̀sẹ” (‘accident’).

vi. Ègbètàlá - Two thousand and six hundred in Yorùbá numeral.

Ègbètàlá - Twenty-six thousand in Yorùbá numeral.

Owomoyela (2006, p. 244) explains that “ègbètàlá” could be “a contraction of either igba mètàlá (2,600) or ẹgbàá mètàlá (26,000). This writer observed that the phonological derivation of “ègbètàlá” from “igba + ètálá” involve the phonological processes of vowel elision of the central vowel /a/ and its tone in “igba” (‘two hundred’) and a non-contiguous regressive assimilation between the front mid-low vowel /ɛ/ in “ètálá” ‘thirteen’ and the high front vowel /i/ in “igba” (‘two hundred’) to form “ègbètàlá” (‘two thousand six hundred’). Also, the numeral “ègbètàlá” (‘twenty-six thousand’) is through the phonological processes of vowel elision of the two central vowels in “ẹgbàá” (‘two thousand’) and its contraction with “ètálá” (‘thirteen’) to form “ègbètàlá” (‘twenty-six thousand’).

vii. Èkùn - Tiger, a carnivorous animal that belongs to the cat family. It is also known as “ògìdán” in Yorùbá.

Èkùn - A region or place, e.g., “ẹ̀kùn ìdìbò or ẹ̀kùn gúúsù” (‘a geographical region’ or ‘voting constituency’). For example, we can say “ẹ̀kùn ìdìbò ilà oòrùn Ọ̀yọ̀” (‘Oyo East senatorial district’).

viii. Èsà - Masquerade chant. It is an oral poetry that is mainly used by masquerades and their followers in Yoruba. It is also known as “iwi” in the language.

Èsà - It is used to denote a special being in Yoruba.

Èsà - Tomato and other varieties of pepper showing signs of rotteness.

ix. Ètì - Procrastination.





Ẹ̀tì - Friday. This is the sixth day of the week in Yorùbá.

x. Ẹ̀yìn - Palm fruit from which products such as ‘palm oil’ (“epo”), ‘vegetable oil’ (“òróró”), etc. are refined.

Ẹ̀yìn - To praise someone. It is derived morphologically through the process of prefixation, where the prefix /ẹ̀/ is attached to the root verb “yìn”, which means to praise.

## 6. /i/

i. Ibi - Place.

Ibi - Evil.

Ibi - Placenta.

It is a shortened or contracted form of “olubi” in Yoruba.

ii. Ìfà - bonus.

Ìfà - The variant for the numeral “ẹ̀fà” (‘six’) in Yorùbá. For example, “Ìfàní” means ‘in six days’ or ‘on the sixth day.’

iii. Ìgbá - Garden egg.

Ìgbá - Locust beans tree

iv. Igba - A tight rope that is used to climb palm tree for palm-oil exploration.

Igba - Physical labour as interest payment on principal loan acquired by parents or guardians.

v. Ìje - The seventh day in Yorùbá pre-day counting.

Ìje - It is the clipped form of “ìdíje”, which means ‘competition’ in the Yorùbá language. For example, “wón n sáré ìje” – ‘they are in a race/competition.’

vi. Ìkàté - Name of a popular town in Etí-Ọ̀sà local government area of Lagos State. The royal title of the king of the town is “Elégùṣì”.

Ìkàté - A floating cork that marks the position of a certain kind of fish trapped underwater.

vii. Ìlábùrù - Baboon. A species of monkey.

Ìlábùrú - It is a type of female innerwear that is worn by Yorùbá women. Other Yorùbá female inner wears include “yẹ̀rì”, “tòbì” and “àgbékó”.

viii. Ìpá - Kick.

Ìpá - Hiccup. It is a disease that usually affects the male private part and, as a result, will make the scrotum swell up. The Yorùbá people would say “Ó so ipá” – ‘he has a hiccup.’

ix. Ìran - Race/Generation.

Ìran - Scene.



Ìran - Vision/trance.

x. Ìrègún - This is an indigenous traditional music that is popular among the Yàgbà people of the Western senatorial district of Kogi State, Nigeria.

