CAUSES AND VARIOUS FORMS OF AMBIGUITY IN THE STUDY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Oluga, writing on “Consequences of Ambiguity in Human Communication” observed that ambiguity usually poses some problems in linguistic studies in that structural analysis are usually done for the various possible semantic interpretation of given ambiguous expressions. This is because the various possible meaning are usually treated as if they are different expressions in order to properly account for constituent structures of the possible meanings. He maintained that apart from the effect of ambiguity on various forms of continuous writing and literary or creative writing which may be positive or negative. He reiterates that as far as all forms of expository or continuous writing are concerned, clarity has to do with dissemination of comprehensible or unequivocal information is an inexcusable quality. Ambiguity in communication prevents clarity of ideas in that it makes expressions to confuse readers by communicating both intended and unintended meanings at the same time. Ambiguity therefore impedes clarity of ideas which is a fundamental principle in communication. Ambiguity can negatively affect the response or the message communicated or received. This is usually the case where the receiver or reader decides to take for granted one of the meanings of the ambiguous expression communicated. He proffers various ways a writer can resolve ambiguity in human communications. He agrees with all the other writers that one can use context to ensure clarity. So, ambiguity of semantically complex structure, in written communication can be resolved by specifying the intended constituent’s structure of such a sentence or expression, thereby preventing misinterpretation. However, to achieve the aim of this work, the writer arranged the paper by presenting to the readers with the topic: “Causes and Various Forms of Ambiguity in the study of the English Language. He highlighted the topic with the subheadings thus: Causes of Ambiguity and Forms or types of Ambiguity.
It is a universally recognized and demonstratable fact that many of the acceptable utterances of English and other languages are ambiguous. They can be interpreted in two or more different forms (Lyons 1978).

This study therefore aims at discussing the causes and various forms of ambiguity in the study of the English Language. So, ambiguity having more than one meaning, may be as a result of syntax or semantics. There are other forms or types of ambiguity such as:

1. Lexical Ambiguity
2. Structural Ambiguity
3. Syntactic Ambiguity
4. Semantic Ambiguity
5. Grammatical Ambiguity
6. Phonological Ambiguity
7. Pragmatic Ambiguity

Ullman (1962) identifies three main forms of ambiguity. According to him, they are Phonetic, Grammatical and Lexical ambiguities. Ambiguity may result in speech from the phonetic structure of the sentence since the acoustic unit of connected speech is the breath group, it may happen that two breath groups made up of different words become homonymous and so ambiguity occurs. If this occurs often enough, it may live a permanent mark on the language. Many grammatical forms, free as well as bound, are ambiguous. Some prefixes and suffixes have more than one meaning, for example, the suffix “able” does not mean the same in desirable or readable as it does in eatable, knowable, debatable. There are also homonymous prefixes and suffixes.

The prefix “in” meaning “into” “towards” “upon” for example indent, inborn, inflame, has a homonym in the prefix in: – expressing negation or privation for example inappropriate, inexperienced, inconclusive). ‘In’ flexional endings can be ambiguous. Ullman considers the most important type of ambiguity as the one that occurs due to lexical factors. Ambiguity occurs when the same word may have two or more different meanings – This situation is known as polysemy. For instance, the noun “board” may mean a thick plank, a table, food served at the table, persons sitting at the council table and various other things.

Two or more different words may sound identical. These are called homonyms, though some may be spelt differently. For instance- (waist – waste, court – caught). Both polysemy and homonyms may be accompanied by syntactical differences when a word belongs to several parts of speech, for instance “double” which can be an adjective, an adverb, a verb and a noun. These uses will differ not only in meaning but in grammatical functions. Homonyms also may come from different word classes, for example, rebel (adjective), rebel (noun); import (noun), import (verb); Conduct (noun), Conduct (verb)
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However, the writer of this paper aims at discussing causes and various forms of Ambiguity in the study of the English Language. He expresses the study under two main subheadings thus:
Causes of Ambiguity and Forms or Types of Ambiguity.

Causes of Ambiguity:
Some linguists and communication experts in their contribution to the study of ambiguity have identified causes of ambiguity.

Cann (1994): states that ‘ambiguity can arise through (1) the ascription of multiple meanings to single words’. For instance "the mean's punch was impressive". Ambiguity occurs because the word "punch" may be interpreted as a drink or as an action. (2) Lexemes whose word forms have this property are called homonyms and can be subdivided into homophones where the forms of the lexemes sound the same but may be written differently. For example "draft and draught" which can be represented phonemically as /draːft/ and homographs for instance "minute" which are written the same way but pronounced differently. (3) Ambiguity can also arise through the assignment of different syntactic structures to a sentence. For example: ‘The strike was called by radical lecturers and students’. In this sentence, the ambiguity results from the possibility of assigning two or more syntactic structures to a single grammatical string of words. It becomes necessary to know whether the adjective "radical" modifies the nominal phrase "lecturers and students", in which case both the student who called the strike are said to be radical but the political attitude of the students who did so is not specified. The major issue here is, the scope of the adjective, ‘radical’. Scope is a primary source of ambiguity which involves not only adjectives but also conjunctions, like ‘and’, ‘or’ and quantifiers like ‘every’, ‘all’ and ‘some’. Apart from lexical ambiguity, there is structural ambiguity. This has its source in the syntax of a language. There are other ambiguities that involve negation (not), quantification (every, some) and other elements like ‘sense’, which do not vary their syntactic position according to the reading of the sentence.

