

A Semantic Analysis of Ambiguity in English

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ABSTRACT

Experience in teaching English and previous findings show that learners confront acute difficulties very often in finding solutions to the commonest ambiguities whether in speech or in written language. Such difficulties stand strongly against learners' ability to understand an ambiguous sentence or a vocabulary item.

The reason which has driven the researcher to write this paper is to highlight the notion of ambiguity posed in English trying to help learners lessen and overcome the difficulties which may be come across in everyday life by displaying the commonest ambiguities that exist in the English language. In so doing, the learners can find the research subject-matter helpful to increase their experience in this respect and pay more attention when they face such ambiguous constructions or words.

The procedure to be followed in this research is to present the available literature relative to ambiguity whether intentional or unintentional. The researcher adopts a procedure of comments and analyses of spoken and written ambiguities which frequently appear in the language. However, conclusions are arrived at after thorough investigation of the topic.

The degree of difficulty a learner of English faces when using an ambiguous sentence or a word by a speaker of English depends largely on the learner's educational level and whether he is an experienced learner or he is still at beginning stages. Some expressions and sentences, indeed, bring about ambiguity which are

hardly understood, but by keeping contact with English speakers, ambiguity can be decreased.

1. Preliminary

Ambiguity can be confronted in any language, i.e. , it is a universal matter ; and English as an international language includes a remarkable rate of ambiguities in spoken and written communication. Certain expressions in the language that the speakers use or the listeners hear can be very confusing and impede guaranteeing the right meaning easily; such expressions may be interpreted for more than one semantic reading. In that case, the required meaning may be distorted and the right meaning does not reach the listener's mind. Misunderstanding usually takes place when the wanted meaning is not clear because it is shaded with other various interpretations that inhibit comprehension totally or partially.

The concept of ambiguity is classified into two categories, viz, intentional and unintentional. Our key concern is to highlight both intentional and unintentional types of ambiguity since the first helps widen our horizons of thinking in understanding and enjoying literature; whereas the second causes misunderstanding in language communication, which is usually harmful to speakers and listeners. Hence, each of which will be tackled separately.

It is worth noting that even native speakers of English face the problem of ambiguity in their readings or when listening to others. This is a standing problem for both native speakers of English and overseas learners of English on equal footing. This research is intended to take into consideration the concept of ambiguity whether intentional or unintentional. Anyhow, the subject matter of ambiguity is reviewed in four parts: phonologically, lexically, structurally and semantically.

Palmer (1971: 81) stresses the fact that ambiguity is one of the commonest features of the English language components.

Although the research is not written on politics but the researcher insists that ambiguity occupies a broad spectrum in the field of international affairs. In the realm of politics, statesmen may use ambiguities to create pretexts for managing wars or obtain physical and political gains after a war. So ambiguity through playing on words is clearly and easily identified in UN's Resolution No. (242) issued on the Palestinian question about the occupied Arab territories which should be restored by the Arabs. The Resolution mentioned above confirms the Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories. The exact quoted article says, "Israel must withdraw from Arab territories." The Arab negotiator thought that Israel must withdraw from all Arab territories occupied and seized during the war that took place in 1967.

The deliberate omission of the definite article "**the**" had caused the ambiguity between the two disputable sides, Israel and the Arabs represented by Egypt. This linguistic trick was made on purpose by the Americans to deceive the Arab politicians. As a result, according to the article in the Resolution, Israel was given the right to keep some of the Arab territories within its control.

(Al-Thawra newspaper, 1-8-1977: No. 2481)

2. The Concept of Ambiguity

The general sense of this term refers to a word, phrase or sentence that expresses more than one accepted meaning in the field of language use. Ambiguity, as a misleading characteristic in the language, may upgrade the rate of difficulty in learning English. Therefore, the research deserves the efforts since ambiguity is pervasive whether it is deliberate or non-deliberate. Ambiguity is double-standard effects: negative and positive. It may act as a positive quality in the language of literature when a poet or a writer tries to play on words by using ambiguity via which meaning multiplicity is adopted to create certain effects on readers or listeners.

