The Ambiguous Nature of Language

By

Mohammad Awwad

Applied Linguistics, English Department, Lebanese University, Beirut, LEBANON.

mh28412@yahoo.com

Abstract

Linguistic ambiguity is rendered as a problematic issue since it hinders precise language processing. Ambiguity leads to a confusion of ideas in the reader's mind when he struggles to decide on the precise meaning intended behind an utterance. In the literature relevant to the topic, no clear classification of linguistic ambiguity can be traced, for what is considered syntactic ambiguity, for some linguists, falls under pragmatic ambiguity for others; what is rendered as lexical ambiguity for some linguists is perceived as semantic ambiguity for others and still as unambiguous to few. The problematic issue, hence, can be recapitulated in the abstruseness hovering around what is linguistic ambiguity, what is not, and what comprises each type of ambiguity in language. The present study aimed at propounding lucid classification of ambiguity types according to their function in context by delving into ambiguity types which are displayed in English words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. converges in an attempt to disambiguate English language structures, and thus provide learners with a better language processing outcome and enhance teachers with a more facile and lucid teaching task.

Keywords: *linguistic ambiguity, language processing.*

1. Introduction

Ambiguity is derived from 'ambiagotatem' in Latin which combined 'ambi' and 'ago' each word meaning 'around' or 'by' (Atlas,1989) , and thus the concept of ambiguity is hesitation, doubt, or uncertainty and that concept associated the term 'ambiguous' from the first usage until the most recent linguistic definition.

Though ambiguity in language is not a recent notion, for its existence is directly related to the existence of natural languages, tackling ambiguity in language has taken different perspectives over the ages. Atlas (1989) claimed that both "linguists and philosophers find it natural to split their analysis of language into three levels: the sentence (grammar), the statement (speech-act theory), the speaker (pragmatics)" (p.3). However, the difference between linguists and philosophers in tackling ambiguity topic lies in the fact that whereas linguists concentrate on the sentence criterion in their analysis; philosophers are more oriented to examine the speaker's meaning. This divergence has led to an ambiguity hovering around the classification of ambiguity in language. Aristotle, as cited in Pehar 2001, considers that

ambiguity arises because the number of items that form vocabulary of any human language is much smaller than the number of realities that the vocabulary items are supposed to depict to make human language meaningful and functional (p.4).

Pehar (2001) explains that ambiguity in language arises due to the fact that reality is much more complex than language; and therefore the demands of expressing one's thoughts are always higher than the symbols or the words used to denote this reality.

Atherton (1993) states "ancient theorists, critics, and teachers of style and composition tended to see ambiguities as stylistic infelicities making an author's meaning obscure or indeterminate; and they were commonly identified by logicians and philosophers as sources of innocent or fraudulently induced intellectual error" (p. 24). Therefore, a clear account to EFL learners on ambiguity types may aid in better language processing in both decoding and encoding texts. Unfortunately, in the literature relevant to the topic, no clear classification of linguistic ambiguity can be traced, for what is considered syntactic ambiguity, for some linguists, falls under pragmatic ambiguity for others; what is rendered as lexical ambiguity for some is perceived as semantic ambiguity for others; what is categorized under scope ambiguity in certain critiques is considered as unambiguous in others (Zelta, 2014). The problematic issue, hence, can be recapitulated in the abstruseness hovering around what is linguistic ambiguity, what is not, and what comprises each type of ambiguity in language.

Historical Background

Filozoficky (2006) sheds light on six types of ambiguity leading to paralogism, or illogical reasoning and countable for hindering effective communication: homonymy, amphiboly, combination, division, accent and grammatical form He, further, relates the problem of ambiguity to a sole reason: the tendency of words, phrases, and sentences to carry more than one meaning. First, homonymy represents the process where one word stands for two completely different meanings in one argument. Filozoficky (2006) gives the example of 'evils are good; for what *must be* is good, and evils *must be*' (p.54). The first must be means ought to be while the second one means inevitable. Second, Amphiboly lies in the case where the sentence itself, and not the words, can be perceived in two different meanings. For example, *last night I shot a burglar with my pyjamas* (Filozoficky 2006, p.55). I, can be the one wearing pyjamas, or the burglar can be the one with pyjamas. The combination paralogism stands for attributing a feature to every individual member of a class which means the whole has the same feature. For example, *he knows now if he has learnt his letters* (Filozoficky 2006, p.55). Learning the letters does not include the comprehensive process of knowledge. As for the division part, it can be best represented by a shift of spoken or written emphasis. *He turned his assignment on time today* (Filozoficky 2006, p.55). Stressing the last word can change the meaning of him being usually late. The last paralogism results from the ambiguity of a word which can be of various grammatical forms as nouns or verbs as *I saw her duck* (Filozoficky 2006, p.55), where duck can be a noun or a verb and nothing in the sentence suggests either part of speech.

