

# Lexical Ambiguity and Cognitive Processing in Modernist English Poetry: A Semantic Analysis of Ambiguity and Vagueness

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#### **Abstract**

The present study is an attempt to investigate the complex relationship between lexical ambiguity and cognitive processing in modernist English poetry. It focuses on how a representative group of modernist poets employ ambiguous language to involve readers to compute active interpretation. It is clear that modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore use non-linear and fragmented expressions to mirror the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary life. This style has become a thematic hallmark of the modernist movement. The writer of this paper relies on the semantic theory posited by Empson. He argues that ambiguity can be used as both a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon to make it necessary for the readers to navigate multiple meanings through personal experience and cognitive associations. This study employs a qualitative methodology that intertwines semantic analysis with cognitive theory in examination of selected poems to illustrate how lexical ambiguity enriches interpretive possibilities and prompt deeper emotional engagement on the part of the readers. The findings reveal that modernist poetry defies traditional interpretations by compelling the readers to become co-creators of meaning. In this way, this paper has demonstrated the significant role of ambiguity in fostering a dynamic reader-text relationship. All in all, this study may be regarded as a contribution to the fields of literary and linguistic research by showing clearly the cognitive effects of ambiguity and its impact on the reader's experience. As a result, this research paper has bridged the gap between language theory and literary analysis.

#### ملخص:

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في العلاقة المعقدة بين الغموض المعجمي والمعالجة الإدراكية في الشعر الإنجليزي الحديث. تركز الدراسة على كيفية توظيف مجموعة من شعراء الحداثة للغة الغامضة لإشراك القراء في عملية تفسير نشطة. يتضح أن شعراء الحداثة مثل ت. س. إليوت، ووالاس ستيفنز، وماريان مور يستخدمون تعبيرات غير خطية ومجزأة لتعكس تعقيدات وعدم يقين الحياة المعاصرة، وقد أصبح هذا الأسلوب علامة مميزة للحركة الحداثية. يعتمد كاتب هذه الورقة على النظرية الدلالية التي طرحها إمبسون، حيث يجادل بأن الغموض يمكن استخدامه كظاهرة لغوية وإدراكية على حد سواء، مما يجعل من الضروري أن يستكشف القراء معاني متعددة من خلال تجربتهم الشخصية والروابط الإدراكية. تستخدم الدراسة منهجية نوعية تمزج بين التحليل الدلالي والنظرية الإدراكية لفحص قصائد مختارة، لتوضيح كيف يثري الغموض المعجمي إمكانيات التفسير وبحفز تفاعلًا عاطفيًا أعمق من جانب القراء.

#### 1. Preliminaries:

Following is an overview of the research topic, aim, significance and methodology.

# 1.1 Overview of Lexical Ambiguity and Cognitive Processing in Modernist Poetry

A characteristic feature of modernist English poetry is lexical ambiguity and vagueness. In the early 20th century, poets of modernist persuasion employed literary techniques that were radically different from traditional forms and meanings. They used expressions that were non-linear and fragmented. The adoption of this stylistic method by modernist poets echoes a modernist goal to depict the complexities and uncertainties of modern life. In the words of the leading modernist poet, T.S.Elion, modernist poetry embodies a" heap of broken images," a phrase that effectively captures the fractured, ambiguous nature of much Modernist works (Eliot, 1922).

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A well-known semantic theorist, Empson (1930) defines ambiguity as a linguistic term that can be understood in multiple ways. Empson pioneered a basic understanding of how ambiguity functions in poetry. He maintains that ambiguity is both a linguistic and a cognitive phenomenon. This notion reverberates well within modernist poetry. For instance, Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1923) uses ambiguous language to paint the fleeting nature of life. Readers would compute two interpretations of the poet's ambiguous expression based on their personal experiences and cognitive associations (Empson, 1930). Such ambiguity will prompt the readers to be involved actively with the text in order to comprehend its fragmented items by relying on their cognitive abilities and interpretative skills.

From the point of view of linguistics, a sentence is called a lexically ambiguous sentence when there is a word that may have two senses, for example the sentence,

'I saw him at the bank'

May have two different meanings, because the word 'bank' can mean a river side or a financial institution, a structural ambiguity occurs when the sentence, like,

'They kept the car in the garage'

may have two different interpretations depending on whether the phrase 'in the garage' may be thought of as modifying the word 'car' which can be an answer to the question 'Which car did they keep?', or, as an adverb of place modifying the verb 'kept', and in this caste it can be an answer to the question 'Where did they keep the car?'.

