

Semantic Disambiguation Through Contextual Clues in Political Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines the role of context in resolving linguistic ambiguity in political discourse, and how different types of contextual factors help resolve ambiguous sentences. Ambiguity is often the cause of misunderstanding in communication, but there is little comprehensive analysis of how different contextual factors affect interpretation. The study uses a qualitative approach to analyze instances of ambiguity in President Joe Biden's speech at the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (2024) using Yule's (2010) classification framework of lexical, structural and pragmatic ambiguity. Seven instances of ambiguity were identified, two pragmatic, three lexical, and two structural, and it was shown that successful disambiguation is a function of the interaction of multiple contextual layers rather than isolated elements. The results clarify that specific kinds of context are especially good in solving certain kinds of ambiguity like linguistic context for lexical ambiguity, pragmatic context for structural ambiguity, and cultural context for pragmatic ambiguity. This study implies that although all encoded types help in decoding, their relative importance is dependent on the ambiguity type, which indicates that many types of context such as cultural, thematic, etc. weigh factorial when one deals with diplomatic communication.

Keywords: (Semantic, Disambiguation, Contextual Clues, Political Discourse).

إزالة الغموض الدلالي من خلال الأدلة السياقية في الخطاب السياسي

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة دور السياق في حل الغموض اللغوي في الخطاب السياسي، وكيف تساعد الأنواع المختلفة من العوامل السياقية في حل الجمل الغامضة. غالباً ما يكون الغموض سبباً لسوء الفهم في التواصل، ولكن هناك القليل من التحليل الشامل لكيفية تأثير العوامل السياقية المختلفة على التفسير. وتستخدم الدراسة نهجاً نوعياً لتحليل حالات الغموض في خطاب الرئيس جو بايدن في الدورة التاسعة والسبعين للجمعية العامة للأمم المتحدة (٢٠٢٤) باستخدام إطار تصنيف يول (٢٠١٠) للغموض المعجمي والبنوي والبراغماتي. تم تحديد سبع حالات من الغموض، اثنتان عمليتان، وثلاث معجمية، واثنتان بنيويتان، وتبين أن إزالة الغموض الناجحة هي وظيفة تفاعل طبقات سياقية متعددة بدلاً من عناصر معزولة. وتوضح النتائج أن أنواعاً معينة من السياق جيدة بشكل خاص في حل أنواع معينة من الغموض مثل السياق اللغوي للغموض المعجمي، والسياق البراجماتي للغموض البنوي، والسياق الثقافي للغموض البراجماتي. تشير هذه الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من أن جميع الأنواع المشفرة تساعد في فك التشفير، إلا أن أهميتها النسبية تعتمد على نوع الغموض، مما يشير إلى أن العديد من أنواع السياق مثل الثقافي والموضوعي وما إلى ذلك لها وزن عاملي عندما يتعامل المرء مع الاتصالات الدبلوماسية. الكلمات المفتاحية: (الدلالية، إزالة الغموض، الأدلة السياقية، الخطاب السياسي).

1.1 Introduction

Language ambiguity is one of the most intriguing challenges in linguistics and cognitive science, because it shows how human language processing is so complicated (Smith & Johnson, 2019). Ambiguous sentences can have multiple possible interpretations, but humans resolve these ambiguities with

a strikingly high degree of efficiency and accuracy in natural communication settings (Chen et al. 2021). Researchers have turned to the role of context to disambiguate potentially confusing utterances, finding that contextual information has a large impact on how listeners and readers understand ambiguous linguistic structures (Anderson & Williams, 2020).

The subject of context as a means to interpret ambiguous sentences is important for apprehension of both linguistic theory and practical communication. Context contains different aspects such as cultural, social, and situational ones, all of which contribute to demonizing meaning (Levinson, 2000). Newly speakers and writers, while using more context-related behavioral models, implicitly lay down new ways to be understood without the probability of miscommunication. This research delves into the complex connection between ambiguity and context, with the aim to give insights into the way language users function in the presence of ambiguity in everyday interactions and how these outcomes can be applied to other fields of linguistic and communicative practices.