Atherton (1993) claims that the stoics in the 3rd century B.C.E. showed interest in the topic of language ambiguity, and their interest in ambiguity rose from a moral and philosophical perspective and aimed at scrutinizing human nature and rationality in human communication more than did it come from a linguistic aspect. According to the stoics, language ambiguity

leads to unclear information and this hinders sage people from taking the right decision; as a consequence ambiguity must be avoided. On the other hand, despite the philosophical angle that ambiguity was tackled within the Stoic age, the stoics drew upon the rules of grammar, semantics, psychology, and epistemology , and a wide range of linguistic and semantic concepts when defining and classifying ambiguity. The stoics defined ambiguity as: " a linguistic phenomenon, which can easily be recognized today as familiar to users of most, if not all, natural languages: that one and the same linguistic item can mean or signify two or more different things" (Atherton1993,p. 1). The main bearers of ambiguity based on the stoics' definition are the lexis. Although the stoics were not linguists in the modern definition of the term, the similarity between the stoics' classification of ambiguity types and modern classification of linguists does reflect the influence of the stoics on modern linguistic paradigm in dividing ambiguity types. The classification of ambiguity types according to the stoics is as follows: common, homonymy in simples, homonymy in compounds, ellipsis, pleonasm, non-significant part, significant part, and reference according to Atherton (1993). The common homonymy ambiguity for stoics matches the ambiguity categorization of Aristotle "combination and division". Edlow (1975) suggests that common ambiguity, in stoics' classification, in homonymy in simples and homonymy in compounds does not refer to lexical or syntactic level but rather to the articulate sounds of homonyms or the phonological unit. The second case is the homonymy in simples as the word 'manly' which can be used either to describe a shirt or to refer to a man. The third species is homonymy in compounds as 'man is': the sentence is ambiguous because it can signify the being (or the substance), or that the case is. The fourth species of ambiguity is due to ellipsis or omission as 'whose are you?' a term as father's or master's is omitted in this sentence which makes it ambiguous; the omission is that of a term which would appropriately identify the role between two parties. The fifth species is due to pleonasm as 'he forbade him not to sail'. Adding the *not* makes the whole sentence ambivalent, whether he forbade him to sail or not to sail. The sixth species is that which fails to make clear which nonsignificant part is ranged with which significant part. 'The people of great hearted Erechtheus whom Athena, Zeus' daughter, once nourished and the fruitful earth brought forth.' It is ambiguous whether it was the people or Erchtheus who were nourished by Athena and whom the earth brought forth. The seventh species or the reference is the ambiguity which fails to make clear what is being referred to what. 'Egyptians too are Colchians'. It is unclear whether the Colchians are Egyptians or the Egyptians are Colchians.

Despite the fact that the stoics' definition and classification of ambiguity were based on the Latin Language, the English language seems to inherit the concept and the features of linguistic ambiguity from the Greeks.

Definition of Ambiguity

In 1930, William Empson gave a detailed description of seven types of ambiguity in literature. Empson further revised his book and modified some concepts in the books' second edition in 2014. According to Empson (1930), ambiguity can be best defined as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which adds some nuance to the direct statement of the prose (p. 1). In the second edition of the book, Empson (2014) restated the definition "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (p. 5). According to Empson, the fundamental situation, to term a word or a grammatical structure as ambiguous or not, is if the latter can be effective in several ways.

Hartman and Stork (1976), in the *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, define ambiguity as a construction which admits more than one interpretation. They continue to attribute ambiguity to a word when it typically refers to an unclear choice between different definitions as may be found in a dictionary. As for a sentence, it is termed as ambiguous if there are different ways of parsing the same sequence of words.