According to linguists like Crystal, ambiguity exists "when two or more interpretations are plausible within a particular linguistic structure" (Crystal, 1987). Cognitive linguists further argue that this ambiguity causes active processing, as readers attempt to "resolve" the meanings they encounter, often drawing on prior knowledge or intuition (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). This characteristic is in line with Modernist goals, as ambiguity invites readers into a co-creative

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experience, positioning them as active participants rather than passive interpreters of meaning.

#### **1.2** Aim

The present paper aims at analyzing the use of lexical ambiguity and vagueness in modernist poetry. It focuses on the effects of this kind of use on the readers 'cognitive processing. The research writer examines how modernist poets use ambiguous language to enrich interpretive possibilities and how these poets involve readers cognitively. By analyzing certain examples of ambiguity the research writer attempts to understand how these linguistic techniques produce meaning that challenges traditional interpretations and to enrich the intellectual and emotional experiences of poetry readers.

# 1.3 Significance

It is believed that this study hold significance for literary and linguistic research. It is significant for literature because it provides a deeper understanding of modernist poetry as it clarifies how the use of ambiguous language by modernist poets functions as an important instrument that shapes the interpretation and involvement. For linguistics, this study provides insight into the cognitive effects of lexical ambiguity. It demonstrates how poetry readers computes and resolve ambiguities which causes multiple and sometimes even contradictory meanings. It is thought the findings arrived at by this study may contribute to the study of semantics, psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics. It creates an area of research where language theory and literary analysis converge.

# 1.4 Methodology

A qualitative method is followed in this study. It joins semantic analysis with cognitive theory to examine examples of lexical ambiguity cited from modernist poetry. The writer of this paper starts his investigation by reading closely the selected poems. This careful reading is supported by secondary analysis of documented sources on semantics, literary theory and cognitive processing. It is believed that this approach enables the paper writer to explore linguistic features and interpretive processing.

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# 1.5 Selection of Relevant Data and Justification for the Selection

The present paper has selected three well-known poems by prominent Modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore. These authors were chosen due to their significant contributions to Modernist poetry and their frequent use of ambiguous language and complex imagery. Poems like Eliot's The Waste Land, Stevens' The Emperor of Ice-Cream, and Moore's Poetry exemplify the depth and complexity of language use in Modernist poetry, offering rich examples of lexical ambiguity and vagueness that require active cognitive processing from readers.

#### 2. Analysis of Data:

The three selected poems are analyzed one by one in terms of the aim of the study

2.1 T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land

In The Waste Land, Eliot piles ambiguity into multiple lines to prompt the readers to interpret each statement against the poem's fractured, surreal landscape.

"April is the cruellest month"

The poem opens with the line, "April is the cruellest month,". The poet here juxtaposes typical springtime associations with fertility and rebirth against "cruelty." This ambiguous reversal implies that springtime (usually considered symbolic of hope and new beginnings) brings unwelcome renewal that forces buried emotions to appear. Readers are left to figure out the reason why renewal could be deemed "cruel," with interpretations ranging from historical trauma (post-WWI desolation) to a reflection on the impossibility of escaping the cycle of life and death. The reader's attempt to reconcile the cruel nature of April mirrors the modern existential crisis that Eliot portrays.

Ambiguity in "Unreal City"

Later in The Waste Land, Eliot refers to London as the "Unreal City." The term "Unreal" is ambiguous and evokes multiple interpretations; it may refer to the depersonalization of urban life,

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the ghostly presence of individuals, or even a supernatural view of London as a dystopian metropolis. The phrase demands cognitive engagement as readers try to pin down an elusive meaning. This squares well with the Modernist theme of disorientation and alienation.

Vagueness in "A Game of Chess"

In the section "A Game of Chess" Eliot presents ambiguous imagery, especially in his depiction of an elaborate, almost dreamlike setting filled with "strange synthetic perfumes" that "troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odors." The lexical items here, such as "strange" and "confused," reflect vagueness, which elicits a multi-sensory response from readers and throws doubts on the scene's reality. As the lines proceed, ambiguity overwhelms the narrative and forces the readers to sort out the meanings mentally as they are incapable of grasping fully whether the scene reflects material decadence, mental instability, or social decadence.

Multiple Interpretations of "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME"

In "A Game of Chess," the line "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" echoes repeatedly. It is clearly ambiguous in its possible meanings. It may be interpreted as a pub closing call, a call to action, or even a warning of impending judgment or consequence. This line interrupts the poem with a haunting refrain which evokes a sense of urgency without a clear resolution. Here the ambiguity resides in both context and tone, pushing readers to grapple with the implications of time, mortality, and change.