1.2 The Problem of the Study

One of the most challenging issues for both practical communication and theoretical linguistics is the misinterpretation of ambiguous sentences. Ambiguity does tend to provoke misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or confusion especially when the context is not sufficient or is wrong. In resolving ambiguity, despite being very important, context is not enough analyzed. Thus, there is no understanding of how various contextual factors (cultural, situational, and linguistic ones), affect the interpretation of communicative acts. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how the context shapes the comprehension of ambiguous phrases and thus, it also identifies the key elements that are required to help resolve ambiguity correctly.

1.3 The Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how contextual factors help in resolving lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguity in sentences.

2. To identify the specific types of contextual cues that play a significant role in interpreting ambiguous sentences.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do contextual factors help in resolving lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguity in sentences?
2. What specific types of contextual cues play a significant role in interpreting ambiguous sentences?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Context

The importance of context in understanding language is a vital aspect and provides us the meaning of the words and sentences. As mentioned by Brown (2019), context is the sum of all the things relevant to a piece of language, like the other words in a text, the environment where communication takes place, and the cultural background of the speakers. For example, when someone says "it's cold," the meaning changes depending on whether they're talking about the weather or their coffee.

Context can also include things like body language, tone of voice, and the relationship between speakers (Miller & Chen, 2020).

Another important thing about context is that it changes how we understand language in different situations. Roberts (2021) explains that context can be divided into different types: linguistic context (the words around a sentence), situational context (where and when something is said), and cultural context (the shared knowledge between people). These different types of context work together to help people understand what others mean when they speak or write (Thompson, 2018).

2.2 Types of Contexts

1. Linguistic Context

Linguistic context refers to the words, phrases, or sentences surrounding a particular expression, which help determine its meaning (Leech, 1983). This type of context is essential for resolving ambiguity, as the nearby text often provides clues to clarify interpretation. For example, in the sentence "The bank is closed today because of the holiday," the word bank is clearly

identified as a financial institution based on the surrounding words. Similarly, in "She didn't notice the bat until it flew out," the linguistic context points to the flying mammal rather than the sports equipment. Linguistic context operates at both the sentence and discourse levels, ensuring that meaning is derived coherently within a given text or conversation.

2. Situational Context

Situational context involves the physical and social environment in which communication takes place, influencing how language is understood (Malinowski, 1923). This includes factors such as the location, time, and the participants involved in the conversation. For instance, if two friends are at a park and one says, "Let's go to the bank," the situational context, such as the presence of a nearby river, helps the listener infer that bank refers to a riverbank rather than a financial institution. In another example, the phrase "Watch out!" can mean different things depending on the situation—it could be a warning about a car or a playful comment during a game. Situational context provides immediate and tangible cues for interpreting meaning.

3. Cultural Context

Cultural context refers to the shared beliefs, practices, and norms within a community that shape how language is interpreted (Hymes, 1972).

Understanding cultural context is crucial for avoiding misinterpretation, especially in cross-cultural communication. For example, in Western cultures, a compliment like "You look good today" is often taken as a positive remark, while in some Eastern cultures, it might imply that the person usually does not look good. Similarly, idiomatic expressions like "kick the bucket" in English require cultural knowledge to interpret their figurative meaning as "to die." Cultural context shapes the way people understand and use language, making it an integral part of communication.

4. Pragmatic Context

Pragmatic context refers to the speaker's intentions, the listener's assumptions, and the implied meanings that go beyond the literal words (Yule, 1996). It plays a significant role in understanding indirect or non-literal speech acts. For instance, if someone says, "It's getting late," in the

middle of a meeting, the pragmatic context may imply that they want the meeting to end rather than simply stating the time. For instance, the phrase "Can I get some water?" is considered to be a simple request, not a question that refers to the speaker's ability to release water. The pragmatic context is formed by the shared knowledge and expectations of the speaker and the listener, and it is through them that the intended meaning is transmitted successfully.

