



## UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES: THE ENIGMATIC CAUSES AND INTRIGUING FORMS OF AMBIGUITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDIES

**Fida UI Mustafa**

Department of English Linguistics, University of Okara, Okara, Pakistan  
fidamustafa786@gmail.com

**Mudassar Jahangir**

Visiting Lecturer, University of Okara  
[Mudassar.jahangir87@gmail.com](mailto:Mudassar.jahangir87@gmail.com)

**Waqar Mahmood Khan**

Lecturer in English and Founder, Shaheen Empowerment and Guidance Center  
University of Okara, Pakistan  
[waqar.m.khan@hotmail.com](mailto:waqar.m.khan@hotmail.com)

### Abstract

*This paper aims at studying how precisely the phenomenon of ambiguity, which is a widespread yet mostly unnoticed component of language, functions. It can make expressions more versatile, provide several meanings that make literature pieces even deeper, or it can complicate communication and, in some cases, create misunderstandings. The present work focuses on the doubts and vagueness that exist in the English language, the reasons behind and different types of which are described here, ranging from lexical to pragmatic. In accomplishing this, the study on context, syntax, and semantics shall seek to reveal the manner in which ambiguity functions in language and reveal how it can be managed in different communicative contexts.*

### 1. Introduction:

#### 1.1. Background of the Study

Uncertainty is inherent to any natural language, which is part of both written and oral communication. This stems from the fluidity of language, where the same or different words or structures may mean different things based on context, syntax, and/or interpretation. Usually implicit language, people do not pay attention to ambiguity as it is a part of the language use. Nonetheless, if one has to find a detailed meaning for some particular piece of text, be it a contract, an academic paper, a technical guideline, etc., the presence of antonyms twists the message substantially. Thus, the analysis of the concept of ambiguity is central to the interdisciplinary field of linguistics since it is closely associated with the key elements of meaning, structure, and hermeneutics.

Consequently, it can be argued that ambiguity is as important in the analysis of languages as it is in any other field. It allows expressing the variety and versatility of the human language, for a single word or a phrase can be absolutely different. This feature of language is not an isolated peculiarity of verbal communication but an instrument applicable in literary works, orations, jokes, and other spheres of human interaction. For example, puns employ the lexical level extensively to come up with a humor that has a double entente. In the same way, poets do not hesitate to use contextual meanings of words to come up with several interpretations that enhance the reader's experience of the poem. Yet, this same feature of language is most often a source of misunderstanding and distortion in communication, especially if the message is delivered in front of an audience that is not privy to the encoded meaning of the message.

Nonetheless, wherever clarity is the watchword, vagueness poses challenges in communication, and this is something seen commonly in various specialized areas. For example, in legal documents, one may read an unclear statement, the implications of which may range from civil to criminal with a court case to fight for. In general usage, ambiguity

poses a problem for conveying a clear and concise meaning since other people may interpret the presented data or the author's reasoning in a way the communicator did not intend. In day-to-day interactions, lack of clarity results in confusion, dissatisfaction, and sometimes even aggression when the message given and the one received are not the same. Thus, there is a need to comprehend the reasons for the peculiarities of ambiguity and its various manifestations that play a significant role in communication, especially when clarity is crucial.

### **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Issues with ambiguity in language are diverse, which is due to the nature of languages and the systems inherent in them. Thus, ambiguity is viewed as one of the most serious problems when it is necessary to deliver accurate and clear messages, which can be especially important in the spheres connected with law, science, and education. The main problem is that one and the same word or phrase can mean different things due to the influence of such factors as context, syntax, and the listener's prior knowledge. Such a multitude of possible interpretations may cause confusion, misunderstanding, distortion of the disseminated information, and, in some cases, dramatic failures in the exchange of information.

In the scope of the study of the English language, the issue of confusion is exceptionally sensitive, given the extensive presence of lexical sets, complex syntactic patterns, and multiple layers of meaning. English is thus an international language and is used in different domains and by people with different L1s, hence making the question of ambiguity even more problematic. For example, it is possible to meet the words "bank" and "court" that can be used in different contexts and mean either one thing or the other. Altogether, it is also possible to mention that a complex sentence can be constructed in a way that will result in structural or syntactic ambiguity of its meaning. It is, thus, about searching for these often micromanaged but potential communicational uncertainties and legacies that hamper well-defined interconnection and interaction at work and to then attempt to seek suitable approaches to render them concrete and thereby reduce their impact on inter-organizational communication.

Moreover, political leaders, particularly those wielding significant power, often manipulate narratives to shape public opinion and consolidate their authority. This deliberate construction of political narratives often obscures the truth, creating confusion and misleading citizens. In such a scenario, the media plays a pivotal role in countering these tactics by questioning fabricated narratives and holding powerful entities accountable. Ensuring media independence through legal safeguards, diverse ownership structures, and elevated journalistic standards is critical for the dissemination of unbiased information, enabling the public to make informed decisions and resist manipulation. Moreover, ambiguity a frequent tool in political rhetoric intensifies public confusion through vague language in legal contracts, speeches, or media reports, increasing the potential for misunderstanding and exploitation. This paper discusses the causes and subtypes of ambiguity, proposing methods to identify and mitigate its use in general and political communication. By addressing ambiguity's role in narrative manipulation, the study offers actionable strategies to enhance transparency and clarity, thereby equipping citizens to navigate political discourse with greater awareness and confidence. (Mahmood Khan, 2023)

### **1.3. Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of the given work is to identify and classify the types of factors that lead to the emergence of ambiguity in the English language and give a description of how these factors cause different types of the said phenomenon. Thus, investigating the specific

features of homonymy, polysemy, and syntactic construction, the research is expected to reveal the causes that make some expressions ambiguous. Besides the causes, the study aims at describing different facets of ambiguity lexical, structural, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic and the effect they have on communication.

Another important aim is the focus on the role of the ambiguity and the extent to which it can affect the communication, especially in the specific conditions that require more accurate and rational approaches. The proposed research will therefore have the study's objective of examining practical ways through which certain types of vagueness may be effectively mitigated in various forms of communicative interactions; this will entail exploring the role of context in decomposing expressions, the application of clearer syntactic patterns in the expression of meaning, as well as the crucial role of pragmatic linguistics in handling the issues of vagueness. In terms of objectives, this study intends to make the following contributions to the general body of linguistic literature and to the target stakeholders who could utilize the findings of the study in handling the phenomenon of ambiguity.