#### 2.2 Wallace Stevens' the Emperor of Ice-Cream

'The Emperor of Ice-Cream by Wallace Stevens is usually praised because of its complex and sometimes equivocal language. Apparently, the language is straightforward but in reality it hides deep thematic ambiguities.

Analysis of "Call the roller of big cigars"

The poem opens with the command, "Call the roller of big cigars," .Here a mysterious figure is introduced. He seems both mundane and exalted. This figure could stand for a working-class man, or he could symbolize a greater force of life and celebration amid death.

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The readers are faced with the cognitive task to infer whether this individual is a mere craftsman or a symbol of life's ephemeral joys. This interpretation hinges on the ambiguity of Stevens' diction which mingles the everyday with the mythical.

Ambiguity in "Let the lamp affix its beam"

In the closing lines, Stevens writes, "Let the lamp affix its beam," .This expression invites interpretations that vary from literal to symbolic. This line could imply a straightforward action, or it might allude to the illuminating power of truth in a world of shadows and mortality. Consequently the ambiguity of the phrase demands cognitive processing because the readers have to interpret whether the "lamp" is simply a physical light or a representation of awareness or existential insight.

# **Interpretive Ambiguity of the Title Itself**

The title "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is ambiguous because it brings to mind images of both authority and triviality. The readers have to figure out whether the "emperor" is death, pleasure, or a mixture of both. This cognitive ambiguity squares well with the poem's general meditation on mortality and the fleeting nature of life's pleasures. Each reader may guess different meanings to this "emperor," depending on his or her perceptions of authority, the brevity of life, and the inevitability of death.

#### 2.3 Marianne Moore's Poetry

In her poetry, Marianne Moore employs lexical ambiguity and ironic vagueness, frequently subverting expectations to convey a layered commentary on poetry itself.

Ambiguity in "I, too, dislike it"

The poem begins with "I, too, dislike it," Although this phrase seems straightforward, it is in fact ambiguous in tone and this sort of statement clearly urges the readers to ponder why a poet like Moore would begin a poem with disapproval to poetry. It suggests possible irony, dissatisfaction with poetic conventions, or perhaps an invitation to redefine poetry beyond conventional expectations. Moore's line embodies cognitive complexity which renders it

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essential for readers to process potential contradictions and confront their own assumptions about art.

Vagueness in "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"

Both ambiguity and vagueness can be detected in a famous line by Moore, namely "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," .The poet here blends fantasy with reality in an unexpected manner. This symbolic image is not clear because presents a paradox that readers must settle mentally. It challenges readers to consider whether poetry should contain tangible truths ("real toads") within its imaginative constructs. This interpretation is left open-ended which shows Moore's Modernist intent to unsettle and provoke thought rather than deliver definitive meaning.

Ambiguous Meaning in "genuine"

Mariana Moore describes poetry's value ambiguously by using the lexical item "genuine". This is because the mere assertion that poetry should have a genuine quality opens the term to interpretation. The readers may question whether "genuine" refers to emotional authenticity, aesthetic purity, or intellectual honesty, each one of these interpretations adds layers of interpretative depth to the poem. The intentional use of vague language by Moore make it necessary for the readers to be involved in her definition of poetic truth and resist any single, reductive interpretation.

# 2.4 Summary of Analysis

The above analysis of some selected examples of poetic language used by a representative group of modernist poets may be summarized as follows:

**a.** The analyzed examples have demonstrated that modernist poets like Eliot, Stevens, and Moore use lexical ambiguity and vagueness to destabilize meaning in order to urge their readers to engage cognitively with their poetry. In the Waste Land, Eliot's refrains and unexpected associations evoke a world of fragmented perceptions which may be deemed as reflecting the disorienting impact of modern life. Stevens' The Emperor of Ice-Cream 'disrupts the demarcation line between the ordinary and the existential, forcing readers to question the boundaries between life's trivialities and its

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weighty, ultimate truths. Moore explores the boundaries of sincerity and artifice, leaving the readers to define the meaning of what constitutes "genuine" poetry.

**b.** Each poem requires the readers to choose between multiple possible interpretations. This is evidence for modernist principles of subjective interpretation and the open-ended nature of meaning. By means of these analyzed examples from modernist poetry it can be seen clearly that modernist poetry has achieved an interactive, co-creative quality which pushes the readers to interpret ambiguity by using cognitive and emotional lenses, thereby constructing individualized meanings within the text.