2.3 What is Ambiguity

Ambiguity occurs when words or sentences may have more than one meaning, which can make it hard to understand what someone is trying to say. As per Wilson (2020), ambiguity is very common and omnipresent in everyday language and can lead to misunderstandings whenever there is no or little context present for the intended meaning. For example, when "visiting relatives can be boring" is said, it can mean that either visiting relatives is boring or that the relatives visiting are boring.

Davis and Smith (2021) research shows that ambiguity no doubt seems like a problem in language, but it's actually a normal thing about how languages work. But as context tends to make the meaning clear, most people don't even notice ambiguity in normal conversations. However, ambiguity becomes more noticeable and problematic in situations where context is limited, like in written text messages or computer programming (Johnson, 2022).

2.4 Types of Linguistic Ambiguity

2.4.1 Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity happens when a single word has more than one meaning. Anderson (2020) explains that this is one of the most common types of ambiguity in English. For example, the word "bank" can mean either a financial institution or the edge of a river. Another example is the word "rose," which could be a flower or the past tense of "rise." According to Lee (2021), lexical ambiguity is especially challenging for people learning a new language because they have to learn multiple meanings for the same word.

2.4.2 Structural/Syntactic Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity occurs when a sentence can be understood in different ways because of its grammar structure. Park and Kim (2019) claim that different meanings can be derived by the sentences similar to "The man saw the girl with the telescope." One of the meanings is the man used the telescope to see the girl, and the other is the girl had a telescope. The other example is also frequent "Flying planes can be dangerous," which is passed in two directions. Either the act of flying planes is dangerous or that planes that are flying are dangerous. To quote, research shows that people often depend on context and common sense to figure out which meaning is correct (Martinez, 2021).

2.4.3 Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity occurs when a sentence's meaning is influenced by the situation in which it is used. According to Taylor (2022), this form of ambiguity is based on the intention of the speaker and the set of the conversation. For example, if someone says "Can you pass the salt?"

usually, they're not asking about your ability to pass the salt but, in fact, they are requesting that you do so. Also, when people say "It's getting late" during a visit, they could be implying that it is time to go. White and Brown (2021) indicated that pragmatic ambiguity can be a complicating factor in cross-cultural communication since different cultures tend to interpret the same phrase in varied ways.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Nature of the Study

Qualitative approach is used to analyze linguistic ambiguity in political discourse in this research. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative research is well suited to researching language patterns and the meanings of language in particular contexts, because it permits detailed study of textual data and informs us about how language is used to express a range of meanings. This method allows us to investigate the subtleties of a speaker's ambiguous expressions and hypothesized meanings within political speeches.

3.2 The Data of the Study

The source for primary data for this study is the speech of President Joe Biden at the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 24th September, 2024. This was chosen as a speech that reflects a considerable portion of contemporary political discourse directed toward an international audience and thus is particularly suitable to examine the way in which ambiguity is manifested in diplomatic communication. The material that the speech raises is rich for linguistic analysis as it covers a variety of global issues.

3.3 The Model of the Study

The model for this study draws on Yule's (2010) extensive exploration of linguistic ambiguity which identifies ambiguity as being of three main types – lexical, structural/syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is when a word has more than one meaning, structural ambiguity occurs when different grammatical interpretations are possible to a sentence, and pragmatic ambiguity shows because of different interpretations that are

based on either context or speaker intention. This three-way categorization offers a full tool for the consideration of ambiguity functioning and usage in political talk and its usage in diplomatic conversations of various types.