Kaiz (1966 pp. 158-9) states that; Semantic ambiguity, as distinct from syntactic ambiguity and phonological ambiguity, has its source in the homonym of words. Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a sentence has more than one underlying structure. Phonological ambiguity occurs when surface structures of different sentences are given the same phonological interpretation. Semantic ambiguity, on the other hand, occurs when an underlying structure contains an ambiguous word or words that contribute to or their multiple senses to the meaning of the whole sentence to be used to make more than one statement, request, query etc.

Pink Thomas (1970) emphasizes that; A sentence can be ambiguous through bad arrangement of words and clauses, that is a violation of the rule of proximity. For example; “this lift must only be used by the staff”. The vague use of pronouns-this occurs particularly in reported speech. For example; ‘he told his younger brother
that he could not sleep because he was too busy at night’. Ambiguity arises because we do not know if "he" refers to "the speaker" or to his "younger brother". The omission of necessary words and "insertion" of articles to certain sentences. For example: ‘The qualification for a teacher and lecturer are not the same’. The article "a" should be inserted before "lecturer" to show that two distinct persons are referred to.

Akwanya (1976 P.78) agreeing with others, states that some lexical items play a pivotal role in the interpretation of a sentence and that the sentence may be subject to more interpretation if the item is not sufficiently specified in the context. For instance the item "run" in the following sentence plays such a central role. ‘Obiageli is running the race’. "Run" here may be interpreted to mean (1) contending in a race (2) organizing a race.

Fowler, H.W. (1974) apart from agreeing that the use of a word with two meanings in a context makes for absurdity or uncertainty also lists other common causes of ambiguity as: the use of pronouns in such a way that the reader cannot be sure of their antecedents. For example:
1. ‘In the December previous to his raid on the Tower he was chief of a gang who overpowering his attendants seized Mayor of Abuja in Yakubu Street when returning from a dinner party’. (His refers not to the preceding he, but to the Mayor)
2. ‘If the baby does not feed on fresh milk, boil it’.
3. ‘John told Derek that he has passed the examinations’.

In the last sentence does "he" in the sentence mean John or Derek, does "it" in sentence (2) refer to the milk or the baby. It cannot be assumed that readers will always associate a pronoun with the last noun but one can think of the baby as the antecedent of it.

Another cause of ambiguity is uncertainty ‘whether’ ‘shall’ or ‘will’, ‘should’ or ‘would’ is used as a simple auxiliary or as implying volition or obligation. Example: ‘It is of interest to note that even as a tiro in politics’, he should have taken his own line, failure to make clear the field of operation of a word or phrase for example; He needs more suitable compassions, or a participle – ‘His dog might sometimes come to resemble the frightened and exhausted rabbit who in the end walks towards the stoat seeking to devour him or a relative’.

Other subordinate clause, for example: ‘I accused him of having violated the principles of concentration of force which had resulted in her present failures’. Are so, a negative in a sentence can cause ambiguity. For example, ‘the hat was not sent because of information received’. The word "because" showing a negative clause is often a cause of ambiguity. Does "because" in the subordinate disclaim the reason why a thing was done or does it give a reason why a thing was not done.

Furthermore, the placing of the word "even" wrongly can cause ambiguity. It will be seen in position of adverbs that their placing is a matter partly of idiom and partly of sense. “Even” is one of those words whose placing is important to the sense.
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For example:
1. ‘Even I did not see him on Monday’. This implies that I was more likely to see him than anyone else was.
2. ‘I did not even see him on Monday’ implies that I had expected not only to see him but also to speak to him.
3. ‘I did not see him even on Monday’ implies that he was the person expected to see.
4. ‘I did not see him even on Monday’ implies that ‘Monday was the day on which I expected to see him’.