Furthermore, the last aim of this study is to draw the readers' attention to the bipolarity of ambiguity as a perilous phenomenon that threatens to disrupt understanding and a valuable resource in language that promotes creativity. Although vagueness may have a negative effect of confusing the audience or the receiver, it can also bring in a twist in language and hence be a useful tool in literature, rhetoric, as well as conversational language. Hence this research aims to expand on this duality of ambiguity and present ways through which it can be utilized in organizations should there be a need for multiplicity of meanings while, on the other hand, avoiding its detrimental incidences in areas that require stability.

#### **1.4. Scope of the Study**

This research is geared towards the English language and the analysis of the role of the ambiguities in the written and verbal communication. In regard to the above-mentioned aspect, the analysis considered the lexical, structural, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic ambiguity of the word. Since this is a learning module, it samples examples from literature, casual and formal language, media, and other scholars' documentation. It is therefore expected that the study will mainly focus on English, but the results and conclusions that will be derived from the study will equally apply to other languages and communication situations. Also, the area of concern of the study encompasses a discussion on the effects of ambiguity in various aspects of communication. This entails a study of how ambiguity impacts writing, particularly when it comes to legal contracts, academic writing, interpersonal communication, and efficient methods of managing the issue of ambiguity in the various situations. The study also revisits the aspect of purposeful vagueness that exists in creative endeavors like writing or jokes, where multiple meanings enrich the reader's experience. Therefore, by exploring different aspects of ambiguity, the proposed work will attempt to offer a comprehensive view on this multifaceted phenomenon of language.

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## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1. Theories of Ambiguity in Linguistics***

The analysis of the ambiguity in linguistics has its basis in several theories that make up the theoretical background and that offer guidelines about how the ambiguity appears and how it can be solved. Among the theories in the area, one can distinguish the transformational grammar first introduced by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s. Chomsky theory that was useful in explaining the aspects of syntactic ambiguity included the deep structure and the surface structure. Chomsky worked on linguistic morphology and identified that the profound structure of a particular sentence holds the main grammatical relations, and the surface

structure is the way in which the words are formed, which is visible. On this basis, the ambiguity appears as a situation when one surface structure corresponds to the various deep structures. This theory is quite helpful for the study of syntactic ambiguity because it does help the linguists to distinguish the different interpretations of the syntactic structure of words in relation to the total context of meaning of the given sentence.

The next theoretical foundation of ambiguity is semantic theory, majoring on the meaning of words as well as sentences. Edward Sapir (1977), Leonard Bloomfield (1933), John Lyons (1978), and Stephen Ullman (1962) are some of the heroes of this area, as they have investigated how one and the same word can mean different things. Semantic theory holds more ground to explain lexeme ambiguity, where a lexeme has multiple meanings, re: homonyms and polysemes. For example, the word 'bat' can be used to mean both an animal and equipment used to play a game of baseball. Semantic Theory aids in the explanation of how these various meanings are stored into the mental dictionary and how they can be retrieved during the processing of language.

This paper also discusses how context is significant in resolving these multiple meanings to show how the intended interpretation is arrived at by the speakers and listeners. Another important part of linguistics that is also concerned with understanding the meaning of the word is called pragmatics; pragmatics investigates the effect that context has on the text. Scholars like H. P. Grice (1975) and Stephen Levinson (1983) have defended the pragmatic theory, which is centered around the function of conversational implicature and context exhibited in removing the ambiguity. For example, in the typical conversation, "Can you pass the salt?" the reference can be grossly interpreted as the listener's capacity to pass the salt physically, while the pragmatic layer refers to a polite request from the speaker. The area of relevance for the given concept is pragmatic, for pragmatic ambiguity is mainly characterized by the fact that the meaning of the sentence is highly dependent on the context of its use. This framework assists in providing insights on how speakers can help themselves and the listeners in resolving the apparent ambiguity in spoken language in light of contextual information as well as general knowledge and social taboos.

## **2.2. Ambiguity in Structural Linguistics**

Another source of interpretation of the concept of ambiguity is structuralism, whose main idea was developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure with his concepts of the signifier and the signified also shows how language is structured through the arbitrary connection between a signifier and the signified. The latter is arbitrary because it signifies that one and the same signifier can be linked up with different signified. For instance, one meaning of the word 'bark' is the noise that a dog produces, while another meaning is the outer skin of a tree. Structuralism renders Saussure helpful in explaining how and why the sign's arbitrariness leads to the creation of an equivocal nature and to the manner in which these signs are conveyed in certain languages and cultures.

Developing Saussure's concepts, Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss tried to explain which structural duals cause the semantic indeterminacy of the meanings. In Jakobson's sphere of concern that compiles the functions of language, which are the referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and the poetic, it is clear as to how different functions can easily give different meanings to the same linguistic sign. For example, in the poetic function, which is oriented toward the avenue and the value of language, the use of the ambiguous word creates several meanings at once. Thus, sociological analysis based on Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myths showed that similar structures signify different meanings in different cultures and eliminate the issue of ambiguity.

Structural linguistics also combines with syntax in explaining the manner in which the structure of a sentence contributes to the formulation of the ambiguities. This paper expands

on the theory held by Noam Chomsky about generative grammar, which is based upon the structuralist postulates to explain how different syntactic constructions can result in polysemy. For instance, sentences with T-attachment like the man saw the woman with the telescope and the interpretation of the sentence in two different ways. Structural linguistics is thus beneficial in identifying the lexical and syntactic causes of semiotic vagueness while defining the constitution of multiple meanings.

### **2.3. Cognitive Approaches to Ambiguity**

There are other ways elaborated by cognitive linguistics to explain how the ambiguity is handled and managed in the mind. This implies that when people use language in their communication, the perceived state of ambiguity is as a result of the mental models and frames that people employ. These schemas depend on context, knowledge, and prejudice, thereby eliciting different interpretations for the same linguistic input. For instance, the observation that upon hearing the word "bat," people are likely to access one meaning rather than another can be due to the current situation in which the observer was most recently exposed to a set of stimuli (for instance, watching a baseball game or visiting a zoo).

