

A Pragmatic Analysis of Ambiguity in Political Speeches
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Abstract

Investigating ambiguity in political statements is the goal of the current study. More adequately, it clarifies the lexical and structural ambiguities that are used by Vince Cable as a member of the British Liberal Democrats in 2018. The importance of this speech lies in the fact that it discusses the Brexit argument which is about the issue of leaving the European Union for Britain. Moreover, it presents some other crucial issues like racism, immigration, and economy. This paper provides a theoretical background on ambiguity and its relevant types. Two methods are chosen for analysing the data: descriptive (analysing the data descriptively) and statistical (analysing the data statistically by using frequencies and percentages). It is found that the speaker employs lexical ambiguity more than he does with structural ambiguity with percentages that amount to (75%) and (25%), respectively. It is concluded that lexical ambiguity is more appropriate for achieving linguistic ambiguity than structural one.

Keywords: Ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, political speeches, structural ambiguity.

1. Introduction

Speakers and listeners must use all linguistic levels in order to reach a communicative language. However, some aspects are still vague or ambiguous to understand since they encompass multiple interpretations. This phenomenon is referred to as ambiguity. According to Leech (1981: 30), “an expression is said to be ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be assigned to it”. Ambiguity can be found in one word, phrase, or sentence. It is defined as a complex phenomenon where a given structure might result in the possibility of several interpretations and this may lead to confusion and misunderstanding (Radford et al., 2009:5). Typically, context plays a key role in resolving ambiguity. As a result, the same information may be evident in one context but unclear in another. The complexity of poetic language, for example, is enhanced by lexical ambiguity, in particular.

Lexical ambiguity is found in certain words. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, is found in specific structures. The present study aims at investigating lexical and structural ambiguities that are used by Vince Cable as a member of the British Liberal Democrats in 2018. It attempts to identify the types of ambiguity in the speech under analysis and pinpoint the frequent type of ambiguity that is used by the speaker.

2. Definitions of Ambiguity

Ambiguity (and *ambiguous*) “comes from the Latin *ambiguus*, which was formed by combining *ambi-* (meaning "both") and *agere* ("to drive")”. So, each of these words has historically meant "both"; one with the sense of "both meanings" and the other with that of "both hands." *Ambiguity* “may be used to refer either to something (such as a word) which has multiple meanings or to a more general state of uncertainty” (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

Ambiguity is regarded as a ubiquitous feature that is found in all languages. In this regard, Leech (1981: 30) argues that “An expression is said to be ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be assigned to it”. Accurate communication depends on both the speaker and the listener having a clear comprehension of a potentially confusing term, according to Akmajian, et al. (2001: 237).

For Radford et al. (2009: 5), it is challenging to understand what ambiguity is. The capacity to comprehend a word or phrase in many contexts is referred to as interpretive flexibility. As a result, there is ambiguity about what is being said, therefore, in most cases, ambiguity may be clarified by considering the surrounding context. A statement may be clear in some situations but unclear in others, depending on the context. Ambiguity is defined by Crystal (2008: 22) as the term that “referring to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning (is ambiguous), is found in linguistics.”

Even full sentences can have many interpretations because many, if not most, words have more than one meaning. Ambiguity is the precise term for this phenomenon; an expression or utterance is ambiguous if it has more than one possible interpretation. All levels of meaning: expression meaning, utterance meaning, and communication meaning, can be considered ambiguous.

Ambiguity can occur in one word, phrase, or sentence where more than one meaning can be assigned to them. These different meanings can affect the message and convey a different one. While these two words, phrases or sentences have the same function, there is a difference in the way of delivering the exact message. In spoken language, speakers deliver the messages and utter the words directly to the listeners, while writers use some written documents to deliver the messages to the readers. Because written language does not deliver the messages directly, readers sometimes get confused in determining the meaning of the sentences and expressions. Besides, written language uses more complex grammar than spoken language. Written language also does not use pauses, hesitations, tone of voice, stress, and intonations. That is why sometimes the sentences in written language can be interpreted and ascribed to more than one meaning (Lobner, 2013: 41).