4. Data Analyses

1. **"I've seen a remarkable sweep of history. I was first elected to office in the United States of America as a U.S. senator in 1972. Now, I know I look like I'm only 40. I know that. (Laughter.)"**

The utterance "I know I look like I'm only 40. I know that" creates a pragmatic ambiguity. The ambiguity is due to the multiple readings one can yield concerning whether the speaker is genuinely registering his look or laughing at the fact of that. On a surface level, the statement could be interpreted as a genuine claim about the speaker's youthful appearance. However, the repetition of "I know that" adds another layer of potential meaning, suggesting self-awareness that could either reinforce sincerity or signal irony.

The ambiguity is resolved through multiple contextual cues. The linguistic context, specifically the notation "(Laughter)" in the transcript, indicates the audience's humorous interpretation. The situational context of the UN General Assembly, where diplomatic speeches often include moments of levity, and the pragmatic context of President Biden being 81 years old at the time of the speech, make it clear that this was intended as self-deprecating humor rather than a literal observation. The cultural context of Western political discourse, where such humor is often used to establish rapport with audiences, further confirms this interpretation. Through these combined contextual elements, what might appear ambiguous in isolation becomes clearly understood as an intentional use of ironic humor to engage the audience before addressing more serious topics.

2. “New challenges, new threats, new opportunities were in front of us.

We needed to put ourselves in a position to see the threats, to deal with the challenges, and to seize the opportunities as well.”

The phrase "in front of us" in the statement "New challenges, new threats, new opportunities were in front of us" presents a lexical ambiguity. The ambiguity stems from the multiple possible interpretations of the spatial phrase "in front of us." This phrase could be interpreted literally to mean physically positioned ahead in space, or metaphorically to indicate future events and situations. The word choice creates uncertainty about whether these challenges, threats, and opportunities are immediate, present concerns or anticipated future developments.

This ambiguity is resolved primarily through the linguistic context of the speech. In the preceding sentences, Biden discusses his early political career and historical events, establishing a temporal framework. The situational context of a UN General Assembly speech, where leaders typically discuss future global challenges, also helps clarify that "in front of us" is meant metaphorically to refer to future developments. Additionally, the pragmatic context of diplomatic discourse, where spatial metaphors are commonly used to discuss time and future events, supports the metaphorical

interpretation. The phrase becomes clearly understood as referring to upcoming challenges and opportunities that nations must prepare to face, rather than physical objects or situations literally positioned in front of the speakers.

3. “When I came to office as president, Afghanistan had replaced Vietnam as America’s longest war. I was determined to end it, and I did. It was a hard decision but the right decision.”

The statement "I was determined to end it, and I did" presents a pragmatic ambiguity. The ambiguity arises from the unclear scope of what "end it" actually means in the context of the Afghanistan war. The phrase could be interpreted in multiple ways: it could mean ending American military involvement while the conflict continues, achieving a complete cessation of all hostilities in the region, or withdrawing all American presence regardless of the outcome. The vagueness of the pronoun "it" and the broad verb "end" creates uncertainty about the exact nature and extent of what was concluded.

The ambiguity is resolved through the linguistic context of the speech, where Biden previously mentions "Afghanistan had replaced Vietnam as America's longest war." The situational context of his role as U.S. President, rather than as a leader of all parties involved in the conflict, clarifies that he's specifically referring to ending American military involvement. This interpretation is further supported by the subsequent pragmatic context, where he discusses American casualties and the decision to withdraw troops. He mentions "thirteen brave Americans lost their lives along with hundreds of Afghans in a suicide bomb," which provides additional context that "ending it" specifically refers to the U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan rather than the broader conflict in the region. The cultural context of American political discourse, where presidents are primarily concerned with American military involvement rather than resolving entire regional conflicts, further confirms this interpretation.

4. "In our time, the center has held. Leaders and people from every region and across the political spectrum have stood together."

