

# The Application of Ambiguity in English

Tong Lili

Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning, China

## Abstract

Ambiguity is a commonly acknowledged linguistic phenomenon. In each aspect of linguistic application process, words, structure or pragmatic meaning of a phrase or a sentence can help the forming of ambiguity in a language. This paper will take English as an example to illustrate some ambiguous phenomena, whose causes can also be found in some linguistic research fields. Ambiguity in language is a common phenomenon, which have to be analyzed adequately in order to make good use of it to reach good communication.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Application, Rhetoric, Communication

## 1 Introduction

As everything in the world has two sides, ambiguity in English is not merely negative. Although its vagueness in meaning often puzzles people here and there, the diversity of explanations can make up its shortcomings. In English, making good use of ambiguity is also a necessary skill for language learners. Ambiguity in English shows its advantages in many ways, especially in rhetoric, communication and etc.

## 2 Ambiguity

Ambiguity is regarded as a linguistic phenomenon, which happens when a word, phrase, sentence or a group of sentences has more than one possible interpretation or meaning. It commonly exists

in all kinds of languages throughout the world. English, as one of them, is not an exception.

### 2.1 Lexical ambiguity

According to the literal analysis, lexical ambiguity is related to interactive confusion emerging from words. It may get the origin from polysemy, homonym, transition of meaning and the difference between American English and British English.

### 2.2 Pragmatic ambiguity

Apart from the phonetic, structural and lexical ambiguity, recently pragmatic ambiguity becomes more popular in the research world. Compared with other forms pragmatic ambiguity seems more complicated and common, so the language receivers should be sensitive enough toward pragmatic ambiguity. They should be capable in pragmatic knowledge to grasp the real intention of other speakers or writers from the indirect utterances. However, what is the pragmatic ambiguity like? How does it work? English linguist Leech has given his hypothesis on it: "The semantic representation (or logical form) of a sentence is distinct from its interpretations." That means the meaning of an utterance is not totally equal to what the internal structure conveys. There are still some external factors functioning, like the contexts. Actually an utterance carries more from the external factors than the internal to structure itself. So the significance or meaning of an utterance should also be investigated from a pragmatic perspective, in which generally there are three aspects being consi-

dered—conversational implicature, illocutionary act and rhetoric application.

### 3 The Application of Ambiguity

#### 3.1 Rhetoric

In rhetoric, pun is actually regarded as a style of ambiguity, because both of them are phenomena of being identical in form, different in interpretation. Puns can make the language funny and humorous and express the theme vividly and powerfully.

E.g. The clerk: Can you see a female?

Angustus: Of course, I can see a female as easily as a male.  
Do you think I'm blind?

In the dialogue, as for "see", the clerk means "meet", while Angustus was angry by interpreting it as the outcome of "look at", so he scolded the clerk. There is another example.

E.g. Secretary: Excuse me, sir, but are you engaged?

Manager : Yes, but what business is it of yours?

(COLLEGE ENGLISH BOOK IV)

That conversation is very interesting, the semantic pun makes the manager misunderstood the secretary, because the verb "engage" can be translated into either "plan for a marriage" or "be occupied to do another thing".

#### 3.2 Communication

Although clearness in communication is very important, sometimes ambiguity is still necessary. When people are not willing or convenient to express their ideas, trying to be ambiguous is a good way. By this way, people can prevent themselves from some embarrassing situations and push the communication forward naturally. For example, "I'll write and tell you if I can come." may imply the writer's considering of the language receiver's opinion and his hesitation to come.

On the other hand, ambiguous talking in our daily life can make things funny. People often make jokes with ambiguous words or sentences.

E.g. (1) A: You are a patient...

B: I'm not ill.

A: Aha, you are a patient girl.

B: You are a naughty girl!

(2) A: Where have you been this summer holiday?

B: Africa.

A: What were you doing there?

B: Shooting elephants.

A: Then how can you catch them?

B: With a camera.

Those jokes fill life with laughter and enrich the contents of life, so it is not always necessary to eliminate ambiguity in our conversations. For those advantages, they should be made good use of.

