

Semantic ambiguity In English language

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Abstract

Ambiguities in spoken and written language stand strongly against learners' ability to understand an ambiguous sentence or an utterance. This short research aims at highlighting some of the common ambiguities existing in English language that we might face in our daily communication, in both categories of intentional and unintentional ambiguities. The available literature relative to ambiguity adopts a procedure of analysis of spoken and written ambiguities appear in words, phrases and sentences levels. Standing and local ambiguities are also mentioned briefly in the analysis. Conclusions are shown through investigation of the topic by many examples included in the paper.

SECTION ONE

Introduction

1.1. The Problem

Ambiguity is a universal matter in languages; and English is one of the important languages in the world that has a remarkable rate of ambiguities in spoken and written communication.

The problematic aspects of ambiguities are semantically engaged in the possibilities of different interpretations for certain expressions in the language that the speakers use or the listeners hear related to words, phrases and sentences.

1.2. The Aims

The concept of semantic analysis of ambiguity aims at establishing and enhancing a better approach of comprehension of the language in general. The benefit of such short study is to illustrate some of the two categories of the concept of ambiguity, the first is the "intentional" and the second is the "unintentional". The intentional category of ambiguity helps us to cope with literature's conception,



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while the unintentional causes misunderstanding in language communication.

1.3. Hypothesizes

Some ambiguities can be local while others can be standing ambiguities. The ambiguity can raise misunderstanding and confusion even to native speakers of English not just foreign learners.

1.4. The Procedures

The procedures used to write this brief paper have considered special reading of many references and books in semantic and semantic analysis of ambiguity beside many other structural ones in syntax and grammar that have been mentioned in the references page.

1.5. Value

The essential value resulting from writing this paper is to assist, to a certain extent, and help some learners of English language to avoid some of the common misconception of ambiguity and reduce it for better understanding of English language and to enhance the level of communication of some learners.

SECTION TWO

2.1. Definition of Ambiguity

Empson (1973: I) indicates that “ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful”.

Ambiguity lexically means " The possibility of being understood in more than one way." (Oxford word power, 2006: 24)

Ambiguity exists when a form has two or more meanings. There are two kinds of ambiguous language, lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity that can affect the meaning of words, phrases or sentences.

(Hudson, 200:313,314)

2.2. Classification of Ambiguity

The concept of ambiguity is classified into two categories: a) The intentional of ambiguity that we find in literature which is used to



widen the avenues of our understanding and thinking beside the enjoyment that could provide us with. The intentional type is a positive one that could be considered as an enhancement for the components of English Language.

Beauty is but flower

which wrinkles will devour

(Nash, Summers's Last will and Testament.)

"I call it a subdued metaphor here that 'devour' should mean 'remove' or 'replace' with no more than overtone of cruelty and the unnatural." (Empson, 1973:45)

But we have to note too, that the intentional type of ambiguity can be used pragmatically, like in politic, commerce and other fields or places, which might be for a reason of benefit, especially in documentations' applications, that could cause farther complications in the field of international affairs. "Ambiguity is one of the commonest features of the English components".

(Palmer, 1971:81)

b) The unintentional type of ambiguity causes misunderstanding in language communication on many levels of listening, speaking and writing which will be illustrated throughout this paper.

2.3. Lexical Ambiguities

Hudson (2000 : 313) indicates that lexical ambiguity is ambiguity in the form of a morpheme or word.

2.3.1. Homophones Ambiguity

A homophone is a single pronunciation with two or more meanings. common examples are:

flour / flower

right / write

sent / cent

sight / site

to / too / two.

Some homographs are also homophones like "read" which either [ri:d] the present tense form of "read" or [rɛd] the past tense form of "read". (ibid : 313)

Ulman (1962 : 156) demonstrates 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 the



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suprasegmental features, such, juncture, stress and intonation.

Forexample:

There are two people by the white car and there are too others by the black one.

2.3.2. Homonyms Ambiguity

Homonymy in semantics is linguistically defined as lexical ambiguity " when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings." some examples are:

bank (of a river)	bank (financial institution)
bat (flying creature)	bat (used in sport)
mole (on skin)	mole (small animal)
pupil (at school)	pupil (in the eye)
race (contest of speed)	race (ethnic group)

(Yule, 1996 :120)

The homonymy causes confusion in selecting the right meaning and creates ambiguity in words and sentences for example:*I will meet you by the bank* This sentence is ambiguous because of the two different meanings of the word “bank” as it is mentioned above, but the ambiguity can be solved by specification of certain context such as:

I will meet you by the bank to have some cash.

