

Some cases of Ambiguity in English

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1-1 Introduction : Ambiguity ,which is pronounced / ambiguiti/ .is the property of being ‘ambiguous’ ,where a word ,term , notation , sign symbol , phrase, sentence ,or any other form used for communication ,is called ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way. Ambiguity, however ,is context –dependent ,i.e .the same linguistic item ,be it a word, phrase , or sentence may be ambiguous in one context and unambiguous in another .

Ambiguity to Crystal (1988;15) is the reference to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning and this reference has to do with linguistics .In this regard ,several types of ambiguity can be recognized; these include grammatical (or structural) ambiguity in a phrase like “new houses and shops “ which could be analyzed as either “new{houses and shops } “ ,i.e . both are new , or “{new houses }and shops” ,i.e.’ only’ the houses are new .

Another major type of ambiguity is the semantic (or lexical) ambiguity which might be viewed in a sentence like “Visiting speakers can be awful “,which is interpreted in two different ways .The first interpretation is ‘It is awful to visit speakers “whereas the second one is “Speakers who visit are awful “ .

Another definition of ambiguity is forwarded by Hartmann and Stork (1976;11) who state that ambiguity is a construction which admits more than one interpretation . An instance is “Patent medicines are sold by frightening people” the ambiguity arises due to the fact that we cannot tell whether the sense intended is ‘Patent medicines are sold by putting fear into people “ or “ Patent medicines are sold by people who are frightening.

1.2 Types of Ambiguity: Linguistic theories have identified two main types of ambiguity:

1. **Syntactic Ambiguity:** This type of ambiguity is also known as 'structural ambiguity'. Syntactic ambiguity arises when the role a word plays in a sentence is unclear, as in :

1- Squad helps dog bite victim .

2- **Lexical Ambiguity** : This type of ambiguity is also known as "semantic ambiguity " .Lexical ambiguity arises when a word has more than one generally accepted meaning ,as exemplified in:

2- Drunk gets nine months in violin case .

Here it is necessary to mention the fact that we may ,at times ,come across the label "lexical –semantic ambiguity " ,especially in 'linguistics ' to refer to lexical or semantic ambiguity .As stated above ,it is a type of ambiguity that arises out of the fact that a word may have more than one meaning .In most cases , the intended meaning is made clear by the context .

To illustrate the case ,let us adduce these examples :

3.Child's stool is great for use in garden .

4. I saw a bat .

Other types of ambiguity , however ,have also been identified by linguists.

These generally exist in subtypes of 'syntactic ' or 'lexical' ambiguity. These subtypes are listed below :

3- **Scope ambiguity** : It is still under debate whether this type of ambiguity is a form of syntactic or lexical ambiguity ,or whether it represents a unique class of ambiguity .An example of such ambiguity is :

2-2. Prostitutes appeal to Pope .

4- **Phonological ambiguity:** This is a subtype of lexical ambiguity that occurs when a set of sound can be interpreted in more than one way .In essence, it is a type of ambiguity that arises at the level of the surface structure rather than the deep structure .An instance is the following :

6. Psychotherapist Vs . Psycho therapist

5- **Punctuation Ambiguity** : This can be considered as a mix of syntactic and lexical ambiguity .The ambiguity in this case is also in the surface structure rather than in the deep structure ,notice ,for example :

7- I want you to notice your hand me the glass .

7-a – A woman without her man ,is savage .

7-b- A woman, without her, man is savage .

6- **Grouping Ambiguity** :This is a type of 'syntactic' ambiguity .In this case ,the ambiguity arises from the precariousness of the clarity as to whether a modifier in a sentence modifies only one or several objects ;for instance :

8. Hand me the red and yellow balls .

9.Hand me the red ball and yellow ball .

10. Hand me the balls that are red and yellow .

7-. **Cross-reference Ambiguity**: It is a type of 'syntactic ' ambiguity , that of 'referent ' ,especially when using pronouns ; a good example is :

11- Bob kicked Tom ,and he broke his leg .