The other theory that has the aspect of ambiguity is the cognitive picture, which includes the concept of mental lexicon, which is a store of words and their identification. Linguists and cognitive scientists, for instance Eleanor Rosch (1975) and George Lakoff (1987), have embarked on studies to determine how categorization as well as the prototype theory affects the understanding of words with multiple meanings. For instance, the term 'fruit' mainly points to the apple or banana image; in other information, it could be more varieties of fruit or less known ones. I find this notion of prototypes as an explanation in understanding why some meanings of an ambiguous term will be easily retrieved relative to the other meanings based on context and experience of the user.

Thus, the respective study of Frazier and Rayner (1982) that examined the process of syntactic parsing evidences that people rely on both syntactic and semantic information to distinguish between similar meanings. Frazier's garden path model accounts for the notion that readers select the easiest initial syntactic analysis for a sentence, and they have to back up and reconsider the analysis after encountering an uncertainty. This cognitive process of syntactic reanalysis is very critical if there is to be a proper analysis of how real-time language use handles apparent ambiguity. Different cognitive approaches are thus useful for understanding the psychological processes that take part in understanding the gray areas of language and estimating the reasons why particular interpretations of a given message or text are preferred to others.

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## **3. Causes of Ambiguity**

### **3.1. Lexical Causes**

This is the case of terms that contain more than one meaning and will, therefore, be interpreted differently depending on the usage. Such a type of ambiguity is rather frequent in languages that possess a great number of synonyms; for example, the English language is characterized by homonymy and polysematicity. Homonyms can be words with the same spelling or same sounding but different meaning, like 'Bank', meaning financial organization, and 'Bank', meaning side of a river. These homonyms can prove rather problematic in communication as they often cause confusion, particularly when writing and therefore when there are no audible prompts to rely on. Whereas, the term polysemy is used when one word is used to denote many related meanings. For example, the word can bear the meaning of a place where legal cases are heard, an area to play sport, or to woo a lady for marriage. Polysemy differs from the homonym in that its ambiguities depend on context, or in other words, the receiver has to use contextual information to decide which meaning is correct.

Context plays an important role in cases of resolving the lexical ambiguity. One cannot get the right information from an ambiguous word when there is not much context given concerning the word. For instance, consider a simple sentence like "He went to the bank." This sentence will have dichotomous meanings depending on whether a reader understands bank as in a financial institution or the riverbank. In spoken language, intonation and stress can help one to resolve such ambiguities; in written language, one is completely on one's own, so to speak, and has to guess from the context. Semantic theories highlighted by scholars such as John Lyons (1978) and Stephen Ullman (1962) give a kind of guideline as to how many meanings of a word are activated in the mind depending on the context. These theories highlight the input of context in the process of eliminating the numerous possible meanings of an ambiguous word, and hence, the probability of misunderstanding is retarded.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that lexical ambiguity is not always negative. However, in literature and all the works of creative writing, ambiguity can be part of the style and an addition to the work's depth. For instance, poets and authors will employ a polysemous term in a context whereby the different meanings will cause different feelings in the reader for a richer experience. Thus, in such contexts, the ambiguity is not an enemy that needs to be fought, banished, and erased from the surface of the text but is in fact a strength that enriches the text. This duality of the concept of lexical ambiguity both as a possible cause for misunderstanding and as one of the means for conveying meanings suggests the vast nature of the topic under consideration and the contextual approach to it.

### **3.2. Structural Causes**

This involves the property whereby the arrangement of the words in the sentence allows for more than one meaning. Such ambiguity is quite frequent in compound and compound-complex sentences, especially when placing phrases and clauses in the context of a sentence. For instance, the sentence "The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive soon" can be interpreted in two ways: either both the mother of the boy and the girl will come or two different mothers one of the boys and one of the girls will come. The indeterminacy is caused by the fact that it is not quite clear if 'and the girl' is a conjunct of 'the dress to going out' or a separate noun phrase. Structural ambiguity is interrelated to the constituent structure, in which depending on how the words in the string are grouped, the strings have different meanings.

Kiparsky (1973) and Chomsky (1957) view that there is a way in which this form of ambiguity can be explained; this is through transformational grammar. This theory integrates the notion of deep structure, which is the grammatical relations in a sentence, and surface structure, which is the physical layout of terms in a sentence. Ambiguity is when different semantic analysis of the same surface structure is possible due to the correspondence with more than one deep structure in the language of the text.

For instance, in a sentence like "Flying planes can be dangerous," the deep structure could be either 'It is dangerous to fly planes', or 'Planes that fly is dangerous.' Possible confusion arises when the title 'flying planes' is viewed in terms of either a noun, planes that fly, or a gerund, the act of flying planes. Such cases of structural polysemy are characteristic of English, in which free word order and functions of sentences correlate with ellipsis and other ways of word combination that make for interpretative readings.

Structural ambiguity, like any other type of ambiguity, is not limited to comprehensive sentences but is also apparent in simple-sentence structures whenever there is a question over the reference of the modifier or the prepositional phrase to be attached. For example, the sentence "The man saw the boy with the telescope" can be understood in at least the latter of the two ways, that is, the man was seeing the boy through a telescope, or the boy had a telescope. The confusion is due to the different ways in which the prepositional phrase "with

the telescope” can be interpreted. It is often said that such a type of ambiguity can be easily removed by either using different words or supplying the appropriate context, but the nature of syntactic structure is clearly revealed in such cases. Thus, structural ambiguity is a constant indication to people that language is not merely a set of words but a way of placing these words into a sentence.

### **3.3. Syntactic Causes**

A syntactic type of ambiguity arises when a sentence admits of more than one construction, that is, its syntax is ambiguous. This kind of ambiguity is again linked to the fact that English syntax is very free, which means that there are many possible sentence constructions. For instance, the sentence “Visiting relatives can be exhausting” can either have the meaning that visiting relatives is tiresome or the relatives that initiate the visit are tiring. The context added to the confusion due to the possibilities of where exactly the phrase ‘visiting relatives’ fits in the given sentence. Syntactic ambiguity appears in situations where the same word sequence can be analyzed with the help of different parse trees, which means that the text contains different syntactic structures.

