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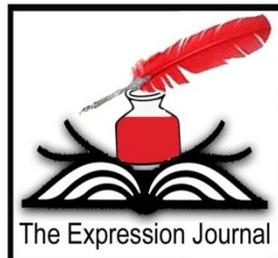
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AN ANALYSIS OF AMBIGUITY IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The term 'ambiguity' refers to a linguistic phenomenon where more than one meaning is inherent in a word, phrase or a sentence. Ambiguity differs from the phenomenon of vagueness. It allows for specific albeit distinct interpretations. Vagueness, on the other hand, does not permit the formulation of any specific interpretation owing to lack of requisite information. Ambiguity is found in every genre whether it is a novel, play, poetry or a story. It has its own appeal and importance in any language and the use of the ambiguous language always has a specific purpose. This paper discusses the various forms of ambiguity, its operations and contexts. It also explains the means to identify ambiguity and allied terms.

Key-Words

Ambiguity, Lexical Ambiguity, Structural Ambiguity, Polysemy, Context, Meaning.

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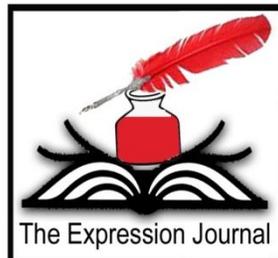
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Uncertainty in language is as old as language itself. Often we encounter sentences and expressions when we are not absolutely clear as to the exact meaning. Consider the sentence below:

Umer worked on the paper on the couch.

What does it mean? Does it mean Umer worked on the paper that lay on the couch or that he worked on the paper while he was sitting on a couch? Which of the two meanings is the correct meaning? You will agree that depending upon the context both the meanings are correct. Such duality of meanings in language is termed as ambiguity.

The term 'ambiguity' refers to a linguistic phenomenon "*where more than one meaning is inherent in a word, phrase or a sentence.*" (Jindal & Syal, 2004) Ambiguity differs from the phenomenon of vagueness. It allows for specific albeit distinct interpretations. Vagueness, on the other hand, does not permit the formulation of any specific interpretation owing to lack of requisite information. Let us take a simple example of the two phenomenon to understand the difference clearly:

Visiting relatives can be boring - (I)

Applicants must hold a diploma in early childhood education or have equivalent work experience - (II)

Consider the sentences above. The first sentence allows for two diverse interpretations depending upon where you place a stress or enforce a pause. If for example, you stress relatives and place a secondary stress on visiting then the following meaning emerges: It can be boring to visit relatives. However, there is a second meaning embedded in the sentence. If we consider visiting as a present participle, then an entirely different meaning arises. The meaning that arises is that relatives who visit one are boring. The

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agent of the action shifts entirely from you to a particular kind of relatives – the relatives who visit you. This sentence is a classic example of an ambiguous sentence. Now consider sentence (II). At a first sight it appears precise, but a closer look will reveal it is vague. Let us assume, I was desirous of applying for the job/course and I do not possess a diploma. In that case the second part of the sentence is applicable to me. But how do I know what experience qualifies as a substitute for the diploma. Is the number of years of experience the pre requisite? If yes, how many years qualify? Is the field where you got your experience the yardstick? If yes, is every sub type of the field suitable? 'Children' is a very broad term. I may have experience in teaching nursery school kids or tutoring high school students. Both classify as children. Which one should be taken into account? Again, must both the years of experience as well as the level of children taught be combined to arrive at an equivalent criterion? You will agree that the statement allows for no single interpretation. Each candidate who does not possess a diploma with a vestige of experience can apply. This sentence is an example of a vague sentence which allows for no specific meaning.

Ambiguity is of two types: lexical and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity of a word or phrase pertains to its having more than one meaning in the language to which the word belongs. (Wikipedia: Ambiguity) Lexical ambiguity is more common and pronounced in everyday language. Common examples would be the word note as a noun and as a verb. In the noun sense it implies a short statement or record of something while in the verb sense it implies to observe something or translate that observation into a written statement.

Another example of lexical ambiguity would be the word stone as a noun or a derivative verb. The noun refers to the hard, solid, non-metallic mineral matter of which rock is made. However, the verb refers to the act of throwing stones at somebody/some object. For example, the sentence the policemen were stoned by the crowd, uses stone as a finite verb with a past tense inflection. Further examples of the same would be pen and suit which are both primarily nouns. Both pen and suit function as verb and noun. The noun pen refers to a writing instrument that relies on an inbuilt mechanism of ink transfer to draft the figures on the writing material e.g. this pen writes smoothly. The word pen functions as the subject in the sentence and hence is a noun. However, in the sentence he has penned a poem, pen is used as a verb, again, with the past tense inflection. It is evident here that the verb means to write down. Thus pen has two meanings: an object to write (n) and to write (v). Similarly, suit has two meanings as a noun. The first sense can refer to a set of outer clothes made of the same fabric and designed to be worn together, typically consisting of a jacket and trousers e.g. He wore a dark sharp suit. In another sense it can refer to a legal petition or a lawsuit e.g. He filed a suit against the government in the high

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court. The word suit is used here as an object which classifies it as a noun. However, the verb suit refers to the property of acceptability or convenience. Consider the sentence: The job suits you. Here suit is used to indicate the meaning of the job being acceptable and perfect for the object being spoken to. The same meaning is conveyed albeit with a little difference in: The pattern suits the theme. The meaning conveyed is that the pattern blends in well with the theme emphasizing its acceptability.

Various tests exist for identifying ambiguity. Consider the word light. One way of identifying its ambiguity is to pair it with two unrelated antonyms i.e. heavy and dark. Both of these words can serve as the opposite depending upon the context. The conjunction reduction test is another test that can help in identifying ambiguity. Consider the sentence:

The farmer filled the pen and marked its number with his pen.

