

The comprehension, use and perception of selected ambiguous English expressions by Polish subjects

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Abstract

The objective of my presentation will be both a theoretical and an empirical elaboration on the notion of ambiguity in English and how this rather intriguing, but on the other hand, misleading aspect of English is used and comprehended by Polish subjects. The subjects will represent different proficiency groups ranging from 1st year to 3rd year English Philology students deriving from different universities. Students will be requested to explain the instances of ambiguity during a test instrument administered to them for the needs of a research study.

Ambiguity as such is divided into lexical ambiguity and syntactic ambiguity. Let us quote some of many selected instances to be given to clarify during the student's test instrument.

Lexical ambiguity:

- the word "bank" has several distinct lexical definitions, including "financial institution" and "edge of a river". Another example is as in "apothecary". One could say "I bought herbs from the apothecary". This could mean one actually spoke to the apothecary (pharmacist) or went to the apothecary (pharmacy).

Syntactic ambiguity:

- "He ate the cookies on the couch", for example, could mean that he ate those cookies that 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.

It is believed that the sufficient number of instances of both kinds of ambiguity perceived appropriately or erroneously by Polish subjects, supported by relevant theoretical assumptions will provoke lots of fruitful scientific discussions concerning this intriguing aspect of a foreign language.

Key words

ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity

1. Introduction

Throughout the years there has been much study concerning linguistic ambiguity, its value and properties. Many scholars took their interest in this subject and therefore there are as many definitions as we can think of and all of them have common features. For instance according to the dictionaries available on the Internet ambiguity is:

1. *the state of being difficult to understand or explain because of involving many different aspects* (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 15.01.2014)
2. *an unclear, indefinite, or equivocal word, expression, meaning, etc.: a contract free of ambiguities; the ambiguities of modern poetry.*(Dictionary.com, 16.02.2014)
3. *the state of being unclear, confusing, or not certain* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 25.03.2014)
4. *(an example of) when something has more than one possible meaning and may therefore cause confusion* (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 18.01.2014).

"Ambiguity is uncertainty among specific alternatives. A word in context can mean more than the isolated word; and can also mean less than the isolated word - more, because in context the word acquires new context and, at the same time, less, because the word is delimited by that context" claims Conway (2002, p. 5).

However, all these explanations provide a rather negative approach to the phenomena of ambiguity whereas in the linguistic field it is perceived not only as unavoidable but also necessary and wanted. As Lyons states "Ambiguity is commonly described by philosophers and linguists as if it were of its nature pathological- something which gets in the way of clarity and precision. This is a highly prejudiced and unbalanced view of the matter. Not only is it frequently, and erroneously, associated with the view that all sentences have precise and determinate meanings; it is based on the equally erroneous assumption that clarity and the avoidance of vagueness and equivocation are always desirable, regardless of genre, style and context".

This statement is similarly considered by William Empson who explores ambiguity in seven different dimensions. He claims that "an ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful". It is comprehensible that ambiguity is valued mostly by linguists as other professions make it simply impossible to contemplate on the possible meanings of utterances. Therefore even in technological applications of linguistics ambiguity seems to be dysfunctional (Gibbon, 2010).

Kaplan also describes this case as follows: "Ambiguity is the common cold of the pathology of language. The logician recognizes the equivocation as a frequent source of fallacious reasoning. The student of propaganda and public opinion sees in ambiguity an enormous obstacle to successful communication. Even the

sciences are not altogether free of verbalistic disputes that turn on confused multiple meaning of key terms”.

This might be the result of the amount of effort for communicating faster than in the past which makes people reluctant to rethink what they want to say or wonder about possible meanings of someone else’s statement. That is also the reason why people are so easily offended these days. Almost any sentence can be ambiguous under sufficient circumstances and it is not difficult to overlook the original thought. Lyons explains:

“From time to time, however, we are made aware of such ambiguities, precisely because our contextual beliefs and assumptions differ from those of our interlocutors. We may then either fail to understand what they are saying, hesitating between alternative interpretations, or misunderstand their utterances by taking them in the wrong sense”.

Luckily there are linguists and grammarians who are willing to study this phenomenon as it is of high interest in the case of meaningfulness and understanding. It is also believed that the most sophisticated quips derive from linguistic ambiguity which is followed by a common belief that the sense of humour is an indicator of one’s intelligence. It comes from understanding the true, often hidden, meaning of many language puns.

