

AMBIGUITY IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND RESOLUTION

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Abstract

Effective communication is not just about the transmission of ideas/messages from the sender to the receiver. Rather, it is about the dissemination of properly worded meaningful ideas/messages that are comprehensible to both parties and which ultimately can attract the desired response or feedback. Semantic clarity therefore, is very essential to the effectiveness of communication which facilitates the attainment of target goals. Ambiguity however, has a way of intruding into communication and subjecting ideas/messages to double or multiple semantic interpretations thereby resulting in semantic complexity and sometimes leading to semantic confusion. Proper disambiguation however, remains the only antidote to the semantic problem of ambiguous communication. This paper therefore, highlights causes of ambiguity in human communication. It analyses its possible consequences. Finally, it explicates appropriate ambiguity resolution techniques as linguistic panacea.

Kekaburan dalam Komunikasi Manusia: Sebab, Konsekuensi dan Resolusi

Abstrak

Komunikasi berkesan bukan setakat menyampaikan idea/mesej dari penyampai kepada penerima. Malah, ianya berkaitan dengan penyaluran idea/mesej yang bermakna dan diungkap dengan baik agar boleh difahami oleh kedua-dua pihak yang pada akhirnya dapat merangsang maklumbalas yang diharapkan. Justeru, kejelasan semantik adalah penting demi keberkesanan komunikasi yang membawa kepada pencapaian sesuatu matlamat. Namun kekaburan berkemampuan mengganggu proses komunikasi dan menyebabkan idea/mesej mempunyai dwi atau pelbagai interpretasi semantik yang mengakibatkan kompleksiti dan kadang-kadang membawa kepada kekeliruan semantik. Proses nyahkekaburan adalah perlu dan dianggap satu-satunya usaha menangani masalah semantik akibat komunikasi yang kabur. Makalah ini membincangkan kesan kekaburan dalam komunikasi manusia. Ia juga menganalisis kesan dan konsekuensi kekaburan. Makalah ini juga menyampaikan teknik-teknik resolusi yang sesuai sebagai suatu langkah linguistik untuk menangani masalah kekaburan.

Keywords: Ambiguity, human communication, feedback, semantic clarity, semantic interpretation

Introduction

Various linguists like Hirst (1982), Kemson (1977), Cruse (1983), Yusuf (1984 and 1990), Ruwet (1983), Oloruntoba-Oju (1999) etc. have attempted the definition/interpretation of ambiguity as a concept. What can be deduced from their various definitions/interpretations is the fact that ambiguity has to do with the susceptibility of lexical items that is, words or grammatical strings, that is, expressions to dual/double or multiple semantic interpretations. The *Chambers Dictionary* however, limits the scope of the semantic interpretation of ambiguity by giving the meaning of the adjective “ambiguous” as having two or more possible meanings. This means the example of ambiguity given by Little (1983) “If the baby does not thrive on fresh milk boil it” may not be regarded as an authentic ambiguity because only it is first meaning “to boil the fresh milk” is logical while the second meaning “to boil the baby” is not logical or possible under normal situation. Various linguists have however, identified lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, phonetic or phonological ambiguity and semantic ambiguity as types of ambiguity.

The word or term communication has also attracted myriad of definitions from experts in various/related field hence, Little (1983) describes it as a Chameleon of a word changing the colour of its meaning with a change of speaker or listeners. Authors like Rogers and Rogers (1976), Cook (1980), Appleby (1981), Evans (1984), Lucey (1991), Ashaolu, Fabiyi & Eko-Davis (1993) etc. have given definitions of communication. Oluga, Adewusi and Babalola (2001:4) however, harmonize the basic points of many of these definitions by describing communication as:

the process which involves the transmission of properly conceived and coded facts, ideas, views, thoughts, opinions, messages, feelings or information among individuals, organisations or systems via appropriate means like face to face conversations, letters, reports, memoranda, drawings, designs, posters etc. which can be easily decoded, understood, responded to or acted upon with the aid of appropriate feedback

Communication can be verbal - making use of words in speech or in writing and it can be non-verbal - not using spoken or written words but other means like facial expression, physical appearance, gesture, body movement and para language. We can also have vertical communication, horizontal communication, diagonal communication and quasi or semi vertical communication as forms of communication in an organization (Evans, 1984).

