

Chapter Three

Ambiguity

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Ambiguity

- **Ambiguity in semantics** refers to the phenomenon whereby a linguistic expression whether a word, phrase, or sentence admits more than one interpretation. An expression or utterance is considered ambiguous if it can be understood in multiple ways. It can manifest at several levels: **expression meaning** (lexical or compositional), **utterance meaning** (interpretation within a context of use), and **communicative meaning** (the intended speech act). This multidimensional nature of ambiguity highlights the interpretive flexibility of natural language and the necessity of both linguistic structure and contextual cues in meaning construction.

Ambiguity and Ambiguous

Ambiguity (Noun)

- ❖ **Definition:** A linguistic phenomenon in which an expression allows for more than one interpretation.
- ❖ **Usage:** Describes the general *property* of language or meaning.
- ❖ **Example:** *The ambiguity of the sentence “She saw the man with a telescope” lies in whether she used the telescope or the man had it.*
- ❖ **Function:** Abstract concept which means that the state or condition having multiple meanings.

Ambiguous (Adjective)

- ❖ **Definition:** A descriptive term applied to a word, phrase, or sentence when it can be interpreted in more than one way.
- ❖ **Usage:** Qualifies a specific *expression* as possessing ambiguity.
- ❖ **Example:** *“Bank” is ambiguous because it may refer to a financial institution or the side of a river.*
- ❖ **Function:** Practical label, it points out that a particular linguistic item is unclear or has several possible readings or meanings.

Lexeme

lexemes are linguistic units within the language system, they can be built into phrases and sentences according to the grammatical rules of the language. They are assigned to different grammatical categories which differ in their grammatical behavior. For example, a **noun** can be combined with an adjective, and the whole with an **article** to form an **NP**. The **NP** in turn can be combined as a direct object with a verb to form a **VP**, and so on.

- **English Examples**

- Noun + Adjective + Article → NP
 - *the beautiful garden*
 - *a difficult question*
- NP + Verb → VP
 - *The student reads a book.*
 - *The child plays football.*

- **Arabic Examples**

- اسم + صفة + أداة تعريف → جملة اسمية
 - الطالب المجتهد
 - الحديقة الجميلة
- عبارة اسمية + فعل → جملة فعلية
 - قرأ الطالب الكتاب
 - لعب الطفل الكرة

Lexeme and Lexicon

Lexeme

- ❖ **Definition:** The basic unit of lexical meaning in a language.
- ❖ **Nature:** Abstract entity, not tied to a single word form.
- ❖ **Function:** Represents a *concept* or meaning stored in the mental lexicon.
- ❖ **Examples:**
 - ❖ The lexeme *run* covers *run, runs, ran, running*.
 - ❖ The lexeme *child* covers *child, children, child's, children's*.
- ❖ **Note:** Different grammatical forms, spellings, or pronunciations belong to the *same lexeme*.

Lexeme and Lexicon

Lexicon

- ❖ **Definition:** The complete system of lexemes stored in the mind of a speaker (mental lexicon), or collectively in a language.
- ❖ **Nature:** A structured inventory of all lexemes in a language.
- ❖ **Function:** Acts like a mental “dictionary,” containing:
 - ❖ Lexical meaning (concepts).
 - ❖ Grammatical category (noun, verb, adjective, etc.).
 - ❖ Word forms and irregularities.
- ❖ **Example:** The English lexicon includes all lexemes such as *run*, *child*, *light*, *give up*, etc.

Lexical Ambiguity

❖ Homonymy

❖ Are **unrelated senses** of the same phonological word. Some authors distinguish between **Homographic**, senses of the same written word, and **Homophony**, senses of the same spoken word. Here we will generally just use the term homonym. We can distinguish different types depending on their syntactic behavior, and spelling, for example:

❑ **Homophones**: “same sound.” e.g. Sun / Son:

- Sun: The *sun* rises in the east.
- Son: Her *son* just started school.

❑ **Homographs**: “same writing.” e.g. Close:

- Verb: Please *close* the door.
- Adjective: They have a *close* friendship.