The phrase "The center has held" presents a lexical ambiguity. The ambiguity stems from the multiple possible interpretations of the word "center," which could refer to several concepts: the political center (moderate political positions between extremes), institutional stability (the core structures of international order), or moral/ethical foundations (fundamental shared values). Additionally, the metaphorical use of "held" compounds this ambiguity, as it could mean maintained position, retained power, or preserved integrity. This creates uncertainty about exactly what has remained stable or intact.

The ambiguity is resolved through multiple contextual layers in the speech. The linguistic context places this statement in direct response to Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," which Biden explicitly quotes: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The situational context of addressing the UN General Assembly, a body representing international cooperation and order, suggests that "center" refers to the institutional foundations of global governance. This interpretation is

strengthened by the pragmatic context of Biden's subsequent statements about how "Leaders and people from every region and across the political spectrum have stood together" and examples of international cooperation, such as defending Ukraine and addressing climate change. These contextual elements clarify that "center" primarily refers to the international order and its institutional frameworks rather than purely political or moral centers.

5. “I’ve seen it all around the world in the brave men and women who ended apartheid, brought down the Berlin Wall, fight today for freedom and justice and dignity.”

The statement "I've seen it all around the world in the brave men and women who ended apartheid" contains a structural (syntactic) ambiguity. The ambiguity arises from the grammatical structure and the placement of the adjective "brave," creating two possible interpretations. First, "brave" could modify both "men and women," meaning both groups are described as brave. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as modifying only "men," with

"women" as a separate group. Additionally, the relative clause "who ended apartheid" creates another layer of structural ambiguity – it could be understood as referring to both "men and women" collectively, or just to "women" as the nearest noun phrase.

This structural ambiguity is resolved through multiple contextual elements. The linguistic context of the speech emphasizes unity and collective action, with Biden consistently using inclusive language throughout. The cultural context of the anti-apartheid movement, which historically involved both men and women working together, supports interpreting "brave" as modifying both groups and "who ended apartheid" as referring to their collective action. The pragmatic context of a diplomatic speech at the UN, where emphasizing inclusivity and shared achievement is paramount, further suggests that both the adjective "brave" and the relative clause "who ended apartheid" are meant to apply to both men and women. Additionally, it would be historically inaccurate and diplomatically inappropriate to attribute the end of apartheid to only one gender, further supporting the inclusive interpretation.

6. “Will we stand behind the principles that unite us? We stand firm against aggression. We — will we end the conflicts that are raging today?”

The phrase "Will we stand behind the principles that unite us?" presents a lexical ambiguity. The lack of clarity is due to the expression ‘stand behind’ whose meaning varies. The possible interpretations include, but are not limited to, physically placing oneself behind something, or giving one's vote of approval to something, or even, taking a protective or defensive stance. Because of the phrase's ability to be understood both literally and figuratively, the exact nature of the action seems vague. It is questionable whether it is a non-locomotive defense action, an active defense, or just the kind of moral support that is suggested. A figurative interpretation and a literal meaning bundled up in one, make it hard to understand what action is requested –whether it is a passive support, a shield, or simply a metaphorical rapport with them.

This uncertainty is clarified through the contextual features of the speech. The linguistic context of the UN General Assembly speech, in which Biden speaks of global difficulties and international cooperation, seems to be more obviously common than symbolic. In the situational context of the president addressing other countries for their roles in the international system, we get the idea that stake out stands for lead and back up these perspectives. The pragmatic context of diplomatic discourse, where such metaphorical language is commonly used to call for concrete action and commitment, further confirms that Biden is calling for active support rather than passive agreement. This interpretation is reinforced by the subsequent discussion of specific actions and commitments required from the international community, indicating that "standing behind" principles requires active engagement and support.

7. The world needs to stop arming the generals, to speak with one voice and tell them: Stop tearing your country apart. Stop blocking aid to the Sudanese people. End this war now. (Applause.)