Ambiguity can be found on many levels of discourse such as speech and communication, written language (which divides into sentences for grammatical purposes and literature with wider context) and psychological complexity. In the literary sense it has been studied by Empson. He presents this phenomenon in ‘an extended sense’ which includes seven distinctions that are:

1. The aspect is effective in many ways at the same time (a metaphor, a conceit, ambiguity of a rhythm and dramatic irony)
2. Two or more meanings resolved into one (two metaphors, grammatical ambiguity)
3. Ideas combined through context in one word, puns
4. Two or more different meanings in one word signal complexity
5. Ambiguity in writing, ‘a fortunate confusion’
6. Ambiguity in reading (not always intended by author)
7. Indecisiveness (an antagonism in the author’s mind).

Following Empson in his study Gibbon proposes even more intriguing classification of the Empson’s seven types. He assigns them to three major categories which are: beauty, power and understanding. The first two are put in beauty, which ‘is taken to refer to a positive experience shared by poet and

reader'. The three to five points are in the power, which 'is taken to be a form of manipulation of the reader by the poet. The remaining two belong to 'the semantic category of understanding [which] refers to the sharing of meaning by poet or reader, and its antithesis misunderstanding (by either poet or reader or both) relates to the structural linguistic concept of ambiguity as a mishap of language'. "The assignments are tendencies, not hard and fast unique assignments, and are perhaps best thought of as dimensions of effect, or in speech act terms perlocutions, which all ambiguities may possess to a great or lesser degree" (Gibbon, 2010).

Following those quoted scholars we accept that linguistically ambiguous sentence or phrase is not only something uneasy to understand. Moreover, it does not always have to be made unconsciously or by mistake. It may be an utterance that has been intentionally created this way to convey two or more meanings, not so rarely, the humorous or witty one for instance, as J. Lyons illustrates: *"(...)humourists and comedians deliberately set up the context in such a way that their audience will unconsciously assign one interpretation to an utterance-inscription and then, in the so-called punch-line, suddenly reveal to them, more or less indirectly, that they have been led up the garden path."* Lyons thus takes 'a rather hackneyed example' of two sentences:

(1) *Three strong girls went for a tramp,*

Which is followed by a brief pause and continued with

(2) *The tramp died.*

The audience is 'led by the garden path' which in this case would be the sense of 'go for a tramp' as simply 'go for a walk, ride or swim'. In other words 'the garden path' is the immediate, obvious meaning that strikes the listener but surprisingly that appears not to be the right one and the pun is created.

Another thing that has been brought up by Empson is whether all phrases that seem to be, really are ambiguous. Following him on this matter we would have to include as thereof only grammatical structures or words that convey two distinctive meanings at the same time. (Empson, 1930:2). Although these as well are his words: "in a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous".

This issue is also described by Smith: *"Linguists thrive on ambiguity, using it as in the case of 'Flying planes can be dangerous'- as a first indication of hidden structural differences. In contrast, 'When did John decide which car to fix?', illustrates a surprising lack of ambiguity. 'John decided to fix the car on Saturday' is ambiguous: he may have decided on Saturday to fix the car some time or other, or*

he may have decided some time or other to fix the car on Saturday. The corresponding question 'When did John decide to fix the car?' has exactly the same ambiguity". Provided with these examples a reader would probably expect the sentence to acquire the same two meanings, but it does not. It has only one interpretation where 'when' is constructed solely with 'decide', not with 'fix'; that is 'when did he make his decision?'. It may seem difficult but after a careful study of the sentences it clarifies itself. Studying such a broader subject is inevitably time consuming but also rewarding and fascinating. For instance, even the phrase 'colourless green ideas sleep furiously' is ambiguous as it could be given many different meanings such as 'uninspiring ecological proposals generate hot air'. (Gibbon, 2010, p. 34).

Ambiguity is created by several different grammatical processes which hence are distinguished as types of ambiguity. Therefore we have:

- I. Lexical ambiguity
- II. Syntactic ambiguity (class and attachment ambiguity)
- III. Referential ambiguity
- IV. Phonological ambiguity.

It is claimed "*that syntactic ambiguity resolution can be interpreted as a form of lexical ambiguity resolution*" (Bucaria, 2004).

Similarly Trueswell states that: "*the resolution of a traditional syntactic ambiguity, the reduced relative clause ambiguity, depends upon the availability of the competing lexical alternatives of a morphologically ambiguous word*" (1996: 566). But not only is the lexical ambiguity a way of resolving the syntactic one. It will be further analysed in this paper with examples added to best illustrate the phenomenon.