Lexical Ambiguity

❖ Polysemy

If a lexeme is polysemous has two or more interrelated meanings. It refers to a single word that has several meanings, but these meanings are **related by extension or association**, not completely different.

One-word, has multiple related meanings, for instance;

▪ **Nail** ;

- Use a *nail* to hang the picture on the wall.
- She painted her *nail* a bright red color.

▪ **Heavy** ;

- (a *heavy* stone, a *heavy* rain, a *heavy* meal).

The relationship between Homonymy and Polysemy

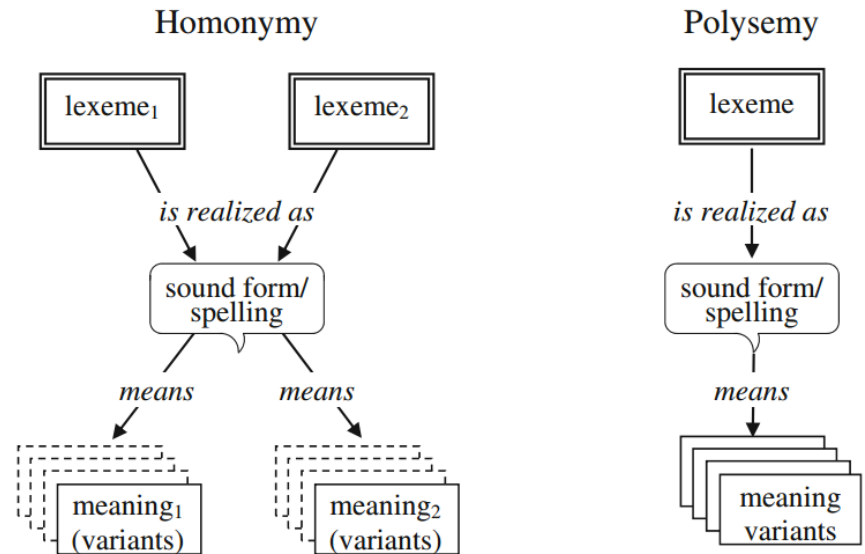
- There is a traditional distinction made in lexicology between **homonymy** and **polysemy** that are both of them deal with multiple senses of the **same phonological** word, but **polysemy** is invoked if the senses are judged to be related. : e.g.

Book

She *booked* a ticket to travel on Sunday.

He reads the *book* with focus.

Figure 3.1
Homonymy and polysemy



Vagueness

A lexical meaning is vague if it allows for flexible adaptation to the given Context of Use, it is considered vague when it is not sharply delimited but instead allows flexible adaptation depending on the (CoU) . And this does not mean the word is meaningless, rather, the boundaries of its meaning are open and can shift with situational needs.

- **Components of CoU**

- ❖ **Physical setting** → where the utterance happens (classroom, street, hospital).
- ❖ **Participants** → who is speaking and who is listening (professor vs student, doctor vs patient).
- ❖ **Time** → when the utterance is made (today, in the past, in the future).
- ❖ **Purpose** → why the utterance is made (inform, request, persuade).
- ❖ **Co-text** → the surrounding words in the discourse.

e.g. Soon

- Dinner will be ready *soon* → 10–15 minutes.
- The next election is *soon* → several month.

Compositional Ambiguity

Compositional ambiguity arises when a phrase or sentence can be interpreted in more than one way, because the meanings of its components can be combined differently, even though each word itself is clear. It's not caused by vagueness or polysemy of a single word. It's caused by the way words are structured and combined (syntax + semantics). And the **lexical ambiguity** is one word has multiple unrelated meanings (bank = river / finance). While **Compositional ambiguity** is words are clear individually, but their combination allows multiple readings.

e.g. *John and Mary are married.*

It may mean that John and Mary are married to each other or that they are both married, each to a different spouse. Such sentences are syntactically ambiguous.