A symbolic linguistic framework such as the generative grammar developed by Chomsky (1957) helps in analyzing the syntactic ambiguity. In generative grammar, the formation of sentences is done syntactically, through certain rules that join words to form phrases and clauses. This is the case when the mentioned rules enable generating more than one valid parse tree for a single sentence. For instance, in the sentence “The old men and women were present,” the problem occurs because of the combinations of “old” with both ‘men’ and “women” or only ‘men.’ The different ways in which the elements of the sentence syntactically relate point to different interpretations. The complexity of the surface structure is repeatedly manifesting itself in syntactic ambiguity, which is indeed a feature of the speaker's multifaceted freedom of expression in English.

Sometimes, semantic disambiguation of syntactic ambiguity can heavily rely on the syntactic approach taken to solve the problem and on the context in which the given sentence is used. Subsequent to this, further information or paraphrasing may be required to expand the given information or to provide clarity as to the meanings intended. For example, the sentence “I saw the man with the binoculars” can be clarified by specifying whether the binoculars belong to the speaker or the man: For example, consider the following two statements: “I used binoculars to see the man” and “I saw the man who had binoculars.” So, it can be noticed that syntactic ambiguity serves as a constant reminder that language is not just a linear string but a system of structures that interact in a certain way in order to produce specific meaning.

### **3.4. Phonological Causes**

Phonological ambiguity derives from two or more words that sound alike and is referred to as homophones. Homophones are those words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings, for example, “knight” and “night.” This kind of shift is rather problematic in spoken language because here the possibility of using context or different intonation is used up. While in written language this is indicated through spelling, in spoken language, homophones create numerous problems because words sound similar. For example, the specific use of homophones is understandable when reading, while in the oral communication, it may be confusing; for example, the phrase “The knight rode through the night” has two such homophones that can cause confusion if the speaker is not extra careful.

Phonological ambiguity can also stem from the intonation difference, or the variation in the regional English spoken, and therefore some words may be easily confused for other words. For instance, there are cases of inseparable ‘pin’ ‘pen’ pairs that are often confusing, especially in spoken language. Such a feature is a good example of the presence of phonetic

variations and the context of communication in which some minor divergences might cause confusion or misinterpretation. Other linguistic researchers, such as Hirst (1992), have analyzed the role of phonological aspects in the creation of ambiguity and the ways in which the audience de-ambiguates sexually similar words based on contextual factors. Relating phonological ambiguity to language, it has to be understood that language and words are not only about articles and writing but the manner in which these are spoken and interpreted.

It is worth mentioning that the effect of phonological ambiguity is most pronounced in industries where information exchange is particularly crucial, and the recipient's failure to receive a message will lead to adverse consequences, for example, in determining a person's guilt or diagnosing a disease. It is very dangerous if, because of homophones, the wrong shift of interpretation is made, as it may lead to rather serious consequences. For instance, in a medical context, the spelt "dose" means a measured quantity of a medicine, while "doze" means to recline or lie down to sleep. Phonological ambiguity is also quite frequent when playing on words, when two words sound alike but have different meanings. Despite all this, phonological ambiguity can be seen as a beneficial aspect of language if applied at the right time and in the right manner; however, it causes significant problems in spoken language, as it is the main carrier of meanings.

### **3.5. Pragmatic Causes**

Pragmatic ambiguity stands for the situation where the context allows for understanding the given statement more than once. This kind of imprecision is linked to the notions of deixis and implicature that are used in pragmatics. Pronouns and temporal adverbs are examples of deictic expressions that are interpreted with respect to the context. For instance, in the statement "He told his brother that he could not sleep," the antecedent of the pronoun is not very clear as to whether he is the speaker of the sentence or the brother. Common features of the pragmatic ambiguity include generous reference and intent where the two are not accurately determined or said. Sometimes, the only way to determine an exact meaning for the given word is to know the circumstances in which the statement is being launched.

H. P. Grice's theory of conversational implicature (1975) should be useful for explaining pragmatic ambiguity because Grice argued that certain meanings are inferred when speaking in natural languages. Grice makes use of the term implicature, where there is no literal connection between the speaker's intention and the utterance made, but there is a relational one that is dependent on the background knowledge the two parties have. For example, the line "Can you pass the salt?" is semantically perhaps a question as to whether the listener is capable of passing the salt, but typically it is an indirect order. This is when the intended implicature may not easily be understood or when there are two possible meanings of any given statement.

Pragmatic ambiguity can also be realized in the written medium of communication, especially when the context of the communication has not been set or where there are multiple meanings to the situation or message. For instance, in a contract, one may state, 'The intended party will provide the service within reasonable time.' Such a clause is ambiguous because the meaning of reasonable time is not well defined. Managing pragmatic context is a complex process that depends directly on the perception and interpretation of the listener of the speaker's intentions and purpose, the nature of the speaker-listener relationship, and the situational context. Pragmatic ambiguity also forces attention to be paid to how what is being said may be understood and within what contexts.

### **3.6. Punctuation and Modifier Placement**

The place of punctuation cannot be overemphasized when it comes to occasions when ambiguity is created or resolved. Commas, periods, hyphens, and other marks do matter very



much when it comes to determining the way a reader understands a particular sentence or some parts of it. Failure to use or put commas in the wrong place may create differences in meaning that can be very large. For instance, the sentence “Let’s eat, grandma” turns into “Let’s eat, grandma” when eliminating the comma and alters the meaning significantly. Also, the context of modifiers contributes to the occurrence of ambiguity since their position may affect the meaning of the sentence. The statement “She likes coffee and rolls in bed” is an example of the use of an unclear conjunction because the relationship between the last two words is not very clear; that is, it is not clear whether “in bed” refers to the action that “likes” or the action “to roll.”

According to Fowler (1970), the way different sentences should be punctuated to eliminate the issue of ambiguity, especially those coming from different speakers. In his extensive volume on the English language in the modern world, Fowler offered many instances to illustrate how punctuation can alter a sentence’s meaning. For instance, the sentence “A woman without her man is nothing” can be interpreted in two entirely different ways depending on punctuation: Changing the position of the comma in the two following quotations, we get two absolutely differently sounding statements: “A woman, without her man, is nothing” versus “A woman, without her, man is nothing.”