2. Types of ambiguity

This chapter will contain a brief presentation of different types of ambiguity and illustrate them with examples. One type, that is syntactic ambiguity, will be dealt with separately. Its examples of it will also be given and analysed. In the last component there will be a short remark on distinguishing between ambiguity in syntax and semantics.

As it has already been stated above, there are some types of ambiguities that can be distinguished. They are divided into three main types, that are: lexical, phonological and syntactic. Syntactic ambiguity is then further divided into subtypes. The division is based on which part of the discourse causes the ambiguity of meaning.

The first one that will be taken into account is **lexical ambiguity**, which is the easiest to recognise. This kind of ambiguity characterises itself by having more than one meaning within a single word and it “connects to a homonym or a polysemous word presented in isolation” (Bilá, 2009, p. 36). A homonym is a word that can acquire many unrelated meanings for instance *fluke* (a worm) and *fluke* (a stroke of luck) whereas polysemous words share origin for example *mouth* (part of face) and *mouth* (of a river). Both of them can cause ambiguity when used in an encouraging environment of newspaper headlines.

It was also mentioned before that lexical ambiguity has much to do with syntactic one although the previous one does not change part of speech. A fine example of that is the word *bank* which can mean both ‘the financial institution’ and ‘the side of a river’. This phenomenon often appears in headlines as a result of multiple word meanings, which will be discussed on the basis of some instances.

(1) My Security System Caused Great Alarm

In (1) the word *great* can mean both ‘large in amount’, which would make us think of a really loud and serious noise and ‘nice and pleasing’, which is understandable in a way that the alarm was somewhat good and satisfied the owner.

(2) Which Is Greener- Hand Drier or Paper Towels?

Here the headline was located next to a photograph of both objects presented in shades of green, which created the ambiguity. The garden path that the reader is led by is the picture illustrating the literal meaning of the word *green*. The reader is to say then which object has the more natural or lively colour resembling grass. The other meaning of *green*, that is ‘concerned with the protection of the environment’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online, 7.04.2013) conveys the ‘political’ message with which we are to decide whether the first or the latter one is more ecological.

(3) Land Mines

(4) Silver Screen

In (3) the word *mine* is the ambiguous one as it also conveys two different meanings. One of them is ‘a deep hole or holes under the ground where minerals are dug’ which suggests that the digging place is located inland, not for instance in the sea. However, the land could also be the area of concealment of an explosive device, which would change the meaning of *mine* into a ‘bomb’. In (4) similarly to (3) the word *silver* does not change the part of speech. The adjective when understood literally suggests that the screen is either made of silver- the metal or has a ‘shiny greyish-white colour’ (OALD Online, 7.04.2013). In both

cases it covers the appearance matter in contrast to the latter meaning of 'film industry' that introduces us with a whole new understanding of *silver screen*.

(5) The Mark of Mankind

In headline (5) it is again a noun that obtains an ambiguity. *Mark* in (5) could be a 'personal pronoun/a name', a 'grade/standard' and a 'symbol'. The first would mean that a man named Mark is a human being, probably in a way important. The second, on the other hand, gives us the impression that either the mankind is being assessed by someone or it itself grades something else- gives a *mark*. The last and the most probable one is that human race has left some sign or a symbol of itself which could distinguish it from other living species.

(6) Race Against Time

In example (6) there is also lexical ambiguity within the word *race*. The noun can mean 'a competition between people, animals, vehicles, etc. to see which one is the faster or fastest' combined with the understanding that someone lacks time or is running out of it. But *race* can also mean 'one of the main groups that humans can be divided into according to their physical differences, for example the colour of their skin' (OALD Online, 17.05.2013). Based on this definition the headline suggests that some people of similar origin are (*are* in here is also an example of omission) anti the time; they are not pleased with it.

Phonological ambiguity is the second type that will be analysed in this chapter. It is so to say based on homophony which is "a term used in semantic analysis to refer to words (i.e. lexemes) which have the same pronunciation, but differ in meaning. (...) Homophony is illustrated from such pairs as *threw/through* and *rode/rowed*. When there is ambiguity on account of this identity, a *homophonic clash or conflict* is said to have occurred" (David Crystal, 2008:231). Following Chiara Bucaria we can state that newspaper headlines often depend on readers' recognition of sounds, for instance in case of rhyme and alliteration, despite the fact that they are not to be read aloud (2004:18). In this paper only two clear examples of a homophonic clash were found.