Furthermore ; we may come across several other types of ambiguity based on elliptical elements or on a lack of situational mediums .

1.2.1 **Structural Ambiguity**: According to transformationlists , there are two distinct deep structures expressing , on the one hand ,the fact that :

1-Annie had an umbrella and she whacked a man with it and , on the other hand ,that :

2- Annie whacked a man and the man happened to be carrying an umbrella are actually represented in the same surface structure form ; notice :

3-Annie whacked a man with an umbrella .

This last sentence is 'syntactically' ambiguous in the sense that it has two different underlying interpretations which would be represented differently in the deep structure ,as stated in (1)and (2) above .

Even phrases , however can also be 'syntactically ' or (structurally) ambiguous ,as in the expression below :

1- The hatred of the killers

Which could mean either :

2- Someone hated the killers .or

3- The killers hated someone .

The case ,as such ,indicates that "killers" stands in subject-verb relation as well as in object –verb relation , and this accounts for the ambiguity of the superficial structure of (1) above .

Moreover , let us exemplify the case further by illustrative examples like :

1-an American history teacher .

Which, as it appears on the surface ,is structurally ambiguous as it admits of the two interpretations :

2-a teacher of American history . and

3- an American teacher of history .

A phrase like the one mentioned above normally confirms to a pattern like : {Determiner +Adjective +Noun +Noun } .In this regard ,Stageberg (1981: 252) illustrates the case by introducing this example :

4- a decent college graduate.

Which involves a sort of ambiguity due to the following two interpretations :

5- graduate of a decent college ,or

6- a decent graduate of college .

The ambiguity of (4) above arises from the fact that the adjective, in this case "decent " may modify either the first noun ,i.e 'college' or the second noun ,i.e 'graduate' .

Notice ,however , that sentences like these show a sort of ambiguity:

1- Flying planes can be dangerous.

2- Visiting aunts can be a nuisance.

3- The parents of the bride and the groom were waiting.

With regard to the ambiguity of (1) above , we can say that , as such , the sentence may be interpreted as:

a- For someone to fly *planes/ a plane* can be dangerous .

Notice that "flying" is interpreted as a transitive verb with an implicit subject, whereas the second interpretation, i.e. b- Planes, when flying can be dangerous.

exposes the fact that "flying " is being interpreted as a modifier modifying the succeeding noun ,i.e ' planes ' .The same explications can be made with reference to the ambiguous sentence(2) above. But what about sentence (3) ,i.e ."The parents of the bride and groom were waiting ".The sentence, as it stands, is ambiguous, and its ambiguity arises from the obscure sense which leaves us wondering whether:

a. The parents of the bride were waiting.

b. The parents of the groom were waiting.

- c. The parents of the bride were waiting ,and so was the groom.
 d. The parents of the bride and the parents of the groom were waiting.

In order for us to remove the ambiguity , we have to stick to one meaning , that which is intended ; in this case only , the ambiguity is cleared off ,i.e by picking out any of the interpretations mentioned above , especially (c) and (d) .

1.2.2 Linguistic Competence : Linguistic competence plays a considerable role in making a distinction between any two or more sentences that may be ambiguous .

A mature speaker of English ,however ,knows enough about the structures (1) and (2) to retrieve either or both of the meanings involved ;notice :

1-The chicken is ready to eat.

2- I saw her in the street .

Sentence (1) can be associated with :

3- X eats the chicken , or

4- The chicken eats X .

Whereas sentence (2) means either :

5- I saw her when I was in the street ,or

6- I saw her when she was in the street .