(Emspeson, 1965:141)

An ambiguous sentence or a word is understood and rephrased in more than one way. Although ambiguity is a complex theme in English, it is an interesting one to investigate. Thus, linguists pay attention to the occurrence of the ambiguity in the language and they try to find the reasons for such a problematic phenomenon, i.e., they are doing their best to put the necessary linguistic measures to stop it. Schuster (1965:76) proposes the above-mentioned idea and gives the following ambiguous sentences although he does not provide the solutions for them. The way of avoiding the ambiguity in the sentences below is the researcher's effort.

When we say, for example:

1. I saw the English history teacher.
2. Ship sails tomorrow.
3. Ali went to the bank.

These three examples are linguistically ambiguous. Since ambiguity can be overcome either by resorting to a lexicon or syntax; so speakers of English can recognize and remove the ambiguity but the task is not so easy.

The first example is used to express two different concepts. Consider

- a. I saw the English teacher of history.

Or

- b. I saw the teacher of English history.

In the second example, two meanings can be obtained, as cited below:

- a. Ship the sails tomorrow.

Or

- b. The ship sails tomorrow.

Whereas the third instance gives the following senses:

a. Ali went to the bank in which he would save money.

Or

b. Ali went to the bank for swimming.

3. Ambiguity in Spoken and Written Language

Human beings made big efforts developing means of communication to facilitate life affairs. But language remains the best human development whether it is speech or writing system. Man's mind has the intrinsic readiness to use language in communication. For this reason Chomsky (1965:7) claims that language is a ***god given gift***. The investigator's opinion that language is inherited by birth does not contradict with what Chomsky believes in.

Words, however, are not written the same as they are spoken. Sometimes there is a big difference between writing and speech (English is concerned here). Words are pronounced differently by different people or even by the same person at different times.

In the absence of the intonation, stress and juncture, ambiguity may arise in the written material because these phonetic features are not shown or represented overtly in writing. But punctuation marks, syntactic structures and context can play an important decisive role in resolving the problem of meaning multiplicity. Written ambiguities seem to be more vague and dangerous than those ambiguities of speech. In speech, the listener may ask for more information and explanations about ambiguous statements. The following words seem identical but context can be tailored to realize the difference in meaning between them:

bear → carry

bear → animal

(Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 352)

When we speak rapidly, the spaces between words will not be so clear that the listener may not distinguish whether he has heard *grey day* or *grade A and night rate* or *nitrate*. We can overcome this ambiguity by making a short pause after the first word *grade*, and then we proceed to produce *A* /ei/. Another short pause has to be made after *night* in the *night rate*. This is a phonetic process called *junction*.

4. Intentional Vs. Unintentional Ambiguity

The concept of ambiguity is classified into two categories :the first category, which is faced in linguistic writing and speech, seems to be risky because it create misunderstanding for readers and listeners in ordinary life while the second category is usually confronted in literature which is devoid of any danger or risk in everyday life. This type of ambiguity is made on purpose. Such ambiguities are found in branches of literature to boost interest and enjoyment for readers obliging them to use their minds to the maximum degree to reach the intended meaning, besides, other shaded meanings. In this way, literature becomes delightful and interesting.

4.1. Intentional or Deliberate Ambiguity

Ambiguity may have a positive value when it is created in literature. The poet, for example, tends to use ambiguous expressions deliberately to convey his intended meaning associated with one or more meanings at the same time. This sort of ambiguity is one of the characteristics of poetry, pun or irony. The misunderstanding quality of ambiguity in literature is amusing to readers and devoid of any risk to human beings.