For Cruse (1986), every word at a certain point is ambiguous; ambiguity in language comes in different sources and different types. According to Cruse, the meaning aspect of any lexical unit is termed as sense, and every lexical unit has a different sense according to the context which it occurs in. For instance, the same word *topless* means different in a 'topless lady', 'topless watchdog committee', and a 'topless dress'. Cruse (1986) continues to distinguish between a 'general' word and an 'ambiguous' word as in the example *I met my cousin :* the word cousin can be a female or a male relative, so it is a general term that covers all specific possibilities regarding sex, height, eye color… and perceiving whether the cousin is a male or a female relative does not affect the conversation between the speaker and the hearer, while in the sentence *I went to the bank,* the word *bank* is ambiguous with respect to the sense distinction 'financial institution' or 'side of the river'. In other words, the word "bank" has two different senses for the same lexical unit which is the source of ambiguity. Cruse explains that modulation, or the effect of a context on an included lexical unit, is the only way to disambiguate ambiguous sentences. The interpretation of the word *bank* cannot be left undecided, or not modulated by the context of the speaker "if the sentence is to play its part in a normal conversation exchange" (p. 51).

Crystal (1988) defines ambiguity as the reference to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning. In his book, *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics 6ᵗʰEdition*, Crystal believes that grammatical or structural ambiguity is the most prevalent in the English language. Crystal (1988) differentiated between phrase structure ambiguity, transformational ambiguity, and lexical ambiguity. "In phrase structure ambiguity, alternative constituent structures can be assigned to a construction" (p.22), as in the example of *new houses and shops*, where the adjective *new* can be attributed to either the *houses and shops* or only to the houses. "In transformational ambiguity, the sentence may have a similar bracketing on the surface for both reading, but is related to a more than one structure at a more abstract level of representation" (p.23). The example '*visiting speakers can be awful'* can be perceived as either it is awful to visit speakers or speakers who visit are awful. Crystal (1988) defines another type of ambiguity which rises not from the grammatical structure of a sentence but solely from an "alternative meaning of an individual lexical item" (p.23), lexical ambiguity. I found the *table* fascinating: the table can be a piece of furniture, or table of contents. Crystal asserts Cruse's perspective that ambiguity must be distinguished from generality and indeterminacy. For instance, the word *parent* is not ambiguous but general because it has a single but general sense read in one example as mother and in another as father. In the sentence, *Mary saw a balloon,* no ambiguity is detected, but indeterminacy to where, when, and how she saw it. Such sentences, including generality or indeterminacy, are categorized with vagueness but not with ambiguity.

Atlas (1989) terms a sentence as ambiguous when a sequence of words can be structured in alternative ways that are consistent with the syntax of the language or when a given lexical item has more than one semantic interpretation. In his book, *Philosophy without Ambiguity*, Atlas pinpoints different types of ambiguity by discussing Johnson's poem ' The Vanity of Human

Wishes' illustrated for similar reasons by Empson (1930) in the latter's book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*
What murdered Wentworth, and what exiled Hyde,
By kings protected, and to kings allied?
What but their wish indulged in courts to shine,
And power too great to keep, or to resign?

