

## LEXICAL MISUSE AND ITS IMPACT ON LANGUAGE

DOI: [10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.2.26.2025.art.25](https://doi.org/10.56177/AUA.PHILOLOGICA.2.26.2025.art.25)

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**Abstract:** *Lexical misuse or semantic error is the incorrect use of words in speech or writing, generally related to meaning, connotation, collocation or grammatical compatibility. This phenomenon prevails in both native and non-native speakers and is due to such factors as inadequate language education, overreliance on technology and interference from other languages. In comparison with lexical innovation which usually enriches language, lexical misuse often leads to ambiguity and miscommunication. Lexical errors can significantly alter meanings and affect comprehension. They can also influence broader linguistic trends. When misused words are on the rise, they may gradually reshape standard usage, reduce language precision, and ultimately contribute to misunderstandings across cultures. The present work aims at highlighting how lexical misuse occur, its impact on language and how to mitigate its effects. Equally, the paper also provides a short analysis of various pair words that are prone to lexical misuse. Proper word usage is essential to ensure clarity, accuracy, tone and appropriateness in communication.*

**Keywords:** *lexical misuse; ambiguity; language precision*

### 1. Language as a system of communication throughout history

Human life in its present form is inconceivable in the absence of language. Language is a prominent part in all cultures and people have always recognized its force and significance throughout history. It has acquired numerous valences starting with biblical traditions, continuing with ancient philosophers, early modern language marked by the printing press revolution and the rise of national languages (English, French, German, Spanish), modern linguistics (Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky), the technological influence of the 21st century and the rise of multilingualism and AI.

Language in the biblical accounts is divine and revelatory "In the beginning was the word (Logos) and the word was with God." (John 1:1). Divine language is mysterious and often requires interpretation or yields ambiguity (visions, dreams). The Hebrew period in the biblical tradition highlights three important aspects of language: 1. the divine control over its use, 2. its power over man in relation to his environment, 3. the linguistic diversity of communities.

Over time, people have noticed the main function of language as the expression of thought. From the perspective of Greek philosophy, language is more related to truth, knowledge and an ideal reflection on things. According to Aristotle, "speech is the representation of the experiences of the mind" (On Interpretation). He focuses more on the logical semantic and practical function of language in the real

world. He believes language reflects the structure of thought and only by grammar and syntax can we understand how humans reason.

Ferdinand the Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, regarded language as a system of arbitrary signs without any connection between word and meaning. From his perspective, words get meaning not from what they are, but from how they relate to other words in the system. Noam Chomsky, the founder of generative grammar, focused on the innate cognitive mechanisms behind language use. He stated that "the mechanisms underlying how language change over time remain essentially beyond our understanding, not because there are language changes...but because we cannot predict what they will be. Languages are like glaciers: we walk upon them, they move, but we do not recognize this movement unless we realize that the shape of the panorama has globally changed."<sup>1</sup>

Language in the 21st century is evolving faster and in more complex ways than in any other historical period. English has become the dominant *lingua franca* in science, business and digital communication, whereas multilingualism has become a key feature of communication in the 21st century. The coexistence of more languages in a community has brought benefits like greater cultural sensitivity, ability to navigate various environments, access to literary and historical resources, the quick spread of machine translation tools, social media and the Internet.

English prevails in America, Australia and India and its versions underline the importance of mastering its subtleties, especially among those who want to get fluency. Any type of writing in journalism does not deviate from the standardised English. Although language is in constant change, it is desirable that it conveys intelligent forms of expression. It is important for standard English not to get an air of informality or colloquialism but to remain the principal form of communication in formal documents or letters. It should also continue as an authority, based on clarity and unambiguity.

Despite the modern tendencies of communication shaped by globalization, migration, AI or shifting social values, language must remain accurate and precise in order to prevent misunderstandings. In globalized settings where miscommunication carries higher stakes, the clarity and purity of language become paramount. Articulacy and precision in speech and writing are mandatory because "if we can't convey meaning exactly as we intend we have failed in our ability to communicate; and as such, our use of language becomes largely futile."<sup>2</sup>

## **2. What constitutes lexical misuse**

Lexical acquisition, especially when marked by the speed of digital information, has not been exempt from the presence of lexical errors. The communities that migrated to different parts of the globe have tried to take and adjust their language to the culture they have adopted, and consequently certain words, idioms or grammatical

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<sup>1</sup> Chomsky, N., Moro A., *The Secrets of Words*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2022, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Heffer, S., *Scarcely English*, Hutchinson, Heinemann, 2024, p. xxiii.

structures have lost their conservative character being altered either through inappropriateness or translation.