Contextual Ambiguity

Interpretation in context:

The process of composition produces potential sentence meanings, but these are shaped by context (CoU). To be a reasonable message, an utterance must not be self-contradictory and must be relevant, yielding what are called possible readings, and here some cases to explain that;

- (a) The expression meaning may be taken over as it is and enriched with contextual information, e.g. by assigning it a concrete referent.
- (b) The expression meaning may be refuted and eliminated if it is contradictory or does not fit the CoU.
- (c) The expression meaning may be modified by some kind of meaning shift in order to fit the CoU, and subsequently enriched with contextual information.
- (d) The context is revised or enriched as to make the meaning fit into it

In context, an expression meaning may be (a) retained and enriched, (b) rejected if irrelevant or contradictory, (c) modified through meaning shift, or (d) accommodated by adjusting the context itself. These processes apply to lexical, grammatical, and compositional meanings, often reducing ambiguity by eliminating incompatible interpretations. **Polysemous** words show how context selects among meaning variants, while meaning shifts can create new senses, producing what is termed contextual ambiguity.

Contextual Ambiguity

Disambiguation:

It occurs when context restricts the possible readings of an ambiguous lexeme. For example, the word *letter* may mean either “written message” or “alphabetic character.” In *Johnny wrote a letter* both interpretations are possible, but in *Johnny wrote a letter to Patty* only the “message” sense is available. Thus, the sentential environment can eliminate certain meanings, narrowing interpretation. However, even grammatically correct sentences may be meaningless if lexical restrictions clash, as in *Age shivers*, where the verb *shiver* requires an animate subject but *age* cannot provide one. This shows that following rules of grammar and composition does not always ensure a sensible utterance.

Contextual Ambiguity

Meaning shifts:-

Metonymical shift

Certain expressions allow multiple readings in context due to meaning shifts rather than lexical ambiguity. For instance, *James Joyce is difficult to understand* may mean that Joyce's writings, speech, style of expression, or behavior are difficult, depending on context. Here the proper name *James Joyce* shifts to stand for his work or personal attributes, though the name itself is not polysemous. A similar pattern appears with the word *university*: in *The university lies in the eastern part of the town* it refers to the campus, in *The university has closed down the faculty of agriculture* to the institution, and in *The university starts again on April 15* to its courses. Such variation is not stored as separate lexical meanings but arises from a general semantic process—metonymy—where a term that denotes an entity is extended to things that naturally belong to it. Thus, *James Joyce* can stand for his works, and *university* can stand for its premises, administration, or courses.

Metonymy

Metonymy is a figure of speech (and a semantic relation) where one word or phrase is used to refer to another concept that is closely associated with it. It is used metonymically if it is used to refer to things that belong to the kind of objects to which the expression refers in its literal meaning.

- **Examples in English**

- *The crown* → stands for *a king or queen*.
- *The White House* → stands for *the U.S. President / administration*.

- **Examples in Arabic**

- البيت الأبيض → يدل على الإدارة الأمريكية، وليس المبنى نفسه.
- القلب → يستخدم للدلالة على المشاعر والعاطفة.
- مكة → تستخدم أحياناً للدلالة على مركز العالم الإسلامي.
- لسان العرب → لا يقصد اللسان الحرفي، بل اللغة العربية.

Contextual Ambiguity

Meaning shifts:-

Metaphorical shift

Metaphorical shift occurs when concepts from one domain are borrowed to describe phenomena in another. For example, in a Newsweek article (1998), Chinese investment institutions are introduced with the metaphor *China's cowboys*. This does not literally mean cowboys, but likens dealmakers to them in their swaggering, bold, and reckless behavior, as developed further by the metaphor of a *sheriff*, which in this context refers metonymically to the Chinese government exerting control. Here, the **source domain** is the American Wild West, while the **target domain** is China's financial sector, with the metaphor relying on the source domain's familiarity to readers. Metaphor thus constructs parallels: cowboys represent risk-taking entrepreneurs, and the sheriff represents authority. **Metaphor** involves cross-domain mapping. It creates new target-domain concepts that retain selected features of the source, making complex realities more accessible through analogy.

Metaphor

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech and a cognitive process where one concept is understood or described in terms of another, based on similarity or resemblance. It's not literal meaning. It works by mapping features of a source domain (e.g., “journey”) onto a target domain (e.g., “life”).

Examples in English

- Time is money. Time is conceptualized as a valuable resource.
- Life is a journey. We speak of life in terms of paths, destinations, obstacles.
- Ideas are food. That's a spicy idea / I can't digest that theory.

