

# **AMBIGUITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISEMENTS VIA THE MASS MEDIA AND RELATED MEANS: THE NEED FOR PROPER DISAMBIGUATION**

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## **Abstract**

A commonest way of publicizing the products or services of given firms or organizations is usually through radio, television, newspapers, billboards, handbills, or poster advertisement. However, vital information which advertisers want to disseminate to prospective customers are sometimes misconstrued because of ambiguous words or expressions used by advertisement copywriters. Such ambiguously worded advertisements usually lack semantic clarity as they communicate both the intended and unintended meanings. The aim of advertising the products or services in question will be defeated if such advertisements fail to attract the desired response. This paper states the meaning(s) of ambiguity and related concepts. It also identifies the major types of ambiguity and enumerates the meanings of the ambiguous advertisements of Seaman's Schnapps, Peak Milk, Cowbell Chocolate, etc. Most importantly, the paper suggests methods of resolving or disambiguating such ambiguous advertisements like use of contextual information, use of appropriate prosodies, graphic displays, hyphenation and syntactic re-organization.

## **Introduction**

The word 'ambiguity' has attracted various definitions or interpretations. Trask (1983) defines it as the phenomenon in which a single string of words receives two or more sharply distinct meanings in such a way that the ambiguous string corresponds to two or more distinct sentences. Copi (1978) also similarly defines ambiguity as a word or expression which has two distinct meanings in which the context of its use does not make clear which meaning is intended. The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English by Hornby also interprets the word 'ambiguity' as the presence of more than one meaning.

Advertising simply put is a way of publicizing the activities of a firm, business or organization so as to make known goods or products being sold or about to be sold, services rendered or about to be rendered, prices of such goods or products and services, their uniqueness, etc. This is usually done through the mass media, that is, the main ways or means of disseminating news or information to large number of people like the radio, television, newspapers or magazines as well as other related means like handbills, posters and billboards. A good advertisement according to Appleby (1981) is that which achieves the ultimate goal of arousing the interest of the recipients and encouraging them to take steps to demand for the advertised goods or services. Appleby believes that before an advertisement can achieve this ultimate goal, it must be timely, believable, acceptable, convincing and most importantly, it must be meaning specific by expressing a clear idea or message.

Unfortunately, some Nigerian advertisements unknown to advertisement copywriters who are the advertisement message specialists in advertisement departments or agencies are ambiguous, hence, they are not clear enough because they are not meaning specific. The irony of this is that such ambiguities in advertisements usually occur because advertisers want to be brief, specific and clear via the use of some linguistic devices or language techniques. The commonest of such linguistic devices or language techniques are brevity of expression or economy of words and proper modification of grammatical items, which normally should ensure semantic clarity. Unfortunately, such devices sometimes subject advertisements to double or multiple semantic interpretations, for example, when the expression "the prayer drink that is original" is reduced to "original prayer drink" in the advertisement of Seaman's Schnapps.

## **Types of Ambiguity**

Various types of ambiguity have been identified by language and communication experts

who have contributed to the study of ambiguity. These are the lexical ambiguity, the phonological ambiguity and the syntactic ambiguity which are discussed below:

### **1. Lexical Ambiguity**

This is the first type of ambiguity identified by Hirst (1982), which as the name suggests is a situation where a given word is capable of having more than one meaning or semantic interpretation. Copi (1978) also identifies this same type of ambiguity but describes it as equivocation which arises because many words usually have more than one literal meaning or interpretation. Expressions like "Agricultural Science students must bring new pens"<sup>11</sup>. "The bank belongs to the government" and "I want a new file" are subject to dual or multiple interpretations because the underlined words are lexically ambiguous. "Pens" can mean, "instruments used in writing" or "enclosure used in housing domestic animals". "Bank" can mean "an establishment for keeping money and other valuables" or "a piece of land along the side of a river". "File" can also mean "a metal tool for smoothing hard surfaces", "a folder for keeping papers together" or "a line of persons or things".