The linguist ,however ,attempts to find a way of explaining the facts about the speaker –hearer's linguistic capacities .In this respect Fowler (1977:3) states that the linguist has to account for the structure of English sentences in a way which takes cognizance of speakers' intuitions of deviance , similarity , distinctness , and ambiguity in their experience of English sentences .For instance ,no analysis of (1) is adequate unless it assigns two alternative structural descriptions to that sentence in recognition of the fact that speakers attach two different meanings to it .In this case , the grammarian will probably say that 'the chicken' is the object of the verb in one interpretation (i.e .X eats the chicken), the subject of the sentence in the other (i.e the chicken eats X) .Notice that 'subject ' and 'object' are descriptive concepts which the linguist proposes as a way of explaining certain structural facts about English .Moreover , the motivation for these concepts comes from the inquiry into ' what the speaker knows ' ,i.e , the speaker's perception of "ambiguity".

These concepts are no more than theoretical terms i.e aids to expressing a hypothesis about linguistic knowledge .It is not necessary ,however , to assume that English speakers' brains contain two compartments labeled 'subject' and 'object'.

1.2.3 Surface structure and Deep structure : The sentence , when uttered , is on the surface and this surface structure may hide the presence of two or more deep structures .Notice that we cannot pronounce(1) below .

1- The chicken is ready to eat

One way to show that the "chicken" is the 'object' of eat , another way to emphasize that it is the ' subject' . Therefore, the sentence as it appears on the surface is 'syntactically ' ambiguous .In (2) below :

2- I saw her in the street .

"in the street " , goes with” I ” in one interpretation , and with” her” in another ; the two interpretations sound just the same ,i.e one surface structure , but undeniably two meanings .

Transformation lists give an insight into the case through two of their favorite examples :

3- John is easy to please .

4- John is eager to please.

Which appear to be identical except for the simple 'lexical ' contrast "easy-eager" . But there is a fundamental difference elicited in (3), i.e. ."John" stands in an object-verb relation to "pleas" ,while in (4), "John" is in a subject-verb relation to "please" ; let us ,now, compare:

5- It is easy to please John .(Right)

6-It is eager to please John.(wrong)

Sentence (5) above is not in a meaningful relation to (6). The two different functions of "ready" in the sentence about the 'chicken are represented separately in ' easy' and 'eager' ,neither of which is the syntactic chameleon that "ready" is . Obviously , a grammarian who pays attention only to surface structure would fail to notice some vitally important distinctions , that between (3) and (4) above, between the two meanings of (1)and between the two meanings of (2) .The familiar operation of 'parsing' would miss the point entirely

Parsing ,however ,entails assigning each word in a sentence to a part of speech or word –class , and then representing the sentence as a sequence of these word classes .On this analysis , these sentence :

- 1- The chicken is ready to eat .
- 2- John is easy to please.
- 3- John is eager to please .

Would all come out as :

{Noun + Copula +Adjective+ Particle + Verb }

Or by bracketing together to form one unit :

(Noun + (Copula+(Adjective+(Particle +verb))))

Alternatively , we might use notions like 'subject 'and 'object' but the way "John " in (2) , and "the chicken " on one reading of (1) would be erroneously labeled, since we would certainly be tempted to call John and the chicken 'subject ' in all cases .

1.2.4 Duality of Part of speech : An English sentence is an arrangement of words , not as words but in their capacity as parts of speech . If we do not, as listeners or readers , grasp the identity of those parts of speech , we cannot understand with certainty the message being communicated consider ,for example :

- 1-They are encouraging reports .

Here the word "encouraging " is the stumbling block ,as it may be a verb , and the sentence would mean :

- 2- They are encouraging reports .

Or "encouraging" may be an adjectival, giving the meaning of :

- 3- These reports are encouraging.

Notice that not knowing the part of speech of this single word ,i.e ."encouraging " would result in a sort of ambiguity .But in a carefully controlled context , however , this sentence might not be ambiguous .Another example is a sentence like :

- 4- They are watching dogs .

On the surface , sentence(4)is suggestive of a sort of ambiguity in the sense that it is very much bewildering to determine whether :

5- Some people are watching dogs.

6-Watching dogs are over there (for them to see).

In (4) , the ambiguity arises from the duality of concept the word "watching" poses , which makes it hard for readers to pinpoint the difference in sense i.e whether 'watching " is the present participle indicating the progressive tense .In this sense ,pronoun "they" indicates the subject as in (5) .In (6) ,however, "watching " is a modifier designating the succeeding noun "dogs" ,i.e .telling the type of dogs as those bred and kept for watching and guarding.