The indiscriminate placing of adverbs can cause ambiguity. There is an important difference between these two sentences:
1. ‘He did not win luckily’.
2. He did not win, luckily.
Doubt avoided by re-arranging the order of the second sentences as luckily, he did not win.
All adverbs need not be placed where there can be doubt what word they are modifying but some adverbs like ‘hardly’, ‘scarcely’, ‘almost’, ‘even’, and ‘only’, need special care.
In some sentences ambiguity occurs because of faulty punctuation. It may be because a comma has been omitted or wrongly introduced. Example: ‘I am speaking to you Ugo’. There should be a comma after you so the sentence should be I am speaking to you, Ugo. Consider the following: ‘She likes coffee and rolls in bed’. If comma is introduced after coffee the sentence will have quite a different meaning.

Omission of Vital Punctuations:
This is a major factor responsible for ambiguity in human communication. This is because proper use of punctuation marks in most cases usually aids the communication or comprehension of writer’s intended meaning. Hence, the omission of vital punctuations may not clarify intended meaning and thereby subject communicator’s expressions or ideas to double or multiple semantic interpretation.
Example: ‘If you need a good car at the end of the month, bring your money’. This sentence is capable of dual or double semantic interpretation because it is not properly punctuated to indicate the intended meaning by putting a comma at the appropriate place.

Use of Double or Multiple Referent Pronouns:
This arises when a communicator uses a pronoun that can go with two or more nouns mentioned in a given expression i.e. where the pronoun has double or multiple nominal referents. Cook and Ayodele also identified the role of this key factor in semantic multiplicity.

Multiple Class Membership of some Verbs
According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartik (1981) say that this is possible because some verbs can belong in some ways to different classes of verbs and
thereby function grammatically in different ways. The problem in this kind of situation is that such multiple class membership can subject the various functional possibilities of the verbs to different semantic interpretations.

Example: ‘She found him a reliable partner’. The verb found can be mono transitively used. When used mono-transitively we will have the SVOC sentence structure with the meaning she discovered or realized that he was a reliable partner. When used di-transitively we will have [the SVOO sentence structure with the sentence meaning - she got a reliable partner for him.]

Another factor recognized by Arisop is peculiar to pre-modifying adjectives that usually have unique reference and cannot be further limited or restricted by such pre-modifying adjectives.

Double or multiple semantic interpretations can be possible with the use of such pre-modifying non-restrictive adjective because they are not usually marked either by punctuation in written communication or by intonation in spoken or oral verbal communication. A good expression that can illustrate this kind of ambiguity is - The patriotic British citizens respect their unwritten constitution a lot. This can mean ‘All the British citizens are patriotic and they respect their unwritten constitution’. Or only the patriotic British citizens (not all citizens) ‘respect their unwritten constitution a lot.

Hyphens can also cause ambiguity. The primary function of the hyphen is to indicate that two or more words are to be read together as a single word with its own meaning. It is always used in such phrasal compounds as stick-in-the-mud, ne'er-do-well, and sister-in-law. Some words can be left also without hyphens for instance ‘post office’, ‘motor car’ but some cannot like ‘cross-word’ (puzzle) ‘black-cap’ (the bird). The problem is, when a compound word is hyphenated and when is it not. This accounts for the ambiguity by hyphens. Other examples are ‘loophole’, ‘public house; and ‘cocktail’. Some people place a hyphen between the word cocktail. Another problem is, whether there is any need for the hyphens often used in compound designation of rank or office such as ‘Attorney General’, ‘Vice Admiral’, ‘Lord Lieutant’, etc. We discover that it is not easy to find a uniform principle underlying such decision that, we must hyphenate. There exists a linguistic gap. ‘Field-officer’ is hyphenated but not ‘field Marshal’, ‘Quartermaster-General’ but we do not hyphenate ‘Attorney General’. We have ‘Commander-in-Chief’ but not ‘Secretary of State’. Some authoritative works of reference may say that we must hyphenate Field Marshal but not Field-Officer. Another cause of ambiguity is the use of dangling modifiers. Dangling modifiers are phrases that do not clearly and logically refer to a noun or pronoun. They usually appear at the beginning of a sentence. Example: ‘While eating lunch in the cafeteria, the computer malfunctioned’.

The sentence does not say who was eating lunch and suggests that the computer was.

Sometimes they appear at the end of a sentence.
Example: ‘Riding bicycle can be dangerous when inexperienced’.

The sentence does not say who is inexperienced. To know whether a phrase is a dangling modifier, one should check if the subject of the independent clause is the noun or noun phrase-acting as the modifier. If not, the modifier is dangling. Example: ‘After finishing the research, the paper was easy to write’. The subject of the independent clause is paper, but paper did not finish the research, so the modifier is dangling and the sentence needs to be recast. To revise a dangling modifier, one may change the subject of the independent clause. The sentence should read:

‘After finishing the research, I discovered that the paper was easy to write’. One can also change the phrase into a clause with an explicit subject. Example: Hating the idea of hotdog, the recipe was unacceptable to her. Because she hated the very idea of hotdog, the recipe was unacceptable to her. Ogbulogo (1976) writing on Fallacies Related to Meaning in Language Use noted that one of the fallacies of misuses or misunderstanding of language is equivocation. Equivocation can also be referred to as double speak. Equivocal language or equivocation is usually applied when a writer has not passed across the subjects of two or more interpretations, rather, writers make use of such language with the intention to device, mislead or confuse the reader.