### **2. Phonological Ambiguity**

This is the second type of ambiguity identified by Hirst (1982) and it is considered important because it has to do with speech which is man's basic form of communication and the most commonly used in human communication. He identifies homophones as basic forms of ambiguity which are words with similar or exactly the same pronunciation but which don't have the same spelling or meaning. For example, 'hare' and 'hair' are pronounced /heɪ(r)/ but 'hare' means "a fast running field animal with big ears" while "hair" means "the thread like growth on the head or on the skin". The word "bear" and "bare" are also pronounced, /bed(r)/ but 'bear' means "to carry, have, tolerate or endure" while "bare" means "to reveal or uncover". So, when such homophones are used in contexts that can't depict the intended meaning they will be ambiguous. Copi (1978) also identifies a similar type of ambiguity called (fallacy) ambiguity of accent.

### **3. Syntactic Ambiguity**

This is the third type of ambiguity identified by Hirst (1981), which is otherwise called structural ambiguity. This refers to a situation where a given expression or sentence is capable of having more than one semantic interpretation or realization usually due to the fact that such a grammatical construction can be given or assigned alternative grammatical constituents. Copi (1978) also identifies this third type of ambiguity which he describes as amphiboly. Examples of syntactic ambiguity are "He killed the rouge with a knife" and "She greeted the man on the field". The first expression can mean "He killed the rogue who was having a knife" or "He used a knife to kill the rogue". The second expression can mean "She greeted the man who is on the field" and "She greeted the man while she was on the field". Another example is "the government is against dirty canteen operators" which can mean the government is against either "canteen operators who are dirty" or "operators of dirty canteens".

### **Semantic Interpretation of Selected Ambiguous Advertisements**

A number of Nigerian advertisements, as already mentioned, are ambiguous and are not meaning specific and thereby fall short of a most important parameter of effective advertisement. This is because such advertisements are capable of double or multiple semantic interpretation as they convey both intended and unintended meanings. Some of the products with such ambiguous advertisements are Joy, Gala, Vaseline, Schnapps, Polyfoam, Power flow, Camela, Turkey, Orphetal, Visco '2000, Peak Milk, Cowbell, Leonards, Heatol, Vim and-Dispirin. The meanings of each of these ambiguous expressions are shown below:

1. *Joy, your own special beauty treatment*, has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Joy soap is your own beauty treatment that is special or uncommon.
  - (b) Joy soap is the treatment for your own special or uncommon beauty.
2. *Gala, the tasty snack with pure beef filling* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Gala is the tasty snack which has beef filling that is pure i.e. without any dirt.
  - (b) Gala is the tasty snack which has filling made up of only beef i.e. which is not mixed with any other thing.

3. *Vaseline contains pure yellow petroleum* that is pure i.e. clean or without dirt.
  - (a) Vaseline body jelly contains yellow petroleum that is pure i.e. clean or without dirt.
  - (b) Vaseline body jelly contains petroleum whose colour is pure yellow.
4. *Seaman's Schnapps, the original prayer drink* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Seaman's Schnapps is the prayer drink that is original i.e. the first of its kind or which is not an imitation,
  - (b) Seaman's Schnapps is the drink that is meant for original or real prayer and not just any prayer.
5. *Poly foam, the long lasting foam* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Poly foam is the lasting foam that is also long.
  - (b) Poly foam is the foam that is long lasting.
6. *Power flow, for complete engine protection* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Power flow is the engine protection that is complete.
  - (b) Power flow is for a complete engine.
7. *Camela, the pure vegetable oil* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Camela is a vegetable oil that is pure or clean.
  - (b) Camela is the oil that is made of/from pure vegetable.
8. *Turkey, pure vegetable cooking oil* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - fa) Turkey is a pure cooking oil made of/from vegetable.
  - (b) Turkey is a pure oil made for vegetable cooking.
  - (c) Turkey is a cooking oil made of/from pure vegetable.
  - (d) Turkey is the oil for cooking pure vegetable.
9. *Orheptal, the famous blood tonic* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Orheptal is the blood tonic that is famous or well known.
  - (b) Orheptal is the blood tonic for the famous or well known blood.
10. *Visco 2000, high performance motor oil* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Visco 2000 is a motor oil with a high performance.
  - (b) Visco 2000 is the oil for a motor with a high performance.
11. *Peak, with 28 vitamins and minerals* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Peak contains 28 vitamins and unspecified number of minerals.
  - (b) Peak contains 28 vitamins and 28 minerals.
  - (c) Peak contains vitamins and minerals which altogether are 28 in number.
12. *Cowbell Chocolate contains 17 vitamins and minerals* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Cowbell chocolate contains just 17 vitamins and unspecified number of minerals.
  - (b) Cowbell chocolate contains vitamins and minerals totalling 17 altogether.
  - (c) Cowbell chocolate contains 17 vitamins and 17 minerals.
13. *Lennards Nigeria Plc., School shoes and sandals* has the following semantic interpretations:
  - (a) Lennards Nigeria Plc produces or sells school shoes and other types of sandals.
  - (b) Lennards Nigeria Plc produces or sells school shoes and school sandals.
14. *HeatoJIChinese Balm gives fast relief to sufferers of muscular aches and pains* has the following semantic interpretations;