The examples presented above as well as the formulas of post-modifying phraseology allow for an understanding of the fact that the position of modifiers is also one of the influences that contribute to the emergence or elimination of the focus area’s ambiguity. Hanging or floating embeddings are when the modifier is placed so far from what it modifies that it takes the reader a moment to figure out what the writer wanted to accentuate. For instance, in a sentence such as “Riding a bicycle, the dog barked loudly,” a reader would understand that it is the dog riding the bicycle, which is incorrect. The latter removes all the confusion as it rewrites the sentence as ‘The dog barked loudly while I was riding a bicycle’. It is necessary to remember that modifiers should be used near the words they are changing because it will prevent the confusion. Commas, semicolons, periods, question marks, or the appropriate use of ellipses, apostrophes, and hyphens; the positioning of the commas before the coordinating conjunction ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘or’, etc., all qualify as punctuations that are employed to defuse the risk associated with the passing on of ambiguity and to facilitate the passage of the actual intended meaning from the speaker/writer to the intended recipient/s.

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#### **4. Forms of Ambiguity**

##### **4.1. Lexical Ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity is one of the most widespread types of ambiguity in the English language. It takes root when one word can be interpreted in several ways; thus, different interpretations of the same word will be given. Homonyms and polysemes are the two principal kinds of lexical ambiguity. Homonyms are words that are spelled or pronounced in the same way but have different meanings, like 'bat', which can mean the flying mammal, and 'bat' that is used in sporting activities. Polysemes are such word forms as 'light' which may denote both visible and non-weight radiation. Lexical ambiguity has been pointed out to be common by Fromkin (2003) in literature since poets and writers hinge on the flexibility of meaning of a certain word to further the interpretation of the text. For example, the word “grave” in Hamlet by Shakespeare means serious and a place of burial; therefore, the line “To be or not to be” acquires a second layer of meaning.

Thus, the use of lexical ambiguity in everyday conversation often results in either confusion if the context is not sufficient enough to give a clue to the intended meaning of the word. For example, if someone says, “I will see you at the bank,” without qualifying whether it is the banking institution or the river, the listener gets lost. This imprecision can be

especially tricky in writing that is particularly official or legal, or for any writing in which accuracy is especially critical. Thus, members of the legal field may employ accurate definitions and little or no lexical variability to prevent possible misinterpretations. Nonetheless, in the arts, such as in advertisements or poetry, lexical ambiguity can be deliberately employed in order to create the element of puzzlement in the audience.

Another factor that is a subject to discussion is the role of lexical versatility in humor and wordplay since the examples of puns and jokes are based on the use of words with multiple meanings. For example, the actual joke "Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana" is derived from the homonym 'flies' used to refer to both a property of time and the name of the fruit fly species. This is the time when lexical ambiguity is not an issue that needs fixing but a perfectly good joke to be had. Another component of lexical knowledge is the capacity to reconcile lexically related contents since dealing with lexical mismatches becomes the particular cornerstone of linguistic proficiency, as it provides people with the awareness of how to have fun with language.

#### **4. 2. Structural Ambiguity**

Ambiguity of structure occurs where the words are placed in a certain way within a sentence so that they can be understood in two ways. Such kind of provincial ambiguity is most rife in sentences, which entail numerous phrases and clauses, and the positioning of which is significant in the comprehension of the intended meaning of the sentence. For example, the sentence 'The old men and women were present' can mean that the old men as well as the women were present, or only the old men and young women were present. Structural ambiguity raises awareness of the role of syntactic structure in the creation of meaning, because otherwise the same words can be used to convey different statements. Cann (1994) opines that where there is structural ambiguity, a syntactic analysis has to be done to pinpoint all the meanings that are possible so that the right meaning can be inferred.

One of the types of SA is the presence of specific changes introduced by prepositions; these changes are usually added to the various phrases of the text and can be attached to almost any component of the sentence, which confuses the reader. For example, in the sentence "She saw the man with the telescope," the meaning can be given as the woman used a telescope to see the man or the man had a telescope. The problem arises because the proposition "with the telescope" can either qualify the verb "saw" or the noun "man." Such ambiguities can be solved by simple rewriting of the sentence; nevertheless, such examples exemplify how the syntax of English allows for two meanings. The presence of structural ambiguity underlines the fact that the relations between words in a sentence and their grouping are among the vital factors that define the sense of the sentence.

One of the two major sources of structural ambiguity is conjunctions; it is occasions where conjunctions are used that allow for more than one grouping of words in a sentence. For instance, the sentence "She likes cooking and gardening and her family" can be interpreted in two ways: either she is the type of woman who likes to cook and also likes to work on the garden, and who in addition likes her family, and the second option is that she likes only cooking and gardening, and she likes only her family. The problem is that the word "and" may combine the activities as one or differentiate between them. Deal with SAs can be easily resolved if punctual attention is paid to the syntactic organization of the sentence and the surface context of the referent. Structural ambiguity shows that syntax is needed in communication and that a structure is needed to avoid other structures being created.

#### **4.3. Syntactic Ambiguity**

Syntactic ambiguity is a type of ambiguity in which a particular sentence can be syntactically built in more than one way. This type of ambiguity is connected with the feature that you can construct a number of correct English sentences with the same words but with

different meanings. For example, the interpretation of the sentence such as ‘Flying planes is dangerous may tend to mean one of the following: ‘it is a risk to fly planes’ or ‘planes that can fly are risky’. The uncertainty is due to the fact that the phrase “flying planes” can refer to different constituent scopes of the given sentence. Syntactic ambiguity is prominent in many-sibling parse tree structures when the same string has more than one set of possible analyses or when SYN-LEXXX has more parse trees than its input string’s length.

In terms of the theoretical approach, such a phenomenon of syntactic ambiguity can be analyzed in the framework of Chomsky’s generative grammar developed in 1957. In generative grammar, they come up with a set of rules on the formation of syntactic structures in the form of phrases and clauses. Conflict arises when these rules permit the expression of more than one parse tree for a given English sentence. For instance, we are left with the question of whether the word “old” should be thought of as modifying both “men” and “women” or just “men.” The different possible parsing relations cause the differences in interpretation of the sentence. Conflicts concerning syntax are a relatively inherent effect of the variability that defines the English language’s syntax’s versatility.