English speaking areas, largely represented by the United Kingdom and America have developed various dialects and versions of the language. The American culture and mass-media have irresistibly influenced the English speaking masses, becoming dominant especially in the digital media. Despite the fact that the British Isles have their own linguistic cultures, a tolerant approach to the dialects used by the English speaking communities would be required.

The language should acquire a democratic meaning, and if the majority of speakers decide to use the American English version, there should be no suspicion that it minimizes the authority of British English. Language is a supreme instrument which belongs to all of us. It carries history, identity and value being the perfect tool for preserving and transmitting culture across generations.

**2.1** Starting from the very definition of the word *misuse*, the Cambridge Dictionary registers it as "to use something in an unsuitable way or in a way that was not intended."<sup>3</sup> Lexical misuse or semantic error is the incorrect use of words in speech or writing, generally related to meaning, connotation, collocation or grammatical compatibility.

Lexical misuse includes semantic error, that is the use of a word whose meaning opposes the speaker's intention. In the example, *He was compelled to go on a trip and had a great time*, the semantic error consists in the incorrect use of the word *compelled* (to do something because you are forced to or feel it is necessary – dictionary.cambridge.org) which suggests lack of choice or force. The correct variant should be *He decided to go on a trip*. Therefore, shifting the tone from enthusiasm to obligation resulted in altering the entire meaning of the sentence.

**2.2** Due to assumed similarity, a word borrowed from another language may be used incorrectly. This is what we call false friends phenomenon. What *sensible* means to Spanish or French cultures, differs from the English language in which it means *practical* or *rational*: *Since he is my chief target in this paper, it seems to me sensible to follow this usage* (Cambridge English Corpus). *Library* is expected to mean *bookstore*, but its true meaning is "a place to borrow books". *Eventually* is usually translated as *eventual* in Romanian, but its actual meaning is "in the end", "after some time". The expected meaning of *fabric* is *factory*, but in reality it means "material" or "textile". There are numerous examples of false friends which cause serious misunderstandings among speakers or writers. Due to their familiarity with other languages, such words are often confusing or even embarrassing for learners.

**2.3** Another common type of lexical misuse includes collocations, which are word combinations playing an important role in language acquisition. They are key to fluent clear and natural communication in language and help learners sound more native, improve understanding and prevent common lexical mistakes.

Authors like M. Lewis (1997), Yang & O'Neill (2009) or N. Nesselhauf (2005) highlight the importance of collocational competence in the language

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<sup>3</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/misuse>.

acquisition and focus on the idea that vocabulary is better understood or expanded when collocations are used rather than isolated words. "This competence plays an important role in helping learners use a language fluently, accurately and appropriately."<sup>4</sup>

However, learning collocations may give rise to lexical confusion, resulting from the learners' insufficient knowledge of appropriate word use and how words are associated. "Since collocation is not determined by logic as in the case with grammar, the learner has to resort to linguistic convention in order to produce acceptable word combinations."<sup>5</sup>

In certain cases, collocations do not conform to the grammaticality criterion. Even if a word combination is grammatically acceptable, native speakers may never use it that way. *Make a mistake* sounds more natural than *do a mistake*. *Do* is correct from a grammatical point of view, but *make* is the verb that collocates with *mistake*. *Tell a joke* is not very different from *say a joke*, but *tell* is the verb that naturally pairs with *joke*. *Rich vocabulary* is less common especially in academic writing, but it can be replaced by more elaborate combinations such as *broad / advanced / varied vocabulary*. *Pose a solution* is usually misapplied, since *pose* typically collocates with a threat or a question. Instead, *offer / provide a solution* are more natural and adequate.

Whether collocations can be substituted for synonyms is what we call substitutability phenomenon. This concept highlights that collocations are often fixed or semi-fixed words which do not combine freely. They prefer specific pairs which is not entirely governed by logic or grammar, but by conventional frequency of use.

*Do a decision* (correct - *make a decision*), *receive a cold* (correct - *catch a cold*), *give attention* (correct - *pay attention*) are unacceptable substitutions which usually happen due to such factors as conventional use, lexical preferences or first language transfer.