- (a) Heatol Chinese Balm gives fast relief to sufferer of muscular aches and sufferers of pains in general.
  - (b) Heatol Chinese Balm gives fast relief to those who suffer from both muscular aches and other pains.
  - (c) Heatol Chinese Balm gives fast relief to those who suffer from both muscular aches and muscular pains.
15. *Vim, effective on stubborn stains and germs* has the following semantic interpretations:
- (a) Vim is effective on stubborn stains and germs in general i.e. those that are not stubborn.
  - (b) Vim is effective on both stubborn stains and on stubborn germs.
16. *Dispirin, fast solution for everyday ache and pain* has the following semantic interpretations;
- (a) Dispirin is the fast solution to everyday ache and any form of pain.
  - (b) Dispirin is the fast solution to everyday ache as well as everyday pain.

### **Resolution of Ambiguity in Advertisements**

Since it is possible for the language of advertisements to be susceptible of double or multiple interpretations by communicating intended as well as unintended meanings, it is therefore become necessary for language of advertisements to be properly examined and ambiguous expressions of such advertisements properly resolved or disambiguated. To resolve ambiguity or disambiguate an expression is itself subject to dual interpretations. Basically, it can mean determining the correct and appropriate sense of lexically or structurally ambiguous grammatical constituents (Hirst, 1987.) It can also mean the use of various linguistic and non-linguistic devices to remove the ambiguities of given expressions.

The context of a spoken or written message can be used to resolve or disambiguate any ambiguity resulting from the language used in advertising. Lyon (1968) confirms this by saying that disambiguation of expression resulting from dual or multiple distributional classification of given lexical items depends on the contextual usage and the meanings of the constituent parts of such expressions. He gives the example "They can fish" which can mean, "They know how to fish" if the context is that of fishery or "They process fish as can food" if the context is that of food processing. In line with contextual disambiguation, Moulton and Robinson (1981) also state that the disambiguation of semantically ambiguous lexemes can rely on the context dependent pragmatic information that may be given linguistically or non-linguistically.

Ambiguity in advertisements can sometimes be resolved with the use of appropriate prosodic or supra-segmental features like stress, tone or intonation and pause. The use of these features help in that it ensures proper accenting of words and which automatically disambiguates an inherently ambiguous expression in an advertisement. For example, the ambiguity in "special beauty treatment" used to advertise Joy toilet soap can be resolved or disambiguated by accenting appropriate words using appropriate tone group to depict the intending meaning. If what is intended is "Beauty treatment that is special" then 'special' will be realized as a tone group while 'body treatment' will be realized as another tone group with a slight pause between them. But if what is intended is 'treatment for special beauty', then 'special beauty' will be accented as a tone group followed by a slight pause and 'treatment' will be accented as another tone group.

It is important to note that prosodies can only be used to disambiguate or resolve ambiguities of oral or spoken advertisements but for written or printed advertisements a disambiguation method; called hyphenation can be used. This involves the use of hyphen (-) one of the common punctuation marks used in the formation or compounds lexical items especially the compound nouns. For example, the ambiguous expressions "special beauty treatment" can be hyphenated as 'special beauty-treatment' and 'special-beauty treatment' to realize its first and second semantic interpretations respectively. Also, the ambiguous expression 'pure vegetable cooking oil' used to advertise Turkey cooking oil can be hyphenated as "Pure vegetable-cooking-oil", "Pure vegetable

cooking-oil", "Pure vegetable-cooking oil", Pure-vegetable cooking oil and "Pure-vegetable-cooking oil", to mean "vegetable cooking oil that is pure or pure cooking oil made of/from vegetable," "pure oil made for vegetable cooking", "cooking oil made of/from pure vegetable" and "oil meant for cooking of pure vegetable" respectively.