When ambiguity occurs in a sentence, a lot of linguistic problems are created. First meanings are impaired, communication marred and confusion is created. The meaning is affected when the writer means one thing and the reader understands it differently because of other possible interpretations and once this happens, the communication between the writer and the audience is badly affected.

This study will however discuss only three types of ambiguity.
1. Lexical ambiguity
2. Structural ambiguity
3. Syntactic ambiguity

**Lexical Ambiguity**

It has been established that 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 referred to as lexical ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity arises when context is insufficient to determine the sense of a single word that has more than one meaning. For example the word "court" has several meaning. It can be understood to mean an open level area marked with lines upon which tennis-or handball etc is played. It can mean the building, hall Jr or room in which cases are heard. It can also mean the regular session of a judicial assembly or a man who pays attention to a lady he wants to marry etc. The word "good" for example can mean "useful" or "functional" in ‘she is a good student’. It may mean "moral" - He is a good person. It can also mean "pleasing" – ‘This is good soup’. So a sentence like - "I have a good daughter" is not clear about which sense is intended.
Clare (1996 P. 11); Opines thus: Lexical ambiguity can be found everywhere; in fact, almost every word has more than one meaning. 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.

Fromkin (2003, p.122) states that: Lexical ambiguity arises when at least one word in a phrase has more than one meaning. For instance "This will make you smart." It is ambiguous because of the two meanings of the word smart "clever or burning sensation".

Lexical words are far more useful to the writer than grammatical words such as determiners. This occasionally leads to lexical ambiguity as many lexical words depend on grammatical words to establish which word class they belong to.

Consider the following newspaper headlines
1. British left waffles on Falkland Islands
2. Lung cancer in women Mushrooms
3. Red tape Holds Up New Bridge
4. Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jay Walkers
5. Kids make Nutritious Snacks

The reader is floundering as the meaning is almost irrevocably ambiguous until the accompanying article is read. The first two headlines are difficult to interpret because the word class of "left" and "mushrooms" is not clear and the context leads the reader towards the wrong choice. The reader is likely to make the obvious interpretation of "British left" as subject + verb in a sentence. However it is intended as a noun phrase. The word "mushroom" is frequently used as a noun. This leads the reader to see "women mushrooms" as a noun phrase but "mushrooms" is being used as a verb giving the structure. So the sentence can be analyzed as Lung Cancer in women (S) mushrooms (V).

In headlines 3 and 4 the ambiguity is caused by the different possible meanings of the phrases - "hold up and run down". In sentence 5 the ambiguity occurs because of the different but closely linked meanings of "make". In sentence 6, it is impossible to tell if "dog bite victim" is a noun phrase. In the headline, it looks more like a noun followed by a verb and direct object.

According to Lobner,(2002) ‘the two common phenomena that characterize lexical ambiguity are the homonymy and polysemyn;.

**Homonym**

Homonym is a group of words that share the same spelling and the same pronunciation but have different meanings. The state of being a homonym is called homonymy. Homonyms are different words with the same form. Most dictionaries
distinguish homonyms by assigning distinctive numbers or letters to them and giving them separate entries.

For example: bank₁ - means "financial institution" and Bank₂ - means "sloping side of a river"

The fact that the word has been classified as separate words and given separate entries whether or not they are furnished with distinctive letters show that the word “bank” is a homonym.

Words are recognized as homonyms if they differ etymologically and are semantically unrelated, which means that the words do not have any connection as to their meanings. Take a word like; sole (1) and sole (2) – Sole 1 means "bottom of foot or shoe" while sole 2 means a kind of fish, so "sole" is a homonymous word.

Homonyms can be referred to as different lexemes with the same form. Hirst (1992) establishes what he referred to as absolute homonymy. According to him: Absolute homonyms must satisfy the following three conditions:

i. They will be unrelated in meaning

ii. All their forms will be identical;

iii. The identical forms will be grammatical equivalent.

Absolute homonym is common - example : ‘bank’, ‘court’, ‘sole’, ‘bat’, etc. Examples of pairs of homonyms are ‘stalk’ (part of a plant) and ‘stalk’ (follow/harass a person), ‘left’ (opposite of right) and ‘left’ (past tense of leave). The sentence "She cannot bear children." May be understood to mean "she is unable to give birth to children." Or "she cannot tolerate children." The ambiguity occurs because there are two words "bear" with two different meanings. Both words as used in the sentences are verbs. There is another homonym, ‘bear’, the animal, which is a noun with very different semantic properties. The fact that, two words with different meanings may sound the same makes such words good candidates for humour, as well as for confusion.