Removing syntactic ambiguity sometimes needs consideration of the structure that the mentioned sentence has touched upon and sometimes requires understanding the situation in which the particular sentence was mentioned. Sometimes it is necessary to provide additional data or the rewriting of some parts of the text in order to show that the author did not have such meaning. For example, the sentence "I saw the man with the binoculars" can be clarified by specifying whether the binoculars belong to the speaker or the man: Whereas syntactic ambiguity stresses the fact that language is more than a linear sequence of words and that the words and phrases have relationships with other words and are arranged in a way that we must understand.

#### ***4.4 Phonological Ambiguity***

Phonological ambiguity is caused by similarity of the sound in words, more specifically homophones. Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different meaning and spelling; for instance, knight and night. Phonological ambiguity is a major problem in the spoken language. When understanding speech, context and intonation are usually used. Depending on the instance, homophones can often be differentiated through written language; however, speaking them causes confusion. For example, two homophones in the sentence “The knight rode through the night,” which are distinguishable in textual, might cause confusion when the sentence is spoken without further context.

Phonological ambiguity may also come from the variations of the pronunciation of words according to the region or the accent of the speakers of the culture. For example, in certain dialects, ‘pin’ and ‘pen’ sound almost identical, and therefore the context might not be clear in certain spoken interactions. Such a case illustrates how and why the phonetic differences do form an essential part of language and how the context may help reduce confusion. Other scholars, such as Hirst (1992), have researched the role played by the phonological aspect in causing uncertainty and how the similar-sounding words can be differentiated based on the context. Phonological ambiguity of phrases is pertinent, then, to the fact that language is not solely a matter of lexicon and grammar but also of the manner in which lexemes can be phonetically and phonemically realized.

It is highly alarming that phonological ambiguity can take a toll on communication in various settings, especially where clarity is an issue of life and death, such as in legal or health sectors. Conflicts might occur at any time if relatives, friends, or colleagues decide to make a wrong interpretation from the presence of the homophones. For instance, in a medical context, two terms, ‘dose’ and ‘doze’ might sound nigh alike, but their distinctions are very clear. Phonological ambiguity is also very often met in puns and word jokes; they rely on the

similarity between two words' sounds. Thus, phonological variation can create the layer of meaning and express the infinitive shadings in language, but at the same time reveals problems of understanding in words, primarily in speech.

#### **4.5. Pragmatic Ambiguity**

Pragmatic ambiguity is somehow atypical in terms of context relative to the usage of the sentence and its bearing on how the actual sentence is interpreted. Such an override often occurs due to the use of such deictics that are references like pronouns or adverbs whose meanings are determined by the context. For instance, the following sentence "Can you pass the salt?" can mean either, "Pass me the salt," or it can be a query to the receiver's capability to pass the salt. Such a structure stems from the uncertainty of the speaker's purpose, as the latter depends on the conversation context. Thus, while pragmatic ambiguity primarily deals with the difficulties in the interpretation of the specific words and phrases used in the speech, the meaning of pragmatic ambiguity is usually arrived at through a consideration of the intent of the speaker, the nature of the conversation, and the knowledge that is available and assumed by both the speaker and the listener.

Thomas (1995) also described ways in which people employ context in resolving pragmatic ambiguity because meaning can be located not only in the lexicon but also in the context of a situation. For instance, the words "I'm going now" can mean either that the speaker is going now or they are dismissing the listener kindly and suggesting they leave now. Pragmatic ambiguity usually requires nonverbal gestures, for example, tone of voice, postures, and the culture of the society through which meaning is given to a certain statement. At times, pragmatic ambiguity is deliberate; this ability is used consciously by the speakers to purposely mean more than the face value or else, purposely to leave it to the interpretation of the recipient.

The same can be said of written communication, where the given context can either be missing or can be subjected to more than one interpretation. For instance, in reference to the contract conditions, a word like 'reasonable 'ime'—in th this case, 'the party agrees to provide the services within a reasonable me'—can lea lead to confusion since the meaning of the word'reasonable' is relative. Namely, the identification of the pragmatic indefinite elements means that solving the pragmatic ambiguity presupposes a rather profound perception of the context, including the intentionality of communication, the sort of involved participants, and the situational environment. Thus, pragmatic ambiguity underlines the role of context in meaning and the necessity to contemplate about the ways one's words may be taken.

#### **4. 6. Comparative Ambiguity**

The second type is comparative ambiguity, where a sentence contains a comparison that can be misunderstood in another way. This kind of vagueness is most typical in questions where the degree of comparison is not designated. For instance, one can say, "I love Mary more than Lucy," which may be understood as either 'I love Mary more than I love Lucy' or 'I love Mary more than Lucy does.' The source of the confusion is the fact that the elements to which 'more than' points are not defined, which creates two distinct interpretations. It is clear that comparative ambiguity has quite a close connection with syntactic because it often presupposes the structure of the sentence and the positioning of modifiers.

Pink and Thomas, for instance, posited that a comparative ambiguity may be cleared by one of the following rewordings, for instance, "I love Mary more than I love Lucy" or "I love Mary more than Lucy loves Mary." In as much as comparative ambiguity is usually solved by rewording, in most cases it is used purposefully so that it can elicit different meanings or provide with different connotations. It is most expected to find comparative ambiguity in stylistically rich and, in particular, poetic and literary language where the point

of comparison itself would carry a certain amount of fuzziness. For instance, in the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost, there is no comparison of the two roads since the narrator sees a difference in the quality of the two roads, and this comparison is also done in a complicated way, and the reader is left to need to decide and interpret what the difference means.

Comparative ambiguity is also found in ordinary language use, especially in cases of expressing a preference or some opinion. For instance, a statement like This cake is better than that one can be vague if one is not sure what is being compared: the taste, texture, or appearance of cakes. Deciding on comparative ambiguity usually does not allow making a conclusion and is accompanied by the addition of context or clarification of the criteria. When the terms of comparison are not well established, there is the possibility of multiple meanings, thereby, comparative ambiguity.