In terms of the semantic component, collocations may be misused leading to inappropriate, illogical or unnatural meaning. Even if words are correct and similar in meaning, they may carry different semantic roles or connotations, making their combinations misleading. Although *powerful* and *strong* are synonyms in *powerful* vs. *strong coffee*, the former refers to people or emotions, whereas the latter refers to the intensity of beverages, therefore the natural combination is *strong coffee*. In *get knowledge* vs. *acquire knowledge*, *get* is informal and general-purpose, whereas *acquire* semantically conveys a process of learning which is more appropriate in academic contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> Yang J. & O'Neill R., *Collocation learning through the AWARE approach: learner perspectives and learning process*: in Barfield, A. & Gyllstad H., (eds) – *Researching collocation in another language: Multiple interpretations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis M., *The Lexical approach: the state of ELT and a way forward*, Language Teaching Publications, 1993, p. 36.

Conventional collocations are not based on strict rules, but on accepted usage or exposure. They help to improve writing and speaking, fluency, to comprehend native texts or to reduce cognitive load when performing a task. Here are some examples of conventional collocations which are learned through repeated exposure and become fixed in the mental lexicon: *make a choice, language barrier, deeply concerned, under pressure, strong argument, meet a deadline, draw a conclusion, burst into tears* etc.

**2.4** Another common lexical misuse includes polysemy confusion. Polysemy is the phenomenon by which a single word form is associated with two or several related meanings. It can cause significant confusion in language processing and become ambiguous in writing unless meaning is inferred from context. For example, *The writer sat by the bank and wrote a few lines of his novel* needs subtle semantic understanding to infer *riverbank*.

Taking into consideration the specialized meanings found in legal or scientific texts, words may be easily confused or misinterpreted, therefore the context should be unambiguous. For example *charge* is a formal accusation in criminal law, whereas its common meanings include *to demand payment, to rush forward* or *to power a device*. The sentence *He is under a charge* may be ambiguous in the absence of a legal context.

*Execution* acquires the legal meanings of *carrying out a court judgement or capital punishment*, whereas in common usage it refers to any form of putting a plan into action. *Execution of the will* involves a semantic confusion and may sound like *someone put to death*, rather than *the will being carried out*.

Polysemy confusion is a critical issue with a big impact on language processing. It may lead to misunderstandings in speaking or writing, confusion in multilingual communication, difficulties in developing reliable semantic search or delayed comprehension due to slow mental filtering of information. While polysemy confusion can't be eliminated, being a natural feature of our language, it can be disambiguated by including more sentence context, rather than translating isolated words or phrases, using specialized glossaries or using contextual reading, semantic mapping and contrastive examples.

**2.5** By narrow usage, we understand a word with a limited or specific meaning, though it can technically apply to broader contexts. For example, the polysemous word *issue* is usually restricted to a single meaning of *problem*, although it has a full range of other senses which are neither recognized, nor used by the learner: *topic, publication, legal claim, a particular type of shares, currency* etc.

Such narrow usage often occurs due to limited exposure, domain-specific use or language interference. A person's limited exposure to different reading materials or cultural interaction may lead to narrow usage of words. Lack of variety, lack of formal or academic language input, over-reliance on literal meanings or lack of active language use, may also generate narrow usage among learners.

The tendency to interpret language literally rather than metaphorically is that literal language is less ambiguous, whereas metaphors involve recognizing

multiple meanings, making abstract associations or understanding contextual clues. For example, *spring* is only a season in its narrow usage, whereas in broader sense it acts as a verb *to spring into action* or a noun *a piece of curved metal, a water place following out from the ground*. *Run* is a physical activity in its literal meaning, but expands its range to other senses like *run a business, run deep, run short, run for office* etc. *Plant* is easier used as a living thing, but someone might not understand such meanings as *power plant* or *to plant an idea*.

Avoiding narrow usage is recognizing that words have multiple meanings, functions and contexts. A more comprehensive analysis of dictionary entries, engaging in varied conversations and understanding figurative meanings may contribute to developing the ability to interpret words beyond their literal meaning, making logical connections and discovering more subtleties of language.

### **3. Lexical misuse – a short analysis of word pairs**

Lexical misuse affects sectors like education, medicine, law, media, business etc., having serious consequences on language clarity and safety. The misuse of words has an impact on every aspect from the individual's understanding to societal discourse and even governance. When words foster an environment of misunderstanding, they cause a distortion of reality which further diminishes trust and creates barriers.

Despite its high importance, the emotional side of lexical misuse was often overlooked either in social or professional settings. The emotional content of a word is usually defined in terms of two affective dimensions: emotional valence and emotional arousal.<sup>6</sup>

According to Kuperman et al. 2014,<sup>7</sup> valence appears to have a stronger effect than arousal. In terms of valence, words are perceived as positive, neutral or negative. For example, the valence of *joy* is positive, in contrast with *war* which is negative. Arousal refers to the intensity of emotional activation a word produces. *Triumph, elation, bliss, euphoria* are high-arousal words often used in news headlines, emotional storytelling or advertising. Others like *peace, serenity, contentment* etc., are low-arousal words generally found in poetry or meditation. Even lexical misuse becomes emotionally charged when it exposes gaps in knowledge or fluency, influences clarity or the communication flow or affects one's confidence and sense of competence. In the following lines we will make a short analysis of some word pairs that are prone to lexical misuse.