Consider this passage from Fromkin and Rodman (2003); "How is bread made?"

I know that" Alice cried eagerly. "You take some flour-
"Where do you pick the flower?" The White Queen asked. "In a garden, or in the hedges?"

"Well, it isn't picked at all, it's ground-" "How many acres of ground?" said the White Queen.
The humour of this passage is based on two sets of homonyms: flower and flour and the two meanings of ground. Alice means ground as the past tense of grind, while the white Queen is interpreting ground to mean earth.

Some other sentences may be ambiguous because of the particular semantic properties which belong to some of the words of the sentence. For example, ‘The girl found a book on Nnamdi Azikiwe Avenue’. The sentence can mean either: "The girl found a book which was lying on Nnamdi Azikiwe Street." Or "The girl found a book while she was passing through Nnamdi Azikiwe Street."

The ambiguity is caused by the particular semantic properties of the words ‘book’, ‘on’, ‘street’. The meaning of book includes something which contains written information. ‘On’ is a homonym meaning on the surface of or about that is on the subject of. ‘Street’ has surface on which things may be located among its semantic properties. There are also many different kinds of what Hirst(1992) referred to as partial homonymy. These are the cases where (a) there is identity of one form and (b) one or two but not all three of the above conditions in Hirst (1992)’s absolute homonymy.

Example: the verbs - "find" and "found" - share the form found but not - finds, finding or founds, etc. So found as a form of "find" is not grammatically equivalent to found as a form of "found".

Consider the word "rung" in the following sentences
1. A rung of the ladder was broken.
2. The bell was rung at midnight.

The noun "rung" and verb "ring" are partial homonyms.

There are several linguistic concepts which are related to homonymy. These include HOMOGRAPHS - These are words that share the same spelling, regardless of how they are pronounced. If pronounced the same they can be referred to as homophones for example ‘bark’ (the sound of a dog) and ‘bark’ (the skin of a tree). Homonyms can lead to communicative conflicts.

Polysemy

Polysemes are words with the same spelling and distinct but related meanings. It is a word or phrase with multiple, related meaning. A word is judged to be polysemous if it has two senses of the word whose meanings are related. According to Hirst (1992 p. 5); Polysemous words are those 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 meaning with no relationship to another. Polysemy is a property of a single lexeme.

According to Cann, (1994 p.8) "a polysemous lexeme is one that is interpreted with multiple senses that are not entirely distinct"
Consider the word "mouth" - this has different interpretations depending on what sort of entity is described as having a MOUTH. There are for example - human mouths, mouths of caves, bottles, rivers, etc.

According to Agbedo (2010) polysemy refers to a set of different meanings associated with a word. When a word has a range of different meanings it is referred to as "polysemy". Polysemy (or multiple meaning) is a property of single lexemes; and this is what differentiates it, in principle, from homonymy. (Lyons 1978 p.146). For example: "club" and "clubs" meaning - "a group of people who meets regularly" and "a heavy stick with one end thicker than the other that is used as a weapon" are normally regarded as homonyms, while the noun - "neck" is treated as a single lexeme in standard dictionaries as a single lexeme with several distinguishable meanings - as being polysemous. Neck can refer to (a) Part of the body (b) part of skirt or other garment (c) part of a bottle (d) narrow strip of land, etc. All standard dictionaries reveal that most are polysemous.

Lobner (2002 p. 44), maintains that; "a lexeme constitutes a case of polysemy if it has two or more interrelated meanings or better, meaning variants". Each of these meaning variants has to be understood. The phenomenon of polysemy is independent of homonymy: of two homonyms - each can be polysemous. Consider the word ‘light’ and ‘light’ A₁ when considered as a noun can refer to a certain sort of visible radiation, electric lamp, traffic light etc. These meanings are interrelated. A₂ when considered as an adjective becomes polysemous as can refer to - a light meal, light rain or light load. In principle, polysemy is a matter of single lexemes in single languages. Many colour adjectives in English are polysemous not because they relate primarily to colour properties but with meaning variants. For instance, green means- "unripe". This is motivated by the fact that the green colour of many fruits indicate that they are not yet ripe.

One group of polysemes are those in which a word means an activity, perhaps derived from a verb ‘acquire’ the meanings of those engaged in the activity or perhaps the results of the activity or the time or place in which the activity occurs or has occurred. Relatedness of meaning accompanying identical form is technically known as polysemy which can be defined as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings which are related by extension. (Yule 2007)

According to Fromkin (2003, p.591), polysemy describes a single word with several closely related but slightly different meanings - examples: ‘face’ can mean the "face of a person", "face of a clock" or "face of a building". A polysemous word may share its meaning with another word, example ‘mature’ and ‘ripe’ are polysemous words that are synonymous when applied to fruit but not when applied to (smelly) animals. Polysemy contributes not only to ambiguity but also to vagueness. Colour terms like red have a vague meaning because we conceive the range of colours as a continuum with fuzzy transitions. All gradable adjectives are vague.
According to Yadugiri (2008): Different suggestions have been made as to the criteria that could be used to decide which are instances of polysemy and which, of homonymy. One is the etymology or history of words which will show whether a pair of words was originally distinct or not, if distinct then it is a homonymy, if not it is a polysemy.