The ambiguity inherent in the word pen is proved by the anomaly of the 'crossed interpretation' of the sentence, in which pen implies a small enclosure in which sheep, pigs, cattle, or other domestic animals are kept and an instrument for writing.

The examples quoted above are of words that possess more than one meaning. However sometimes it is difficult when we have only one word to choose between two homonymous words and an ambiguous word. The verb 'desert' i.e. to forsake and the noun dessert i.e. the sweet course eaten at the end of a meal sound the same but are spelled differently. This makes it easy for them to be classified as distinct words. The noun bear (animal) and the verb bear (to endure) follow the same pattern although they sound the same and are spelled in the same way. These examples may be clear cases of homonymy but sometimes words are related to each other in meanings while being spelled in the same manner. Consider the case of respect in the following sentences:

I have great respect for his sense of propriety. -I

Please show your respect for the national flag. -II

Sentence I conveys the meaning of respect as esteem for the object's personal quality or ability. In this sense we would say: She has little respect for his old age. Sentence II conveys a meaning which is rather close to sentence I. Respect here indicates deference to the object's privileged position. The meanings are closely related yet they are not the same. This phenomenon is termed as polysemy. Polysemous words also exhibit lexical ambiguity. (Yule, 2014)

The case of the preposition over (above in place or position e.g. the roof over one's head) and the preposition 'over' (above and to the other side of: to leap over a wall) is another example of Polysemous ambiguity.

Lexically ambiguous words tend to impart their ambiguity to the sentences in which they occur. Consider the sentence: He saw her duck. The sentence is transformed into an ambiguous sentence only because of the lexically ambiguous duck. Otherwise the sentence

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would be quite clear with one specific meaning: his sight registered her. However, with the addition of 'duck' – ambiguity is produced as we cannot be sure whether to consider the word duck as a noun and by extension as an object or as an action and consequently as an adverb. Let us examine the two meanings:

He saw her duck (n) –I

He saw her duck (v) –II

In sentence-I 'duck' is used as a noun characterised as a waterbird with the connotation of possession defining the bird as a pet or the property of the female in question. In sentence II the word duck is an adverb referring to the act of lowering the head or the body quickly to avoid a blow or so as not to be seen. The meaning, thereby, that arises is the male subject registered the action of the female object. A similar example is the ambiguous sentence: It is light. Consider the two meanings that arise from the lexical ambiguous word-light:

It was light – I

It was light – II

The first sentence uses light as an adjective while the second uses it as a noun. The first sentence transforms it into a pronoun for an inanimate object and indicating its quality of being low in weight. The second sentence is an uncommon utterance and is rather inspired by the biblical statement: God said let there be light, and it was light. This sentence places 'it' as an empty subject and refers to the phenomenon of darkness being obviated. Yet sometimes a sentence can be ambiguous without any of its constituent parts being ambiguous. Then a case for syntactic ambiguity arises. Syntactic ambiguity is a *property of sentences which may be reasonably interpreted in more than one way, or reasonably interpreted to mean more than one thing* (George, 2012). Consider the sentence: The Kashmiri language teacher is brilliant. The sentence is clearly an ambiguous sentence depending upon where you enforce the pause. Consider the two meanings that are derived thereof:

The Kashmiri [language teacher] is brilliant –I

The [Kashmiri language] teacher is brilliant –II

The first sentence relies on the Kashmiri being an adjective head modifier with the compound word language teacher classifying as the main subject. In simple words it means: the language teacher who is from Kashmir is brilliant. But the second sentence inverts the meaning of sentence I. It allows for the compounding of Kashmiri and language giving rise to the compound Kashmiri language. The meaning thereof gets changed to: the teacher who teaches Kashmiri language is brilliant. It is evident from the sentences that none of the constituent parts is a lexically ambiguous word. How can we then explain the ambiguity in this sentence? Let us consider two more sentences before we answer this question:

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Flying planes can be dangerous –I

[Flying planes] can be dangerous – II

This example is an oft quoted example of Chomsky. The first sentence is easy to explain and understand. Flying is taken to be the finite verb which with can as the auxiliary verb. The sentence therefore means: The act of flying a plane can prove to be dangerous. Sentence II however considers flying to be the present-participle and thus conveys the meaning: the planes which fly can be dangerous.

Now consider the following sentence:

Put the bottle [in the basket on the table] –I

[Put the bottle in the basket] on the table –II

Sentence I is an imperative which calls for the bottle to be placed in the basket that lies on the table. Sentence II on the other hand is an imperative that calls for the bottle that lies in the basket to be carried out and placed further on the table. However the sentence: the lamb is ready to eat, cannot be explained on the basis of structure alone. Consider the sentence in detail:

[The chicken is ready to eat] –I

[The chicken is ready to eat] –II

The first sentence can be assumed to mean that the chicken which was previously indisposed towards consuming food is now ready to consume it (I). The second sentence thereby assumes the meaning that the cooked chicken is ready to be eaten (II). The ambiguity in the sentence can only be resolved through knowledge of the context. So the meanings can be derived only when this sentence occurs in a structure like this:

The chicken is ready to eat. Bring the bowl with the feed. – (Meaning I will arise)

The table has been laid. The chicken is ready to eat. (Meaning II arises)

The resolution of ambiguous sentences by knowledge of contexts holds good for all ambiguous sentences.

It is thus evident that ambiguity in both its forms: lexical and syntactic, is an integral part of our language. Ambiguity helps us to enrich our language and build a multiple variety of sentences with the same structures and words. It helps us in focusing our attention towards the comprehension of context. We must possess the knowledge of the context in order to understand which meaning is intended from an ambiguous sentence. Therefore it sharpens our cognitive and perceptive skills and gives us a more informed idea about how meaning is embedded in context.

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