



AMBIGUITY/FALLACY

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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity—two kinds-lexical and structural-the statement which contains more than one meaning/several meaning-differs in meaning according to the change of parts of speech/sentence patterns/parsing the sentences which give alternative meanings with an ambiguous choice.

Ambiguity lies in literature- prose, poetry, pun/homonyms of the words, written and spoken languages. Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo Juliet-Shakespeare, Keats-ode on a Grecian Urn, Poetry verse-Robert Frost, The sick Rose-William Blake, Heart of Darkness-Joseph Conrad for moral ambiguity, F.Scott Fitzgerald-Gatsby character for narrative ambiguity 'The Scarlet letter'- the novel-Nathaniel Hawthorne etc. This article discusses the literary term about Ambiguity with some of the interesting factors with solution that confound the easy detection and categorization of apparent ambiguities.

Key-Words: Ambiguity/fallacy, Prepositional phrase, restructured.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word Ambiguity or Fallacy means something which will be understood in more than one way, something uncertain, something unclear. *Ambiguity* or fallacy of *ambiguity* is a *word*, phrase, or statement which contains more than one *meaning*^(1,3,5). Ambiguity causes double meaning or even more meaning. William Empson⁽²⁾ was the first to discover that ambiguity in a work of art can be used as a special poetic device. William Empson⁽²⁾ says that a writer can use ambiguity as a literary device to convey two or more meaning relevantly. Multiple meaning or plurisignation are the alternative terms to ambiguity. The concept of ambiguity is generally contrasted with vagueness. In ambiguity, specific and distinct interpretations are permitted, whereas with information that is vague, it is difficult to form any interpretation at the desired level of specificity. *Ambiguous* words or statements lead to vagueness and confusion, and shape the basis for instances of unintentional humor.

In 2012, cognitive scientists Tom Gibson and Steven Piantadosi⁽⁴⁾ of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology pointed out that '**Ambiguity**' **actually makes language more efficient**. Words with fewer syllables and easier pronunciation can be "reused" avoiding the need for a vast and increasingly complex vocabulary.

"The surprising benefits of ambiguous language should be as clear and precise as possible? You might think so, but it seems that vague words and mixed messages might help you communicate better". "But a growing body of research suggests there is a point. It indicates that ambiguous language is more useful for the way we communicate than it first appears."



II. Ambiguity lies even with the stop (comma):

1. 'Woman without her man is a savage'.

1a. The men wrote: "woman, without her man, is a savage".

1b. The woman wrote: "Woman: without her, man is a savage". -Realdo Colombo-BBC-Future- The above mentioned example is the proof.

Similar example it has been familiar with us.

2. 'Hang him not leave him'.

2a. Hang him, not leave him'.

2b. Hang him not, leave him'.

This is referred in Tamil literature of Silappathikaram. By seeing the Anklet in the hand of Govalan, **the Pandia King** ordered '**Hang him not, leave him**' and bring the Anklet. But the Blacksmith twisted the word by using Ambiguity into "**Hang him, not leave him**" and bring the Anklet. This is the reason, the Govalan was beheaded.

III. Lexical ambiguity

Let's see a typical example here:

E.g. In a coffee room two English- professors meet. Prof. 'A' entered the room and said to Prof. 'B' "**I hear you had a good time with my wife**". Initially, Prof. 'B' looked startled. But 'A' looked friendly. In a few seconds, 'B' relaxed as he realized that 'A' had used 'with' to mean "**in company with**" and not by '**means of**'.

IV. Structural Ambiguity:

1. e.g. "Guevara says many of the things that Mao-Tse-Tung said in much less digestible form"

The structural Ambiguity stems from some aspects of English Grammar; it is an arrangement that causes the double meaning in this sentence.

2. 'We have mimeographed drafts of the guidelines

Here, we have mimeographed can be classified as auxiliary main verb, or as main verb (have="possess")+adjectival participle. Each structure has its own meaning. In English syntax there are many grammatical situations that are potentially ambiguous.

3. 'Patent medicines are sold by frightening people'.

In this sentence, frightening people can be read as a verb noun object (i.e. someone is frightening the people) or as adjectival noun head (i.e., The people are frightening'.)

4. 'If you fall out of that window and break both your legs, don't come running to me' -Taken literally, an illogical sentence.

5. 'Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution'

Groucho Marx makes use of the double meaning word 'Institution' to liken marriage to an asylum.

'Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend, inside it is too hard to read. Groucho Marx is at it once again. The first half of the sentence means, "Other than a dog, a book is a man's best friend", the rest is self explanatory.

