

Analysis of Ambiguity

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Abstract. Ambiguity in English is a phenomenon, which, for a variety of reasons, is very complicated. The paper's intention is to analyze how ambiguity may have its origins in phonetics and lexis. The ensuing commentary thus contributes towards avoiding possible misunderstanding caused by ambiguity in communication. Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in natural. It means that a word, phrase or sentence has at least two distinct meanings. In extremely informational communication it will cause barriers to understand. Sometimes it will cause divergence or dispute. So sophistry and argument usually use ambiguity to make tricks. But ambiguity has its advantages. For example, in poetry or lyrical prose, it can arouse rich imagination or add aesthetic color to the word. The writer usually uses ambiguity to express complicated emotion, so every reader can have his or her own understanding instead of only one conclusion puns, riddles and cross talks are the positive models of using ambiguity. So, in order to understand the language deeply and promote the efficiency of communication, we should make further discussion about ambiguity. According to the systematic functional grammar, language has 3 dimensions: phonology, syntax and semantics. So we will discuss the language ambiguity from these three dimensions.

Phonological Ambiguity

In oral communication, the speech sound is the carrier of information. It is a psychological process of encoding and decoding. If there is no literal help and context, the polysemy, homonymy, liaison and omission are easier to cause ambiguity. The following examples are part of this kind of ambiguity.

A. "How is bread made?"

B. "I know that!" Alice cried eagerly, "You take some flour."

A. "Where do you pick the flower?" the White Queen asked, "In a garden, or in the hedges?"

B. "Well, it isn't picked at all." Alice explained, "it's ground....."

A. "How many acres of ground?" said the White Queen.

During this conversation, the ambiguity is due to the two sets of homonyms: flower and flour and the meanings of ground.

Semantic Ambiguity

It is also called lexical ambiguity. There are mainly three types of lexical ambiguity: polysemy, homonymy and categorical ambiguity. Polysemous words are whose several meanings are related to one another. For example, the verb "open" has many senses concerning unfolding, expanding, revealing, moving to an open position, making openings and so on. Conversely, homonymous words have meanings with no relationship one to another. For example, "bark" means both the noise a dog makes and the stuff on the outside of a tree. A word may be both polysemous and homonymous; the adjective "right" has several senses concerning correctness and righteousness, but also senses concerning the right-hand side. There is no clear line between polysemy and homonymy. Categorically ambiguous words are those whose syntactic category may vary. For example, "sink"

can be a noun describing a plumbing fixture or a verb meaning become submerged. It usually interacts with other types of ambiguity.

Besides the above mentioned three types, we should discuss the lexical ambiguity due to the cultural differences. Language is part of culture. Its existence and development interact with the culture, so the different cultural backgrounds often make misunderstanding and ambiguity in communication. For example, the sentence “You are a lucky dog.” means you are very fortunate. In English, people like dogs and usually use ‘dog’ to signify the human being. But, in Chinese, the dog is a derogatory term. Sometimes, literally, the correspondent translation means one. But, in fact real meaning is completely different from the literal. For example, the “mad doctor” means the “psychiatrist” instead of a doctor who is mad. The “confidence man” means the “fraudulent person” instead of the man who has confidence. So learning a foreign language is not a matter of simple word-for-word translation. At the same time, The semantic ambiguity due to culture differences is very important for a translator.

Syntactic ambiguity

It is also called grammatical ambiguity or structural ambiguity. The difference in meaning is due to the different structures which are permitted by the rules of syntax. Different grammatical combinations have different functional potentials, so one surface structure may have more than one deep structure.

The first class of syntactic ambiguity is that of Attachment Ambiguity: there being more than one node to which a particular syntactic constituent may legally be attached. Attachment problems are mostly problems of modifier placement. The most common example is that of a prepositional phrase. For example, “he hit the man with a stick”. Below I list some of the other occasions on which Attachment Ambiguity may occur.

- 1) A prepositional phrase may have more than one verb phrase available to attach to. For example, the student will discuss their plan to hold a party in the classroom. Here, the phrase ‘in the classroom’ can attach to the verb phrase ‘discuss their plan’ or verb phrase ‘hold a party’.
- 2) When a sentence contains a subsentence, both may contain places for the attachment of a prepositional or a adverb. For example, “Rose said that Nancy had taken the cleaning out yesterday.” The word “yesterday” may quality the saying action of the matrix sentence, or the taking action of the subsentence.
- 3) An Attachment Ambiguity also occurs when an adverbial may modify the sentence verb or the whole sentence: “Happily, Nancy cleaned up the mess Rose had left.” The adverb ‘happily’ would be attached to the sentence, meaning that the event was a fortunate occurrence, or it would be attached to the verb phrase, meaning that Nancy was happy to clean up the mess.

The second class of ambiguity is Gap-finding ambiguity. It occurs when a move constituent has be returned to its pretransformational starting point, and there is more than one place that it might go. For example, “there are the boys that the police debated about fighting.” In this sentence, there are two possible gaps in the relative clause. Taking the first gap gives the meaning that the police debated with the boys on the topic of fighting, the second give the police debated among themselves about fighting the boys. In a few cases, a past participle can look like a gapped verb phrase, rendering a question indistinguishable, but for punctuation or intonation from a command. For example, “have the crystals dissolved?” (Question) “have the crystals dissolved.” (Imperative)

The third king of ambiguity is the Analytical Ambiguity. It occurs when the nature of the constituent is itself in doubt, that is, when there is more than one possible analysis of it. For example, “ revolving doors can be dangerous.” Here the word ‘revolving’ can be an adjective or a present participle. Participles and adjectives can be particularly troublesome when they occur at the end of a clause. For example, “The manager approached the boy smoking a cigar.” The participle ‘smoking a cigar’ can be as a reduced restrictive clause or as a verb complement. This sentence can mean that the man, smoking a cigar, approached the boy or the boy smoking a cigar was approached by the manager. On the other hand, the noun groups can have a complex internal structure. It is difficult to determine the structure of a complex noun group, including modifier scope. For example,

“long hair and beards.” It means either long hair and long beards or beard and long hair. In the phrase of more realistic novels, the word ‘more’ can either modify the adjective ‘realistic’ or the noun phrase of ‘realistic novels’.

At last we should discuss the interaction between categorical and syntactic ambiguity. If a word is categorically ambiguous, a sentence containing it can be structurally is categorically ambiguous and the possibilities will correspond to those for words. For example, “The Japanese push bottles up the Chinese.” In this sentence, the word “push” and “bottle” could be verb and noun respectively, or noun and verb. Certainly, not all categorical ambiguity result in syntactic ambiguity, since the syntactic context will often admit one of the alternatives.

From all the above discussions, it should be realized that the meaning of a sentence depends to a great extent on the meaning of the words of which it is composed. But the structure of the sentence also contributes to its meaning. Phonological analysis, semantic interpretation and syntactic analysis must be completely integrated. Especially the syntactic and semantic processing of text should proceed at the same time. Though the occurrence of ambiguity is very common, it is not a big problem in communication. Sometimes the supra-segments, such as stress, intonation could disambiguate the sentence in spoken language, as may the insertion of punctuation in the written form. On the other hand, mostly conditional contexts can help to unambiguous sentences. For example, “she can not bear children may mean she is unable to give birth to children or she can not tolerate children. It will be unambiguous if the sentences are like: “She can not bear children if they are noisy,” or “she can not bear children because she is sterile.” The deep research on ambiguity will contribute to reveal the inherent law of language and have far-reaching significance to the linguistic theory. At the same time, it helps us to promote our communicative ability.

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