Another criterion is the closeness of the meaning; if the different meanings are close then we consider the word as a polysemy. One thing is that there is a traditional distinction made in lexicology between homonymy and polysemy. Both deal with multiple senses of the same phonological word, but polysemy is invoked if the senses are judged to be related. Polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry in dictionaries while homonymous senses are given separate entries. Lexicographers use the criteria of "relatedness" to identify polysemy. These criteria include speakers' intuitions and what is known about historical development of the items.

**Structural Ambiguity**

Structured in a sentence thus making two possible meanings to emerge. Structural ambiguity therefore occurs when a sentence has more than one meaning based on the arrangement of the structures. Consider the following sentence:

‘The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive soon’.

This sentence is ambiguous because one can derive more than one meaning from it is either about one person (the mother) or about two people (the mother in addition to the girl).

The ambiguity is not in the words mother, boy or girl as in a sentence like "I got a mouse today". There is an ambiguity in the word "mouse" because mouse may mean "small rodent or a pointing device that is used to move the cursor on a computer monitor screen". In the above sentence the ambiguity occurs because of the linear order of the words thus amounting to structural ambiguity.

The sentence can be grouped in two different ways:

The mother (of the boy and the girl) will arrive soon.

The (mother of the boy) and the girl will arrive soon.

When "of the boy and the girl" are grouped together as in sentence 1, the sentence is interpreted to mean that only the mother will arrive. When "of the boy" is instead grouped with the mother as in sentence 2, the sentence is interpreted to mean that both the mother of the boy and the girl will arrive. So depending on how the words are structured, one interpretation rather than the other is possible. One string of words may have more than one well-formed set of groupings. Word grouping is therefore a theoretical property we appeal to in order to account for abstract characteristics of sentence such as structural ambiguity.
Structural ambiguity may therefore be a function of the constituent structure. Example: ‘beautiful girl’s dress’- in this construction ambiguity occurs in terms of a difference of the constituent structure. Under one interpretation one has ‘girl’s dress’ which is beautiful - the words girl’s and dress form a constituent. Under the second interpretation - one may have dress of a beautiful and girl that are brought together to form a constituent.

Structural ambiguity, according to Fromkin (2003), states that ‘it is the phenomenon in which the same sequence of words has two or more meaning based on different structure analysis’.

Certain ambiguous sentences have more than one phrase structure tree, each corresponding to a different meaning. This could be represented with the sentence – ‘The boy saw the man with the telescope.’

The first phrase structure tree represent - The boy used a telescope to see the man. The key element is the position of the PP directly under the VP. Though the PP is under VP, it is not selected by the verb because it is not a complement. The tree selects an NP only. In the sentence, the PP has an adverbial function and modifies the verb. In the other meaning: ‘The boy saw a man who had a telescope, the PP - with the telescope’ occurs under the direct object NP, where it modifies the noun man. The complement of the verb see is the entire NP - the man with the telescope.

The PP in the first structure is generated by the rule: VP  V NP PP
In the second structure the PP is generated by the rule: NP  Det N PP
Two interpretations are possible because the rules of syntax permit different structures for the same linear order of words. According to Alice Harris and Campbell Lyle another understanding of structural ambiguity involves necessarily that each of the possible reading is a structure that is otherwise available in the language.

Examples: 1. ‘Visiting relatives can be dangerous’. 
2. ‘Flying planes are dangerous’. In these two sentences there are two possible structures, one corresponding to the meaning - "relatives who visit..." and the other "to visit relatives...". In the second sentence – ‘planes that fly are dangerous’ and .... ‘to fly planes is dangerous’. Each of the readings has different underlying structures as against a structure like:

1. ‘Singing children are happy’.
2. ‘Crying babies are difficult to handle’.

To disambiguate sentences Vennemann quoted in Harris Alice suggests that a change to SVO order should be used to distinguish subject from object as an alternative means of distinguishing the essential grammatical relations. According to Yule (2007), ‘structural ambiguity occurs when a sentence has two underlying interpretations which would be represented differently in the deep structure’.

Example: Annie hit a man with an umbrella. Two different concepts can be derived:
1. Annie had an umbrella and she hit a man with it.
2. ‘Annie hit a man who was carrying an umbrella’.

