**Language Ambiguity**

**Introduction**

Despite the fact that ambiguity in language is an essential part of language, it is often an obstacle to be ignored or a problem to be solved for people to understand each other. Even when perceived as a problem, ambiguity provides value. In any case, language ambiguity can be understood as an illustration of the complexity of language itself.

**What does Language Ambiguity Mean?**

Something is ambiguous when it can be understood in two or more possible senses or ways. If the ambiguity is in a single word it is called **lexical ambiguity**. In a sentence or clause, **structural ambiguity**.

Examples of lexical ambiguity are everywhere. In fact, almost any word has more than one meaning. "Note" = "A musical tone" or "A short written record." "Lie" = "Statement that you know it is not true" or "present tense of lay: to be or put yourself in a flat position." Also we can take the word "ambiguity" itself. It can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. Ambiguity tends to increase with frequency of usage.

Some examples of structural ambiguity: "John enjoys painting his models nude." Who is nude? "Visiting relatives can be so boring." Who is doing the visiting? "Mary had a little lamb." With mint sauce?

In normal speech, ambiguity can sometimes be understood as something witty or deceitful. Harry Rusche proposes that ambiguity should be extended to any verbal nuance, which gives room to alternative reactions to the same linguistic element.

**Polysemy** (or polysemia) is a compound noun for a basic linguistic feature. The name comes from Greek *poly* (many) and *semy* (to do with meaning, as in *semantics*). Polysemy is also called radiation or multiplication. This happens when a word acquires a wider range of meanings. For example, "paper" comes from Greek *papyrus.* Originally it referred to writing material made from the papyrus reeds of the Nile, later to other writing materials, and now it refers to things such as government documents, scientific reports, family archives or newspapers.

There is a category, called "complementary polysemy" wherein a single verb has multiple senses, which are related to one another in some predictable way. An example is "bake," which can be interpreted as a change-of-state verb or as a creation verb in different circumstances. "John baked the potato." (*change-of-state*) "John baked a cake." (*creation*)

**Strength of Ambiguity:**

“Various people have said that ambiguity is a problem for communication,” says Ted Gibson, an MIT professor of cognitive science and senior author of a paper describing the research to appear in the journal Cognition. "But the fact that context disambiguates has important ramifications for the re-use of potentially ambiguous forms. Ambiguity is no longer a problem — it's something that you can take advantage of, because you can reuse easy [words] in different contexts over and over again."

For a somewhat ironic example of ambiguity, consider the word “mean.” It can mean, of course, to indicate or signify, but it can also refer to an intention or purpose (“I meant to go to the store”); something offensive or nasty; or the mathematical average of a set of numbers. Adding an ‘s’ introduces even more potential definitions: an instrument or method (“a means to an end”), or financial resources (“to live within one’s means”).

But virtually no speaker of English gets confused when he or she hears the word “mean.” That’s because the different senses of the word occur in such different contexts as to allow listeners to infer its meaning nearly automatically.

Given the disambiguating power of context, the researchers hypothesized that languages might harness ambiguity to reuse words — most likely, the easiest words for language processing systems. Building on observation and previous studies, they posited that words with fewer syllables, high frequency and the simplest pronunciations should have the most meanings.

To test this prediction, Piantadosi, Tily and Gibson carried out corpus studies of English, Dutch and German. (In linguistics, a corpus is a large body of samples of language as it is used naturally, which can be used to search for word frequencies or patterns.) By comparing certain properties of words to their numbers of meanings, the researchers confirmed their suspicion that shorter, more frequent words, as well as those that conform to the language’s typical sound patterns, are most likely to be ambiguous — trends that were statistically significant in all three languages.

To understand why ambiguity makes a language more efficient rather than less so, think about the competing desires of the speaker and the listener. The speaker is interested in conveying as much as possible with the fewest possible words, while the listener is aiming to get a complete and specific understanding of what the speaker is trying to say. But as the researchers write, it is “cognitively cheaper” to have the listener infer certain things from the context than to have the speaker spend time on longer and more complicated utterances. The result is a system that skews toward ambiguity, reusing the “easiest” words. Once context is considered, it’s clear that “ambiguity is actually something you would want in the communication system,” Piantadosi says.

Tom Wasow, a professor of linguistics and philosophy at Stanford University, calls the paper “important and insightful.”

“You would expect that since languages are constantly changing, they would evolve to get rid of ambiguity,” Wasow says. “But if you look at natural languages, they are massively ambiguous: Words have multiple meanings, there are multiple ways to parse strings of words.

**How to Avoid Ambiguity**

1. **Be careful with prepositions.** The thing about prepositional phrases (such as “he murderer killed the student with a book”) is that it’s not always clear what they’re modifying. Look at the “book” example from section 2; the [ambiguity](https://literaryterms.net/ambiguity/) in that sentence is entirely based on the preposition “with.” Does it modify “killed” or “student”? Could go either way. It’s always important to be careful with your prepositions.
2. **Use commas correctly!** Commas exist primarily to resolve syntactic ambiguity. If you’re worried that your sentences are too ambiguous, try working on your grammar and punctuation, especially when it comes to commas.
3. **Don’t assume that your reader will interpret things correctly.** What you say might be clear enough to you, but the reader might interpret it differently. If you leave room for ambiguity, there’s every chance that the reader will interpret that ambiguity in ways you didn’t intend. To write clearly you need to develop the skill of seeing your own writing from a reader’s perspective.
4. Keep your sentences short.
5. Start every sentence with the subject, follow closely with the verb, and end with the object.
6. Place all adjectives close to the words they modify.
7. Use words consistently throughout a document, *e.g.,* if the agreement defines or uses “days” to mean “business days” at one point in a contract, then it may confuse the reader to use “days” in another part of the same document to mean “calendar days”.