Effective communication however, is not just the sending and receiving of messages or information. It is that which does not fail neither to successfully pass exactly the sender's intended message (meaning) nor to attract a desired or corresponding feedback. Ambiguity can therefore be a hindrance to effective communication just because of the semantic confusion that arises from the susceptibility of an ambiguous expression to double or multiple semantic interpretations. It is in the light of this that Little (1983) points out that though second meanings have a way of appearing in what one writes without being aware, to produce a sentence capable of only one meaning every time one writes (or speaks) must be one's aim as a good communicator. The knowledge of the fundamental causes, likely consequences and possible ambiguity-resolution techniques to be discussed can go a long way to assist writers or speakers who always want their messages or information to be as meaningful and comprehensible as possible, especially to their intended recipients that is, the target audience.

Causes of Ambiguity in Human Communication

Various causes of ambiguity have been identified by some of the linguists and communication experts that have contributed to the study of ambiguity. Some of such already identified causes as well as some other factors responsible for ambiguity in human communication are discussed below with appropriate examples.

Use of Ambiguous Lexemes

This occurs when communicators, speakers or writers, use words or expressions that are inherently ambiguous, which are capable of reflecting or conveying hidden meanings, in addition to the superficial meaning, to the readers or listeners if not to the writers or speakers. Moulton and Robinson (1981) identify this major cause of ambiguity because it is fundamental to semantic complexity. A good example of inherently ambiguous lexeme is the use of the adjective “old” in an expression like “I trust my old friends” or “I want to see only my old friends”. The use of “old” renders the expressions ambiguous as “old friends” can mean “friends that have been known for a long period” or “friends who are no longer young”.

Omission of Vital Punctuations

This is another major cause or factor responsible for ambiguity in human communication. This is so because proper use of punctuation marks in most cases usually aids the communication/comprehension of speaker’s or writer’s intended meaning. Hence, the omission of vital punctuations may not clarify intended meaning and thereby subject communicator’s expressions or ideas to double or multiple semantic interpretations. For example, the expression “If you need a good car at the end of the month bring your money” is capable of dual or double semantic interpretations because it is not properly punctuated to indicate the intended meaning by putting a comma at the appropriate place. Hence, the expression as it is, can either mean “The money should be brought at the end of the month if the good car is needed” or “The money should be brought if the good car is needed at the end of the month”.

Use of Double or Multiple Referent Pronouns

This usually arises when a communicator, speaker or writer, uses a pronoun that can go with two or more nouns mentioned in a given expression, that is, where such a pronoun has double or multiple nominal referents. Cook (1983) and Ayodele (1996) identify the role of this key factor in semantic multiplicity. A good example of an expression that illustrates this is “Engr. James told Dr. Thomas that he has been nominated for the president’s 2010 national award”. This is ambiguous because the personal pronoun “he” as used in the expression has dual referents as it can either refer to the subject noun or the object noun. Hence, the expression can either mean “Engr. James is the one nominated for the president’s 2010 national award and he is only telling Dr. Thomas” or “Dr. Thomas is the one nominated for the president’s 2010 national award and Engr. James is just informing him”.

Multiple Class Membership of Some Verbs

This according Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1972) is possible because some verbs can belong in some ways, to different classes of verbs and thereby function grammatically in different ways. The problem in this kind of situation is that such multiple class membership can subject the various functional possibilities of the verbs to different semantic interpretations. A good example is the expression “she found him a reliable partner” where the verb “found” can be mono-transitively and di-transitively used. When used mono-transitively, we will have the SVOC sentence structure with the sentence meaning “She discovered/realised that he was a reliable partner”. When used di-transitively we will have

the SVOO sentence structure with the sentence meaning “She got a reliable partner for him”. The same thing applies to the verb “called” in “They called him a staunch supporter”. It can mean “They referred to him as a staunch supporter” or “They brought a staunch supporter to him”.