#### **4.7. Adjective Phrase Ambiguity**

Adjective phrase ambiguity is the kind of ambiguity that occurs when an adjective in the sentence is understood in different ways depending on where it is put in the sentence. For instance, the final of the sentence “There stood a big brick house at the foot of the hill” gives a meaning of a big house that is made of bricks or a house made of big bricks, respectively. Such a probabilistic ambiguity results from the labeling ambiguity of the adjective that could refer to either the noun that follows it or the noun that precedes it. This type of ambiguity is relatively common in the descriptive sentences regarding the positioning of the adjectives. Lyons (1978) observes that the mentioned type of ambiguity is more characteristic of descriptive sentences where the positioning of adjectives really matters.

As with all types of ambiguity, it is usually possible to eliminate the confusion by restructuring the sentence or by providing extra information. For instance, in the given sentence, the big, brick house stood at the foot of the hill. The adjectives modify the house, making it big and brick, while in the sentence A brick house with big windows stood at the foot of the hill. The adjectives qualify the windows as big, not the house. Another property of the adjective phrase is its ambiguity, which shows the importance of the linear organization in English as the change of the position of the adjective produces distinct meaning in the sentence. Such relative vagueness serves as a polite reminder of the fact that speech is not just a question of choosing appropriate terms but also of how they are to be put in a string.

However, the topic adjective phrase ambiguity is sometimes employed deliberately in a literary and poetical work where its author intends to make the topic’s meaning obscure and ambiguous. For example, the two words “kindly” in the poem “Because I could not stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson, when one is used, can be interpreted in two ways: either as a description of the way the figure of death acted in stopping for her or as a description of the kind of stop that was made. This way of doubling the meaning of some terms and their aspects enriches the poem and enables the reader to come across various possibilities regarding the text. Thus, great opportunities for creativity arise in literature where the intentionally used AP ambiguity allows for the reader to have a multiple reading of a given text.

#### **4.8. Adverbial Phrase Ambiguity**

Adverbial phrase ambiguity arises where the adverb is placed in a particular location in the sentence the meaning of the sentence is altered. This kind of slant is characteristic of circumstances when the given adverb can refer to various segments of the analyzed sentence. For instance, a sometimes-ambiguous construction is the following one: “The General Manager promised a bonus for each employee later” According to the context, it can bear two related but distinct meanings: the General Manager promising “bonus later” or the General Manager promising “a bonus that will be given later.” The problem of intermediary inclusion

lies in the rather vague way the adverb ‘later’ may refer either to the verb ‘promised’ or the whole clause. Fowler (1974) made it known that since ambiguity often arises with adverbial phrases, the best way to solve such ambiguity is to rearrange the sentence in such a way that the correct meaning will be made known thus; “Later the General Manager promised a bonus for each employee” OR “The General Manager promised that a bonus will be given later.”

Another type of adverbial phrase ambiguity is when an adverb is located in a particular place within a sentence so that it can take more than one meaning. For instance, the statement such as “She quickly decided to leave” may be understood in either of the two fashions: the decision was swift or that the departure could be rather fast. The one type of structural ambiguity takes place when the adverb of the verb can refer to two different verbs. In such cases, it is useful to move the adverb closer to the verb it modifies or rewrite the entire sentence. Adverbial phrase ambiguity points us to the fact that prepositions and adverbs that are allowed in English can be such a source of a large number of different interpretations in case they are not placed adequately.

Sometimes in writing adverbial phrase ambiguity can be employed and it act intentionally where the writer wants to leave something undecided or give the data multiple interpretations. For instance, in the lines from T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock the phrase ‘In the room, the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’ is open to interpretation as it remains uncertain whether the women are talking of Michelangelo as they leave as indicated, or whether it is just a phrase used to depict the passage of time. Such confusion, therefore, enriches the poem as it enables the readers have a chance to consider various meanings of the poem. The ambiguity of adverbial phrases is a good asset in implementing creativity and using the techniques of ambiguity deliberately in creative writing to enhance reader’s experience and provide several options of their interpretation.

#### **4. 9. Negative Ambiguity**

Negative ambiguity involves sentential level and means that a sentence contains a negation that can be read in different ways. Such type of ambiguity is usually due to the fact that the range of negation is not clear and hence one may perceive the sentence in different ways. For example, the reading “I don’t teach because it is easy” can be read as either “I don’t teach, because it is easy” that is teaching it is easy and hence the practice is not done or “I teach, but not because it is easy” that is teaching is done for other reasons other than the ease of the activity. According to Cann (1994), negative ambiguity always recurs when the number of negations is not obvious from the surrounding context; In this case then, the following modifications to the above sentence may help resolve the negative ambiguity: “I do not teach because it is easy” or “I do teach, but not because it is easy.”

Negative ambiguity can also be seen in those sentences where the scope of negation is also ambiguous because of the position of the negation sign. For instance, the statement “He didn’t say he was coming”, could be a way of saying that he stated that he would not be coming or he never mentioned coming at all. The problem of the reading concern is that the negation ‘didn’t’ can either apply to the verb ‘say’ or the whole clause. In such cases, one can easily fix this problem by bringing closer the negation to the word it negated or by rewriting the sentence. Negative ambiguity also draws the attention towards the conventions of building a sentence in English where the position of negations makes a lot of difference in the resultant meaning.

In writing, negativity is intentionally employed at times with the intention of making the readers feel uncertain or to introduce more than one interpretation. For example, in the novella "1984" by George Orwell, the true motto of the party ‘War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength’ is purposely paradoxical with negation of the mentioned concepts resulting in a disputation of the meaning of such terms. Any vagueness as pertains to

the completion of tasks by workers gives this novel an element of complexity, which can be enriching as more than one view can be availed as one reads the novel. Negative ambiguity can, therefore, be admired when used tactfully to make the reader develop multiple interpretations of a certain aspect in a creative writing piece.

#### 4. 10. Modifier Ambiguity

The cases of ambiguity involve an improper placement of a modifier which might be an adjective or an adverb, which creates many possible ways of understanding the given sentence. This kind of ambiguity mostly affects complex sentences in which the modifier can logically relate to more than a single element of the sentence. For instance, the meaning of the following sentence; “The soldier with a wooden leg was dancing” may be the soldier who has a wooden leg was dancing or the soldier was dancing using a wooden leg, perhaps as a material. Lyons (1978) therefore say that modifier ambiguity means that the modifier can be placed nearer to the word that it qualifies, for instance, “The man with a wooden leg was dancing” or “The soldier was dancing and he had a wooden leg.