The third line of the quatrain reveals syntactic ambiguity where two representations of the phrase can function properly in the sentence (their wish to shine indulged in courts) or (their wish to shine in courts) indulged. In addition, the phrase can be interpreted as their wish to shine indulged by themselves, or their wish to shine indulged by others. "This elliptical phrase is neutral between these two expansions" (Atlas, 1989, p.24). Atlas (1989) adds another type of ambiguity in the aforementioned quatrain: lexical ambiguity where one word can have different senses. 'Allied', for example can mean either 'connected by marriage' or 'connected by treaty'. Atlas explains that this lexical ambiguity can be either due to polysemy or to homonymy. Polysemy occurs when the same word comes in two different senses as in the example 'mouth' organ in the body, or 'mouth' opening of a cave. Homonymy, on the other hand, occurs when the same linguistic form stands for two completely different meanings as 'bank', a financial institution, and bank 'side of the river'. Atlas (1989), also, highlights a type of ambiguity referred to as ambiguity in presuppositions. In the line 'power too great to keep' many meanings can be unfolded: a. power too great for Wentworth and Hyde to keep but not too great for others to keep, or b. power too great for anyone to keep or c. power too great for Hyde and Wentworth to give up, or d. power too great for anyone to give up. The words themselves in the line 'power too great to keep' do not represent any ambiguous sense; however, the meaning represented by the words is contextually, according to Atlas (1989), not specific and thus does represent ambiguity. Atlas (1989), also, defines another type of ambiguity, 'referential ambiguity' as in the phrase ' the girl with the flowers' can present a girl wearing flowers, selling flowers, carrying flowers, strewing flowers…. Atlas (1989) discussed in details the negation scope as in the sentence '*everyone didn't show up*' which can be explained in two senses: the narrow scope predicate negation: no one showed up, and the wide scope sentence negation: not everyone showed up. For Atlas (1989), and in contrast with linguists who preceded him and others who followed him, negation scope sentences are not considered as ambiguous but as sense- general and Atlas applies Zwicky and Sadock (1975) disambiguation test of privative opposites to prove his point. "If the expression is truly ambiguous it ought to be possible to assert the general case and deny the specific case without contradiction." (p. 72) and this is not the case in negation scope. In other words, if the word *dog* is ambiguous it is logical to say *that's a dog, but it isn't a dog* as in the example *this is a bank, but it isn't a bank*, while this privative opposite does not apply to negation scope sentences which denies the adjective ambiguous from them.

Cann (1993) defines ambiguity "as the presence of two or more distinct meanings in a sentence'' (p.8). He further elaborates on the topic of ambiguity by claiming "we call a sentence ambiguous when a sequence of words can be structured in alternative ways that are consistent with the syntax of the language or when a given lexical item has more than one semantic interpretation" p. (9). Therefore, Cann (1993) restricted ambiguity to lexical or semantic, and syntactic type. Moreover, Cann (1993) differentiates between ambiguity and vagueness, for whereas the former refers to a word or phrase that has at least two meaningful

senses in a context, the latter refers to a word or phrase that is not clear. Cann (1993) gives the example of *three- year –old teacher needed for preschool* as ambiguous since the advertisement seems to seek a teacher three years old and it can be looking for a teacher to teach children who are three years old; while in the example *nurse needed for preschool* vagueness characterizes the sentence since there are many kinds of nurses, and the same job is certainly not available for all of them.

Cushing (1997) states "that ambiguity in language can be applied to several fields of linguistics. There is ambiguity in the way words is pronounced, in their meaning, in the tonal qualities, and in the way they are structured to make a sentence" (p.104). Thus, according to Cushing ambiguity can be found in phonetics, semantics, and syntax. Cushing classifies ambiguity into three main categories; each category having its own sub parts: potential ambiguity, actual ambiguity, and imaginary ambiguity. Potential ambiguity comes in lexical, syntactic, and inflective mode. Actual ambiguity is pragmatic ambiguity, and imaginary ambiguity comes in suggestive and emphatic mode. Cushing gives a definition to each of the above terms: ambiguity is lexical, also known as semantic, when a single term has two different meanings. Syntactic ambiguity is a kind of structural or grammatical ambiguity of the whole sentence while inflective ambiguity occurs in "a word or a phrase (as opposed to a whole sentence), but occurs because of a grammatical shift (to a different part of speech) in a second occurrence of that word (p. 263). Pragmatic ambiguity is the ambiguity of a word or phrase as used in a particular context as 'going around' which is not semantically ambiguous as having two distinctive lexical meanings in the dictionary as the word *bank*, but means differently when associated with *squirrels* than with *rumors*, In addition, there is "emphatic ambiguity which is a phonological type arising from different stresses or intonation in how a term or a sentence is pronounced" p (263). Emphatic ambiguity, according to Cushing, can appear in the form of italics, bold print, and headlines in written discourse. Eventually suggestive ambiguity has to do with implicatures of "the multiplicities of connotations of a sentence, or a word phrase that occurs in it, with the result that different optional presumptions can be drawn from it (p.263)." Cushing categorization lacked specific examples to support his perspective and ambiguity hovered around his classification of ambiguity types.