(Holman and Harman, 1986: 86)

4.2. Unintentional Ambiguity

In this type, ambiguity results unconsciously due to constituents of the sentence structure defect in users' competence and performance or misunderstanding of referring the intending pronoun. It also happens in the causative and negation which are combined in one sentence, as in:

4. He was not in the hospital because he was sick.

This sentence may be improved to give the required meaning, as follows:

5. He was not in the hospital for the reason of being ill but for something else.

Or the subordinate clause "he was sick" is paraphrased to mean:

6. He was not coming to his job in the hospital because of illness.

(Ulman, 1962:77)

5. Ambiguity Vs. Vagueness

Crystal (1985:15) claims, "*An ambiguous sentence is formulated as having more than one distinct structure,*" whereas a vague sentence, on the other hand, "*permits an unspecifiable range of possible interpretations.*" Thus, ambiguity differs from vagueness in terms of referring to objects which could be true or false, whereas vague terms are represented by the propositional object. Consider the negation in the following example:

7. He **did not** hit the dog.

The negation is a matter of vagueness because of the difficulties in specifying a fixed number of underlying structures of the sentence.

(Fromkin and Rodman, 1988:329)

Looking up the meaning of *vague* in the dictionaries reaffirms that it is the sentence which is judged vaguely because it is wrongly formulated and not easily perceived by the listener or the reader. Thus, the idea expressed by a vague sentence is not clear and very often non-understandable. Such a sentence can be grammatically correct but semantically is of little value or to a large extent it is meaningless. Vague sentences are anomalous ones which do not abide by any meaning.

Chomsky (1957:37) proposes the following sentence which does not have a precise meaning or the meaning is distorted and misshaped:

8. Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

The researcher frames his own vague sentence depending on Chomsky's example by saying:

9. Colourful ideas are always flourishing.

The listener cannot get what is in the speaker's or writer's mind.

6. Types of Ambiguity

6. 1. Phonological Ambiguity

Phonological rules are the presentations of phonetic interpretation of the surface structure in terms of transformation. The phonetic representations may sound ambiguous owing to interferences in the spelling of words and form of words, besides, the absence of prosodic features. Ulman (1962:156) demonstrates, in support of the above-mentioned idea that ambiguity may result in the spoken language because of the phonetic structure of the sentence. Such ambiguities can be solved or can disappear by using *suprasegmental features*, viz, *juncture*, *stress* and *intonation*, as in the following examples:

Ice cream → *I scream*

An ice house → *A nice house*

Twenty six soldiers → *Twenty sick soldiers*

A light house keeper → *A light house keeper*

6. 2. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguities are enormously encountered everywhere in dictionaries which offer almost any word having more than one meaning. "Note" = "a musical tone" or "a short written record". "lie" = "a statement you know it is not true" or "present tense of lay; to be or put yourself in a flat position". The word "ambiguity" itself can mean indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or another or both of two things might be meant.

6. 3. Structural Ambiguity

Stageberg (1971:367) identifies specific structural ambiguity type called "class ambiguity". They involve devices creating humorous sense.

This type of ambiguity gets its name because it creates a confusion between the traditional classes or parts of speech (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.). it is not at all easy for anyone who is not well-versed in English to recognize such ambiguity devices and comprehend humorous texts invested with these devices.

Some examples may fit two basic patterns, in that case such examples are ambiguous. If the reader or listener does not recognize the pattern to which a sentence belongs, he cannot understand what the sentence means. Here are some examples:

10. The man found his friend a pig.

11. The engineer found the machine a helper.

Each of the aforementioned sentences is ambiguous since the intended meaning is not clear. The meaning in 10 is either that the man found a pig for his friend or is that the man found (out) that his friend was a pig himself, in the sense that he was an unpleasant person and difficult to deal with, or a person who eats too much. Example 11 means that the engineer found a helper or assistant for the machine or probably for himself. Sentence 11, however, may mean that the engineer found that the machine helped him in his work and made it easier for him to do. Two more examples are given below:

12. The referee turned out a player.

13. Our cat made a good friend.

Sentence 12 means that the referee turned out (i.e. forced a player to leave). Or it may mean that the referee was unexpectedly discovered to be a player rather than a professional referee. As for sentence 13, it means either that the cat was a good friend to us or that the cat itself found a friend (most likely another cat).

