

AMBIGUITY

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Abstract:

Ambiguity is a fact of linguistic life , many words do double duty or more.It is the use of words that allows alternative interpretations.A word, phrase,or a sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning.A phrase is vague if we do not know what is meant by it.If we do not know which of the two meanings is intended, then it is ambiguous.Ambiguity could be lexical, grammatical or pragmatic.It depends on our knowledge of the world.However,we cannot separate our knowledge of semantic structure and our knowledge of the world.We have also to consider the number of readings of a sentence.This has implications for stylistics , language teaching and translation.Lexical ambiguity is also accounted for as in the use of juncture and intonation.Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a phrase or a sentence has more than one underlying structure.The utterance can be given two types of analysis.Pragmatic ambiguity occurs in the sociocultural and contextual condition that affect the appropriate use of language in communication.A sentence can be ambiguous because of faulty arrangement of words,phrases or clauses, misplacement of pronouns or omission of necessary words

الغموض

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ملخص البحث :

الغموض حقيقة لغوية، فكثير من الكلمات تؤدي وظيفتين أو أكثر، والغموض هو استخدام الكلمات التي تسمح بتفسيرات بديلة، فالكلمة أو العبارة أو الجملة تكون غامضة إذا كان لها أكثر من معنى. وتكون العبارة غير واضحة vague إذا لم نعرف ماذا يقصد بها، أما إذا لم نعرف أي من المعنيين هو المقصود فإن العبارة تكون غامضة ambiguous. ويكون الغموض إما مفرداتيا lexical أو نحوي grammatical أو براغماتيكيا (سياقي اجتماعي عملي) pragmatic، وهذا يعتمد على معرفتنا بالعالم نستطيع أن نفصل معرفتنا بالتركيب المعنوي عن معرفتنا في العالم، كذلك علينا أن نأخذ بنظر الاعتبار عدد القراءات المختلفة للجملة ولهذا مضامين في الأسلوب و تدريس اللغة والترجمة. ويتطرق البحث إلى غموض المفردات كما في استخدام الوصل المعنوي juncture والتنغيم (ارتفاع وانخفاض طبقات الصوت أثناء الكلام) intonation، أما الغموض النحوي فيحدث عندما يكون للعبارة أو الجملة أكثر من تركيب كامن.

وبذلك يمكن إعطاء نوعين من التحليل للكلام. ويحدث الغموض البراغماطيسي في الحالات السياقية والحضارية-الاجتماعية التي تؤثر في الاستخدام الصحيح للغة أثناء التفاهم. وتكون الجملة غامضة بسبب الترتيب الخاطئ للكلمات والعبارات وسوء استخدام الضمائر وحذف الكلمات الضرورية.

1.Introduction:

Problems of communication affect us all in many aspects of day-to-day living, and can cause serious troubles. It is easy to be unintentionally misunderstood, or to speak ambiguously, or vaguely. In doctor-patient interaction, for example, the word "ache" is vaguely used by the patient to describe his symptoms. The meanings of terms like freedom, progressive and democratic have good, bad or neutral overtones depending very much on which part of the world you were brought up in. There are also many words which have good connotations for one group and bad connotations for another (Crystal, 1985: 15-18). Ambiguity, therefore, is a fact of

linguistic life, many words do double duty or more, and despite the unlimited number of sentences, many have several meanings, and their utterance must be disambiguated in the light of the speaker's likely intentions (Bach:2004,4). The meaning of a word or a sentence cannot be known in isolation.

A good visual model of ambiguity is the well-known duck-rabbit picture, a drawing which can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, but not both at the same time. This picture thus includes two separate and incompatible possibilities (internet:file A/ambiguity. Htm 14/01/1425)

2. Definitions:

Ambiguity is the use of words that allow alternative interpretations. In factual, explanatory prose, ambiguity is considered an error in reasoning or diction; in literary prose or poetry, it often functions to increase the richness and subtlety of language and to imbue it with a complexity that expands the literal meaning of the original statement (Empson:1953).

Bach (1994:internet) states that “a word, phrase, or sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. The word **light**, for example, can mean not very heavy or not very dark. Words like **light**, **note**, **bear** and **over** are lexically ambiguous. They induce ambiguity in phrases or sentences in which they occur, such as “light suit” and “The duchess can't bear children.”