Use of Non-Restrictive Adjectives

This is one key cause or factor responsible for ambiguity in human communication identified/recognized by Allsop (1992). It is peculiar to pre-modifying adjectives that usually have unique reference and therefore, cannot be further limited or restricted by such pre-modifying adjectives. Double or multiple semantic interpretations can be possible with the use of such pre-modifying non-restrictive adjectives because they are not usually marked, either by punctuation in written verbal communication or by intonation in spoken/oral verbal communication. A good expression that can illustrate this kind of ambiguity is “The patriotic British citizens respect their unwritten constitution a lot”. This can mean “All the British citizens are patriotic and they respect their unwritten constitution” or “Only the patriotic British citizens (not all citizens) respect their unwritten constitution a lot”.

Positional and Directional Interpretations of Adjuncts

This is another cause of ambiguity in human communication identified by Quirk et al (1972). The positional and directional interpretations of modifying adjuncts refer to situations where adjuncts, which are a form of adverbial, used in given expressions can be described as, or go for both, adjuncts of position and adjuncts of direction. A good example of an adjunct that can subject an expression to ambiguity is “upstairs” as in “The boy is matching upstairs”. The expression is ambiguous because it can mean “The boy is upstairs and he is matching there” when the adjunct “upstairs” is given a positional interpretation. The expression can also mean “The boy was downstairs but he is now matching upstairs” when the adjunct “upstairs” is given a directional interpretation. The expression “you can run outside’ is also ambiguous because the adjunct “outside” is also capable of positional and directional interpretations.

Complex Multiple Modification of Nominal Groups

It is paradoxical that complex multiple pre and post modification of heads of nominal groups can also lend expressions so modified to double or triple semantic interpretations. This can be so if a pre or post-modifying element can possibly modify more than one item or where two or more pre or post modifying elements modify just a single head. For example, the expression “the new female students’ ward” can mean “the female students ward that is new” or “ward for new female students”. “Mature boys and girls” can mean “boys and girls who are mature” or “mature boys and girls with unspecified description”. “The man sitting on the chair that has a bad leg” can either mean “The man sitting on the chair has a bad leg” or “the chair on which the man is sitting has a bad leg”. Also, “the body guard bringing a dog with a chain on the neck” can mean “The guard bringing the dog has a chain on his neck” or “The dog the guard is bringing has a chain on its neck”.

Use of Hanging Clausal Modifiers

This cause of ambiguity, also identified by Cook (1983) results from imprecise placement of a clausal modifying string, which makes it to hang. This happens when the idea expressed by such a hanging modifying string is related to both the intended subject of the sentence or expression and any other noun in the same sentence or expression. A good example of a sentence or an expression with a hanging clausal modifier is “Arriving earlier than expected, the staff members saw the auditors”. The clause “arriving earlier than expected” can either

refer to the staff members or the auditors hence, the expression can mean “The staff members who arrived earlier than expected saw the auditors”. It can also mean “The auditors who arrived earlier than expected were seen by the staff members.

Clausal Non-finiteness

This is also a factor that can possibly induce ambiguity. Clausal non-finiteness simply refers to the inability of such a clause with this feature or quality to reflect or indicate time/tense, mood, person or number. An example of an expression whose ambiguity results from clausal non-finiteness is “We explained to them how to receive the national merit award from the president”. The clause “how to receive a national merit award from the president” renders the whole expression ambiguous and lend it to dual semantic interpretations because it can now mean “how to behave when one is about to be presented a national merit award by the president” or “what one can do or steps one can take to be qualified/nominated for the national merit award”.

Mixed Quantification

This, according to Yusuf (1990:74) is “an ambiguity inducing linguistic phenomenon” which according to him occurs when some quantifiers susceptible of ambiguity are used. A good example of a mixed quantification induced ambiguity is “Four doctors treated eight patients” which is capable of having about three different semantic interpretations. Firstly, the expression can mean the four doctors divided the eight patients and they then treated them e.g. two patients to each of the four doctors. Secondly, the expression can mean each of the four doctors treated all the eight patients one after the other meaning each of the eight patients was treated by each of the four doctors. Thirdly, the expression can mean each of the four doctors treated eight different patients making a total of thirty-two patients treated altogether by the four doctors.