1.2.5 ICS & Hierarchical Structure: Any sentence in English can be divided into immediate constituents .i.e, ICs .Moreover ,simply dividing a sentence into ICs .does not provide much information .Nevertheless it can some times prove illuminating . It can , for instance ,show that a certain type of ambiguity , a difference of meaning , is related to a difference in the hierarchical structure of the IC analysis .To shed light on such a hierarchical structure , let us cite an example set in Palmer(1984:125) to this effect :

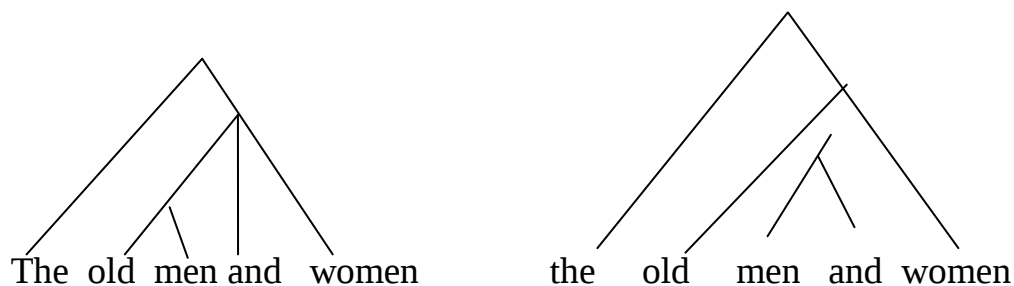
1- the old man and woman

The ambiguity of (1) above is clearly illustrated by paraphrasing it either as :

a- The old men and women. or

b- The old men and the old women.

This , however, would allow us to recognize two different analyses , as shown by the following trees :



Notice that with a conjunction like “and”, it is difficult to provide the justification for a binary cut, since there seems to be no reason to prefer “men and women” to “men” and ” and women “, and it seems that we must cut into three .

Similarly , we can distinguish or resolve the ambiguity of :

1- Egyptian cotton shirt.

By having the first cut after "Egyptian "; notice:

a- a cotton shirt made in Egypt

or after "cotton " ,as in :

b- a shirt made of Egyptian cotton

However the following sentence :

2- He looked over my shoulder .

is less obvious and the ambiguity is ascribable to the fact that if "a doctor examining the shoulder " is the sense intended to be expressed , the second cut is between "looked over" and " my shoulder " .This is because "looked over" is a transitive phrasal verb and "my shoulder " is a direct object .But if it simply refers to the " direction in which someone looked " ,the division , then , is between " looked ' an ordinary verb , and "over my shoulder" , a locative prepositional phrase .

Much more difficult and , perhaps , not suitable in terms of IC analysis alone is the problem of :

3-He said he was coming today .

Notice that ,if " today" is taken to belong to "said " , the first cut is to be after "coming " as illustrated in :

4- He said he was coming | today .

But if it belongs to "coming " , the cut will occur after "said" ;notice :

5- He said | he was coming today .

1.2.6 Compound Words Vs . Grammatical Structures : It is worth mentioning that compound words cannot be divided by the insertion of intervening material between the two parts , but grammatical structures can be so divided .To confuse the two structures would definitely result in a sort of ambiguity . To illustrate this point , let us compare these two sentences :

1- She is a sweetheart .

2- She has a sweet heart .

In sentence (1) , the compound word "sweetheart " is indivisible in that you cannot insert anything between 'sweet ' and ' heart ' , but

in the second sentence , we could say :

3- She has a sweeter heart than her sister .

4- She has a sweet ,kind heart.

5- She has a sweet , sweet heart .

Thereby dividing the components “ sweet ” and “ heart ” , Thus sentence (6) below contains a grammatical structure , not a compound word . Following the principle of divisibility , we find that the next sentence is ' ambiguous ' :

6-She loves sweet potatoes .