Syntactic ambiguity is classified as phrasal structure ambiguity and transformational ambiguity; the latter is indicated by transformational generative grammar (TGG for short). Consider the examples below:

New houses and shops

In the above example, there are two interpretations: either

a. ***New [houses and shops]***(i.e. both are new)

Or

b. ***[new houses] and shops.*** (i.e. only the houses are new)

(Crystal 1985:15)

In case of transformational analysis, an ambiguous sentence can be related to different structures, as in the sentence below:

14. Visiting speakers can be awful

a. It is awful to visit speakers.

Or

b. Speakers who visited are awful.

This means the main sentence has two different structures.

6.4. Semantic Ambiguity

Ambiguity that is commonly confronted in English stems from the semantic properties dealing with the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence; one of the semantic goals is how to describe and explain ambiguous meaning in words, phrases and sentences.

What listeners of English seek is not only to know or understand what the meanings of words refers to but what the writer or speaker of those words intend to convey. This is a branch of linguistics called *pragmatic ambiguity*, which is a main part of semantics.

Via studying *pragmatics*, it becomes easier to make distinctions between various meanings expressed by a word, phrase or sentence.

(Lyons, 1977:7)

6.4.1. Basic Parts of Semantic Ambiguity

The major part of ambiguity is mainly ascribed to various semantically –based interpretations of a word, phrase or sentence. The researcher's basic task, here, is to explain how lexical factors of semantic ambiguity differ. Generally, ambiguity is one of the most important semantic properties that deals with the meaning of words, phrases or sentences.

Palmer (1971:101) claims that:-

Semantic theory describes and
explains the interpretive ability of

speakers: by accounting for their performances in determining the number of readings of sentence; by deciding upon paraphrase relations between sentences and by making every other semantic property or relation that plays a role in this ability.

This definition denotes that confusion and misunderstanding may arise due to the various meanings attached to a word, phrase or sentence. Context and situation are decisive factors in reaching the required meaning.

(Leech, 1974:1)

Lexical ambiguities are linguistically defined, exemplified and analyzed in the following subtitles.

6.4.1.1. Homonymy

This is one of the commonest lexical use that reveals ambiguity. **Homonymy** is the term that is used in the language to mean one form (written or spoken) having two or more unrelated meanings.

(Yule, 1996:188)

Thus, homonyms cause confusion in selecting the right meaning and create ambiguous words or sentences. A word or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. Consider

15. I will meet you by the bank.

Ambiguity is removed by adding certain context, saying:

- a. I will meet you by the bank, in front of automated teller machine.

Or by saying:

- b. I will meet you by the bank. We can go skinny-dipping.

(Yule, 1996:197)

Homonymy is divided into two types, viz, **absolute** and **partial**.

6.4.1.1.1. Absolute Homonyms (Complete Homonymy)

It refers to words, which are similar in spelling and pronunciation, but they have totally different meanings. The following example clarifies this point well,

16. She **bears** a child.

17. I like **bears**.

An ambiguous sentence usually has two or more paraphrases (**synonyms**) which are entirely different from each other. Consider

18. He is wearing a light suit.

The word **light** can be paraphrased either a suit which is not heavy or is not dark. So **light** is ambiguous. (Yule, 1996:161)

The word "bat" has three possible meanings: "bat" the animal, "bat" the stick, and "bat" as in the bat in the eyelashes. Words like the ones mentioned lately are also called monographs.

6.4.1.1.2. Partial Homonyms (heteronyms)

Partial homonyms are called "**homophones**" referring to the lexemes that are the same to the ear but not to the eye, as in:

Write; right /rait/

Sight ;site /sait/

(Palmer, 1971:133)

Thus, these lexemes are distinguishable in the written language but not in the spoken one. The words to , too, and two are partial homonyms.

6.4.1.2. Synonyms

Synonyms are one of the most familiar factor of semantic ambiguity which enrich the English language with a great number of words.