#### 3.3 Other Usages

Because of the multiple semantic effects of ambiguity, which is effective enough to express more than what is written or spoken, it now becomes widely used in society. Some formal institutions have begun to take up the method of using ambiguity to reach their targets. That is to say, ambiguity begins to appear in many public occasions, like in advertisements, newspapers, and even commercial contacts. People use it to achieve more commercial, political or other kinds of profits. For example, in an advertisement for Coca cola, it says "Coke refreshes you like no other can". Due to the different usages of the word "can", this sentence can be translated successfully in two ways:

(1) Coke refreshes you like no other can refresh you.

(2) Coke refreshes you like no other drinks can refreshes you.

Fewer words have been used in the advertisement, so more money has been

saved, whereas more adequate meanings have been transferred.

Another advertisement seems more interesting. In America, there is a glasses company, who only put three big letters—"OIC" outside the door. The passer-bys were puzzled and came into the company to ask what it meant. The shop assistant explained: "It should be pronounced as 'Oh, I see'." Actually it can be understood in two ways:

- (1) Oh, I see clearly when I wearing those glasses of this brand.
- (2) Oh, I see that this brand is really good.

In addition, the media uses ambiguity a lot. Sometimes they will disclose something in a potential and forceful way. Ambiguous words or phrases always appear in the headline of the newspaper to attract people and arouse their imagination and thinking. For example, in the CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MORNING, once there was a piece of news, telling that a Vietnam astronaut was sent into space by the Soviet Union during the World Sports Meet held in Moscow. The headline was "Orbiting Earth with a Friend from Your Own Orbit". According to the different interpretations of the word "orbit", the headline can be translated as:

- (1) Traveling around the earth with a friend in your own social circle
- (2) Revolving along the earth track with one of your friends

It is not difficult for us to find the author's intention in transferring more information than what is written. Some political intentions can be exposed from the double meanings.

Above all, there are many other fields in which ambiguity also plays a very important role. Ambiguous phenomena can always be found in poems, riddles or idioms, which is beyond the coverage of

this paper. However, what should be emphasized is that ambiguity actually useful and helpful in our daily life. It should be noted that it really benefits our life in some aspects.

#### 4 Conclusion

Ambiguity is not only a common phenomenon of human language, but also a complicated problem worth discussing. In our daily life, it exists everywhere. Also it touches and goes deep into many aspects of linguistic study, with the feature of a word, phrase, sentence or a group of sentences' having more than one interpretation or meaning. With the development of society and culture, the study of ambiguity has been enlarged so that it covers phonetics, grammar, lexicon pragmatics and etc.

The significance of anglicizing ambiguity lies in illustrating the proper attitude that should be taken on it. It is unavoidable in fact. In many linguistic fields, we can find its origin. It is not merely a problem arising from sound, structure or vocabulary. In addition, it is also influenced by some pragmatic factors including contexts, presuppositions, qualities of speakers, etc., which make it more complex.

On the whole, ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon should be studied and analyzed more specifically so that we can grasp its features and causes well. Then we can be more capable in dealing with ambiguity. The significance of ambiguity study lies in the benefits that it brings in perfecting and improving of communication.

#### 5 Reference

- [1] H.G.Widdowson, (2000), *Linguistics*, Shanghai Education Press
- [2] George Yule, (2000), *Pragmatics*, Shanghai Education Press

- [3] Leech, G.N. (1983), *Principles of Pragmatics*, London: Longman
- [4] Claire Kramsch, (2000), *Language and Culture*, Shanghai Education Press
- [5] Bernard Spolsky, (2000), *Sociolinguistics*, Shanghai Education Press
- [6] Hu Zhuanglin, Liu Runqing, Li Yanfu (1999) , *Linguistics: A Course Book*, Peking University Press
- [7] Dai Weidong (2000) , *An Introduction to Modern English Linguistics*, Shanghai Education Press
- [8] Zhang Yunfei, Zhou Xiqing (1987) , *An Introduction to Modern English Lexicology*, Beijing Normal University Press