Ìrègún - It is an act of show-off, most especially of a good deed done to someone. It is a practice that is frowned upon among the Yorùbá people.

## 7. /o/

i. Odù - Big storage pot made from clay. This word is the base form of the nickname given to the immediate late Alaafin of Oyo, his imperial majesty Alaafin Lamidi Adeyemi Atanda, who is referred to as “Alówólódù”, that is, someone who has plenty of money stored and saved inside the storage pot.

Odù - corpus. This is a home-grown data set. For example, “odù-Ifá” means ‘Ifa corpus.’

ii. Ogbó - Cudgel. The word “ogbó”, which means “cudgel” according to oral tradition, is used in the creation of the name of a popular group of towns in Osun and Kwara States of Nigeria: “Ìgbóminà”. The name was formed through the morphological process of calquing and can be broken down to “ògbó tí mo fi ń lànà.” This means ‘the cudgel I am using to clear the road.’

Ogbó - Old age. For example, the Yorùbá people usually say “ojó ogbó ti dé,” that is, ‘old age has come.’

iii. Òjé - An ancient town in Yorùbáland which historically was situated beside “Òfà”, a popular town in present-day Kwara State. This Yorùbá proverb “ohun tí ó wà lẹyìn Òfà, ó ju Òjé lẹ” – “what is behind Òfà town is more than the town called Òjé” gives credence to our assertion.”

Òjé - An archaic word for wrist bangle which is exclusively worn by masquerade worshippers. The Yorùbá people usually say “a ti ti òjé bọ olóòsà lẹwọ, ó ku baba ẹnì tí yóó bọ.” This means that ‘we have put the bangle on the wrist of the deity worshipper; who dares remove it from his hand?’

Òjé - Lead. It is one of the mineral resources that can be found in Nigeria.

iv. Òkìtì - Hill or mound. Johnson (1921) in his work explains that the name of the town, “Èkìtì”, was derived from “òkìtì”, which means ‘hill’ or ‘mound’. This is because their settlement is surrounded by hills and mountains. Johnson (1921) explains that “the term Èkìtì denotes a mound and is derived from the rugged mountainous feature of the country. The meaning of ‘ant-hill’, which is “òkìtì-ògán” in Yorùbá, gives credence to this assertion.

Òkìtì - Summersault. It is an acrobatic way of moving forward and backward. It is usually done during sports and festivals to celebrate and entertain the spectators.

v. Òlọ - A beautiful damsel. The Yorùbá people would say “Òlọ ẹlẹjẹ tútù” – “a beautiful young damsel.” Odebode (2012) explains that “Òlọ is a metaphor of fairness and freshness. It is borne out of Yorùbá people saying “Òlọ ẹlẹjẹ tútù” meaning “fair and cold blooded.”



Òlò - Grass mouse. Evidence of “Òlò” being ‘grass mouse’ can be gleaned from a Yoruba proverb as provided by Owomoyela (2006, p. 231) which goes thus: “Ọ̀dúnńí ọ̀ḍe pa erin, ẹ̀míràn ọ̀ḍe pa ẹ̀fòn, ọ̀dún mẹ́fà ọ̀ḍe pa òlò; ọ̀lá n rewájú tàbí ọ̀lá n rẹ̀yìn?” – “this year the hunter kills an elephant; the next year the hunter kills a buffalo; six years after the hunter kills a grass mouse; is his glory increasing or decreasing?”.

vi. Olóòórùn - Spotted genet.

Olóòórùn - A dirty person. This is derived from the prefix “oní” which means “to own” and the noun “òórùn” which means “a bad odour.”

vii. Olú - Mushroom.

Olú - God of small-pox. Adeleke (2020) buttresses this claim when he asserts that “Olú” in Yorùbá tradition is another name for “Sànpònná” which is the god of smallpox contrary to many people’s belief that it means God or Lord. Adeleke (2020, p. 33) opines that “In Yorùbá cosmogony, Olú is related to Òrìṣà Sànpònná, also known as Ọ̀balúáyé.”

viii. Òní - A traditional name given to a child that cries a lot.