However, phrases and sentences can be ambiguous even if none of their constituents is. The phrase “porcelain egg container” is structurally ambiguous, as is the sentence “The police shot the rioters with gun.” Ambiguity can also have both a lexical and a structural basis, as with sentences like “I left her behind for you” and “He saw her duck.” (Bach, K.:2004,1)

Empson (1953:3 in Scott,2001,internet) defines ambiguity as “any verbal nuance ,however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language”.

Pehar(2001:internet) states that ambiguities are pieces of language that 1.can be interpreted as meaning A. 2. Can be interpreted as meaning B 3.cannot be interpreted as A and B simultaneously.In order to qualify as ambiguity an expression must generate not only two different meanings but also two incompatible and unrelated meanings.It is only then that an expression is truly ambiguous.

Leech(1987) defines ambiguity as “ a one-many relation between syntax and sense.Prakasam(1993:94) states that ambiguity is the phenomenon of double or multiple signification.A word, phrase,or sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning.In literary criticism ambiguity refers to the exploitation for artistic purposes of language which has multiple meanings.A phrase is **vague** if we do not know what is meant by it.If we do not know which of the two meanings is intended, then it is **ambiguous** to us.

3. Aims of the Research:

The aim of the present work is to study linguistic ambiguity, define it and to investigate its types and use in communication which gives room for alternative reactions for the same piece of language and to find out what is a truly ambiguous expression which is intended to be taken in more than one way in the same context of utterance.The research tries to study this phenomenon of double or multiple signification and its underlying structure.The study attempts to see how ambiguities can be clarified and study the causes of ambiguity.

4.Value of the Study:

This study has implications for stylistics because one of the aims of semantics is to account for the number of readings of a sentence especially in literary criticism when ambiguity is used for artistic purposes. The work is also useful for translators as they have to know the intended referential meaning when they render words and expressions from one language system into another. It has also implications for language teaching because it is the teacher's job to disambiguate sentences to his students by adding certain words or phrases to a sentence. This can be exploited by the teacher in composition writing and comprehension. The study has lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic value.

5. Types of Ambiguity:

There are three types of ambiguity. Ambiguity could be lexical, grammatical or pragmatic, e.g.,

5.1. Lexical:

(Bank: river bank, money bank) Lexical ambiguity is the most common type. Everyday examples include nouns like chip, pen and suit, verbs like call, draw and run, and adjectives like deep, dry and hard. The word suit in the sentence "The tailor pressed one suit in his shop and one in the municipal court" is ambiguous. The word suit is used to refer to an article of clothing and the word one to a legal action. The above examples are of one word with more than one meaning (Bach, 2004). Katz & Fodor (1963: 174-9) argue that part of the aim of semantics is to "account for the number of readings of a sentence." "The bill is large" is an ambiguous sentence. It has two readings resulting from the two meanings

of **bill**. The sentence can be disambiguated if it is extended with....'but need not be paid'. We can ,therefore, invent extensions to sentences to deal with any kind of meaning relating to any kind of information that may be relevant. The sentence "John was looking for the **glasses**" is ambiguous because it may refer to **spectacles** or to **drinking glasses**. (Palmer, 1977: 49-50 and 112). The meaning of the sentence ,therefore, depends on our knowledge of the world. A speaker cannot separate his knowledge of semantic structure and his knowledge of the world. To recognize the ambiguity of the above sentence , we need to have the relevant information about the kinds of glasses.

Kempson (1977: 81) considers the sentence "He **ran** the race for Hampshire", which may mean either that he was a competitor or that he organized the race. But since the two meanings of **run** here are related in terms of causativity like those of **walk** and **march** , it would be curious to suggest that we have two lexical items. Now consider the different contexts of the word **form** as it is used in the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English (Hornby, 1985).