#### ***Administrate - Administer***

*To administrate something* is to run it or cause it to function. *To administer something* is to give it to someone – whether a toxic substance, some medicine, a

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<sup>6</sup> Bradley, M.M., Lang, P. J., *Affective norms for English words. Technical report C-1*, The Center for Research in Psychophysiology, vol 30, no.1, 2010, pp. 25-36, University of Florida.

<sup>7</sup> Kuperman, V., Estes, Z., Brysbaert, M., & Warriner, A. (2014). Emotion and language: Valence and arousal affect word recognition. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(3), 1065–1081.

punishment or even some charity. *Administer* is a semantically richer transitive verb with broader collocational flexibility: *administer medicine / punishment / an oath / a government* etc., whereas *administrate* is used almost exclusively in institutional contexts when the speaker wants to sound more formal and technical.

The sentence *They administrated the program* is better replaced by the more natural *They administered the program*. Due to its limited syntactic productivity, *administrate* is not used in idiomatic or metaphorical expressions: *He administrated first aid* (incorrect) versus *He administered first aid* (correct).

This lexical misuse is often due to hypercorrection, influence of formal register or exposure to bureaucratic jargon which sometimes uses the form *administrate*. However, in academic English, especially in formal writing, *administer* is the preferred form in almost all contexts.

### **Affect - Effect**

The pair usually causes lexical confusion because their form doesn't clearly signal their role. Even their phonological similarity makes them harder to distinguish in speech. *To affect* in its most common usage means to have an effect on a person or a thing as in *Sedentary life affects your health*. *Affect* as a verb is also used to indicate a degree of pretension as in the example *He used to affect a foreign accent*.

*Effect* is typically a noun and refers to "a change that is caused by an event or action,"<sup>8</sup> but it can also be used as a verb (to be brought about) as in *The new law will effect major change*. Speakers tend to consider them interchangeable because they are near-homophones with similar morphology and shared field (impact, change).

Because our mental lexicon stores and retrieves words based on sound, spelling and meaning clusters, this pair can be easily swapped, which gives rise to lexical misuse, especially when writing under time pressure or speaking without planning.

### **Coarse - Course**

This pair of homophones includes the adjective *coarse* meaning rough (whether of a material or a character) and the noun *course* with a number of uses (direction, program of formal study, area of land used for sports events etc.). They are generally distinguished in speech or writing unless the speaker relies on context to interpret or spell them correctly. Even though their meanings are different, they sometimes appear in similar grammatical structures or related metaphorical contexts: *The students used coarse language* (rough or trivial), *They took a course in social sciences* (a class).

The lexical errors arise because of their similar pronunciation, spelling, mental confusion or low semantic connection.

### **Complacent - Complaisant**

The former is an adjective meaning a lack of understanding of the possibly shortcomings of a situation. The latter adjective is applied to a person who is

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/effect>.

"willing to satisfy others by being polite and fitting in with their plans."<sup>9</sup> These two words are mistakenly interchanged due to their similar spelling, pronunciation or overlapping behaviour. Unlike *complacent* that usually has a negative connotation (*The team grew complacent after several victories and underestimated their next opponent*), *complaisant* is generally positive and neutral (*We need solutions which will keep everyone complaisant*).

Even though they are mixed up in usage, learners tend to use *complacent* which is more common in modern English.

### **Flair - Flare**

*Flair* is a noun showing "a natural ability to do something well"<sup>10</sup> as in the example *Unfortunately her piece of writing lacks flair*. *Flare* as a noun is synonymous with *brightness*, whereas the verb means to get worse (*Temper flared during the hot debate*) or to make wider (*The girl's skirt flares below her knees*). Both words are often confused either due to their identical pronunciation or overlapping metaphorical use. Lexical confusion can be avoided if we create mental anchors to distinguish the pair, attach visual images to the word's meaning or practice their usage more in writing than in reading.