Òní - Today. This word is commonly used in this proverb “bí òní tirí ọ̀lá ò ríbẹ̀ẹ̀ ní í mú babaláwo dífá ọ̀rọ̀rún” – “nobody knows tomorrow; this is why the herbalists consult their oracle every five days.” It is also called “èní” in some dialects of the language.

ix. Oṣó - Wizard.

Oṣó - It is a totem that is used as a prefix in the naming of male adherents of Òrìṣa-oko. Examples of these types of names include “Oṣóyínká”, Ṣóbándé, etc.

Oṣó - It is an abridged form of “olóṣó” which is a slang (informal word) that is used to refer to a “prostitute” in Yorùbá.

x. Owú - Jealousy. The Yorùbá usually say “obìnrin tí ó bá n jẹ owú; bí kò pa ara rẹ̀ yóo pọ̀kọ,” that is, “if a jealous woman does not kill herself, she will surely kill her husband.”

Owú - Blacksmith’s hearth. It is one of the instruments that blacksmiths use in their forge. It is used to beat heated iron into the preferred shape.

## 8. /ɔ/

i. Òdá - Drought. This is derived through the morphological process of affixation which involves the prefixation of vowel /ò/ to the verb “dá” which means “to be scarce,” to form the noun “drought”.

Ọ̀dá - Castration. The Yorùbá would say “wọn tè ẹ̀ ní ọ̀dá” – “he has been castrated.” This act was mainly done to male slaves in Yorùbá society during the period of the slave trade.

ii. Ọ̀fà - Servitude: a state of serving as a slave or subject to an individual as interest on a principal loan taken by the parents or guardians of a child. Evidence of “Ọ̀fà” being servitude can be extracted from the panegyric “oríkì” of the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ̀ kingdom. The oríkì goes thus:



Ó ñ pé kí olówó gbówó – “he is asking the creditor to collect his money”

Ó ñ pé kí iwòfà ó fí ọfà sílẹ – “and that the servant should leave servitude”

Ọfà - Arrow. It is an instrument of hunting and war. It is made of bendable rod that is known as “ọpá” and a threadlike material known as “ọrún”.

iii. Ọfà - The name of a popular town in the Southern senatorial district of Kwara State, Nigeria. The town is dominated by the Ịbòlọ dialect speakers of Yorùbá.

Ọfà - This means one hundred and twenty (120) in Yorùbá numeral. It is an allomorph of the morphemic numeral “ọgófà” (‘120’) and its usage is limited or restricted to the counting of items such as yam. For example, the Yorùbá people used to say “ọfà ọ̀ṣu kan nì wọ̀n ní ká gbé wá nílẹ̀ iyàwó,” that is, “we are asked to bring a hundred and twenty tubers of yam from the bride’s family.” We need to add that “ọfà” and “ọgófà” (‘120’) are mutually exclusive; where one occurs, the other cannot.

iv. Ọjọ̀jọ̀ - It is a practice of taking care of a newly born baby and the mother mostly by the mother of the groom or bride or any female adult in the family. The process is referred to as “Omigo” in Igbo culture.

Ọjọ̀jọ̀ - It is a type of food that is made from water yam and it is usually fried.

v. Ọlógèdè - The owner or seller of banana.

Ọlógèdè - Civet cat. This animal is also known as “Ẹtà” in Yorùbá language.

Ọlógèdè - A type of traditional hairstyle in Yorùbá.

Ọlógèdè - One of the popular Ẹ̀yọ masquerades in Lagos.

vi. Ọpọ̀n - Local tray. For example, “ọpọ̀n Ifá” means “Ifa divination tray.”

Ọpọ̀n - This is a subset class of the dùndún drum which is very popular among the Ọyọ Yorùbá people.

Ọpọ̀n - Canoe.

vii. Ọrọ̀ - Word. For example, “akójọ̀pọ̀ ọ̀rọ̀ ní í dì gbólóhùn” – “it is the combination of words that make a sentence.”