Synonyms are words that sound different but have the same or nearly the same meaning. Some specialists in the field of the English language study claim that there are no perfect or one-to-one synonyms, i.e., no two words ever have exactly the same meaning. Still, the following sentences have a very similar meaning.

19. He is sitting on the **sofa**.

20. He is sitting on the **couch**.

Though the words **sofa** and **couch** are synonymous because they have the same meaning; these words contain different phonological forms.

(Fromkin and Rodman, 1988:181)

6.4.1.3. Polysemy

The name "polysemy" comes from poly (many) and semy (to do with many meanings). Polysemy is also called radiation or multiplication. This happens when a word acquires a wider range of meaning. For example, "paper" comes from Greek papyrus. Originally it referred to writing material made from papyrus reeds of the Nile, later to other writing materials, and now it refers to things such as government documents, scientific reports, family archives, or newspapers.

Semantic ambiguity may occur within a polysemic word. A polysemous word (a word of multiple meanings) generally refers to a word that has some dominant meaning when compared with the other meanings of the same word, i.e., a meaning that is considered more probable and prior without a context. Consider the following lexemes

Foot (of a person) or (of bed) or (of an animal)

Tail (of an animal) or (of a coat)

Mouth (of a person) or (of an animal) or (of a river)

When a word has multiple meanings that are related conceptually or historically, it is said that this word is **polysemous**. This type is more widespread than homonymy and it is considered a fundamental feature of human speech.

(Fromkin and Rodman, 1988:76)

6.4.1.4. Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the commonest forms of figurative language introduced by the Greeks for the first time with the meaning "to carry" or "to transfer". The metaphorical word is that one which can be given one or more figurative sense without losing its original meaning (Ulman, 1962:162).

Metaphor besides, refers to the non-literal meaning of a word, a clause or a sentence. Metaphors are very common; in fact all abstract vocabulary is metaphorical. A metaphor compares things. (Examples: "blanket of stars"; "out of the blue")

A metaphor established by usage and convention becomes a symbol. Thus, crown suggests the power of the state, press = the print news media and chair = the control (or controller) of a meeting.

In metaphorical ambiguity, readers can change the literal word interpretation; in other words, they can add new meanings to objects different from the literal interpretation of the words that have remote or near meanings with the new ones. The image in the metaphorical language seems more difficult to attain than that expressed by **simile** because, in simile, there are grammatical words such as **like** or **as** used in the text. The metaphorical expressions have two different equally extensional interpretations. Have a look at the following examples:

21. The walls have ears.

22. I will make him eat his words.

The above sentences seem metaphorically ambiguous whereas the speaker or the writer, in the first example, refers to a group of people or someone else can hear us. In line with this, the second example refers that

23. I will make him give back his speech.

6.4.1.5. Pun

In literary text, especially, in poetry, **pun** is, however, used critically to indicate language that admits more than one meaning with comic effect to enrich, for example, the texture of a poem. This is the simplest kind of ambiguity in which the writer or the poet intentionally uses one word to mean two different things, usually with comic influence. The reader of this research may understand **pun** better by having a look at the following example when **Mercutio** lies dying in **Romeo and Juliet**, saying :

24. *Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.*

(Ulman, 1962:188)

His poetic device of multiple meanings can extend from fairly simple pun to quite ambiguous statements that can be read and encountered in full context of a play, poem or novel.

6.4.1.6. Paradox

A statement that seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet it is perhaps true; a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true; an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises, such statements are called paradoxes. Example:

25. "I don't love you except because I love you, I go from loving to not loving you, from waiting to not waiting for you."

"My heart moves from cold to fire."

Complexity is a weave constituted by diverse events, interactions and randomness. A sentence which is disorganized and unpredictable is ambiguous.