Walton (1996) states that fallacies in reasoning can be categorized under two main groups: linguistic fallacies and fallacies outside language. Linguistic fallacies do revolve around a major concept, which is, ambiguity in language. Walton draws a distinction between ambiguity, vagueness and obscurity. Walton (1996) defines ambiguity mainly by contrasting it with vagueness and obscurity though the former does cause the latter:

> *Ambiguity is not the opposite of clarity. Nor is ambiguity precisely targeted or totally eliminated by the conversational maxim 'be clear'. Clarity is the opposite of obscurity. Ambiguity can, and perhaps often does lead to obscurity. But in principle, the two things are different. Ambiguity is multiple meanings……. and from a point of view of logic vagueness, ambiguity, and lack of clarity can lead to misunderstanding, misdirection and confusion, and even to fallacies or logical errors of certain kinds. (p. 5).*

Walton (1996) continues that the main problem in ambiguity topic is that there is no general agreement among philosophers and linguists what precisely ambiguity is and what it is not. It is

noteworthy to mention that Walton's classification of ambiguity matches with that of Cushing with a stress given from Walton on the fallacies caused by ambiguity more than on the type of linguistic ambiguity.

Another perspective is that of Jacobson (1999) and later Jacobson's views were adopted by Bittner (2007). Both render ambiguity as revolving mainly around syntax rather than semantic or lexical accounts for the processed data. Bittner (2007) identified another type of ambiguity, scope ambiguity, which does not require lexicon based account, but is rather linked to lexical terms that are ambiguous by themselves as the term 'often'.

Pehar (2001) considers "ambiguities as difficult to define precisely because of their ambiguous nature" (p.3). He, furthermore, renders the definition given by Munson (1976) and later adopted by many linguists as "an expression is ambiguous when it has more than one meaning and it is used in a situation or context in which it can be understood in at least two different ways"(p.3) as incomplete. Pehar (2001) asserts his idea by pointing out that an expression must not be termed as ambiguous unless it generates not only two different meanings but two "incompatible and unrelated meanings" (p.5). In this sense, Pehar notes that ambiguities can be interpreted as meaning A, and as meaning B, but not as A and B simultaneously. He adds that his own definition casts many questions and considers "ambiguity as a sort of phenomenon which presents a serious challenge to any theory of mind and language and which demands that we face the outmost limits of our language in the very medium of the language. That is exactly why it is so difficult to grasp the true definition of this linguistic phenomenon" (p. 9). For Pihar, ambiguity can occur at any level of discourse: words, sentences and set of sentences. He, therefore, presents three types of ambiguity: referential ambiguity based on ambiguity of a word which can have many meanings, syntactical ambiguity based on ambiguity in the relation between parts of a sentence, and cross textual ambiguity based on ambiguity of a text comprising many sentences as in legal text.

According to Sturt (2003), ambiguity involves linguistic meaning rather than the speaker meaning. Sturt proposes two simple parsing operations which are simple attachment and tree lowering to demonstrate that the syntactic processing of language is the milestone in defining what ambiguity in language refers to.

There, on the other hand, is a notion adopted by Culicover and Jackendoff (2005) that relates ambiguity to semantic and conceptual structures rather than to lexical ones.

Taking into account all the previously mentioned perspectives, it is evident that though there is no consensus among linguists on what ambiguity in language does particularly represent, there is a definite unanimity that ambiguity does revolve around hesitation and uncertainty in meaning and therefore it does obstruct communication.

Types of Ambiguity
Linguists have not agreed on a sole classification of ambiguity in language. While most linguists classified ambiguity under two broad categories: lexical and syntactic Chomsky (1965), Hartman and Stork (1976), Palmer (1984), Cruse (1986), Cann (1993) Cushing (1997), Atlas (1989) shed light on another type, pragmatic ambiguity (Zelta, 2014). Later, Cullicover and Jackendoff (2005) introduced semantic ambiguity. For instance, many linguists termed

lexical ambiguity as semantic ambiguity Hanson (1981), Yule (1986); others rendered scope ambiguity as a category by itself Clark (2011), while for many linguists scope is a subtype of semantic ambiguity Quiroga (2005), and still for others scope is not a type of ambiguity Atlas (1989). Referential ambiguity was rendered by some linguists as part of lexical ambiguity Pehar (2001) but by others as a type of pragmatic ambiguity Atlas (1989), Erickson (2002), Zelta (2014). Moreover, syntactic ambiguity which was termed by Chomsky (1965) as structural ambiguity was referred to by Lyons (1975) as transformational ambiguity. Through investigating related studies in linguistic ambiguity, ambiguity in language can be classified under four broad classes: lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic ambiguity.