Ọrọ̀ - These are spirits that live inside cave or trees; they are also known as “ẹ̀bọ̀rẹ̀” in Yorùbá language. For example, “ọ̀rọ̀ inú ọ̀gì ọ̀gèdè lé wa,” that is, “the spirit of the banana tree chased us.”

viii. Ọrún - The fifth day in Yorùbá days of the week. This clearly shows in their saying that “bí ọ̀nì tírì ọ̀lẹ̀ ọ̀ rí bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní í mú babaláwọ̀ dífá ọ̀rọ̀rún.” This means that “the fact that nobody can predict or know what will happen tomorrow is the reason the diviner consults his oracle every five days.”



Orún - This is a rod that is usually used in the process of making a bow. This is evident in the Yorùbá proverb, which says, “òsán já orún dọpá,” that is, when the rope is loose, the bow becomes a stick.

Orún - It is the shortened form for “Ọgórùn-ún” ‘hundred’ in the Yorùbá numeral system. Other shortened or clipped numerals in the Yorùbá language are “òjì” which is the shortened form of “ogójì” (‘forty’), “òtà,” the shortened form for “ogóta” (‘sixty’) and “òrin” which is the shortened form for “ogòrin” (‘eighty’).

ix. Ọtẹ - Conspiracy/rebellion.

Ọtẹ - Time/Period.

x. Ọyà - Grass cutter

Ọyà - Wage. This means payment for service that is made immediately after rendering the service in Yorùbá language. The Yorùbá people usually say “bá mi mú owó ọyà mi,” that is, “give me the money for the service I rendered.”

### **Homo-tonal Homonyms and Lexical Ambiguity in Yorùbá Language**

Ambiguity is an aspect of word and sentence relation that has more than one meaning or can be interpreted semantically in more than one way. Leech (1981, p. 30) explains that “an expression is said to be ambiguous when more than one interpretation (meaning) can be assigned to it.” Ambiguity is referred to as “Pónna” in the Yorùbá language.

Lexical ambiguity is a type of ambiguity where ambiguity in a sentence emanates from just a word within a sentence that has the characteristic of multiple interpretations. According to Osunnuga (2013, p. 62), “lexical ambiguity is combined by a word with more than one possible meaning in a context.” The word that usually instigates ambiguity within a sentence is known as homograph. Homo-tonal homonyms are words that have the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings. It has been observed that homographic words, whenever they occur in non-clearly defined contexts, usually result in lexical ambiguity, most especially when homo-tonal homonyms are used in a sentence. This usually occurs when there is no clear understanding, that is, mutual contextual belief between the speaker and his or her addressee. Babarinde (2018, p. 266) explains that “Yorùbá homonym is one of the sources of miscommunication and incomprehension among L<sub>2</sub> readers. Examples of Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms that can generate lexical ambiguity include the following:

9a. Ọlógèdè - The owner or seller of banana.

Ọlógèdè – Civet cat. This animal is also known as “Ẹtà” in Yorùbá language, for example, the sentence:

Bólájí pa ọlógèdè.

This sentence can be interpreted as:

- (i). Bólájí killed the banana seller/owner.
- (ii). Bólájí killed a civet cat.



“Ọlógèdè” which is ‘civet cat’ is a non-derived word in the Yorùbá language while the other meaning of the word “Ọlógèdè”, that is, “owner of/seller of banana” is a derived word that is derived morphologically through the process of affixation that involves the use of the prefix “o-” with the verb “ní” that is ‘have’ and “ògèdè” (‘banana’), that is:

O + ní + ògèdè → ọlógèdè ‘banana seller/owner of banana’

This is derived through phonological processes of vowel /i/ deletion, denasalisation of /n/ to /l/ and the non-contiguous regressive assimilation of the mid-high vowel /o/ and the mid-low vowel /ɔ/.

(b). Another example of an ambiguous use of homo-tonal homonym in context is the use of the word “ọkà” which can be interpreted as ‘millet’ or “àmàlà”, for example, “Mo ra ọkà ní ojà”. This can be interpreted as:

(i). I bought millet at the market.

(ii). I bought àmàlà at the market.

Àmàlà, which is also known as “ọkà”, is a common food among the Yorùbá but most especially among the people of Ọyọ, and Ègbá that can be found in Oyo and Ogun States, respectively.