Notice that when " sweet potatoes " means the ' yellow kind' , the expression cannot be divided and is therefore a compound word , but when the words refer to ' white potatoes that are sweet ; the division is possible , as in:

7- She loves sweet , fresh potatoes.

And you can now see that we have a grammatical structure moreover , a member of a compound word cannot participate in a grammatical structure . To explain this , let us compare "hard ball" and "baseball" . Notice that "hard ball" is a grammatical structure of modifier plus noun , and its first member ” hard” can participate in the structure "very hard " , as we see in sentence (8) below :

8-It was a very hard ball

But we cannot say :

9 – It is very baseball.

as" base ball " is a compound word .However ,'ambiguous' cases can occur in sentences like :

10- He is fond of sparkling water .

To show the case , let us mention the fact that when "sparkling water" refers to" ordinary water that sparkles", the first member then i.e "sparkling" can participate in grammatical structure , and we can therefore say:

11-Jane has already drunk the brightly sparkling water .

By inserting an intervening material, in this case , "brightly " , so 'sparkling water" with this meaning is a grammatical structure .But when the expression refers to a "carbonated water" , such participation cannot occur and we have a compound word instead .

1.2.7 Absence of Determiner : Occasionally, the absence of a determiner normally used to signal a following noun , will result in a

sort of ambiguity .This ambiguity is often viewed in newspaper headlines ;notice :

1- Union demands increase .

We do not know how to interpret ' increase 'because a signal ,i.e a determiner is absent .Stageberg (1981:173) resolves the ambiguity by inserting "will" between 'demand' and 'increase ' to show that 'increase' is a verb :

(v)

a- Union demands will increase.

While a determiner would indicate that it is a noun ,as in :

(N)

b- Union demands an increase .

Similar illustrative examples include headlines like :

2-Police raid gathering .

Notice that by inserting an indefinite article immediately before the noun “ gathering “ resolves the problem and ambiguity clears off .

3-Complete faculty at state .

A determiner inserted immediately before the noun 'faculty' would render the headline unambiguous .

a- complete the faculty at state .

still there is another possibility to disambiguate it ; notice:

b- A complete faculty at state

In (a) above , "complete " is interpreted as a verb ; while in (b) , "complete " is an adjective modifying the succeeding noun "faculty" .

4- Rule book not absent.

A determiner inserted before 'book ' would indicate that "rule" is rendered into a verb, thus we see:

a- Rule the book not absence

In another interpretation , the ambiguity is cleared off by initiating the headline with a determiner , thus making "rule" modifier to the noun "book ";so "rule" is now noun in form , yet a modifier by function ;this is shown in :

b- The rule book not obscene.

5- clean model house .

The ambiguity of (5) above is removed by introducing the headline by a determiner which would signal that the word "clean" is being used as an

adjective modifying the head noun "house"

a-A clean model house .

Another disambiguating attempt would convert "clean" into a verb by the insertion of " the" between "clean" and "model house ",as in :

b- Clean the model house .

6-Girl shows top baby beef .

(6) above is ambiguous , but could be distinguished by introducing the headline by a determiner ,as in :

a- A girl shows top baby beef .

In this interpretation , "top "is an adjective modifying ,together with 'baby' the noun 'beef' .Moreover " top", is verb in ;

b- Girl shows top the baby beef .

Notice that "shows" is a noun modified by the noun –modifier "girl": "top" is being used as a verb, meaning " to be on top".

1.2.2- Semantic Ambiguity : Sentences are identified by their phonetic representation rather than by the combination of a phonetic and a semantic representation ; each different phonetic representation enumerated by the grammar constitutes a unique sentence .A sentence is then 'ambiguous ' precisely when it is associated with two or more 'semantic ' representations .Conversely ,a single semantic representation may be associated with two or more different sentences ,which are then said to be " paraphrases " .For example , the following sentence cited by Huddleston (1981: 12) is 'semantically' ambiguous :

1-Mary looked hard .