Consequences of Ambiguity in Human Communication

Ambiguity usually poses some problems in linguistic studies in that structural analyses are usually done for the various possible semantic interpretations of given ambiguous expressions. This is because the various possible meanings are usually treated as if they are different expressions in order to properly account for constituent structures of the possible meanings. Apart from the effect of ambiguity on linguistic analysis or the constituent structures of sentences, we also have the effect of ambiguity on various forms of continuous writing/expository writing and literary/creative writing, which may be positive or negative.

As far as all forms of expository or continuous writing is concerned, clarity, which has to do with the dissemination of comprehensible and unequivocal information, is an inevitable quality. This is because clarity of the meaning of a message is a vital parameter for measuring the effectiveness of communication hence, the dissemination of a meaningful idea is believed to be the ultimate goal of communication. However, ambiguity in communication prevents clarity of idea in that it makes expressions to confuse receivers (readers or listeners) by communicating both sender’s intended and unintended meanings at the same time. For example, if a boss just told his/her secretary “I want to see only my old friends” the message lacks clarity because it can refer to either “friends that the boss has known for a long period of time” or “friends who are no longer young”. Ambiguity can therefore, impede clarity of idea, which happens to be a fundamental communication principle.

Ambiguity can negatively affect the response or the feedback to the message communicated and received. This will usually be the case where the receiver (reader or listener) decides to

take for granted one of the meanings of the ambiguous expressions communicated to him/her. If he/she unfortunately takes a wrong meaning or interpretation for granted then this will likely affect his/her reaction or response to the communicated message. The feedback will be negative or contrary to the expected. For example, the boss of the earlier mentioned secretary who gave the directive “I want to see only my old friends” can be about forty-five years having friends who are his age mates known from childhood as well as those old enough to be his father from whom he gets advices. If the boss in question actually means or wants to see the former, whereas the secretary feels he/she wants to see the latter, then there will be a negative response to the instruction given by the secretary. The secretary may allow those the boss is not ready/prepared to see or attend to see, and this is serious in communication because the response or feedback is a most important parameter used in measuring the effectiveness of communication.

The effect of ambiguity in literary creativity or literary communication especially poetry differs from that of general communication or expository writing. This is because literary works with very straightforward or direct meanings may be seen as not being creative enough. Hence, some linguistic devices are usually used to make the intended meaning of such creative literary works especially poems to be hidden or indirect. They can even be pregnant with meanings. It is against this background that figurative language is usually used in such creative writing and the appropriate use of ambiguous lexemes to convey hidden meanings or to make indirect the intended meaning may be regarded as pun used to play on the meaning of words used in a special way. Such literary or figurative ambiguity will be seen as virtue of language use that brings out the hidden aesthetic of literary language and creativity. For example, if a poet says in a poem “Don’t speak ill/evil of a past hero” the ambiguity of the expression may attract positive appreciation or criticism. However, the expression is ambiguous in that it can mean “Don’t say the bad thing a past hero did” or “Don’t say a bad thing about a past hero”.

It is however; important to point out the fact that the use of ambiguities or ambiguous modifications should not be misconstrued to mean that ambiguity is now an acceptable device or technique of general communication. Rather, its acceptance, in poetry for example, is just an exception to the basic facts already discussed under the effects of ambiguity in communication or expository writing. It is therefore, important to note that the best communication is that which is as ambiguity-free as possible. It should also be noted that ambiguity, which may be allowed in some creative or literary works, should be avoided in the appreciation of even creative or literary works especially for examination purpose. This is to ensure the communication of comprehensible ideas or messages at all times.

Resolution of Ambiguity in Human Communication

The term technically used to describe the resolution of ambiguity in human communication is disambiguation. However, to resolve an ambiguity or to disambiguate an utterance or expression is also subject to dual interpretations. Basically, it can mean the process of determining the correct and appropriate sense of a lexically or structurally ambiguous grammatical constituent (Hirst, 1987). It can also mean the use of various linguistic devices to remove the ambiguities of given expressions. Disambiguation with regard to the first interpretation is essentially required in reading comprehension because detecting or deciphering the appropriate meaning of any given ambiguous expression in such a situation can prevent misunderstanding and thereby aid proper comprehension of communicated ideas. Disambiguation with regard to the second interpretation applies to, and is essential in, written communication because those who write features and editorials of dailies and magazines,

continuous writing -essays, reports, letters written in examinations etc can use appropriate disambiguation methods or devices to correct ambiguities discovered in their expressions thereby ensuring clarity.