1. Proteus was a Greek sea-god who could appear in the form of any creature he wished (a well-shaped body)
2. Ice, snow and steam are forms of water (manner in which something exists)
3. The word brother has two plural forms, brother and brethren.
4. Say good morning as a mere matter of form (not because he is pleased to see the person).
5. Application forms are printed papers with space to be filled in.
6. If a horse is not in good form it is unlikely to win a race. (condition of health and training)

The word **charge** can be used with different meanings:

1. Electrical: "The battery was charged with jump leads."

2. Legal:” Thief was charged by PC Smith.”

3. Responsibility:”The lecturer was charged with student recruitment.

Spoken language can also contain lexical ambiguities where there are more than one way to break up a set of sounds into words for example/ aiskri:m/ can be either /ai + skri:m/ or/ais + kri:m/.However this is rarely a problem due to context.By the appropriate use of intonation, we can be sarcastic.For example,”She is very clever” may suggest that she is rather ugly,and “I don’t like coffee” with a fall-rise intonation may imply “I like tea”

5.2. Syntactic(structural ambiguity):

This type of ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure such as the sentence “visiting professors can be expensive” which means either:

- a. Professors who are visiting can be expensive, or
- b. Visits can be expensive(the action of visiting)

The same thing is with the sentence”Visiting relatives can be boring”(Palmer,1977:108)which means that either “relatives can be boring” or “visits can be boring”.The phrase “Iraqi economic specialist” can be represented in two structurally different ways,e.g.,[Iraqi economic] specialist and Iraqi [economic specialist].Another example of structural ambiguity is that which is found in co-ordinate attachment,for example:What can we eat if we are told”You can have peas and beans or carrots with the set meal.”:

1. [peas] and[beans or carrots]
2. [peas and beans] or [carrots]

The sentence”Put the box on the table by the window in the kitchen” can mean:

1. Put the box [which is on the table by the window] in the kitchen.
2. Put the box on the table[which is by the window in the kitchen]

The same thing can be done with the sentence "I saw the boy on the hill with a telescope". This is known as prepositional attachment.

We can also give the utterance two types of grammatical analysis. For example, the often-quoted expression "Flying planes can be dangerous" (Chomsky:1965:21) can be analysed as follows: The word flying can be either a predicator and planes is a complement or modifier+head word. So, the expression means either **planes which are flying** or the act of **flying is dangerous**. The existence of such ambiguities provides strong evidence for a level of underlying syntactic structure (Bach:2004,2). The sentence "They are encouraging reports." The word encouraging is the stumbling block. It may be a verb, so that the sentence means: "They encourage reports," or it may be an adjectival, giving the meaning of "These reports are encouraging." Not knowing the part of speech of this one word, we find the sentence ambiguous. In a carefully controlled context, this sentence might not be ambiguous (Stageberg, 1971:195). Stageberg also says: "When neither position nor formal signals reveal the modification, and when the meaning does not make it clear, we have an ambiguity, as in:

A flower in the garden which was blossoming beautifully. It is not clear whether the flower was blossoming beautifully or the garden was (Ibid, 233). The postnominal position may also coincide with the preverbal position. In such case the suprasegmentals usually show whether the word in the ambiguous position modifies the preceding noun or the following verb; thus, in speech, the ambiguity is eliminated, e.g.,
The **rabbits also** enjoyed our lettuce, and
The rabbits **also enjoyed** our lettuce.

The ambiguity of written sentences can also be removed by using

differences of intonation,e,g the sentence "Those who sold quickly made a profit", can be said in two different ways:

- a) Those who **sold quickly**/ made a profit.
- b) Those who sold/**quickly made** a profit.

Two different paraphrases can be given to those sentences:

- a) A profit was made by those who **sold quickly**.
- b) A profit was **quickly made** by those who sold (Roach,1988:145)

The proper use of stress can also remove ambiguity.Consider the sentence from (Ibid,144): "I have plans to leave"

1. I have plans to "**leave**.(I am planning to **leave**)
2. I have "**plans** to leave.(I have some **plans** that I have to leave)

The sentence”The police were ordered to stop drinking about midnight” has more than one interpretation,or meaning: Was drinking taking place at midnight ,or the ordering?Who was drinking,the police or someone else? The above ambiguities can be clarified by altering the position of the adverbial phrase at midnight or inserting a personal pronoun at a specific point in the second, i.e., by relating the different possible senses to other structures which are similar in meaning but which are unambiguous,for example:

At midnight the police were ordered to stop drinking.

(The ordering was taking place at midnight), or

The police were ordered to stop them drinking at

Midnight.(eliminates the possibility that they were drinking themselves) (Crystal:1985,18)

Now notice the following ambiguous sentences:

- 1.Ali said in the evening he would go.
- 2.She gave orange juice to the children in plastic cups.
- 3.The teacher told us not to throw stones on Wednesday.