The ambiguity arises from the fact that the sentence could roughly mean either:

2- Mary looked intensively ,or

3- Mary appeared hard .

Whereas sentences (4)and (5) below :

4- Give it to the girl that John's talking to .

5- Give it to the girl John's talking to.

are "paraphrases " .The correspondence relations between sentences and their meanings are extremely complex .The existence of ambiguity and ambiguity and paraphrase is just one facet of this complexity .To describe them systematically ,we shall need to set up levels of representations intermediate between the semantic and phonetic so that instead of moving in one step from meaning to pronunciation , we will

proceed in smaller , more manageable steps via these intermediate levels .For example , we will give an analysis of each sentence as a string of words classified in terms of "parts of speech" and grammatical categories " .The ambiguity of (1) above is due to the fact that " hard" belongs to both the adverb and adjective classes , and that " look " appears in a construction with both ; notice , however , sentences like these lack such an ambiguity :

6- She looked carefully .

7- She looked cruel .

8- She worked hard.

The reasons why these sentences are unambiguous is that the elements that follow the verbs belong to a definitive class , either adjective or adverb .

2.1-1 Range of Meaning : Syntactic ambiguity is a property of sentences which may be reasonably interpreted in more than one way , or reasonably interpreted to mean more than one thing .Ambiguity may or may not involve one word having two parts of speech or homonyms. Syntactic ambiguity arises not from the range of meanings of single words but from the relationship between the words and the clauses of a sentence and the sentence structure implied thereby .When a reader can reasonably interpret the same sentence as having more than one possible structure ,the text is " equivocal " and meets the definition of "syntactic 'ambiguity " .

Syntactic ambiguity can be contrasted with "semantic" ambiguity . The former represents multiple ways to infer the underlying structure of an entire sentence whereas the latter represents multiple ways to define individual words within a sentence .

Here in below are some examples illustrating the focal point :

1- Bear left at zoo .

This sentence could suggest either :

a- Do you turn left when you get to the zoo? Or

b- Did someone leave a bear there?

2- I am going to sleep .

"Going " ,above can be a verb with a destination "sleep" ,or together with the proceeding auxiliary constitutes a near –future indicator . However , there is little difference in meaning between the two parses .

3- The word of the Lord came to Zecharia , son of Berekiah ,son of Iddo ,the prophet .

On reading sentence (3) above ,a question immediately occurs as to "who is the prophet ?"(i.e which of the three is the prophet ?)

2.1.2 The Possessive Different semantic relationships can be expressed through the possessive , and this may , at times ,result in a sort of 'ambiguity' .The term 'possessive' ,however , is not a satisfactory label for the morpheme {-sps} because a variety of different semantic relationships can exist between the possessive noun and the one that follows .The following chart shows these relationships :

Relationship

Example

1- possession or belongingness

{ John's hat
Judy's home

2- Characterization or description

{ a cowboy's walk
men's coats

3- Origin

{ Raphael's paintings
Cary's novels

4- Measure (time ,value ,space)

{ an hour's wait
a dollar's worth
a stone's throw

5- subject of act

John's flight =(John flew)
The judge's decision = (the judge decided)

6- Object of act

Jane's punishment was deserved .
= Someone punished Jane)
Eliot's critics were many .
= They criticized Eliot).

A noun possessive is ambiguous when it expresses more than one of the above –mentioned relationships at the same time .

To Further emphasize the ambiguities that such possessives may reveal , let us cite some example sentences shown by Stageberg (1981:138); these sentences are 'ambiguous ' ; notice :

1- Dr .McCoy's examination was a long one .

This sentence could relate either to relationship (5) or (6) above ; notice:

a. Someone assigned Dr. McCoy a long examination ,or

b- Dr. McCoy assigned someone a long examination .

2- This is my father's photograph .

This sentence is "ambiguous" as the possessive partakes of both relationships (1)and (6) ;notice ;

a- This photograph 'belongs ' to my father .

b- Someone took my father a snapshot .