Ambiguities in speech communication are usually resolved with the appropriate use of relevant prosodic features like stress, tone, intonation and pause; hence, such disambiguation becomes less problematic because those prosodic features or elements when properly used can easily make the intended meaning known. But unfortunately, they cannot be adequately represented in written communication. In speech communication for example, the ambiguous string “new female students’ ward” can be resolved or disambiguated by using appropriate tone group to depict the intended meaning. If what is intended is “female students ward that is new” then “new” will be treated as a tone group while “female students’ ward” will be treated as a tone group. But if what is intended is “ward for new female students” then “new female students” will be treated as a tone group while “ward” will be another tone group. Lyons’ (1968) example “They can fish” can also be disambiguated in speech by giving ‘can’ a rising intonation if what is intended is that “They process fish as can food” or by giving ‘can’ a falling intonation if what is intended is the fact “They know how to fish or catch fish”.

Disambiguation of an expression especially that resulting from dual or multiple distributional classification of a given lexical items according to Lyons (1968) can depend on the contextual usage and the meanings of the constituent parts of such expressions which when considered as a whole will make clear the appropriate and intended meaning of such ambiguous strings. The context of use can therefore also disambiguate the expression “They can fish” because if the context is that of ‘life in a riverine area’ then it will likely mean “They know how to fish or catch fish” but if it is that of ‘food production or processing’ then it will likely be “They know how to process fish as can food”. Moulton and Robinson (1981) also support this position stating that the disambiguation of semantically ambiguous lexemes or expressions can rely on the context-dependent-pragmatic information that may be given either linguistically or non-linguistically. Their example of ambiguous expression “Mary had a lamb” will then mean “Mary was an owner of a lamb” if the context of communication is “animal husbandry or pet domestication” or mean “Mary unusually gave birth to a lamb” if the context of communication is that of “obstetric anomaly among pregnant women”.

Ambiguity of semantically complex structures especially in written communication can be resolved by specifying the intended constituents’ structure of such a sentence or expression and thereby preventing misinterpretation. This can be done using a method or technique called hyphenation. This as its name suggests simply involves the use of hyphen (-), one of the common punctuation marks that is specially used in the formation of compound lexical items especially in compound nouns. This method can be used to resolve the ambiguity of the expression “new female students’ ward”. For example, if what is intended by the communicator is “the ward for female students that is new” then it can be properly hyphenated as “new female-students’ ward”. But if what is intended by the communicator is “the ward for new female students” then the expression can be properly hyphenated as “new-female-students’ ward”. Other ambiguous expressions resulting from multiple pre-modification like “popular culture researcher”, “local advertisement agents” and “good news broadcasters’ can also be disambiguated using the same method.

Proper punctuation of grammatical strings using commas can help to prevent and resolve cases of double or multiple semantic interpretations. Punctuation according to Ngwaba

(1981) refers to series of marks used to mark off words one from another either to show grammatical relationship or to give emphasis. Sherman and Johnson (1983) point out that the major function of punctuation is to make written communication clearer and easy to read. Weisman (1985) also adds that punctuation is a means by which a writer can achieve semantic clarity and exactness and that it is writer's semantic intention that guides the choice and placement of punctuation. The comma happens to be a basic punctuation mark that is used to indicate a slight pause so as to separate words, phrases or clauses within a sentence. It can therefore perform disambiguation/ambiguity-resolution function in that it can mark off some grammatical or lexical items from others in a main expression in such a way that semantic clarity will be achieved. For example, the ambiguous expression "If you need a good car before the end of the month bring your money" can be punctuated properly as "If you need a good car, at the end of the month bring your money", if the communicator's intended meaning is that the money should be brought at the end of the month. It can also be punctuated as "If you need a good car at the end of the month, bring your money" if the communicator's intended meaning is that the money should be brought (at an unspecified time) if the good car is need at the end of the month.

