

УДК: 81.132 (575.2)(04)

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## LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF AMBIGUITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

*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. I will examine this fact and attempt to show that 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. Ambiguity is found in every aspect of language. a word, term, notation, sign, symbol, phrase, sentence and other form of language used for communication is called ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way. However, ambiguity is context-dependent, i.e. the linguistic item, be it a word, phrase or sentence may be ambiguous in one context and unambiguous in another.*

**Keywords:** structural, lexical and phonological ambiguity, ellipsis.

**Аннотация:** Көп маанилүүлүк лингвистикада маанилүү орунга ээ болсо да, терең изилдөөгө берилбей келет же болбосо бул суроону изилдөө маныздуу. Анткени англис тилинде сүйлөшүүнү көздөгөн адамдар үчүн өтө керек. Бул жазмада көп маанилүүлүктүн татаалдыктары каралат жана маанилүүлүгү көрсөтүлөт. Кандай болсо да, тилдеги так эместиктерди тил илиминде татаал мисал катары жоромолдоого болот. Көп маанилүүлүк тилдин бардык тармактарында кездешет: сөздөр, терминдер, белгилер, сөз айкаштар, сүйлөмдөр жана байланыш үчүн колдонулган тилдин башка түрлөрү. Аны бир эмес, бир нече жолу чечмелеп, чагылдырса болот. Бирок, белгисиздик контекстке көз каранды, б.а. бир сөз, сөз айкашы, сүйлөм болубу тилдик элементтерге кирет.

**Түйүндүү сөздөр:** структуралык, лексикалык жана фонологиялык көп маанилүүлүк, эллипсис.

**Аннотация:** Несмотря на то, что неоднозначность в лингвистике является неотъемлемой частью языка, часто подвергающийся игнорированию или вопросу, которую нужно решить для людей, чтобы те понимали друг друга. Я буду рассматривать этот факт и постараюсь показать, что даже тогда, когда неоднозначность воспринимается как проблема, она остается значимой. В любом случае, языковую неоднозначность можно понимать как иллюстрацию сложности самого языка. Неоднозначность встречается в каждом аспекте языка: в словах, терминах, знаках, символах, фразах, предложениях и в других формах языка, используемых для общения. Многозначность проявляется тогда, когда может быть интерпретирована в более чем одним способом. Тем не менее, неопределенность является контекстно-зависимой, т.е. лингвистическим элементом, будь то слово, фраза или предложение.

**Ключевые слова:** структурная, лексика и фонологическая многозначность, эллипсис

Ambiguity to Crystal (1988; 15) is a reference to a word or sentence which gives more than one meaning and this reference has to do with linguistics. In this regard, several types of ambiguity can be differentiated. Here they are: grammatical (or structural), for example “*new houses and shops*”; where we understand two meanings like both houses and shops are new or {new houses} and shops i.e. only the houses are new. Another major type ambiguity is semantic (or lexical), which maybe viewed in a sentence “*Visiting speakers can be awful*”, where again two meanings are recognized: 1) it is awful to visit speakers 2) The speakers who visits are awful. Besides these two major types of ambiguity, there scope ambiguity,

phonological, punctuation, grouping types. Ambiguity, as we all know, means double or multiple meaning and it is customary to distinguish two kinds- lexical and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity comes into being when two or more of the meanings of a word are applicable in a given situation. I read a vivid example- conversation between two professors. Professor A entered a coffee room and said to B: “*I hear you had a good time with my wife.*” Professor B looked startled and presumably did some high-speed thinking. But Professor A looked friendly, and in a few seconds B relaxed as he realized that A had used *with* to mean “in company with and not “by means of”. This was lexical ambiguity.

The second type of ambiguity is called structural, where stems from some aspect of English grammar, often from the arrangement of words and structures or from the classification of words. According to transformation lists, there two distinct deep structures expressing, on the one hand, the fact that: 1- *Annie had an umbrella and she whacked the man with it and, on the other hand, that: 2- Annie whacked a man and a man happened to be carrying an umbrella* are actually represented in the same surface structure form; notice: 3- *Annie whacked a man with an umbrella*. The last sentence is “syntactically” ambiguous in the sense that it has two different underlying interpretations which would be represented differently in the deep structure, as stated in (1) and (2) above. Even phrases, however can also be structurally ambiguous, as in the expression below: 1- *The hatred of the killers*. Which could mean either: 1) Someone hated the killers or 2) killers hated someone. The case, as such, indicates that “killers” stands in subject-verb relation as well as in object-verb relation, and this accounts for the ambiguity of the superficial structure of (1) above.

Moreover, let us exemplify the case further by illustrative examples like: 1- *a Kyrgyz history teacher*. This, as it appears on the surface, is structurally ambiguous as it admits of the two interpretations: 1) a teacher of Kyrgyz history and 2) a person of Kyrgyz nationality who teaches history. The mentioned above normally confirms to a pattern like: {Determiner+Adjective+Noun+Noun}. In this regard, Stageberg (1981:252) illustrates the case by introducing this example: 4- *a decent college graduates*. Which involves a sort of ambiguity due to the following two interpretations: graduate of a decent college, or a decent graduate of college? The ambiguity of (4) above arises from the fact that the adjective, in this case “decent” may modify either the first noun, i.e “college” or the second i.e noun “graduate”. Here are other more examples show a structural ambiguity: 1- *Flying planes can be dangerous*. 2- *Visiting aunts can be a nuisance*. 3- *The parents of the bride and the groom were waiting*. With regard to the ambiguity of (1) above, we can say that, as such the sentence may be interpreted as: a) for someone to fly planes/a plane can be dangerous. Notice that “flying” is interpreted as a transitive verb with an implicit subject, whereas the second interpretation b) planes, when flying can be dangerous. Exposes the fact “flying” is interpreted as a modifier of the succeeding noun i.e “planes”. The same explications can be made with reference to the ambiguous sentence (2) above. But what about sentence (3) i.e. *parents of the bride and groom were waiting*. The sentence as it stands is ambiguous and its ambiguity arises from the obscure sense which leaves us wondering whether: a) the parents of the bride were waiting. B) The parents of the groom were waiting. c) The parents of the bride were waiting, and so was the groom. d) The parents of the bride and the parents of the groom were waiting. In order to remove the ambiguity, we have to stick to one meaning which is intended in this case only or by picking out the interpretations mentioned above, especially (c) and (d).