6. '**They are** canning peas' (verb compound noun-i.e. peas for canning)

'They are canning peas. (svo pattern)

7. 'Sam stood drinking in the moonlight.'

7a. 'Sam stood **drinking in** the moonlight' (drinking in=absorbing the moonlight).

7b. Tom stood drinking in the moon light. (SVA Pattern)

8. 'The thesis was passed on.'

8a. The committee passed the thesis on. (S+V+A)=verb+prepositional phrase (Active voice) passed on- "decided".

8b. The thesis was passed on. (Passive voice)

9. 'Student hero',

9a. Can mean "student who is a hero"



9b. "The hero of students" Likewise in.

10. 'new patient counselor'

10a. "a counselor of **new patients**"

10b. "a new counselor **of patients**"

11. 'double job pay'

11a. 'this pay for a double job'

11b. 'double pay for a job'.

Now Let us the common example of Ambiguity " I Love My Pet Dog More Than My Wife".

1a. 'I love my pet dog more than my wife'

My wife



Pet dog

The doers are two. The receiver is only one.

Here, 'I' and my wife are doer of the action. Receiver is one (i.e. Pet dog).

1b. 'I love my pet dog more than my wife'.



Pet dog my wife

'I' is the doer of the action. Receivers are two. (Pet dog and my wife)

(In the alternative sentence: the doers of the action are two; the receiver of the action is one.)

Avoiding ambiguity: 'I love my pet dog more than my wife does'.



12. 'dark brown sugar bowl'

12a. 'dark brown, sugar bowl'

12b. 'dark, brown sugar bowl'

13. 'good-sized ladies garment store'

13a. 'good-sized ladies **garment store**'

13b. 'good-sized-ladies-garment-store= (noun Phrase.)

14. 'A good life depends on liver.'

Here, the word '**liver**' has two meanings-1.an organ of a person and2.a living person.

15. 'Tom took off his trousers by the bank.'

The word 'bank' has two meanings: 1.a building, 2.being the edge of a river.

16. 'Foreigners are hunting dogs.'

Here, 'Hunting dogs' are used as an object and the complement. Dogs are being hunted; and another meaning is 'foreigners are being spoken of as dogs'.

17. 'The passer by helps dog bite victim'.

17a. The passer-by eggs/sets the dog to bite someone.

17b. The passer-by helps the dog bite victim who was bitten by the dog.

18. 'Each of us saw her duck'.

18a. The word 'duck' refers to an action of ducking;

18b. 'duck' is used as an object-a bird.

Fallacy : A **fallacy** is the use of invalid or otherwise faulty reasoning for the construction of an argument.

19. 'I saw a dead cow walking'.

To avoid ambiguity of this sentence we can restructure it, as 'I saw a dead cow while I was going on walking'.

20. 'The police shot every thief with guns'.

Restructured:

'The words '**with guns**' can be dropped out to avoid the ambiguity.

21. 'The son saw his father drunk'.

21a. The son saw his father when the later was drunk. (Father is drunk)

22b. The son saw his father when former is drunk. (Son is drunk)

22. 'The pig is ready to eat'.

22a. The animal '**pig**' is ready to eat at the time of eating.

22b. The pig (pork) is cooked well and it is ready to be eaten.

23. 'The angry tailor pressed a suit in his shop and another in the local municipal court'.

The word '**suit**' is used twice with different meanings to create confusion.'Suit'means a set of outer clothing; another meaning is a Law suit.

23. 'Tonight nothing is on T.V'

23a. There are no interesting shows on T.V.to-night.

23b. The person is watching is entitled, "**nothing**"?

Note: There are too many layers of meaning and you can't be sure what is being suggested.

24. 'The injured woman cannot bear children any more'.

The word '**bear**' has two meanings; one is to tolerate; another meaning is 'no more child bearing-(giving birth to another child)

25. 'A soldier with a pike is a rare scene nowadays'.

The word '**pike**' has two meanings: 1.a kind of fish, 2.a weapon.

26. 'The husband was sentenced to death by an honest judge who had killed his wife'.

The ambiguity is with the husband or with the judge; who had killed?



Restructured: The husband, who had killed his wife, was sentenced to death by the honest judge.

27. 'The cat I had really loved milk'.

The ambiguity is 'who liked milk the master or the cat?

Re-structured: 'I had a cat which really loved milk'./ The cat, I had, really loved milk.

28. 'Kids make nutritious snacks'.

28a. Kids eat good food.

28b. Eating kids are nutritional.

29. 'Eye Drops off shelf'.