(c). Šàkì - Bowel.

Šàkì - A type of robe used by the “ògbóni” secret cult group, for example, mo ra šàkì.

This sentence can be interpreted as:

(i). I bought an animal’s bowels.

(ii) I bought the Ogboni occultic robe.

Other examples of homo-tonal homonym-derived lexical ambiguity in Yorùbá language include:

(d). Ọyà - Grass cutter.

This is an animal of the rabbit family which usually gallops when running, which is why the Yorùbá people usually say “Ó n bẹ bí ọyà,” that is, ‘he is galloping like a grass cutter’ Informally, this sentence can be used derogatorily to abuse an individual who contributes to a discussion that he or she was not invited to.

Ọyà - This means service in the Yorùbá language, as we usually hear people say in Yorùbá that “bá mi mú owó ọyà mi,” that is, ‘give me the money for the service I rendered’. It has been stated earlier that the use of homo-tonal homonyms often leads to lexical ambiguity when used in a sentence. For example, “Fùn mi ní owó ọyà mi” can have these two interpretations:

(i) Give me the money for my grass cutter.

(ii) Give me the money for my service.





(e). Kéran - This can mean to pack or steal the goat. It is phonologically derived from the deletion of vowel /ó/ in the verb phrase “kó + éran” which results in “kéran”. The Yorùbá people usually say “wón ti kéran mi lọ,” that is, “they have packed or stolen my goats.”

Kéran - It is an idiomatic expression that means that the individual in question is in trouble. The Yorùbá usually say “ó ti kéran” which means that “he is in deep trouble.” Using this word in a sentence will result in lexical ambiguity. For example, “Adé kéran” can have these two interpretations:

(i). Ade stole a goat.

(ii). Ade is in trouble.

(f). Ìta - Outside.

Ìta - Third day.

“Ìta ni wón fi sí” can have these two interpretations:

(i). They put it outside.

(ii). It is scheduled for the third day.

(g). Olú - Mushroom.

Olú - Name of a person, most especially adherents of Obaluaye or Sanponna (‘God of smallpox’).

The sentence “Mo rí Olú ní ọ̀nà oko” can have these two interpretations:

(i). I saw Olú (an individual) on my way to the farm.

(ii). I saw mushrooms on my way to the farm.

From the facts established above, it has been confirmed that the use of homo-tonal homonyms can result in lexical ambiguity when used in a non-clearly defined context in Yorùbá language, and one of the ways to disambiguate an ambiguous homo-tonal word is through careful understanding of its context of usage, as well as analysis of the understanding (mutual contextual belief) that exists between the speaker and his or her audience.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR YORÙBÁ LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

The study of homo-tonal homonyms in Yorùbá language presents a very important implication for Yorùbá language teaching and learning. It serves as an important tool in the teaching of different areas of the language, its literature and culture. This provides a veritable tool for educators to provide students, most especially second language learners, i.e., L<sub>2</sub> learners of the Yorùbá language, with phonology, syntax, lexicography, semantics and pragmatics knowledge of the language while also exposing them to the knowledge of



language use in context and all the nuances that go with it. It will also serve as a thesaurus for the language. This importance can be divided into the following:

i. **Phono-Syntactic Instruction:** In terms of phonological instruction, Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms and hetero-tonal homonyms will serve as important tools that educators can use to demonstrate the significant use of tone in the language. The syntactic role of this work is that it can be used to teach the syntactic concept of the selectional principle whereby nouns share similarities in both segmental and supra-segmental features but differ in meaning collocate with different verbs when used in a sentence. For example, while the verb “gùn” which is “to climb” is used for “afára” (‘bridge’) – “mo gun afára” (‘I climbed the bridge’), “kó” which means “to take or pack” is used for “afára” (‘bee hive’), that is, “Mo kó oyin nínú afára” (‘I took or honey from the beehive’).

ii. **Morphological Instruction:** The morphological implication of Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms will help learners understand nominal derivation through the process of affixation, most especially through prefixation. It was observed that while one part of a set of selected Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms are basic morphemes, the other part of the set are derived words. Examples of such homo-tonal homonyms are:

10

Ègé - Segment. This word is derived through the attachment of the prefix è- to the verb “gé” ‘cut’ to form the noun “ègé” that is ‘segment’	Ègé - Dribble.
Egbé - This means to disappear. It is derived through the morphological process of prefixation as in e + gbé, where the prefix e- is added to the verb “gbé” ‘carry’ to form “egbé”.	Egbé - It means, the wrath of God. It is mostly used by adherents of Islamic religion among the Yoruba people.
Èrò - Thought. This word is derived morphologically through the process of affixation, that is, the prefixation of the morpheme è- with the verb “rò” ‘think’ to form the noun “èrò”.	Èrò - Passenger.
Ẹyìn - Palm fruit from which products such as ‘palm oil’ “epo”, ‘vegetable oil’ “òróró”, etc. are refined.	Ẹyìn - To praise someone. It is derived morphologically through the process of prefixation, where the prefix /ẹ/ is attached to the root verb “yìn” which mean to praise.

iii. **Semantics and Pragmatics Instruction:** The semantic and pragmatic implication of investigation of Yoruba homo-tonal homonyms will help learners understand different lexical relations such as homonyms, which can be classified into hetero-tonal homonyms and homo-tonal homonyms, and the role of homonyms in lexical ambiguity. It will also help them to distinguish between homonyms and polysemy, which are two related but distinct lexical relations. It will also aid educators in explaining how context can be used to explain the use of two or more homo-tonal nouns and also how ambiguity can be analysed through the context of the situation. Safataj and Mohammad (2016, p. 2099) explain the role of context in



disambiguating homonyms deriving ambiguity. They assert that “it is the context that can be helpful and aid us in avoiding any obscurity and complication in guessing the correct meaning of a word. So in many cases, the context can work as a disambiguating factor through which no interference is likely to happen and no real confusion will arise.”

Another importance of teaching Yorùbá homo-tonal nominal homonyms is that it will help preserve and document Yorùbá words and protect them from going into extinction. It will also improve and aid the vocabulary development of the learners. This is important as it has been observed by Fabunmi and Salawu (2005) that the Yorùbá language is on the third level of extinction, which is the level of being seriously endangered, and one of the ways to rescue the language is through formalized usage.

## RECOMMENDED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Incorporating Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms into language teaching also allows for the implementation of diverse pedagogical styles, strategies and methods. Teachers can design interactive activities where students pick one vowel and create one or more hetero-tonal and homo-tonal homonyms with it. Instructors can also teach culture with cultural projects where students will research the meanings and origins of different homo-tonal nominal homonyms in the Yorùbá language.

Instructors can also use the pictorial method of teaching where learners will draw pictures of selected Yorùbá homo-tonal nominal homonyms and explain how the two words differ in meaning through peculiar features in the drawings. This will help the students to have photographic images of these words which will help in their assimilation. Yorùbá nominal homo-tonal homonyms will also help students connect linguistic meaning with pragmatic meaning. Additionally, instructors can create role-playing scenarios in which students use Yorùbá homo-tonal homonym names in social interactions. This can provide practical language use experience in context and reinforce the cultural significance of homo-tonal homonyms. For example, while the word “wàjà” linguistically means to enter the ceiling, it means a king has passed away idiomatically, pragmatically and culturally.

## FINDINGS

It was discovered through this work that there are two types of homonyms in the Yorùbá language: hetero-tonal homonyms which are a type of homonym where a set of words share the same sounds but different tonal representations and meanings, and homo-tonal homonyms which are a set of words that share the same sounds, pronunciation and tonal representations but different meanings. It was also discovered that Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms can be used for pedagogical purposes, most especially in teaching Yorùbá L2 learners different aspects of the language, which include phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics and different cultural aspects of the language.



## CONCLUSION

This work on Yorùbá homo-tonal homonyms has helped to fully understand the difference between homo-tonal homonyms and hetero-tonal homonyms on one hand and the difference between homonyms and polysemy on the other hand. It was observed through this work that while hetero-tonal homonyms deal with words that are similar in spelling but differ in meaning, pronunciation and tone representation, while homo-tonal homonyms are words that have the same spelling, pronunciation, and tone representation but differ in meaning. Furthermore, it was also discovered that homo-tonal homonyms usage in a sentence usually results in lexical ambiguity when used in a non-clearly defined sentence.