Lexical Ambiguity
Lexical ambiguity takes place when a single word has more than one meaning, or when a word can be interpreted in more than one sense Dayal (2004). Lexical ambiguity can be subdivided into homonymy and polysemy.

Homonymy
Homonymies are two different words having the same written and phonetic representation but their meanings and their etymologies are completely unrelated. For example, the word *bank* meaning financial institution is different than the word *bank* meaning rising ground bordering a lake, river, or sea (Webster, 2011).

Polysemy
Polysemy occurs when a word has several related meanings but one etymology. For example, the word *green* has several different but related meanings with a common etymology according to Webster (2011). *Green* can be a. of green color b. pleasantly alluring c. youthful, d. not ripened or matured. Cruse (1986) shed light on systematic polysemy that occurs between unit and type as in the sentence *I like this jacket*: *jacket* can refer to an individual jacket or to a certain type of jackets.

Syntactic Ambiguity
Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a given sequence of words can be given more than one grammatical structure, and each structure gives a different meaning (Zelta, 2014). Syntactic ambiguity can be analytical, attachment, coordination, or elliptical ambiguity.

Analytical Ambiguity
Analytical ambiguity occurs when the role of the constituents within a phrase or a sentence is ambiguous (Hirst, 1987). For instance, the phrase *American history teacher* can be read as [American] [history teacher] or [American history] [teacher].

Attachment Ambiguity
Attachment ambiguity occurs when a particular syntactic constituent of a sentence as prepositional phrase or a relative clause can be legally attached to two parts of a sentence (Zelta, 2014). In the sentence, *the police shot the rioters with guns*, [with guns] can be attached to the verb shot or to the noun rioters thus leading to two different interpretations: either the rioters were armed with guns or the police used guns to shoot the rioters.

Coordination Ambiguity

Coordination ambiguity occurs when more than one conjunction is used in a sentence or when a conjunction is used with a modifier (Cruse 1986). In the sentence *I hugged Mary and John and Paul saw me* , it can be read as I hugged Mary and [John and Paul] saw me or I hugged [Mary and John] and Paul saw me. Moreover, the phrase *young men and women* can be interpreted as young [men and women] or [young men] and women (Cruse 1986, p.54).

Elliptical   Ambiguity

Elliptical ambiguity occurs when it is not clear whether the sentence contains an ellipsis. Ellipsis is the omission of some aspect of a language whose meaning can be understood from the context of the sentence. In the sentence, *John knows a richer man than Kim*, it is not clear if the sentence has ellipsis or not, and this gives two interpretations : either John knows a man who is richer than Kim is, or John knows a man who is richer than any other man that Kim knows (Zelta, 2014, p. 4). The second case implies an ellipsis of the verb knows, and nothing in the sentence favors one interpretation over the other.

Semantic Ambiguity

Semantic ambiguity occurs when a sentence has more than one way of reading it within its context although it contains no lexical or structural ambiguity. Semantic ambiguity can be due to the logical form or sense of a word or due to scope quantifiers that is when there are two ways for interpreting the sentence even if the syntactical and lexical structures are the same Cruse (1986).

Transformational Ambiguity

Semantic word sense ambiguity, also called logical word sense ambiguity, occurs with words that are related in meaning but distinct in what they imply. Crystal (1988) defines semantic ambiguity as transformational ambiguity where the sentence may have a similar bracketing on the surface for both reading, but is related to a more than one structure at a more abstract level of representation" (p.23). For instance, *dogs are healthy pets* can be interpreted as either dogs promote health in their owners, or that dogs as animals are themselves healthy Crystal (1988).

In the example, *the chicken is ready to eat*, the chicken can be an animal ready to be fed, or a plate ready to be served Crystal (1988). The word chicken is not lexically ambiguous but the sentence demonstrates semantic ambiguity. Similarly, *Kate and Kim are married* can be semantically interpreted as either Kim and Kate are married to each other, or Kim has a wife, and Kate has a husband; they are not single Crystal (1988).

Scope Ambiguity

Scope ambiguity occurs when a quantifier as each, every, all, some, several, a, and not enter into different scoping relations with other sentence constituents Zelta (2014).For example, the sentence *all linguists prefer a theory*, when the scope of *a* includes the scope of *all* this sentence means all linguists love the same theory, while when the scope of *all* includes the scope of *a*, this sentence means linguists love different theories.

Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity occurs when a sentence has several meanings in the context in which it is uttered. This can be classified as ambiguity in speech acts, ambiguity in presuppositions, and referential ambiguity Zelta (2014).

Ambiguity in Speech Acts

"Full natural language systems must recognize speakers' intentions in an utterance. They must know when the speaker is asserting, asking, or making an official or social gesture" Searle (1975, p. 23). Therefore, *can you open the door* can be ambiguous as it might in context represent a question, request, or even an offer. Similarly, *the cops are coming* can be processed as an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief. Being unable to determine its pragmatic meaning makes this sentence ambiguous.

Ambiguity in Presuppositions

Ambiguity in presuppositions is when speakers mark linguistically the information that is to be taken for granted, and such information can be interpreted in various ways (Zelta, 2014). This can be well demonstrated in the word **too.** Bach (1982) states *I love you too can be understood as one of the four interpretations. 1. I love you just like you love me. 2. I love you just like someone else does.3. I love you and love someone else also.4. I love you as well as I like you.*

Referential Ambiguity

Referential ambiguity occurs when an anaphora can take its reference from more than one element each playing the role of an antecedent. Anaphora includes pronouns, definite noun phrases, and some forms of ellipsis Levinson (1983). In the example, *the trucks shall treat the roads before **they** freeze* the antecedent to the anaphora *they* can be either trucks or roads.

2. Conclusion

Locke in 1698 as cited in Brown 1996 explicitly stated that "unless a man's words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them stand for in speaking he does not speak intelligibly" (p. 6). This 'same idea' between the speaker and the listener referred to by Locke is obstructed by ambiguity in the mode of communication itself, that is to say, ambiguity in language. Paget (1930) in *Human Speech* expresses the liability of words' ambiguity "each root word is naturally liable to bear many different meanings" (p.7), and 'those different meanings' are a direct cause for linguistic ambiguity. From the above categorization, all ambiguity types pose communication breakdown. Moreover, language processing, on both recognition (reading) and production levels (writing and speaking), is hindered by ambiguity. Ambiguity in language can be intentional and can serve certain aims. Intentional ambiguity in literature can trigger deep thought of the interpreter and compel him or her to be an active participant in the learning process, political speeches occasionally exploit ambiguous language to conceal covert ideas. For instance, when a senator claims: "I am against useless taxes", he cannot be accused of deception when he passes taxes since his claim is against useless taxes only; the ambiguity hovering around useless saves this senator from any constraints. Titles of newspapers are sometimes ambiguous in order to attract readers. For example, *Iraqi Heads Seek Arms*, is a newspaper headline that demonstrates lexical ambiguity and that seems humorous on the first reading and may attract readers to indulge into the article. Nevertheless, ambiguity is rendered as a flaw of language, a reason for language processing dysfunction, and a cause for broken communication. Accordingly, in this realm, recommendations to avoid ambiguity in writing and speaking are issued.

References

[1]. Atherton, C. (1993). *The Stoics on ambiguity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2]. Atlas, D. (1989). *Philosophy without ambiguity*: A Logico-linguistic Essay, London, UK: Oxford University Press.

[3]. Bach, K. (1982). Semantic Non-specification. *Semantics Nonspecificity and Mixed Quantifiers, linguistics and Philosophy pp.* 593-605. Retrieved from //http:online.sfsu.edu/kbach.

[4]. Bittner, M. (2007). *Online Update Temporal Modal, and de se Anaphora in Polysynthetic Discourse*, in Chris Baker and Pauline Jacobson (eds), *Direct Compositionality* pp1-19. Retrieved from http://philpapers.org/rec/

[5]. Brown, G. (1996). *Speakers, listeners and communication: Explorations in discourse analysis.* London: Cambridge University Press.

[6]. Cann, R. (1993). Formal Semantics: an introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[7]. Chomsky, N. (1965). Syntactic Feature. *Aspects of Theory of Syntax,* pp75-94. Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press.