3- He was carrying a woman's coat on his arm .

The ambiguity of sentence (3) arises from the dual ascribability to both relationships (1)and (2) and this is interpreted as follows :

a- He was carrying on his arm a coat belonging to a certain woman .

b- He was carrying on his arm a coat designed for women's wear .

4- We bought one of Rutherford's paintings .

This sentence contains a possessive that may be 'multiply ' ambiguous as the sentence is susceptible of being interpreted in four different ways involving the relationships (1), (3),(5)and (6) :

a-We bought one of the paintings 'belonging ' to Rutherford.

b- We bought one of the paintings (painted) by Rutherford.

c-Rutherford painted a painting which we bought .

d- Someone painted Rutherford a painting which we bought .

5- The case was about his wife's fatal shooting .

The sentence implies a sort of ambiguity due to the double –sense indicative possessive involving both relationships (5) and (6) ;notice :

a- His wife shot someone fatally and the case was held to this effect .

b-Some one shot his wife fatally and the case was held to this effect .

6-His son's loss grieved him .

Notice that this sentence has two meanings due to the possessive that admits of the two relationships at the same time ,i.e. of both (5) and

(6) as exemplified below :

b- His son lost something ,perhaps a family heirloom , and this grieved him .

Notice that "his son " indicates subject – of –act relationships ,while :

b- He lost his son , and this grieved him .

denotes object –of –act of relationship ; this , however , demonstrates an observable difference .

3- Phonological Ambiguity : Ambiguity cases may very possibly arise on the phonological level , especially due to the misapplication or confusion of certain suprasegmentals .To shed light on such cases of ambiguity , let us consider the following ambiguity –involving cases :

Stress-Based Ambiguity: When we come to pronounce English phrases and sentences , we have to pay a special attention to the optimal mode of pronunciation .By this we mean the suprasegmentals like stress rhythm and pitch that should be carefully and closely observed in speech .This ,however , is of vital importance as the mispronunciation of a certain phrase or sentence may very possibly result in a sort of misinterpretation and ambiguity .

Moreover , the overlapping of stress patterns may play a part in such ambiguities ;notice for instance :

1-Those hot car deals

Here the modifier –plus-noun stress pattern of {^} in "hot car" overlaps with that of the compound noun {^} in a "car deals" . Thus the meaning can be either :

2-hot car –deals = car deals that are hot .or

3- hot-car deals = deals in hot cars

To further enhance the significance of 'stress' , let us illustrate by giving some noun phrases that may give two meanings ,i.e. may be ambiguous and therefore require exceptional attention to pronunciation :

4- a small arms factory

a- an arms factory that is small

b- a factory for small arms .

5- that greasy kid stuff.

a- that stuff for greasy kids

b- that kid stuff which is greasy .

6- the basic book service

a- the service for basic books

- b- the book service that is basic
- 7- a foreign language teacher
- a- a language teacher who is foreign
- b- a teacher of a foreign language .
- 8- an old car enthusiast
- a- a car enthusiast who is old
- b- an enthusiast about old cars

Traditional English spelling often obscures the fact that utterances may be "ambiguous " in the spoken language even through the written forms of the utterances they correspond to are quite "ambiguous " .Thus though there is a visible difference between (1)and (2) when written , they would be pronounced in exactly the same way , and only non-linguistic contextual information could tell the hearer which meaning is intended ; notice, however , these sentences exemplified to this effect in Smith and Wilson (1980:64):

- 1- We can make your voice great like Rod Stewart's.
- 2- We can make your voice grate like Rod Stewart's.

Notice that when uttered ,both these sentences sound 'ambiguous ' due to the identity of both great and grate on the phonological level. Such sentences ,however, can be disambiguated on the basis of the context within which each one occurs .Despite that , these sentences can be disambiguated as follows :

- 3- We can make your voice as great as Rod Stewart's .
- 4- We can make your voice grate in the same manner as that of Rod Stewart's.