3. Types of Ambiguity

Several types of ambiguity can be discussed in linguistics. The most relevant ones to this study are explained as follows:

3.1 Lexical Ambiguity

A single term having many meanings is referred to as lexical ambiguity. This phenomenon can be divided into two main categories: polysemy and homonymy. This definition indicates that the phrase is ambiguous and could involve different meanings. Thus, lexical confusion - in which a lexical term has two different meanings - is the most typical type of word uncertainty (Ullmann, 1962: 158-159).

The usage of a word that has two or more meanings in a way that allows for more than one alternative interpretation results in lexical ambiguity. This frequently occurs when the speaker or author's knowledge of the subject matter differs from that of the listener or reader (i.e., Not enough contextual information). Lexical ambiguity is the type of ambiguity that does not result from the grammatical interpretation of a sentence, as Crystal (2003: 22) states. Rather, it occurs when a single form has many interpretations. For instance:

1. *I found the table fascinating.*

Example 1. Shows that the word 'table' constitutes a lexical ambiguity since it can be interpreted as 'an object of furniture' or 'table of figures'. According to Trask (2007:14), lexical ambiguity takes place when a context is insufficient in specifying the intended meaning of a word with multiple readings. For illustration, consider the following example:

2. *The sailors enjoyed the port.*

The lexical ambiguity here arises due to the presence of the word 'port'. The reason is that it can be interpreted as 'fortified wine' or 'town by the sea'. Ullman (1997:117) explains that lexical ambiguity happens when a single word can be understood in more than one way. It happens when a sentence includes a word that can convey more than one meaning. This phenomenon known as semantic ambiguity, makes it hard to understand what the writer meant and confuses the reader. For instance, the word 'toll' is considered an ambiguous one and it causes different interpretations for the readers because it has two meanings, that is, 'payment' and 'victim'.

3.2 Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity exists whenever the structure of a phrase, clause, or sentence leaves room for many interpretations. Articles, news headlines, and other types of written content can all include this type of ambiguity. A phrase, clause, or sentence can be interpreted in various ways due to its structure in written language, as Ullman (1997:117) clarifies.

For Yule (2010: 295), structural ambiguity means "a situation in which a single phrase or sentence has two (or more) different underlying structures and

interpretations”. To put it differently, when one surface structure can be interpreted into two different deep structures, structural ambiguity is achieved, as in the following example:

3. ***Annie bumped into a man with an umbrella.***

- a. Annie had an umbrella and she bumped into a man with it; or
- b. Annie bumped into a man and the man happened to be carrying an umbrella.

According to example 3., structural ambiguity results when the two different readings (a. and b.) are represented in the same structure (3). In this vein, Radford et al. (2009:149) highlight that the phenomenon of structural ambiguity is complicated and it needs knowledge of a language to be interpreted. For example, the following phrase consists of two interpretations:

4. ***Toy car crusher***

- a. crusher for toys car
- b. car crusher which is a toy

4. Data Analysis

This section is concerned with the data, its selection, description, and analysis.

4.1 Data Selection and Description

The data of the present study is randomly selected from the website in a written format (see Web Source 1). It is presented by Vince Cable, a member of the British Liberal Democrat Party in Brighton in 2018. The data talks about the British problems concerning the Brexit argument, taxes, racism, climate change, and some other critical issues. The reason behind choosing this data (which is a British political speech) is that it presents crucial issues for the speaker and his country and it is a fertile ground to analyse the two types of ambiguity: ***the lexical*** and ***the structural***.

4.2 Methods of Analysis

The present study adopts two methods: descriptive and statistical. While the first is accomplished descriptively via analysing the lexical and structural ambiguities, the second is accomplished statistically via analysing the frequencies and percentages of the two types of ambiguity by the speaker.