In this case the ambiguity is solved at reference to the financial institution. So, “Homonyms are words that have separate histories and meanings, but have accidentally come to have exactly the same form.” (ibid:120)

2.3.3. polysemy Ambiguity

Polysemy refers to phenomenon that one single lexeme has several different meaning. For example:

- flight - (passing through air)
 - flight - (power of flying)
 - flight - (air journey)
 - flight - (unit of the Air Force)
- (Al-Sulaimani, 2010 : 218)

Polysemy (' one word having two or more senses')
we recognize a case of polysemy if the sense concerned are related.



But when we ask what 'related' means, there are two answers, one historical and one psychological, which do not necessarily coincide. (Leech, 1974 : 228)

Many other examples such as:
run, used to refer to (person does)
run, used to refer to (water does)
run, used to refer to (colors do)

date , so the question '*How is your date?*' is ambiguous that could have several different interpretations.

The word date (= a thing we can eat) and date (= a point in time) are homonyms.

However date , the " the point in time " kind of date is polysemous in terms of a particular day and month (= on letter), an arranged meeting (= an appointment), a social meeting (= with someone we like) And even a person (= that person we like)
Yule (1996 : 120)

The polysemous ambiguity can be solved and removed by the used of suprasegmental features or in the context of certain specification like to say: How is your date with Kelly?

In this question we use the context, so it is clear that we asked about the meeting with Kelly. And if we say: which date do you chose to be with Kelly?
Then we ask about a point in time. Etc.

2.3.4. Synonymous Ambiguity

Lyons (1995 : 60) states that “expression with the same meaning issynonymous.”

Synonymy in general enriches the English language with great number of words.

No two words ever have exactly the same meaning still; the following sentences have a very similar meaning:

He is sitting on the sofa.
He is sitting on the couch.

Though the words sofa and couch are synonymous because they have the same meaning; these words contain different pronunciation's form (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988 : 181)

The ambiguity comes if someone does not know the meaning of ‘couch’ that means ‘sofa’ too.



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There are many examples of polysemous lexemes that are synonymous in one or more, but not all, of their meanings.

'They live in a big / large house' The two adjectives are generally as synonymous while, *'I will tell my big sister '* is lexically ambiguous, by virtue the polysemy of 'big' in a way that *I will tell my large sister.*

is different in this regard

(Lyons, 1995 : 61)

While there is no farther explanation by Lyons; The researcher may add that big sister can mean either " the older sister in age " or " the wiser one " or may be the " stronger sister for bodily size", so the sentence is ambiguous in this regard. While large in the last sentence usually used for size and seldom to be used in such context that can be considered impolite at calling someone 'fat'.

Section Three

3.1. Sentences Ambiguities

The matter of ambiguity phonologically, lexically, structurally and semantically can be harmful to speakers, listeners, readers and writer without a good command for coping with the English Language.

Palmer (1971 : 81)

stresses that ambiguity is one of the commonest features of the English language components. So far, the phonological, the lexical, the structural and the semantical ambiguities are all in general covered through the paper by many examples, but we may enrich the research in all these fields by illustrating extra examples and explanations, beside exploring some other concepts that could cause misconception in sentences, such as metaphor, vagueness, paradox, deictic, pun and pragmatics.

3.2. Class Ambiguity

One of the specific types of structural ambiguities is called "class ambiguity" which creates humorous sense.

(Stageberg, 1971: 367)

For example:



- a- *The man found his friend a pig.*
 b- *The engineer found the machine a helper.*
 c- *Our cat made a good friend.*

The intentional meaning is not clear in the above sentences.

Analyzing the ambiguity in sentence 'a-', the sentence intends to explain either the man found a pig for his friend, or the man found (out) that his friend was a pig himself (unpleasant person and difficult to dealwith) or (a person who eats too much like a pig). This sentence 'a-' causes confusion on the part of speech.

Sentence 'b-' may mean that the engineer found that the used of the machine helped him to do his work, the other meaning is that the engineer found a helper or an assistant for the machine or for himself assisting him on the machine work.

Sentence 'c-' has two different meanings, first- that the cat was a good friend to us, second-the cat itself found a friend.

3.3. Grammatical Ambiguity in Sentences

a) The word can be tokens of the same type, but not form of the same expression. It is the distinction between form and expression, rather than the distinction between form as token and form as type.

For example: *They found the hospitals and charitable institutions.*

This sentence is ambiguous; the reason is that found as a form of 'find' is not grammatical equivalent to found as form of 'found'. It is in both cases a transitive verb form.

Found may be constructed, grammatically either as a form of 'found', as present-tense or, alternatively, as a past-tense utterance containing a form of 'find'.

The ambiguity is partly lexical and partly grammatical.