29a. Eye-Drops off shelf. (Out of stock)

29b. 'Eye drops tears due to eye-sore.

30. 'Queen Mary was having bottom scraped'

Restructured: The boat 'Queen Mary was having scraped.

31. 'The bottom of the Queen Elizabeth is always wet'

Restructured: The bottom of the ship Queen Elizabeth is always wet (As it is on the sea).

32. 'We painted walls with cracks'.

32a. Walls were painted with the help of cracks. (Crazy persons).

32b. Walls were painted with a sudden sharp explosive noise.

32c. The cracks of the walls were alone painted.

33. 'Look at the dog with one eye'

32a. Look at the dog with one eye shut.

32b. Look at the one-eyed dog.

V. Ambiguous choices:

1. "Republicans Grill IRS chief over"-Last e-mails (a head line)

1a. Republicans harshly question the chief about the e-mails.

1b. Republicans cook the chief using e-mail as the fuel.

2. 'I saw a man on a hill with a telescope'.

Alternative meanings:

2a. There is a man on a hill, and I am watching him with my telescope.

2b. There is a man on a hill, who I am seeing, and he has a telescope.

2c. There is a man, and he is on a hill, that also has a telescope on it.

2d. I'm on a hill, and I saw a man using a telescope.

2e. There is a man on a hill, and I'm seeing him with a telescope.

3. 'We saw her duck'.

3a. We looked at a duck that belonged to her.

3b. We looked at her quickly squat down to avoid something.

3c. We use a saw to cut her duck.

4. 'He fed her cat food'.

4a. He fed a woman's cat some food.

4b. He fed a woman some food that was intended for cats.

4c. He somehow encouraged some cat food to eat something.

VI. Resolving the Ambiguity:

Note: It is crucial to get verb less clauses and prepositional phrases in the right place near the words they belong to. Otherwise, even when they don't 'dangle' they risk being ambiguous or misleading.

'Break' Noun and verbal usage creates several different meanings.

Noun: It means interruption, a piece of good luck, a separation, a pause, or a breaking of the bone.



Verb: to terminate, separate, move away, etc.

1. Barbados only just defeated Trinidad, handicapped by a spate of recent injuries.

Was it Barbados or Trinidad that was handicapped?

Handicapped by a spate of recent injuries, Barbados only just defeated Trinidad.

Barbados only just defeated Trinidad, who was handicapped by a spate of recent injuries.

2. I witnessed the girl walk deliberately past the fans shouting abuse.

Who was shouting abuse, the girl or the fans?

Note: To resolve the ambiguity you should either change the word order or add some words to clarify the meaning.

I witnessed the girl walk deliberately past the fans and shout abuse at them.

I witnessed the girl walk deliberately past the fans, who were shouting abuse at her.

3. I saw you using my new binoculars'.

3a. I saw you by using my new binocular.

3b. I saw you while you were using my new binocular.

Note: Now a slightly different problem: Here the ambiguity lies in the word following: Is it a participle?

4. 'The police have been following several new leads'?

Or visit simply a preposition meaning 'after'?

Here are two possible revised versions:

1. Having followed several new leads, the police have made a number of arrests.

2. The police have made a number of arrests after several new leads.

VII. Prepositional Phrases:

Now let's try correcting these examples each containing ambiguously placed **prepositional phrases**.

1. He was forced to abandon his attempt to sail the Atlantic single-handed on Monday.

2. The body of Chopra was cremated yesterday in the compound of the News papers he edited for security reasons.

3. These claims have been dismissed as mere bravado by the police.

In the first example, on Monday is closer to 'sail' than to 'forced', suggests a remarkable sailing speed-crossing the Atlantic in a single day. Presumably what is meant is on Monday 'he' was forced to.

In the second for, security reasons probably goes with 'cremated' and again the prepositional phrase would be better at the beginning.

In the last unless the police are swaggering, the words by the police should appear earlier in the sentence, close to dismissed. These claims have been dismissed by the police as mere bravado.

4. 'A piano is being sold by a lady with curved legs'. Is easily rectified by shifting the last phrase with **curved legs** to a position closer to the noun piano that it relates to.

'A piano with curved legs is being sold by a lady'.

Note: An adjustment may resolve the ambiguity in one direction but not in the other.

5. 'The government ordered an enquiry in to the unrest last year'.

The government last year ordered an enquiry into the unrest.

Note: But if last year relates to unrest, you will have to add an extra word or phrase to solve the ambiguity.

The government ordered an enquiry into the unrest that occurred last year for simply: 'the unrest of last year.'

VIII. Non-parallel constructions:

X-1. She is stubborn, selfish, and has a sharp temper.