4.2.1 Descriptive Analysis

In the following section, some illustrative examples are chosen to be analysed in terms of the two kinds of ambiguity. The lexical one first and then the structural one.

4.2.1.1 Lexical Ambiguity

1. Conference, we meet at an absolutely crucial moment.

The lexical ambiguity is represented by the word ‘**crucial**’ because it has two meanings. The first meaning is ‘cruciform’ which refers to ‘the form of a cross’. The second meaning is ‘decisive or very important’.

2. And history will record that Liberal Democrats have been on the right side of the Brexit argument.

3. Right to oppose Brexit in the first place.

4. Right to predict a bad deal.

By using the word ‘**right**’, the speaker leads to the achievement of lexical ambiguity. It refers either to the direction and it is used when people show directions to those who are strangers or do not know their destination; or ‘adequate choice’ when someone has to choose or pick a certain entity or choice in between many things or choices.

5. But this party knows better than any other that there are no prizes for being right.

The word ‘**party**’ is an example of lexical ambiguity which has two distinct meanings. It can be used to refer to a private or general occasion whereby a group of people gathers to celebrate social or other events, such as a birthday party. Besides, it can be used to refer to a political group who have their own motto to defend, such as Conservative Party or Liberal Democrat and others.

6. Over the summer, I spoke to rallies and meetings across Britain from Bristol to Newcastle to Cambridge.

The lexical ambiguity is achieved due to the employment of the word ‘across’ which either means ‘**toward**’ or ‘**over**’.

7. ...who don’t accept that the country, cannot change its mind

The ambiguity is presented in extract 7 when the speaker uses the words ‘country’ and ‘mind’. These two words have two meanings. Hence, the word ‘**country**’ has two meanings: ‘**political unit or nation**’ and ‘**countryside or rural area**’. In addition, the word ‘mind’ is used to indicate either ‘**a human brain**’ or ‘**an opinion or a viewpoint**’. Accordingly, the lexical ambiguity is fulfilled.

8. And the latest piece of nastiness from Jacob Rees-Mogg – calling into question the right of Europeans to stay in Britain and of Britons to stay in Europe: creating unnecessary worry and insecurity for millions.

In extract 8, the word ‘**piece**’ has two meanings, that is, it may refer to ‘a piece of chess’ or ‘a sample of something’. Thus, the lexical ambiguity is created.

9. He and Michael Gove embraced Brexit after tossing a coin or making a cold calculation about the quickest route to the top of the Conservative Party.

The lexical ambiguity is created due to the employment of the word ‘**coin**’ in extract 9. While the first meaning refers to a metal piece that is used for currency and its value depends on the country, the second meaning refers to the cornerstone that forms the corner of a building.

10. I embarked on a mixed marriage in this country when racism was rife.

The lexical ambiguity is achieved in extract 10., with regard to the meanings of the word ‘embarked’. It either means ‘to go abroad’ or ‘to initiate’.

11. So I will never waver in my commitment to call out and stand up to racism in all its forms.

The verb ‘waver’ is an example of a lexical ambiguity since it has two unrelated meanings. That is, it can refer to ‘shake’ or ‘hesitate’.

12. As a Minister, I was proud to launch the Financial Tech sector through the British Business Bank, as well as the Green Investment Bank and the Catapult network which has created a launch pad for many technological advances as part of a long-term industrial strategy. That’s our model for the future.

Extract 12 illustrates that lexical ambiguity is initiated when the word ‘bank’ is used, since it denotes two different meanings. It can refer to ‘a bank of a river’ or ‘a financial institution’.

13. And if we embrace these technologies, imagine the potential...

The multiple meanings of the verb ‘embrace’ lead to the initiation of the lexical ambiguity in extract 13. As such, it may refer to ‘adopt’, ‘hold someone closely’, ‘support a belief or a theory’ or ‘include’.