In sentence 1 , it is not clear whether the phrase “in the evening”is

meant to qualify “said” or “would go”.The meaning would be clear if we put “in the evening” after “go”.Sentence 2 seems to tell us that the children were in plastic cups.The phrase "in plastic cups" qualifies orange juice; therefore,"in plastic cups" should come immediately after "orange juice". sentence 3 means that stones can be thrown any day except Wednesday:On Wednesday really qualifies""the teacher told us",so "on Wednesday” should come immediately before ,or immediately after"the teacher told us".In the sentence “At the age of ten,Ali s mother gave him his first bicycle”,the phrase”at the age of ten” grammatically qualifies Ali s mother which,of course,is nonsense.It ought to qualify Ali.We can correct the sentence as follows:

- a. At the age of ten,Ali was given his first bicycle.
- b. When Ali was ten,his mother gave him his first bicycle.(AL-Hammash:1981,25).Quirk et al (1972:626-27)

state that the clause”They called Susan a waitress” has three interpretations:

- a.They called a waitress for Susan.
- b.They said Susan was a waitress.
- c.They called Susan,who was a waitress.(intonation and punctuating marks are obligatory)

The sentence” The chicken is ready to eat” either means “ a hungry chicken(subject) is ready to eat “ or “ a broiled chicken is ready to be eaten.

“He ate the cookies on the couch”,could mean that he ate the cookies which were on the couch(as opposed to those that were on the table), or it could mean that he was sitting on the couch when he ate the cookies.(<http://Wikipedia.org>,2004)

A pronoun gets its exact meaning from the word or words to which it refers-its antecedent.A pronoun should not be so placed that it might

refer to either of two antecedents,e.g., "Sue gave Lisa a coat because she felt cold."(Inam,1997)

The following sentence is confusing due to the omission of a necessary word:"I know more beautiful women than Kylie."(Ibid,p.5).This sentence can be interpreted either as:"I know women who are more beautiful than Kylie", or as " I Know more beautiful women than Kylie knows." Another example of referential ambiguity is:"The director fired at the worker.He was known to be aggressive.”(Inam,1997:5).It is not clear who is aggressive,the director or the worker. The ambiguity of the pronoun can be solved by close reference.

5.3.Pragmatic:

Pragmatic ambiguity is an oxymoron.When people use ambiguous language, its ambiguity is not intended.Occasionally, however , ambiguity is deliberate, with an utterance like” I would like to see more of you” when intended to be taken in more than one way in the same context of utterance. Another example of pragmatic ambiguity is “ The six wives of Henry VIII.To some one from a society where polygamy is allowed, it could mean that he had all the six wives at the same time ; to an Englishman ,it means that he married six women ,each time after divorcing the previous one(Prakasam:1993,94). "John wants to marry a girl with green eyes"(Lyons,1977:190-1) has two readings.On the specific reading, there is a particular girl with green eyes that John wants to marry.On the non-specific reading, he has no specific girl in mind,but merely requires that his future wife has green eyes.

6. Conclusion

Ambiguity is a fact of linguistic life. Many words do double duty or more and despite the unlimited number of sentences, many have several meanings, and their utterance must be disambiguated in the light of the speaker's likely intentions. The meaning of a word or a sentence cannot be understood in isolation because meaning is not independent of context. Ambiguity has either lexical or structural basis. It is the phenomena of double or multiple signification. In literary criticism it is used for artistic purposes of language. A phrase is ambiguous if we do not know which of the two meanings is intended. Ambiguity can be either lexical grammatical or pragmatic. A sentence can be disambiguated if it is extended or modified. The meaning of the sentence depends on our knowledge of the world. In spoken language, we can have more than one way to break up a set of sounds into words. A sentence or a phrase can be ambiguous because it has more than one underlying structure. It can be disambiguated by changing the position of certain words or phrases or inserting certain words or pronouns. A pronoun gets its exact meaning from the word or words to which it refers. A sentence or a phrase can be ambiguous because of faulty arrangement of words or phrases or due to the omission of a necessary word. It is, therefore, useful to place words as near as possible to the words they refer to. The clear use of past and present tense, the use of intonation and correct punctuation are useful to avoid ambiguity.

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