Examples in Arabic

- فلان أسد (*He is a lion*) = A brave man compared to a lion.
- الحياة طريق طويل (Life is a long road) = Life compared to a journey.

Contextual Ambiguity

Meaning shifts:-

Differentiation

Differentiation is another type of meaning shift where a single lexical item gains distinct readings through contextual specification rather than polysemy. In *James Joyce is difficult to understand*, the verb *understand* may refer to his works, his speech, his style, or his behavior, but all remain instances of “understanding” shaped by context. Similarly, in other examples *John lost his friend in the subway, in a car accident, or because of constant jokes* the verb *lose* expresses a general sense of “stop having due to some event,” while the precise meaning depends on the situation: loss of contact, loss through death, or loss of friendship. **Differentiation** thus explains variation in meaning without multiplying lexical entries, showing how context determines the respect in which an event or relation is interpreted.

Differentiation

Differentiation in language refers to the process by which a single linguistic form (word, structure, or expression) acquires multiple interpretations or functions, distinguished according to contextual, syntactic, morphological, or pragmatic factors. It explains how meaning is disambiguated not solely by the lexical item itself but by its relational use within a communicative situation.

Examples;

- **English:**

“*bank*” → can mean (a financial institution) or (the side of a river) etc.

→ Differentiation comes from **context**.

- *She deposited money in the bank.* (financial)
- *They sat by the river bank.* (geographical)

- **Arabic:**

(عين) (*ayn*) → can mean (eye), or (spring of water) etc.

→ The correct meaning is differentiated by context.

- رأيت بعيني الحقيقة (I saw the truth with my own eyes).
- شربت من عين ماء عذبة (I drank from a fresh spring).

Contextual Ambiguity

The Principle of Consistent Interpretation

It governs sentence interpretation by ensuring that only contextually relevant and non-contradictory readings are retained. Applied to utterances, it may eliminate certain compositional meanings or trigger new ones, depending on syntactic, semantic, and contextual requirements. At each stage of composition, an expression is embedded into broader contexts—from phrases to sentences, from sentence to context of utterance—which constrain and shape its meaning. For instance, in *a letter to Patty*, the phrase context rules out the “alphabetic character” sense of *letter*, while the verb *write* reinforces the “message” reading. Sentential contexts may also force shifts, such as with *John is being polite*, where the progressive requires reinterpretation of a state as an action. Metonymical, metaphorical, and differentiation shifts likewise arise from sentential constraints, ensuring coherence between components. Ultimately, interpretation combines bottom-up composition with top-down contextual adjustment, the process preserves the rules of compositionality but allows meaning shifts and eliminations so that outputs remain consistent, relevant, and interpretable in the context of utterance.

Meaning shift and Polysemy

Contextual vs lexical ambiguity

Lexemes may shift in meaning through context, which differs from polysemy. In English, *green* can mean the color or “immature,” but Arabic (*اخضر*) stays with the color only. Metonymy shows in English *lend a hand* and Arabic (*مدّ يد العون*) extend a hand of help, where *hand* / *يد* shifts to mean “assistance.” Metaphor appears in English *time is money* and Arabic (*الوقت كالسيف*) time is like a sword, each borrowing imagery from another domain. Differentiation is seen in English *lose a friend* (death, contact, or friendship loss) and Arabic (*فقد صديقه*) with the same range. Thus, while polysemy is language-specific, contextual meaning shifts metonymy, metaphor, differentiation are general and cross-linguistic.

Meaning shift and Polysemy

Polysemy and contextual meaning shifts

Are closely related, since many polysemous variants arise through processes such as metonymy, metaphor, or differentiation. Metaphor also produces polysemy, as in English mouse (animal or computer device) or Arabic word (رأس) which means head used for “*leader*.” The lexeme *film*, for example, has developed through successive metonymical shifts—from “thin layer” to “photographic strip,” “cinema projection,” and finally “film industry.” This demonstrates how systematic principles of meaning extension account for the wide semantic range of many lexemes without assuming random proliferation of senses.

Thanks for your attention