## REFERENCES

- Adegoke-Elijah, A., Odetunji, O. & Salawu, A.S. (2018). Lexical Ambiguity Resolution System for Standard Yoruba Verbs. *American Journal of Engineering Research* (7) 2 <https://www.ajer.org>
- Adélékè, D. (2020). *The Foolery of Man beyond the Theatrical World: Perspectives from an Indigenous African Literary Critic*. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan. Ibadan University Press.
- Adesina K., Obalanlege A. & Katib, I. (2016). African Musician as Journalist: A Study of Ayinde Barrister's Works. *New Media and Mass Communication Vol. 46*
- Adeyemi, L. (2017). Yoruba Literary Criticism: Theory and Theorizing in Nativism. The One Hundred and Seventy-Second (172ND) Inaugural Lecture. Unilorin Press
- Aina, A.A. (2023). Resolving Lexical Verb Ambiguity in Yoruba through Semantic Web Annotations. *Yoruba Studies Review* (8) 1, 249-275 <https://doi.10.32473/ysr.8.1.134096>
- Ajiboye, O.J. (2021). Knowledge of Language through Theories: A Non-Issue to the Layman, A Serious Issue to the Linguist. University of Lagos Inaugural Lecture Series 21. University of Lagos Press and Bookshop Limited
- Arokoyo, B.E (2019). From Crowdfunded Dictionaries to Online Radio, Language Revitalization in Nigeria Takes Many Forms. *The ACU Review*. Canada.
- Babarinde, O. (2018). Lexical Ambiguity in Yoruba: Its Implications for Second Language Learners. *Journal of Language, Linguistics and Literary Studies Vol.5* <https://www.jolls.com.ng>
- Fabunmi, F.A. & Salawu, A.S. (2005). Is Yoruba an Endangered Language? *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. (14)3, 391-408.
- Fromklin, V & R. Rodman. (1983) *an Introduction to Language*. Hault Saunders.
- Lawal, R.A (2004). *Meaning without Mean-ness*. University of Ilorin Seventy-Four Inaugural Lectures. Ilorin
- Mojela, V.M. (2007). Polysemy and Homonymy: Challenges Relating to Lexical Entries in the Sesotho Sa Leboa-English Bilingual Dictionary. *Lexicos* 17, 433-439
- Odebode, I. (2012). Pet-Naming as Protest's Discourse in Polygamous Yoruba Homes: A Socio- Pragmatic Study. *CS Canada Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (2)
- Oloso, Y.O. (2022). A Descriptive Analysis of Yoruba Homonyms for Pedagogy. *ZIJOH* 1 (3)



- Osunnuga, O. (2013). Investigating Ambiguity in Headlines of Contemporary Yoruba Newspapers. *Linguistics and Literature Studies* 1 (2), 61-65  
<https://doi.10.13189/lls.2013.010202>
- Owomoyela, O. (2005). *Yoruba Proverbs*. USA: University of Nebraska Press
- Palmer, F.R. (1981) *Semantics*. (Second Edition). Cambridge University Press.
- Saeed, J.I. (2009). *Semantics*. Wiley- Blackwell.
- Sankaravelayuthan, R. (2018). *An Introductory Course on Semantics and Pragmatics*. Retrieved Online via [http. researchgate.net](http://researchgate.net) on 27th of March, 2020.
- Safataj, M. & Mohammad, A. (2016). Effect of Homonymous Set of Words Instruction on Vocabulary Development and Retention of Young Female Elementary Learners in Iranian EFL Context through Meta-linguistics Awareness. *Theory and Practice* 6(11) <https://doi:10.17507/tpls.0611.05>
- Taiwo, O., Chidi-Onwuta, G. & Iwe, N.N. (2023). *Introductory Semantic and Pragmatics for Nigerian Students*. Academy Publishing Centre North-East Zone