Consider the following sentences:
‘I always buy my newspaper at the shop next to the police station in which cards, magazines and fancy goods are displayed’.

- The girl was followed by a small boy wearing jeans.
- Next came a mother with a very small baby who was pushing a pram.
- A soldier was dancing with a wooden leg.

In each of these sentences, the construction at the end of the sentence has been separated from the noun to which it belongs. This sentence would need to be formulated with the noun immediately followed or post modifying the noun.

Example: 1. The girl wearing jeans was followed by a small boy.
2. Next came a mother who was pushing a pram with a very small baby.
3. A soldier with a wooden leg was dancing.

Structural ambiguity results from the possibility of assigning two or more syntactic structures to a single grammatical string of words.

Example: The strike was called by radicals lecturers and students. To ascertain the meaning of the above sentence, it is necessary-to know whether the adjective "radical" modifies the nominal phrase - "lecturers and students" in which case both the lecturers and students who called the strike are all radical or whether it modifies just the noun...
lecturers, in which case the lecturers who called the strike are said to be radical but the
political attitude of the students who did so is not specified.
The sentence can read:
a. The strike was called by lecturers who are radical and by the students.

OR

b. The strike was called by the lecturers who are radical and by the students who
are radical.
The issue here is the scope of the adjective - radical. In sentence (a) it modifies and
thus has scope over the noun lecturers while in sentence (b) its scope is the nominal
phrase - lecturers and students.
Syntactic knowledge goes beyond being able to decide which strings are grammatical
and which are not. It accounts for the multiple meanings or ambiguity which can create
humour for the writer. Consider this sentence.
‘The man wanted to see the synthetic buffalo hides’.
The humour depends on the ambiguity of the phrase "synthetic buffalo hides"
which can mean "buffalo hides that are synthetic"
Or
"hides of synthetic buffalo".
This example illustrates that within a phrase, certain words are grouped together.
Sentences have hierarchical structure as well as word order. The words in the phrase
"synthetic buffalo hides can be grouped in two ways".
(1) Synthetic (buffalo hides)
(2) (synthetic buffalo) hide
The rules of syntax allow both groupings and so the expression is ambiguous.

Many sentences exhibit such ambiguities, often leading to humorous results.
Scope is an important concept in semantics and a primary source of structural
ambiguity which involves not only adjectives but also conjunctions like: ‘and’, ‘or’ and
quantifiers like ‘every’, ‘all’ and ‘some’.

Structural ambiguity like this has its source in the syntax of a language but
there are other scope ambiguities that do not directly depend on the syntactic structure of a
sentence. Such ones involve negation (not) and other elements like tense which do not
vary their syntactic position according to the reading of the sentence.

There are many classes of structurally ambiguous sentences. The first class of
structural ambiguity is that of attachment ambiguity. This is where there is more than
one node to which a particular syntactic constituent is legally attached. Attachment
problems are mostly problems of modifier placement. The most common example is that of a prepositional phrase that may either modify a verb or an immediately preceding phrase.

Example:
1. ‘Gozie wanted to address the man with one hand’. In the sentence, the final prepositional phrase is attached to the Noun phrase "the man" as a modifier. It is the man who has one hand. The preposition "with" shows an attribute of the man.
2. ‘Emodi wanted to wash the dog with dove brand pet shampoo’. In this sentence, the dog does not have the shampoo, rather, ‘with’ is a case flag marking the shampoo as the instrument of the washing action.
Causes and Various Forms of Ambiguity in the Study of the English Language

Other occasions on which attachment ambiguities may occur are:
1. A prepositional phrase may have more than one noun phrase attached it to (as well as, possibly a verb). Example: The door near the stairs with the "members only" sign had tempted Michael from the moment he first entered the club.
   The sign could be on the door or on the stairs.
2. Relative clauses having similar attachment ambiguities.
   Example: The door near the stairs that had the "members only" sign had tempted Michael from the moment he entered the club.
   Again, there are two possible locations for the sign.
3. When a prepositional phrase is attached to an adjectival phrase.
   Example: He seemed nice to her
   This can be phrased to have (1) He seemed to act nicely towards her (attachment to the adjectival phrase) or (2) He seemed to her to be nice . (attachment to the verb).
4. When a sentence contains a sub-sentence, both may contain places for the attachment of a prepositional phrase or adverb. E.g ‘Obinna said that Grace had taken the cleaning out yesterday’.
   The word 'yesterday' may qualify "the saying action of the matrix sentence or the taking action of the sub-sentence".
5. An attachment ambiguity also occurs when an adverb modifies the sentence verb or the whole sentence.
   Example: Happily, Chioma cleared up the mess Rose had left. The adverb "happily" could be attached to the sentence, meaning that the event was a fortunate occurrence or it could be attached to the VP (Verb Phrase) meaning that Chioma was quite happy to clean up the mess.
6. If an adverbial phrase is placed between two clauses, the adverbial can be attached to either of the verbs.
   Example: The friends you praise sometimes deserve it. Two meanings will emerge: (1) Sometimes the friends you praise deserve it. (2) The friends you sometimes praise deserve it.