[8]. Clark, D. G. (2011). Bias of quantifier scope interpretation. *Journal of Neurolinguists, 24*(4), 401-419. Retrieved from http://www.researchgate.net/251604242

[9]. Cruse, D. (1986). *Lexical Semantics.* Introducing lexical relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[10]. Crystal, D. (1988). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics 6thEdition* 14-17.Retrieved from http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com

[11]. Culicover P.W and Jackendoff R.(2005).Why simpler syntax. *Simpler Syntax*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[12]. Cushing, S. (1997). *Fatal Words Communication Clashes and Aircraft Crashes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[13]. Dayal, V. (2004). *The universal force of free choice any* linguistic variation yearbook 4: 15-40. Retrieved from http//www.ingentaconnect.com

[14]. Edlow, R. B. (1975). The Stoics on ambiguity. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, *13*(4), 423. Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_philosophy/v013/13.4edlow

[15]. Erickson, M. (2002). *Collected Works of Erickson*. Retrieved from Erickson Klein website, http://www.erickson-klein.org.

[16]. Empson, W. (1930) .*Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 1st edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[17]. Empson, W. (2014). *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[18]. Filozoficky, U. (2006). Aristotle on Language Paralogims. *Organon* 13. Retrieved from http://www.klemens.sav.sk/fiusav/doc/organon/2006/2/170-180.pdf

[19]. Hanson, L. (1981). Processing of Written and Spoken words: Evidence for common coding. *Memory and Cognition 9, 93-100.* Retrieved from http//linl.springer.com/article 10.3758.

[20]. Hartman, R.R.K and Stork, F.C. (1976). A *Dictionary of Language and Linguists*. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED071082

[21]. Hirst, G. (1987). Semantic Interpretation and Resolution of Ambiguity, Studies in Natural Language Processing. *Artificial intelligence*,*34*(2). Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0004370293900176

[22]. Hurford J. and Heasley B., (1983) *Semantics: A Course Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[23]. Jacobson, P. (1999). Towards a variable-free semantics. *Linguistics and philosophy*, *22*(2), 117-185. Retrieved from http://www.springerlink.com/index/j706674r4w217jj5.pdf

[24]. Levinson, S. (1983). Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[25]. Lyons, J. (1975). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[26]. May, R. (1985) Logical Form: Its Structure and Derivation. New York: MIT Press.

[27]. Mayor, M. (2009). *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*. Pearson Education India.

[28]. McMillan, J.H, and Schumacher S. (2001). *Research in education. A conceptual introduction*. 5th edition. New York: Longman. Retrieved from http:// educationmonblog.blogspot.com/2006/05/mcmillan-shumacher-2001.html in April 2015

[29]. Munson, R. (1976). *The Way of Words*. Retrieved from http://philpapers.org/rec/MUNTWO-3

[30]. Paget, R. (1930). *Human Speech*. Retrieved from http://doi.apa.org/?uid=1930-04942-000

[31]. Palmer, F. (1984). *Grammar*. London: Penguin.

[32]. Pehar, D. (2001). Use of ambiguities in peace agreements. *Language and diplomacy*, 163-200. Retrieved from http://www.diplomacy.edu/resources/general/use-ambiguities-peace-agreements

[33]. Quiroga, C. (2005). Language ambiguity: A curse and a blessing. *Translation Journal*, *7*(1). Retrieved from https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=11102668092937850079&hl=en&as_sdt=20 05 &sciodt=0,5

[34]. Searle, J. (1975). Indirect Speech Acts. Cole & Morgan. New York: Academic Press.

[35]. Sturt, P. (2003). Monotonic Syntactic Processing. A Cross linguistic study of attachment and reanalysis, *Language and Cognitive Processes* 11(51) 449-494. Retrieved from http: //www.tandfonline.com.

http://www.ijsse.com

[36].   Walton D. (1996). Fallacies Arising from Ambiguity. Springer Science Business Media. Canada. Retrieved from:http://books.google.com?isbn=94015158632 DOI10.1007/978-94-015-8632-0

[37].   Webster, M. (2003). Unabridged Dictionary 11th edition. London: Library of Congress.

[38].   Yule, G. (1986). *Meaning from Combination*, *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[39].   Zelta, E.N. (2014). Ambiguity. *In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from http://plato.stanford.edu.

[40].   Zwicky, A. and Saddack, J. (1975). *Ambiguity tests and how to fail them in syntax and semantics*, pp 1-36. In Kimball (4th ed). New York: New York Academic Press.