14. Those with A stars at ‘A’ level usually leave their hometowns and don’t come back; but those who struggle to get a few GCSEs stay behind. The bigger cities and towns boast their own university; the rest make do with the local tech.

The word ‘stars’ may refer to a famous or talented performer or actor and also it could refer to a fixed, large and remote body in the sky. Hence, these two interpretations of the word ‘stars’ create lexical ambiguity.

4.2.1.2 Structural Ambiguity

1. In the next few months the future of our country will be decided for decades to come.

Extract 1. proves that there exists structural ambiguity due to the two interpretations that can result from this sentence, as follows:

- a. The future of Britain will be decided for decades to come; or
- b. The Future of a country (other than Britain) will be decided for decades to come.

2. The good news is that we are winning the argument.

A type of ambiguity is called structural ambiguity and it is constituted as the result of the two interpreted structures that are presented in the following:

- a. the good news is that we (our party) are winning the argument; or
- b. the good news is that we (not necessarily our party, the people engaged in the argument, or the entire government) are winning the argument.

3. That some of us are starting to feel sorry for the Prime Minister.

Two deep structures result from the surface structure given in extract 3. Accordingly, structural ambiguity is achieved. Hence, the following are the interpretations of extract 3:

- a. that some of us are starting to sympathise with the Prime Minister; or
- b. that some of us are starting to refuse/deny or do not accept Prime Minister's leadership.

4. *My wife and children were being denounced*

The structural ambiguity is achieved due to the following two interpretations that are resulted from the sentence in extract 4. Thus, the sentence is either interpreted as a. or b., as follows:

- a. my wife and my children were being denounced (Vince's wife and children).
- b. my wife and children (**other than mine if the speaker is not known**) were being denounced.

5. *We also believe in active government.*

The structural ambiguity is constituted as the result of the two interpretations of the sentence in extract 5. The pronoun 'we' is ambiguous since it is still vague for the reader or the listener whether the speaker's party or another's party believes in an active government, as illustrated in the following interpretations:

- a. all of us also believe in active government; or
- b. some of us also believe in active government.

6. *It is easy for people to feel powerless and threatened.*

The structural ambiguity of extract 6 focuses on who is threatening whom. In other words, it is unknown who threatens the other, and, thus, structural ambiguity is initiated, as explained in the following:

- a. people feel powerless as the result of others' threatening acts; or
- b. others feel powerless as the result of people's threatening acts

4.2.2 Statistical Analysis

This section is concerned with the statistical analysis of both ambiguities where frequencies and percentages are found in terms of the instances described in the previous sections. The statistical analysis includes all the ambiguous examples found in the entire speech of Vince Cable. This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Use of the Lexical and Structural Ambiguities

Types of Ambiguity	Frequency	Percentage
Lexical Ambiguity	18	75%
Structural Ambiguity	6	25%
Total	24	100%

According to the results that are presented in Table 1., the higher employment is occupied by lexical ambiguity rather than structural ambiguity. Hence, the frequency that is given to the first type reaches (18), while the frequency that is given to the latter registers (6). Hence, the percentages that amount to the lexical and structural ambiguities arrive at (75%) and (25%) respectively.

5. Conclusions

It is concluded that:

1. Linguistics can serve politicians as they may employ unclear expressions and indirect ways to state ideas and concepts. They do so to serve their goals and justify their decisions.
2. Political discourse is characterized by elusiveness. Thus, ambiguity is considered an intended device that politicians use in their speeches.
3. Politicians aim through their speeches to attract the audience's attention and convince them of their different points of view. To achieve this, they intend to adopt different strategies like using ambiguous terms and structures.
4. It is found that ambiguity can be easily achieved using the lexical rather than the structural type.
5. lexical ambiguity is easier to be specified because it depends on the lexical item itself whereas structural ambiguity needs a thorough examination for the entire syntactic structure to be identified as ambiguous.

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1. [Sir Vince Cable's full speech, 2018 Lib Dem conference - BBC News](#)