Syntactic Ambiguity

The meaning of a sentence is derived in the process of composition and is thereby determined by its lexical components and its syntactic structure. If a sentence contains an ambiguous lexeme the process of composition will yield as many meanings of the sentence as the ambiguous item has. If the sentence contains more than one ambiguous lexical item the meanings will multiply.
According to Lobner (2002).
Independently of lexical ambiguities, the syntactic structure of a sentence may be ambiguous.
Consider the following examples
1. Chiamaka left the university on the wrong bus.
2. They are cooking apples.
3. The landlord painted all the walls with cracks.
4. Chika baked the cake in the freezer.
5. Shoeshine by escalator.

Syntactic ambiguity occurs due to the word order in the sentences above. In syntactic ambiguity, the grammatical construction of the sentence or phrase brings about the misinterpretation. Most often, we apply knowledge to get the intended meaning. For example in sentence 1 - we do not take "the university on the wrong bus" as a single noun phrase but we apply the knowledge that 'universities do not ride on buses'.

There is a semantic bias to one of the phrases. Bias may also arise from context. Example: In sentence 2 – ‘They are cooking apples’ - depends on whether the sentence answers the question - "what are they doing in the kitchen? Or what kind of apples are those?"

3 creates a lot of confusion. Is it that the walls were painted with crack-line pattern or (b) That cracks were being used to point the walls or (c) That the landlord painted the walls that had cracks on them. Sentence 4 - may mean that the baking of the cake took place in the freezer -which is impossible or (b) that the cake in the freezer was baked in the conventional manner by Chika. The phrase in number 5 - seems to be saying that the escalator shines shoes. But the connotation is that there is a shoe shiner that stays by the escalator.

Syntactic ambiguity arises when a sentence can be structured in more than one way. Frazier and Fodor suggest that to avoid the inherent consequences of misinterpretation one can use common sense to resolve the conflict by choosing the interpretation that is most likely to be true. Hirst (1992) advocates that 'although the sentences may have more than one structure, there is usually a unique preferred parse for a sentence after semantic and discourse context are considered'. Consider this example: Rose was told what to do by the river.

This may mean that Rose heard voices in the running water though the meaning in which Rose received instructions from an unspecified person on the river bank makes more sense. Marcus (qtd in Hirst (1992) argues that in such cases ‘when syntactic and semantic- biases conflict and neither is strong enough to over ride the other, the sentence is judged ill formed’.

Syntactic ambiguity occurs due to the word order in a sentence or the fact that a word could be either a noun or a verb. In syntactic ambiguity, the grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence brings about the misinterpretation - Example: ‘I know a man with a dog who has fleas’. The ambiguity arises, because one does not know whether it is the man or the dog who has fleas. It is the syntax or the meaning of the words that is unclear.
To clarify the meanings of an ambiguous sentence we can gloss the meaning (express it in a different form of words) or use grammatical terminology to explain the functions of the words and the structure of the sentence.

In the sentence:
"Mine Exploded"
The gloss could be either "the object belonging to me exploded" or "the explosive device exploded".

Grammatically one can say that the first meaning has a structure of first person possessive pronoun + verb, while the second meaning is noun + verb. Syntactic ambiguity arises when a sentence can be phrases in more than one way.

Example: "He ate the cookies on the couch." This could mean that he ate those cookies which were on the couch as opposed to those that were on the table or it could mean that he was sitting on the couch when he ate the cookies.

Systematic Ambiguity means that the grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence brings about the misinterpretation - the word order or the fact that a ‘word could be a noun or verb.

**Conclusion**

In communication, there must be the source of the message, the sender, the message, the channel through which the massage would be transmitted and then the receiver.

Communication can be viewed as “What the sender communicates (the information put into the signal, by the sender’s selection among possible alternatives) and the information derived (which may be thought of as the receiver’s selection from the same set of alternatives) assumed to be identical. In practice, this brings about frequent instances of misunderstanding”. (Lyon 33).

However, the ability to detect the causes and forms of ambiguity is crucial in the communicative process and successful communication can depend on both writers “and readers recognizing the same meaning for a potentially ambiguous word.

So, this work carefully explored the causes and various forms of ambiguity in the study of the English language. The writer listed and explained the causes as (1) Omission of vital punctuations (ii) use of double or multiple referent pronouns (iii) multiple class membership of some verbs. He also explained and discoursed only three types of ambiguity such as:-

1. Lexical Ambiguity
2. Structural ambiguity
3. Syntactic ambiguity.
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