(7) A Tale of Two Tails

In case of (7) we can observe an undeniable instance of phonological ambiguity. Both the words *tale* and *tail* hold the same pronunciation- /teɪl/ therefore the reader could hear the title as a tale about two other stories or a story about two "parts that stick out at the back of the body of a bird, an animal or a fish" (OALD Online, 07.04.2013).

(8) When In Roam

In example (8) there is also a visible or rather hearable homophonic clash. When read aloud the word *roam* /rəʊm/ is pronounced in exactly the same way

as the name of the city *Rome*. As a consequence the reader can understand the headline as ‘during a ramble’ and as ‘staying in Rome, Italy’.

(9) You Can’t Beat a Bit of Butter

In the headline above there is also more than one meaning, hence, despite the ambiguity is not phonological per se, it has been included in this category due to the appearance of the sentence. The first and more, so to say, immediate understanding is that we cannot substitute for a small amount of butter in some dishes. The second one suggests that we cannot mix butter having only just a bit- that we will need more. Both of the meanings make the headline slightly ambiguous but it is not the most apparent and visible feature that holds our attention, it is the minimal pair beat- bit. The words have different spelling but very similar pronunciation which makes them sound almost the same. The other feature is alliteration, often used in headlines to catch the attention of readers, which focuses on the words *beat*, *bit* and *butter*- all three starting with a consonant ‘b’. That way it does not sound ordinary or trivial.

2.1 Syntactic ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity will be analysed on the basis of examples similar to the ones that have already been presented previously. This type of ambiguity will be divided into smaller units in order to take a closer look at this phenomenon and for the research to be done thoroughly.

Primarily for a better analysis of syntactic ambiguity, we should briefly explain what syntax is- “the study of the interrelationships between elements of sentence structure, and of the rules governing the arrangement of sentences in sequences” (Crystal, 2008, p. 471). Following Crystal’s thought on syntactic ambiguity “it is the most widely discussed type” (2008, p. 22). This type of ambiguity concerns the structure of words within a sentence or phrase and therefore we distinguish class, attachment, referential ambiguity and others. Instances of headlines containing these types of ambiguity will be given and analysed in the subsequent parts of this chapter.

As Bilá points out there is also another division regarding ambiguity that is it could be in the surface or in the deep structure of the sentence. She explains: “syntactical ambiguity may be in the surface structure of a sentence (as words can combine in different possible constructions) or it may relate to the deep structure (one sequence of words may have more than one reading, usually because the rules of sentence construction allow ellipsis, the omission of what is generally understood and what the comprehenders may infer” (2009, p. 37). To illustrate she gives examples of a surface ambiguity- *The only people that were*

interested were old men and women. ([old men] and [women], old [men and women]) and of a deep structure ambiguity- *The duck is too cold to eat.* (*'Too cold to eat anything' or 'too cold for anybody to eat it'*).

3 Conclusion

The analysis of the ambiguity has confirmed that lexical and syntactic ambiguity constitute significant linguistic devices used in the process of joke formation and using miscellaneous linguistic devices. It also proved that such types of linguistic ambiguity do not have to be negative phenomena. In addition, it has been confirmed and demonstrated that there are certain grammatical patterns and devices which assist in creating structural ambiguity; thus, they are productive in terms of linguistic humour. Our discussion of these patterns and devices is based on the works by Oaks (1994), Roura (1995) and Lew (1996).

As we have already stated, the purpose of the article was to present the classification and analysis of various instances of lexical and syntactic ambiguity in order to confirm that ambiguity can be a useful device exploited, e.g. in humour. In the future, it would be advisable to perform more in-depth research attempting to analyse the frequency with which each ambiguity type appears, for instance in language-based jokes. In other words, we would set out to discover which ambiguity type is the most productive in terms of humour. Although we have included some remarks concerning the frequency with which some ambiguity types occur in different contexts, these are only our predictions which have not been proved.

Furthermore, we have focused on the practical application of ambiguity in intentional contexts. Nonetheless, this linguistic phenomenon can also result in accidental contexts, e.g. in newspaper headlines. Thus, it would be valuable to search for and analyse newspaper headlines involving structural ambiguity.

Additionally, it would be useful to conduct comparative research on Polish and English lexical and syntactic jokes in order to check which of the two languages uses ambiguity more frequently and regularly.

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