Notice that "great " ,being an adjective in (3) above ,the ambiguity of the sentence can be removed by using the equilibrium – indicating structure "as Adjective as " ;thus we are making an equal comparison between the greatness of 'your' voice and that of Rod Stewart's .In sentence (4) ,however , the case is difficult , "grate " is a verb meaning 'have a harsh voice " and being under the influence of the causative verb make ,its effect is exercised on Rod Stewart's ,so there is no comparison as in (3) ,but , instead, there is a sense of causality which is better clarified through the use of the expression "in the same manner as..." .Only as such do we resolve the ambiguity of the sentence .

3.1 Noun Possessives :Noun possessives may , at times , make for ambiguity in the noun phrase .For example ,we can interpret :

1- the late summer's roses

As :

a- the roses of the late summer ,or

b- the late roses of summer .

Such ambiguities in the written words sometimes disappear in the spoken form because of the ability of the suprasegmentals to distinguish meanings .Notice , for instance , several noun possessives cited in Stageberg(1981:254) those which involve ambiguities on the surface like :

2- her new doll's house .

Though (2) above is 'ambiguous ' ,yet the ear will distinguish between

a- her new doll's house , and

b- her new doll's house .

the following noun phrases give two meanings each :

3- an old girl's bicycle .

a- a girl's bicycle that is old .

b- a bicycle for an old girl .

4- The world women's congress.

a- the congress of the world women .

b- the women's congress of the world.

5- A nice woman's fur coat

a- a woman's fur coat that is nice .

b- a fur coat of a nice woman .

4.1-Ambiguity Due to Ellipsis : When normal ellipsis has taken place, ambiguity can arise as to whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object ,notice :

1- He loves the dog more than his wife .

This sentences ,however, could mean either :

2- He loves the dog more than his wife loves the dog ,or

3- He loves the dog more than he loves his wife .

In this regard ,Quirk and Greenbaum (1983: 332) explicate the matter saying that if "his wife " were replaced by a pronoun , a formal or fastidious English could disambiguate this example ,as we see in :

4- He loves the dog more than she ,and

5- He loves the dog more than her .

Informally , the ambiguity would remain ,since “than” plus the “objective” can be used for both (2) and (3)above , and since objections can be raised against both stiffness and over- familiarity, we sometimes steer middle- course using additional pro-forms ,i.e. "than she does " "than he does her ".

Another example would be a sentence like :

6- We like Shakespeare more than Shaw .

As such , this sentence is "ambiguous" as it admits of two interpretations due to elliptical elements.

7- We like Shakespeare more than Shakespeare likes Shaw.

8- We like Shakespeare more than we like do Shaw .

Sentence (7) is unacceptable, as the sense intended is that in the degree of our preference of one to the other ,i.e. we are more in favor of Shakespeare as a writer than we are of Shaw as a writer .

Conclusion

Ambiguity is an important topic worthy of consideration and exploration; its importance lies in the fact that :

- 1- It is a phenomenon that learners of English may very possibly encounter in the course of their studies .
 - 2- There are quite a number of ambiguities ranging from syntactic through semantic and on to phonological and other types which are touched upon throughout this humble research paper .
 - 3- An insight into numerous exemplifications would undoubtedly , I do hope , sharpen our observance and put us on the alert for ambiguous phrases and sentences we may come across every now and then .
 - 4- Vast knowledge of and good command on English syntax and semantics would definitely play an exceptional role in the disambiguation of (already) ambiguous phrases, utterances, and /or sentences.
 - 5- We need , above all to concentrate our attention on the syntactic structures of phrases and sentences ; besides , focus on the mode of pronunciation is of vital importance . This , however , would ward us off sliding into any sort of mispronunciation that would pander to a sort of misinterpretation or misunderstanding .In other words ,optimal and sound pronunciation would enable us to transmit the sense intended properly and unequivocally .
- Last, yet not least , I do hope that this research –paper would prove beneficial and up to the standard required for the utility and benefit of learners of English in general and specialists in particular .

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