### **Fortuitous – Fortunate**

The dictionary categorizes *fortuitous* as "something not planned, happening by chance"<sup>11</sup> and *fortunate* as something favoured by fortune. It seems to be clear that there is no real difference at all between these adjectives when used in the sense of good luck or good fortune. However, they are usually confused or misused interchangeably. *Fortuitous* is neutral or negative in tone, though it is often used to mean lucky, which is a misuse. *Our meeting was completely fortuitous – I hadn't planned to be there* is the correct usage of the adjective, in contrast with *It was fortuitous that he won the prize* which is incorrect and misused as *fortunate*.

*Fortunate* is always positive, resulting in good luck as in *He was fortunate to enter that prestigious university*. Most modern dictionaries (Merriam-Webster, Oxford) list the *lucky* sense of *fortuitous* as a secondary or extended meaning, but traditionalists still view this as incorrect usage, especially in formal writing.

### **Imply - Infer**

These two verbs remain almost routinely confused, which is bizarre when one considers how little effort it takes to learn their distinct meanings. *To imply something* is to express the likelihood of its happening (*Democracy implies free elections*) and *to infer something* is to register an implication and to deduce a conclusion from it (*I inferred from her attitude that she wanted to give up*). They describe opposite directions in the communication process. *Imply* is used by the speaker or writer, whereas *infer* is used by the listener or reader.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/complaisant>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/flair>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fortuitous>.



The sentence *Are you inferring that I'm not competent?* is incorrect because it is the speaker who suggests something. In this case, it should be replaced by *Are you implying that I'm not competent?* The example *From the way she acted I inferred that she wasn't happy* makes sense because the listener based himself on clues before concluding. To grasp the meanings of the verbs logically we should first understand the role of the speaker and the listener. The former provides indirect premise (*imply*), and the latter draws a logical conclusion (*infer*).

### **Perpetrate - Perpetuate**

These verbs are often confused because they sound similar and relate to negative contexts. However, they have entirely different logical and grammatical functions. *To perpetrate* is associated with committing a crime or a violent act as in the example *They have been accused of perpetrating mass killings*. On the other side, *to perpetuate something* is to keep it going as in *The purpose of the agency is to perpetuate the traditions of the place*.

Confusion often arises and one hears people say that someone has *perpetuated* something when all he has done is *perpetrated* it. *He perpetuated the robbery* is logically flawed because one can't sustain a one-time event like a robbery. Instead we should write *He perpetrated the robbery*. To avoid possible confusion, the writer might better use a synonymous verb like *commit* which is more neutral and common. *Perpetrate* is more formal, more forceful and specific to investigative contexts.

### **Waive - Wave**

This pair is prone to lexical misuse, especially in writing. *To waive* means to forgo a right or privilege as in *She waived her right to a lawyer*, whereas *wave* refers to a literal or figurative motion of the hand as in *She waved to her children from the car* or *You can wave goodbye to your fringe benefits this year following your poor performance*.

Both words appear in common collocations like *waive a right*, *wave a fee*, *wave goodbye*, *a wave of relief*, *give a wave* etc.

To disambiguate between *waive* and *wave* we need to verify the contextual domain (rule, fee, legal right - require *waive*), visual motion (greetings, movements, emotions – require *wave*) or common word pairings (*wave goodbye*, *wave your hand*, *waive a fee* etc.)

### **Conclusions**

Lexical confusion can be due to confusion with similar-sounding words, words with overlapping meanings or misunderstandings of connotation or register. Morphological confusion, overcorrection or high formality overextension from familiar contexts are also causes of lexical errors. All of these have linguistic consequences consisting of distorting messages, ambiguity, miscommunication or stylistic awkwardness.

Promoting lexical awareness is necessary to know how, when and why to use particular words. It involves understanding the literal meaning of the word, recognizing emotional and cultural nuances, discovering what words naturally go

together and differentiating formality levels and contexts. Being more than a vocabulary error, lexical misuse reflects a deeper misunderstanding of meaning, usage and context.

It is essential for writers and learners not just to fix errors but to comprehend why errors arise and how to avoid them. Credible communication is based on accuracy in word choice, reflection and exposure to authentic language use.

Equally significant is the role of dictionaries in promoting lexical precision. At their core, they clarify denotation, distinguish similar-sounding words, provide example sentences to show how words are used in natural contexts, and include typical collocations and synonym lists. Dictionaries should be used reflectively as a tool that trains our lexical judgement and promote a deeper understanding of language.

Last, but not least, all digital tools are valuable when used to provide instant clarification of word misuse, vocabulary refinement or to explain subtle meaning differences. Online dictionaries, lexical databases, learning platforms or AI-powered tools all contribute to verifying word choice and promoting semantic clarity while aligning language with purpose and audience. The essence of refined language is to think more clearly, express more accurately and write more meaningfully.

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