Linguistic competence plays a considerable role in making a distinction between any two or more sentences that may be ambiguous. A mature speaker of English knows enough about the structures (1) and (2) to retrieve either or both of the meanings involved. For example: 1- *the chicken is ready to eat*. 2- *I saw her in the street*. Sentence (1) can be associated with: X eats the chicken or the

chicken eats X. Whereas the sentence (2) means either: I saw her when I was in the street or I saw her when she was in the street. The linguist however attempts to find a way of explaining the facts about the speaker – hearer’s linguistic capacities. In this respect Fowler (1977:3) states that the linguist has to account for the structure of English sentences in a way which takes cognizance of speaker’s intuitions of deviance, similarity, distinctness and ambiguity in their experience of English sentences. For instance, no analysis of (1) is adequate unless it assigns two alternative structural descriptions to that sentence in recognition of the fact that speakers attach two different meanings to it. In this case, the grammarian will probably say that “the chicken” is the object of the verb in one interpretation (i.e X eats the chicken), the subject of the sentence in the other (i.e the chicken eats X). Notice that subject and object are descriptive concepts which the linguist proposes as a way of explaining certain structural facts about English. Moreover, the motivation for these concepts comes from the inquiry into what the speaker knows, i.e. the speaker’s perception of “ambiguity”.

From the given “chicken examples” it is clear that the sentence, when uttered, is on the surface and this surface structure may hide the presence of two or more deep structures. Notice that we cannot pronounce (1) below. 1- The chicken is ready to eat. One way to show that the chicken is the object to eat, another way to emphasize that it is the subject. Therefore, the sentence as it appears on the surface is syntactically ambiguous. In (2) below: 2- *I saw her in the street*. “in the street” goes with “I” in one interpretation, and with “her” in another; the two interpretations sound just the same, i.e. one surface structure, but undeniably two meanings. An English sentence is an arrangement of words, not as words but in their capacity as parts of speech. If we do not, as listeners or readers, grasp the identity of those parts of speech, we cannot understand with certainty the message being communicated.

After having discussed the two major types of linguistic ambiguity, there is a turn to the phonological ambiguity: it may very possibly arise on the phonological level, especially due to the misapplication or confusion. Let us consider the following ambiguity-involving cases: stressed-based ambiguity: when we come to pronounce English phrases and sentences, we have to pay special attention to the optimal mode of pronunciation. By this we mean suprasegmentals like stress rhythm and pitch that should be carefully and closely observed in speech. This, however, is a vital importance as the mispronunciation of a certain phrase or sentence leads to the misinterpretation or phonological ambiguity. Example: “*Those hot car deals*”. Here we can recognize the following meanings as well: 1) a small arms factory, 2) an arms factory that is small, 3) a factory for small arms. Another example: “*the basic book service*”. Interpretations: 1) the service for basic books, 2) the book service that is basic. “*A foreign language teacher*”. Interpretations: 1) a teacher of foreign language, 2) a language teacher who is foreign. “*An old car enthusiast*”, interpretations: 1) a car enthusiast who is old or 2) an enthusiast about old car. Moreover, the overlapping of stress patterns may play a part in such ambiguities, for example: 1) *We can make your voice great* Rod Stewart’s, 2) *we can make your voice grate like Rod Stewart’s*. These two sentences sound ambiguous because of the “great” and “grate” on the phonological level. These sentences can be disambiguated as follows: 1) We can make your voice as great as Rod Stewart’s; 2)

We can make your voice grate in the same manner as that of Rod Stewart's. The word "great" was substituted by the equilibrium "as adjective as".

Ambiguity due to Ellipsis: When normal ellipsis has taken place, ambiguity can arise as to whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object, notice: 1- *He loves his dog more than his wife*. This sentence could mean HE either loves the dog more than his wife loves the dog or he loves the dog more than he loves his wife. In this regard, Quirk and Greenbaum (1983:332) explicate the matter saying that "his wife" was replaced by pronoun, formal or fastidious English could disambiguate this example, as we see in: He loves the dog more than she, and He loves the dog more than her.

After exploring different types of ambiguity in English language, it is important to notice that ambiguity is a necessary topic worthy of consideration and detailed exploration. Its importance lies in the fact that: 1- It is a phenomenon that learners of English may very possibly

encounter in the course of their studies. 2- There are quite a number of ambiguities ranging from syntactic through semantic and on to phonological and other types which are touched upon throughout this humble research paper. 3- Vast knowledge of and good command of English syntax and semantics would definitely play an exceptional role in the disambiguation of already ambiguous phrases, utterances and sentences.

*A list of used literature:*

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