The statement "The world needs to stop arming the generals" contains a structural (syntactic) ambiguity. The ambiguity arises from two possible interpretations of the grammatical relationship between "arming" and "the generals": it could mean either that the world should stop providing arms to the generals (where generals are the recipients of weapons), or that the world should prevent generals from arming themselves or others (where generals are the agents of arming). This structural arrangement creates uncertainty about whether the generals are the direct objects receiving arms or the subjects performing the arming action.

The ambiguity is resolved through the speech's contextual framework. The linguistic context discusses the civil war in Sudan and its humanitarian crisis, where Biden mentions "The world needs to stop arming the generals, to speak with one voice and tell them: Stop tearing your country apart." The situational context of addressing the international community about their role in the conflict suggests that "arming" refers to the supply of weapons to the generals. The pragmatic context of diplomatic discourse calling for concrete

actions to prevent conflict escalation further supports the interpretation that Biden is urging the international community to cease providing weapons to Sudan's military leaders. This is reinforced by the cultural context of international relations, where arms supply to conflict zones is a significant concern, clarifying that the intended meaning is to stop the flow of weapons to these military leaders rather than preventing the generals from arming others.

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of President Biden's UN General Assembly address indicates clear perceptions on how different types of context play a role in dealing with various aspects of linguistic ambiguity, discussions of the first study., which is about how context deals with different forms of ambiguity, was addressed. The analysis identified seven instances of ambiguity: two pragmatic ambiguities, three lexical ambiguities, and two structural ambiguities. In each case, multiple contextual layers worked together to resolve the potential confusion and establish clear meaning.

Regarding the second research question about specific types of contextual cues, the analysis demonstrates that four main types of context – linguistic, situational, cultural, and pragmatic – played crucial roles in disambiguation, though their relative importance varied depending on the type of ambiguity. For lexical ambiguities, such as "in front of us" and "the center has held," linguistic context proved particularly important, with surrounding text providing essential cues for metaphorical rather than literal interpretations. Results from the analysis revealed that situational context (i.e., UN General Assembly setting) was always significant across the different types of ambiguity, suggesting a way to understand diplomatic language and international discourse.

Cultural context was found to play a particularly important role in resolving pragmatic ambiguities, such as Biden's humorous comment that he is 'only 40' and in understanding diplomatic conventions. It was found that pragmatic context was especially important for resolving structural ambiguities, such as in 'brave men and women who ended apartheid' and 'stop arming the

generals,' where knowing the speaker's intentions and diplomatic discourse conventions helped resolve grammatical relationships. This finding indicates that all types of context help disambiguate, but some types of context are more important for some types of ambiguity.

An interesting pattern was observed, indicating that several contextual cues usually interact together rather than act in isolation. For example, in settling the pragmatic ambiguity of "I was determined to end it," not just the linguistic context (the following discussion of Afghanistan) but also the situational context (Biden's role as U.S. President) were needed to comprehend the meaning of "ending" the war. The interconnected nature of these contextual cues serves to imply that the successful disambiguation of the issue often rests on the dynamic synergy of multiple contextual factors rather than single contextual elements functioning in isolation.

6. Conclusions

This study shows through the analysis of President Biden's UN General Assembly speech the importance of context in resolving linguistic ambiguity

in political discourse. The investigation of seven instances of ambiguity (pragmatic, lexical, and structural types) shows that successful disambiguation depends on the interplay of multiple contextual layers rather than isolated contextual elements. It demonstrates that linguistic context (clearing text based clues) provides immediate textual cues, situational context (situational context) provides diplomatic framework, cultural context (shared understanding) provides, and pragmatic context (speaker's intentions) together contribute to clarifying meaning. The study particularly stresses that each type of ambiguity can be better clarified by special types of contexts: Linguistic context induced lexical ambiguity, pragmatic context induced structural ambiguity, and cultural context induced pragmatic ambiguity. Taken together, these insights enhance our understandings of how context operates in diplomatic communication and the need to factor in multiple contextual dimensions when attending to what are often ambiguous diplomatic statements in political discourse.

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