Another disambiguation method or technique that can aid the resolution of ambiguities in written communication is selection of specific-purpose-lexeme. This may apply to the resolution of ambiguities resulting from multiple post-modification as in the case of "the man sitting on the chair that has a bad leg". The ambiguity of this expression specifically arises because of the use of the relative pronoun 'that' which is a neutral or general purpose pronoun used for both human and non-human referents. To disambiguate this expression therefore, a specific purpose (specific referent) relative pronoun can be used. For example 'who' a relative pronoun used for persons or human referents can be selected or used in place of 'that' if the communicator's intended meaning is that "the man sitting on the chair has a bad leg" the expression will then be "the man sitting on the chair who has a bag leg". The relative pronoun 'that' can also be replaced by the relative pronoun 'which' used for inanimate things or non-human referents especially if what the communicator wants to say is that "The chair on which the man is sitting has a bad leg" and in which case the expression will now be "the man sitting on the chair which has a bad leg".

Lexical replacement can also be a good disambiguation technique which simply has to do with the substitution of lexical or grammatical items discovered to be (inherently) ambiguous in given context with other close synonyms of such words that need to be replaced by substitution. This can be very necessary or inevitable especially in the case of complete ambiguity identified by Little (1983) which, try what he/she can, the receiver cannot decipher the intended meaning of the communicated message. The adjective "old" which is inherently ambiguous as used in "I trust my old friends" and "I want to see only my old friends" can be replaced with some other unambiguous descriptive adjective that are synonymous with old to specifically indicate the communicator's intended meaning. For example, the adjective "aged" or "elderly" can be used to replace "old" to have "I trust my aged/elderly friends" and "I want to see only my elderly/aged friends" if by "old friends" what is intended is friends who are no longer young. The adjectives 'ancient' and 'agelong' are synonyms of 'old' when it refers to that which has been existing for a long time but their contextual suitability here is another thing. It is therefore also important to note that there are no hundred percent synonyms that can be used interchangeably in all situations or contexts. For example while "wealthy" can be used as a synonym to replace "rich" in "The man is very rich" it cannot be used as a synonym to replace it in "Beans is very rich in protein".

Finally, syntactic reorganisation is another vital method or technique that can be used to resolve ambiguity. This linguistic device basically has to do with structural rearrangement of the grammatical constituents or lexical components of identified ambiguous expressions which sometimes may even require some lexical insertion. For example the expression “mature boys and girls” can be rearranged in different ways to have its different meanings. We can have “girls and mature boys”, “mature boys and mature girls” or “boy and girls, (who are) both mature”. It means the lexical repetition of ‘mature’ in the second rearrangement may be tolerated if only to achieve clarity, a most important quality of communication. The ambiguous expression “The boy is matching upstairs” can also be rearranged syntactically as “Upstairs, the boy is matching” to have the positional interpretation of the adjunct “upstairs”. The expression “new female students ward” can still be rearranged as “ward for new female students” or “new ward for female students” where ‘for’ which has a prepositional meaning similar to that of the genitive ‘s’ is inserted. The expression “Arriving earlier than expected the staff members saw the auditors” can also be syntactically rearranged with slight modification to have its two meanings hence, we can have “The staff members, arriving earlier than expected saw the auditors” or “The auditors, arriving earlier than expected were seen by the staff members”.

Conclusion

Good communicators, whether writers or speakers, who want their written or spoken/speech communication to be effective at all times must know how to avoid ambiguity at all times. To make the messages or ideas they disseminate to convey only the intended meanings to their target audience that is, readers or listeners, they must know how to use various linguistic (and even non-linguistic) devices at their disposal to remove ambiguities that find their ways into their communicated messages. This is because ambiguity, due to its susceptibility to double or multiple, and sometimes confusing, semantic interpretations may constitute a hindrance to proper comprehension and interpretation, an obstacle to getting desired response/feedback and an impediment to the attainment of communicator’s target goal. However, the knowledge of the possible causes of ambiguity in human communication, the consequences of ambiguity and the application of corresponding disambiguation techniques to resolve such ambiguity will go along in assisting communicators to achieve semantic clarity which is a most important characteristic of effective communication.

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