Another case of modifier ambiguity can be observed where the positional position of the modifier itself by casting doubt into its reference makes it possible to have several interpretations. For instance, sentence like ‘Only John loves Mary’ can mean either John loves Mary and no one else or John is the only one who loves Mary. The case of such an ambiguity is due to the placement of the modifier only as we discussed before; it can modify either the subject noun, ‘John,’ or the verb ‘loves.’ In such a case, the ambiguity may be often cleared up by bringing the modifier closer to the word which it modifies or by the use of another sentence structure. The UF example of modifier ambiguity shows that clear construction of the English language matters I most of the simple sentences, it is the placement of a modifier that can change the meaning of the entire sentence thoroughly.

Sometimes, modifier ambiguity is applied intentionally in writing since it contributes to building uncertainty or adds other levels of context. For example, the phrase “And sorry I could not travel both” from the poem by Robert Frost “The Road Not Taken” is either used to express the apologies for not being able to travel both roads or the apologies for not being able to choose one of the two options. Such a state of vagueness contributes significantly to the creation of a very rich and explained poem, thus giving a chance to the readers to come up with different understandings and meanings of the given poem. This confusion is intentional if used by the author, and especially in works such as creative writing, where it is the author’s intent to expand the reader’s imagination.

**Table: Types of Ambiguity and Their Causes**

Type of Ambiguity	Cause	Example
<b>Lexical Ambiguity</b>	Homonymy, Polysemy	"Bank" (financial institution vs. river bank)
<b>Structural Ambiguity</b>	Word arrangement within a sentence	"The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive"
<b>Syntactic Ambiguity</b>	Multiple possible sentence structures	"The man saw the boy with the telescope"
<b>Phonological Ambiguity</b>	Similar sounding words (homophones)	"Knight" vs. "night"
<b>Pragmatic Ambiguity</b>	Contextual factors, unclear references	"Can you pass the salt?" (request vs. ability)

<b>Comparative Ambiguity</b>	Unclear constructions	comparative	"I love Mary more than Lucy"
<b>Adjective Ambiguity</b>	Placement of adjectives within a sentence		"A big brick house"
<b>Adverbial Ambiguity</b>	Placement of adverbs affecting sentence meaning		"The manager promised a bonus for each employee later"
<b>Negative Ambiguity</b>	Scope of negation in a sentence		"I don't teach because it is easy"
<b>Modifier Ambiguity</b>	Misplaced modifiers	or dangling	"The soldier with a wooden leg was dancing"

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Summary of Key Findings

In the investigation of the ambiguity of English, the interconnection of the lexical and the grammatical levels and the context emerge as crucial. Lack of clarity, however, is a universal problem in communication and is an inherent part of the language as a means of expression. Focusing on the identification of the major sources of vagueness, the paper also classifies the lexical, structural/syntactical, phonetic/phonological, and pragmatic/functional sources. Each form of ambiguity has its peculiarities and must be met with appropriate measures of solving the issue. It is necessary to distinguish these causes in order to increase the efficiency of communication, especially in the circumstances that require clarity.

Thus, it is worth mentioning that the idea of ambiguity is multifaceted: it may pose a threat to the concept of accurate and efficient communication yet, at the same time, it carries the potential to enhance the variety of available ways to express ideas. Despite the fact that ambiguity can entail confusion and uncertainty, it can also contribute to the richness and variety of meaning of the language, which is why it is commonly used in literature, rhetoric, and everyday language. This duality underlines context, syntax, and semantics as the key elements that help in defining meaning and handling the tortuous nature of language. The result of this study helps to extend knowledge about the nature of the English language ambiguity and provide effective strategies for dealing with it in different communication situations.

### 5.2. Implications for Communication

The implications of the current study extend to individuals' interactions and the broader society with reference to legal, academic, and media activities. Uncertainty can inevitably result in confusion, conflict, and sometimes malice when it is not well handled. But still, it is also a wonderful opportunity to continue creation, where the secondary and the tertiary meanings are possible. Thus, it is necessary to mention that all forms of communication contain an element of risk that information will be misunderstood; thus, it is essential to use context, punctuation, and the structure of a message to de-risk it. Writing for educators, writers, and anyone who communicates, these strategies of handling ambiguity can be helpful when used in practice. In close relation with practical implications, the present investigation indicates that the word used to express an idea as well as the way they are put together, each in relation to the given context, should be initially accurate in order to minimize confusion. When it comes to precise, including legal or technical, writing, definition of terms, clear language, and correct punctuation matter. On a rather more formal level of playing with the audience, ambiguity can refer to a beneficial result of which meaning is multiple, not definite. The study focuses on such issues as the kinds of ambiguity



that can occur and the factors contributing to them because improved awareness of what is at stake with ambiguity is a key gun to improve communication and get rid of further misunderstandings.

### 5.3. Future Research Directions

The study serves as laid-out groundwork to usher in further research on the ambiguity that exists in language. Possible future research can be focused on studying ambiguity in different languages and analyzing how aspects of people's languages influence ambiguity. Furthermore, the blending of the two research fields of linguistics and cognitive research, along with the collaboration with the field of communications, might give a deeper reasoning to ambiguity and ways it is addressed in the human brain. The increase in digital communication, inclusive of the following: emojis, abbreviated shorthand language, and fast-paced, back-and-forth conversations, also presents another avenue of investigating how ambiguity is present and dealt with within the modern age of communication. Two potential similar topics for future research can be mentioned; the first one is investigating how ambiguity was being employed in various styles, such as poetic language, novels, and commercial language. Learning how the phenomenon of ambiguity works in these cases can be insightful into the possibilities of the language. Furthermore, exploring the cognitive and neurolinguistic characteristics of the language users when interpreting the examined types of the vaguer words might explain how the human brain helps people in dealing with language. Altogether, this research raises many possibilities for the subsequent investigation, which may contribute to the extent of existing knowledge on ambiguity and its place in human communication.

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