Apart from hyphenation, ambiguity of written advertisements can also be resolved by graphic displays via the use of appropriate visual symbols like diagrams or drawings and distinguishing lettering. Graphic disambiguation by lettering involves using different characters for the words or compound that is intended and the exact meaning conveyed. Diagrams and drawings also perform similar function as they unequivocally depict what the advertiser means. For example: "pure vegetable oil" used for Camela oil can be graphically displayed as "pure *vegetable oil*" or "*pure vegetable oil*" to realize its first and second meanings respectively. The 'original prayer drink' used for the advertisement of Seaman's Schnapps can also be displayed as 'original *prayer drink*' or as "*original prayer* drink' for its first and second meanings.

The last form of disambiguation that will be considered which takes care of the last set of enumerated examples of ambiguous advertisements is syntactic reorganization and/or lexical insertion. This is because the ambiguities can be resolved by bringing the modifiers close to the modified or inserting lexical modifiers just to clarify meaning. For example, the ambiguity in "Peak, *with 28 vitamins and minerals*" can be resolved by syntactically rearranging the italicized ambiguous expression as "peak with minerals and 28 vitamins" to get the first interpretation of the ambiguous expression. The numerical pre-modifier can be inserted between 'and' and 'minerals' to have "Peak, with 28 vitamins and 28 minerals" and finally, the specific number of vitamins and minerals that make up 28 can be specified to get the third interpretation e.g. "peak, with 18 vitamins and 10 minerals".

It is important to note that some advertisements avoid the kind of ambiguities we have in the last set of ambiguity due to syntactic reorganization. For example, in the advertisement of Close Up Toothpaste, we have the expression "with fluoride and long lasting mouth wash." This could have been ambiguous if it has been written as "with long lasting mouth wash and fluoride" because the pre-modifier 'long lasting' can modify both "mouth wash" and "fluoride" hence, one may feel the meaning conveyed is that both fluoride and mouth wash are long lasting.

## **Conclusion**

Ambiguities of advertisements, therefore, may be as a result of the use of words with similar or the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings especially in oral advertisements. It may be as a result of the use of lexically ambiguous words with more than one meaning or due to structural construction which makes the expression to have more than one interpretation. When any of these happens the advertisement in question may be void of a fundamental characteristic of good communication which is semantic clarity. A good example is where the meanings of an ambiguous advertisement are diametrically different as in an advertised requesting the service of "an old computer repairer" which can mean "one who can repair an old computer" or "a computer repairer who is old or aged". The aim of advertisement may be defeated if the first meaning is the intended but young computer repairers fail to respond feeling the second meaning is the intended. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of the dual or multiple interpretations of an advertisement favouring the advertisement product or service especially where the possible meanings still say good things about the advertised product or service thereby reaching out to a variety of audience. A good example is the advertisement of Seaman's Schnapps whose two meanings "the prayer drink that is original" and "the drink meant for original or real prayer" are good attributes of the same product.

## **Recommendations**

Advertisers of products and services should always endeavour to subject the expressions used in the advertisement of their products or services to semantic examinations before such advertisements are publicizing. Such semantic examinations should be done by language experts employed as copy writers in the advertising departments of the organizations that want to advertise or those in the advertising agencies handling the advertisement of such organizations. Language experts outside the organizations that intend to advertise or the advertising agencies can still be consulted to embark on the semantic examinations of selected advertisement slogans or expressions. By so doing, lexico-semantic and syntactico-semantic problems identified by the language experts will be solved, ambiguities that can negatively affect the products or services to be advertised will be disambiguated and the best advice on choice of advertisement slogans or expressions, where there are alternatives, will be given. Where the dual or multiple interpretations of the expressions of a proposed advertisement will not be to the disadvantage of the advertisers but in the favour of the products or services, language experts will tell. This way, advertisements will communicate exactly the advertiser's intended meaning(s) and will ultimately arouse the interest of prospective customers.

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