(Lyons , 1995: 54-56)

The ambiguity of the above sentence can be solved in the specification of syntactic structure as to write and say:

They have found it impossible to found hospitals and charitable institutions. She/he founds the hospitals and charitable institutions. (ibid:57)

b) Many other grammatical difficulties might happen when we use coordinated subject that consists of two or more noun phrases coordinated by 'and'. A distinction has to be made between



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appositional and non-appositional coordination. For example:

*His younger brother and the subsequent editor of his collected paper
was/were with him at his death-bed.*

This example is ambiguous and could have either a singular or plural verb according as the brother and the editor are one person or two. Some latitude is allowed in the interpretation of abstract nouns since it is not always easy to decide if they represent one quality or two. An example: *Your fairness and impartiality has/have been much appreciated.* (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973 : 177,178)

3.4. Metaphorical Ambiguity

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 : 126)

The metaphor refers to the abstract, the non-literal meaning of word, phrase or sentence. Many examples are already mentioned in the paper. An extra example is the following lines from the poem 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Lee Frost viewing how this metaphorical poem has layers within layers of meaning:

The Road Not Taken *I shall be telling this with a sigh Some ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-- And I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference* (Talík, 2010:32)

The researcher can explain that The word 'ages' has many meanings that can refer to, the interval of time, to the distance of the road, or to the role that man may take in life at making a certain decision. Also the word 'hence' that refers to time with a meaning of, from now, or after two years from now, beside its reference to the place with a meaning of, from here, or from this place. The metaphorical sense enhances the beauty of the poem and enriches its fabric with extra meanings.

3.5. Vagueness

Chomsky (1957 :37) processes this sentence:
Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. The sentence is grammatically



correct but semantically odd. The listeners or the readers cannot identify any specific intentional

meaning of that. So the vagueness is always creating misconception and confusion.

Crystal (1985 :15) explains that vague sentence "permits an unspecifiable range of possible interpretation" vagueness is related to hypothetical matters where there is no clear object to refer to.

The negation is also a matter of vagueness.

(Fromkin and Rodman, 1988 :329)

The scope and focus of the negation are interrelated and without clear stress or intonation in sentences the negation often cause many interpretations of the sentence. For example:

Harry didn't attack the Labor Government.

According to where the stresses are, this sentence could mean:

a - (someone attacked...,but wasn't Harry)

b- (He did something to the Labor Government)

c- (He attacked the some government, but wasn't the Labor one).

(Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973 : 188)

3.6. Misconception of Deictic Expressions

Deictic is an expression from the Greek word deixis, which means pointing via language. Some sentences of English are virtually impossible to understand if we don't know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. For example:

You will have to bring it back tomorrow because she is not here today.

Out of context, the above sentence is really vague.

(Yule, 1996 :130)

Deictic are morphemes with variable referential meaning, whose specific reference varies with each context of their use. Deictic usage could result in a lot of vagueness.

(Hudson, 2000 : 314)

3.7. Illusion of Pun

In poetry and other literary work, pun is used to enrich the fabric of the literary work to indicate language that contents more than one meaning. An example from 'Romeo and Juliet' *Ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man.* (Ulman, 1962 : 188)

The word 'grave' has many different meanings, it could mean a dead man in a grave, a patient man who could bear difficulties or it



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might mean a long suffering man affected by the pain.

3.8. Misconception of Paradox

A sentence which is disorganized and unpredictable is ambiguous that might have interaction and randomness.

Paradox is a statement that seems to be impossible but that is or may be true: ' *A deafening silence* ' is a paradox.

Paradox is a situation that has two or more qualities that you would not expect to find together. (Oxford Wordpower, 2006 :556)

3.9. Pragmatics Vs. Intentional Ambiguity

In politic as in daily life, it frequently happens that one person does not understand what the other saying, not because the words are not clear, but simply because the interlocutor does not see what the other is talking about, or because she or he interprets that what the other is talking about as something entirely different. (Mey, 2001 : 217)

To deceive one's partner or to ' keep the door open' . A famous example is the answer that the ancient oracle in Delphi gave the king of Epirus, Hyrrhus, when he asked what would happen if he attacked the Romans. The answer was that *the king will destroy a great empire* ; where upon he set out to win the battle, but loses the war, thus ultimately fulfilling the prophecy and destroying his own empire. (ibid:12)

SECTION FOUR

4.1. Conclusions

Semantic ambiguity can occur in words phrases and sentences lexically, phonologically, structurally, grammatically and semantically, intentionally or unintentionally . Standing or local ambiguity affects the ability of the receiver in both spoken and written languages in understanding or communicating. Other factors that could cause misconception and confusion are related to metaphor, pun, paradox , deictic, negation and pragmatics are also stated in the paper with examples. Reduction of ambiguities is based upon the ability of the individuals coping with English language and



the used of the features of suprasegmental and the implementation of the context.

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