#### 3. Discussion

The examples examined above have clarified how modernist poetry employs lexical ambiguity and vagueness as a means of engaging readers in deep, complex cognitive processing. This stylistic choice reflects the poets' themes .It also makes it incumbent on the readers to interpret the poetic text . This feature mirrors the modernist emphasis on subjective experience and fragmented perceptions. In The Waste Land, Eliot's ambiguous and often contradictory phrases, such as "April is the cruellest month" and "Unreal City," do not offer clear-cut meanings. Instead, they serve as entry points into a world fractured by war and existential uncertainty, a world in which language struggles to reconcile the trauma of the past with the promise of renewal. Elliot uses ambiguous language so as to compel his readers to experience the dislocation and tension inherent in modernity, transforming poetic interpretation into a reflection on the difficulty of locating stability in a post-war world.

In the same vein, The Emperor of Ice-Cream by Stevens uses seemingly simple language, commands like "Call the roller of big cigars" and the title's depiction of an "emperor", but in actual fact these phrases conceal multiple meanings .By describing death through a comparison with ephemeral pleasures (such as ice cream), Stevens blurs the line between life and death, the mundane and the existential. The readers are prompted to make a choice

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between literal and symbolic interpretations as they examine this ambiguous situation to find their own meanings within Stevens' meditation on death and celebration. The requirement of interpretive flexibility is in line with the modernist themes of impermanence and the instability of truth, suggesting that life's ultimate authority (the "emperor") may be both trivial and profound.

In Poetry, Moore's line "I, too, dislike it" invites readers into an ironic critique of poetry itself. She challenges conventions and at the same time posits her own view of what makes poetry valuable. The phrase "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" captures the ambiguity between artifice and reality, suggesting that poetry's true worth lies in the tension between imagination and truth. The Readers are encouraged to be involved with Moore's critique of authenticity, and consequently figure out their individual judgments on what constitutes "genuine" art. Moore's ambiguous language and vague imagery stress the modernist's preoccupation with defying conventional expectations and with requiring the readers to evaluate the poem's purpose and meaning for themselves.

The analysis carried out above has shown that ambiguity and vagueness in modernist poetry are more than stylistic choices; in fact, they are integral to the thematic content, driving the readers toward interpretative work that mirrors the poems' exploration of complexity, instability, and subjective meaning. This linguistic indeterminacy, where words resist singular interpretations, captures the spirit of the Modernist era—a time marked by uncertainty, changing worldviews, and the fragmentation of established structures. By engaging the readers in cognitive processes that mirror these historical and philosophical tensions, poets like Eliot, Stevens, and Moore embody the Modernist endeavor to make art a participatory experience in meaning-making. Consequently, the study of lexical ambiguity in these poetic examples has elucidated modernist poetics and also highlighted the ways in which language itself can become a space of cognitive interaction, where meaning is constructed rather than prescribed.

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#### 4. Conclusion:

This study has demonstrated how lexical ambiguity and vagueness in modernist English poetry—are used as essential mechanisms for cognitive engagement on the part of the readers to enable them to actively construct meaning within the text. By examining T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, Wallace Stevens' The Emperor of Ice-Cream, and Marianne Moore's Poetry, this analysis has shown that ambiguity in language is not merely a stylistic element but a central component of modernist poetry in which—interpretative openness mirrors the uncertain and fragmented realities of the early 20th century.

It was explained in 1.2 that the study's aim is to analyze the role of lexical ambiguity and vagueness in engaging cognitive processing in Modernist poetry. This aim has been achieved through close readings that reveal how poets use linguistic indeterminacy to reflect and respond to the existential challenges of their time. Each selected embodies a modernist approach to destabilized meaning: Eliot's work compels the readers to confront the paradoxes of renewal and decay, Stevens' verses explore the triviality and depth of life's ephemeral pleasures, and Moore's poetry challenges preconceptions about authenticity and artistic expression. These ambiguities demand that readers reconcile interpretations, reflecting Modernist themes of subjective experience and the limitations of language.

The writer of this paper by analyzing these poems has confirmed that the use of lexical ambiguity in modernist poetry is not thematically significant but also crucial to the readers' cognitive engagement.

By focusing on these poems, the study confirms that lexical ambiguity in Modernist poetry is not only thematically significant but also central to the reader's cognitive engagement. The interplay of ambiguity and vagueness promotes an interpretive flexibility that allows each reader to compute his own individual interpretations. This feature is in line with the modernist's distinguishing characteristic of active participation on the part of the readers in

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order to derive the meaning. In sum, this study has demonstrated that the cognitive demands of ambiguous language in modernist poetry are both an artistic feature and a reflection of a broader cultural movement, where meaning is sought through engagement rather than delivered through clarity. This study thus fulfills its aim by underscoring the crucial role of ambiguity in modernist poetry as both a cognitive and a thematic tool, offering insights into how language shapes and challenges human understanding.

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