

Linguistic ambiguity

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NLN 101 Language & Writing Skills-2



Figure 1: Cartoon 1



Figure 2: Cartoon 2



Figure 3: Cartoon 3

- Why are the cartoons funny?
- Check out Arnold Zwicky's blog post on linguistic ambiguity in cartoons.

1 What is ambiguity?

- **Ambiguity** refers to signs (linguistic or otherwise) having the property of potentially bearing multiple legitimate interpretations.
- Linguistic ambiguity is usually resolved in linguistic context or in discourse i.e. the context in which one is speaking.

2 A few types of linguistic ambiguity

- The types of ambiguity found in language may depend upon which “level” of representation of language it arises from. Some kinds of ambiguity are listed below.
- For more on ambiguity read *The Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on Ambiguity and how it is understood in philosophy and linguistics.

2.1 Lexical ambiguity

This refers to ambiguity arising from words and groups of words that sound the same, or are spelt the same. This can be words of a single language or that of two languages.

- Have you heard the ‘aama’ joke from Malayalam and Tamil?

Language info: *aama* means ‘tortoise’ in Malayalam and ‘yes’ in Tamil. *paambu* means ‘snake’ in both these languages.

Malayalam speaker – See! paambu!!

Tamil speaker – aama

Malayalam speaker – No! paambu!!

Tamil speaker – aama aama!

Malayalam speaker – Noooo!! paambu, NOT aama

- Watch Hasan Minhaj White House Correspondents Dinner speech and notice the joke hidden under an ambiguity. Where does the ambiguity arise from? Watch the video from 7:50 to 8:38.

2.2 Syntactic ambiguity

This kind of ambiguity arises from ambiguous structures of phrases and clauses.

- Mary ate the sandwich on the bench.
 - the eating of the sandwich happened on the bench
 - the sandwich lying on the bench was what was eaten
- I saw a snake in the park near me.
 - the seeing of the snake happened in the park
 - the snake that was seen was located in the park.

2.3 Pronominal ambiguity

- Raneen told Sheela that she had won the lottery.
 - Raneem_i told Sheela_j that she_i won the lottery
 - Raneem_i told Sheela_j that she_j won the lottery
- Aman likes his wife and Phil does too (elided phrase).
 - Aman_i likes his_i wife and Phil_j likes his_j wife.
 - Aman_i likes his_i wife and Phil_j likes his_i wife.
- Lisa knows she is the thief.
 - Lisa_i knows she_i is the thief.
 - Lisa_i knows she_j is the thief.

2.4 Quantifier and operator scope ambiguity

This kind of ambiguity arises from the logical property of quantifiers in natural language.

- Every man loves a woman.

3 Why does ambiguity arise

3.1 Deliberate use of ambiguity

- In some uses of language, ambiguity in the form of a play of words is considered clever.
- It is used to deliberately generate two alternative interpretations. This is done in political speeches, comedy, cartoons, and literature. In these cases the ambiguity or double meaning persists despite presence of full linguistic context.

3.2 Accidental use of ambiguity

- Technical and scientific writing and reporting usually aims to avoid ambiguity.
- Ambiguity in these are usually accidental syntactic ambiguity in the form of garden path phrases and clauses, such as the newspaper headlines you've just read.
- **Tip: Keep your sentences short to avoid producing syntactic ambiguity.**

4 Classwork

In groups, classify the ambiguity in each of the following 23 headlines into one or more of the four types — lexical, syntactic, pronominal or quantifier-scope. Explain each case of ambiguity.

1. British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands
2. Dr. Ruth to Talk about Sex with Newspaper Editors
3. Lung Cancer in Women Mushrooms
4. Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
5. Stud Tires Out
6. Soviet Virgin Lands Short of Goal Again
7. Shot Off Woman's Leg Helps Nicklaus to 66
8. Reagan Wins on Budget, but More Lies Ahead
9. Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Axe
10. Miners Refuse to Work after Death
11. Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim
12. Juvenile Court Tries Shooting Defendant
13. Stolen Painting Found by Tree
14. Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in 10 Years
15. Drunk Drivers Paid \$1,000 in 1984
16. Grandmother of Eight Makes Hole in One
17. Stiff opposition expected to casketless funeral plan
18. Two Convicts Evade Noose, Jury Hung
19. Squad helps dog bite victim
20. Dealers will Hear Car Talk at Noon
21. Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
22. Milk Drinkers are Turning to Powder
23. NJ Judge to Rule on Nude Beach