- She is stubborn and selfish, and has a sharp temper./
- She is stubborn, selfish and quick tempered.

2. X 'Not only is that a very unfair statement but also quite untrue.



- 'That statement is not only very unfair, but also quite untrue'. /
- Not only is that a very unfair statement, but it is also quite untrue.

Both...and...

3. X.1.The actors were criticized both by their friends and their enemies. /The actors were criticized by both their friends and their enemies.

- The actors were criticized both by their friends and by their enemies.

4.'Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana'.

The first sentence refers to the speed with which time flies. The second sentence underscores how "fruit flies" are attracted to banana.

5."Colourless green ideas sleep furiously".

A sentence constructed by Noam Chomsky in 1957 as an example of a sentence with logical form; but semantics that are illogical.

IX. Homonyms (pun):

'An ambassador is an honest man sent to **lie** abroad for the good of the country'.

The word 'lie' causes ambiguity. It plays with the idea of 'lying abroad', which means living in another country.

The dual nature of meanings creates ambiguity and makes the audience confused.

- Resolving the ambiguity:

'An ambassador, an honest man was sent to live abroad for the good of the country'.

X. Ambiguity in Literature:

'A certain ambiguity of rhythm is one of the beauties of a poem'.

(The anatomy of poetry, Marjorie Bolton, Routledge&Kegan-London1953)

1. 'The sick Rose', a short lyric written by **William Blake**, is full of ambiguities.

"O rose thou art sick

The invisible worm

That lies in the night

In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy,

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy".

Many of the words in the above lines show ambiguity. We cannot say for sure what "crimson bed of joy" means, neither can we be expect about the interpretation of

"dark secret love". The ambiguous nature of such phrases allows readers to explore for deeper meanings of the poem.

Some of those who have analyzed this poem believe that "Has found out of bed, of crimson joy" refers to making love.

2. We find ambiguity in the first line of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

"Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness". The use of word "still" is ambiguous in nature. "Still" here may mean "an unmoving object" or it may be interpreted as "yet unchanged"

Ambiguity in literature serves the purpose of lending a deeper meaning to a literary work. By introducing ambiguity in their works, writers give liberty to the readers to use their imagination to explore meanings. This active participation of the readers involves them in the prose or poetry they read.

3. Poetry verse-Robert Frost.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep

But I have promises to keep



And miles to go before I sleep

And miles to go before I sleep “

The above stanza conveys a similar message in ordinary language without metrical structure.

4. Hamlet-Shakespeare:

The ambiguity of Hamlet;

: To be, or not to be: that is the question

Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous future

Or to take arms against the sea of troubles,

And by supposing end them? To die: to sleep;

No more; and by a sleep to say one end

The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd,"... (3.1)

Hamlet is a morally ambiguous character. He kills to avenge his father's murder. He is good because he wants to protect his mother but he is bad because he is willing to kill whom he must to achieve this end. The ambiguity in Hamlet's character is seen when he is hurt by the death of "Ophelia" which is his personal loss, but he does not appreciate the effect that his actions are going to have on others.

5. William Shakespeare, in his **Romeo-Juliet** by causing the statements made by different characters to have many layers. He shows a clear use of ambiguity when the dying Mercutio says, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man". This pun on the use of grave as serious and grave as being entombed. Within the context of the play such as an ambiguous statement gives rise to confusion and multiple meanings

'Ambiguity lurks in generality and may thus become an instrument of severity'-Flex Frank foster.

Excerpt: Suspicion of the undesirable Gender ambiguity in **Shakespeare's Macbeth**:

"Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing." (V.5.23-28)

6. The great **Gatsby** by **F.Scott Fitzgerald** employs a narrative ambiguity successfully. The writer skillfully narrates with the leading character "Gatsby" ambiguous in the sense that a reader cannot easily determine if 'Gatsby' is genuinely great or evil.

7. **'Heart of Darkness'** by **Joseph Conrad** is an excellent example of moral ambiguity. He has created an ambiguous character 'Kurtz' in his novel.

8. **Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Scarlet letter"** is full of ambiguous developments and actions. We cannot understand the character 'Hester'. He doesn't fully explain what happens to 'Pearl'. The use of ambiguity towards the end of the novel makes it all the more complex.

XI.Conclusion:

Spain (Fabra University in Barcelona) suggests the following:

'Ambiguity is an essential part of how language works'.

'Ambiguity helps for a palatable argument'

'Ambiguity makes language more clear'

'Ambiguity promotes a critical thinking'-UE ambiguities in sentences-English.Com.



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