7. Conclusions

Semantics is one of the most important subject in the English language; and semantic ambiguity in which an expression or a sentence exposes more than one meaning, a main meaning, besides, other shaded meanings constitutes a big difficulty to readers and listeners. The ambiguity of a word, phrase or sentence shows vagueness in selecting the intended meaning. Ambiguity in speech or writings hinder the readers or the listeners to guarantee the required meaning. Hence, the right communication may be hampered by so many ambiguity barriers. The researcher has discovered throughout the study that ambiguity in literary works bear less dangers to readers because they are mostly used for literary joy and interest. Semantic ambiguity whether in syntax or vocabulary is not easily understood unless one has a widely-acquired experience in the art of speech and writing. The research elaborated, here, is a modest attempt to discover the ambiguous words or sentences semantically so as to analyze them for the purpose of disambiguation. Some significant conclusions have been attained at:

1. What ambiguities do is to confuse the receiver's ability in understanding certain words, phrases or sentences in both spoken and written language. Thus, one has to work hard in order to decide which meaning is intended.
2. In the spoken language, ambiguity stems from existence of ***polysemous*** words which usually sound identical but have

different meanings, thus , such words need change with clearer ones or phrases to reach the correct meaning.

3. Some ambiguous expressions seem either intentional or unintentional. The former is usually posed in literature for individual or stylistic purposes in the hope of inciting readers or listeners to spend more time to reach the intended meaning, as is deliberately done by poets, advertisers or editors to make the reader or the listener think deeply of a certain matter and get the required sense after much investigation. In case of unintentional ambiguity, complicated constructions which demonstrate confusion in meaning may be resolved by intuition. Such confused uses can be overcome by asking the speaker to give further explanations about his speech or calling on him to repeat the word or the sentence once more with clarification. Mostly the intended meaning of a word is realized by context or situation.
4. The existence of some expressions that have more than one meaning requires a high degree of attention or intelligence to eliminate confusing words or to resolve such semantic obstacles.
5. An understanding of intentional ambiguity devices can allow greater awareness of how to prevent structural ambiguity. But just as significantly, such an awareness can also help create it.

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ملخص البحث

تظهر خبرات تعليم اللغة الانكليزية والدراسات السابقة في ان المتعلمين غالبا ما يواجهون صعوبات شديدة في ايجاد الحلول المناسبة لعبارات وجمل شائعة موسومة باللبس وعدم وضوح المعنى المقصود في اللغة المحكية والمقرؤة ، حيث ان مثل هذه الصعوبات تقف عائقا وبقوة امام قدرة المتعلمين في فهم الجملة او المفردة الملتبسة باكثر من معنى. ان السبب الذي دفع الباحث لكتابة هذا البحث هو توضيح فكرة اللبس في اللغة الانكليزية في محاولة لمساعدة المتعلمين في تقليل او التغلب على الصعوبات التي تواجهه في الحياة اليومية عن طريق عرض موضوعات اللبس وعدم الوضوح الشائعة التي تعترى اللغة الانكليزية، وبذلك يمكن للمتعلمين ان يجدوا ضالتهم في مادة البحث المطروحة لزيادة خبرتهم في هذا الجانب وتوفير انتباه اكثر عندما يواجهون سماعا او قراءة تراكيب او كلمات ينتابها اللبس والغموض في المعنى.

الاجراءات المتبعة في البحث تقديم كل ماهو متيسر من مادة تتعلق بموضوع اللبس ان كان مقصود او غير مقصود . يعتمد الباحث اسلوب التعليق والتحليل للالتباسات المحكية والمقرؤة والتي تظهر بشكل متكرر في اللغة. على اية حال لقد توصل الباحث الى استنتاجات بعد بحث شامل للموضوع. ان درجة الصعوبة التي تواجه المتعلم عند استخدام المتحدث لجملة او كلمة ملتبسة او غير واضحة تعتمد بشكل كبير على مستوى المتعلم الثقافي وكذلك على احاطة المتعلم بخبرة واسعة ، ام انه لايزال في المرحل الابتدائية من التعلم. حقا ان هناك بعض التعابير والجمال التي توصف بالالتباس والتي يصعب فهمها، بيد ان الاحتكاك والتواصل مع الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية يذلان الصعوبات في فهم المعنى المراد.