

AMBIGUITY: A FORM OF SEMANTIC NOISE IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Competence in communication skills is indispensable for success at school and at work. Transceivers communicate with the desire to be understood. However, the English Language is inherently embedded with certain features which create ambiguity especially for those who adopt it as a second language. This paper examines the phenomenon of ambiguity in the English Language, its types and causes. Using copious examples, it elucidates the distortions and absurdities that could occur when factors which cause ambiguity in English are not given due consideration. It discusses as well the implication this situation has for the Nigerian educational system.

Key Words: Ambiguity, Communication, Language, Word level, Sentence level

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of a man's life. In fact, an argument can be raised that besides breathing, no other human activity surpasses communication in frequency. Every waking moment of life involves communication. Because of this pivotal position of communication, man must learn to communicate effectively when he shares his feelings, ideas and opinions with people. It is pertinent to note that communication is more or less a compulsive activity of human beings; it is nonetheless generally always purposeful. When people communicate, they intend that they should be understood and that the information they have passed across be acted upon.

However, there is more than meets the eye in a communication process because meanings derived from a communication

experience could either be intentional or unintentional. We say it is intentional when the sender actually chooses and uses the right symbols that adequately express his intended ideas and feelings in such a way that the receiver gets to understand and reacts to them accordingly. On the other hand, there are pieces of unintentional information that get to the receiver from wrong choice and use of words, phrases, incorrect pronunciation, grammatical and syntactical errors, and attitude of the speaker to the receiver as perceived in his tone, intonation and mood. All these and more constitute semantic noise in communication parlance, distorting and interfering with the message; it prevents the receiver from grasping the exact meanings intended by the sender.

Noise relates to "anything that disrupts the communication process, leading to ambi-

guity, misunderstanding, distortion, wrong interpretation or inability to get either the message or the feedback.” (Ezenwanebe, 2005). Noise pervades the entire communication process from the sender to the feedback. The fewer and weaker the noise, the more effective the communication will be. Noise could be physical, psychological or semantic (earlier mentioned). Noise is capable of making a message received differ from the message sent; hence efforts must be made to minimize its effects on any communication situation.

Ambiguity Types

According to Oloruntoba-Oju (1999), ambiguity refers to “a linguistic situation in which a unit of communication is capable of more than one interpretation and is therefore capable of impeding the receiver’s comprehension of the unit.”

Based on the classification scheme employed by Kamstie, Chantree (undated) groups ambiguity into:

- (i) Lexical ambiguity – resulting from a situation in which a word may have more than one interpretation.
- (ii) Semantic ambiguity – when several interpretations result from the different ways in which the meanings of word in a phrase can be combined.
- (iii) Syntactic ambiguity – a case where several different interpretations arise as a result of the different ways in which a sequence of words can be grammatically structured.
- (iv) Pragmatic ambiguity – a situation where the context of a phrase results in the possibility of alternative interpretations of that phrase.

Other linguistic concepts related to ambiguity and capable of causing misinterpretations are:

- (i) Generality – when one meaning subsumes other meaning and still the same word is used to express both.
- (ii) Indeterminacy – this arises because there are factors which, though essential for understanding a meaning, are necessary in order to establish what it refers to.
- (iii) Vagueness – it occurs when one is always not sure of a meaning no matter how much one tries to qualify it.

In addition to the above, Kamstie quoted by Chantree also observes there are certain words and linguistic constructions that are inherently ambiguous – or at least “vague”.

From his own perspective, however, Oloruntola – Oju (1999) identified two broad types of ambiguity– lexical ambiguity and sentence ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is described as the ambiguity resulting from the contribution that a lexical item makes to meaning, either on its own or in a context while sentence ambiguity is expressed as a situation whereby a sentence can be analyzed grammatically into two or more structures, presumably with each structure corresponding to a distinct semantic interpretation.

Causes of Ambiguity

When fused together, we can say ambiguity results from the contribution a chosen lexical item makes to meaning by itself or within its context and by the structure of a phrase or a whole sentence. The application of both classifications to the spoken

and written forms of communication will be examined in this discourse.

Ambiguity at Word Level

In any given communication situation, a sender must choose carefully and use words which accurately represent his ideas. In doing this, two questions he should ask are:

- (i) How accurately do the words I want to use express the idea, information and feeling I have generated?
- (ii) How can I be sure that the receiver at his end will assign the same value to these words as I do?

Certain factors which will assist the sender achieve these goals are discussed below:

The sender must clearly understand what he wants to communicate and get his objective right. "What do I want to say on this subject matter and what exactly do I intend to achieve?", the sender should ask himself. Having done this, he then goes ahead to make a mental organization of his points. Getting clarity of what the communicator intends to say is paramount because one can only give others what one has. It is indisputable then that ambiguity will occur when there is a basic uncertainty in a speaker's original ideas.

Sincerity of expression is another factor that will make the sender express precisely the very idea he has in mind with the choice of the right words. In this wise, a speaker needs be sincere in his motive and not be pretentious in his language use.

To further ensure that his chosen words give the expected meaning, a sender should ascertain that he indicates any familiar words he wants the receiver to attach an unfamiliar meaning to by pointing this out in his speeches or by putting such words in quotation marks or parenthesis in the written form. Similarly, the special meaning the sender wishes to attach to a familiar word should be printed out at the first usage of such words or expression.

Another crucial point to note in preventing ambiguity through the choice of words made has to do with the sender's knowledge about the receiver in terms of his (sender's) age, educational background, sex, intelligence level, the receiver's knowledge of the subject matter and how the message will affect him/her. The sender must always apply his awareness of the different meanings a word can have vis-a-via,

- Denotative meaning
- Connotative or associative meaning
- Pejorative (derogatory) meaning.

When a word is used denotatively, the word is meant to conjure specific concepts, void of any emotional colouration. The meaning is an ordinary one. Whereas, connotative usage of words stands for what the word implies, it carries emotion and is not neutral. It conveys a special meaning as determined by the intention of the user. The pejorative meaning refers to meanings that are meant to show disapproval or criticism; words are used in a derogative manner.

Closely related to the meaning of words are communication ethics in relation to the

choice of words by communicators. These have to do with the communicator's view of the receiver. Illustrating this, Ojebode (2006) points out that certain terms, which will discourage relationships, should be substituted with acceptable ones in discussions while giving talks or in jingles. Below are such terms:

<u>Offensive terms</u>	<u>Acceptable terms</u>
HIV/AIDS patients	People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA)
Patient	Client
Rebels	Radicals
Disabled	Physically challenged

Likewise, vulgar language and offensive expressions that connote gender insensitivity, words and statements that could evoke religious and ethnic provocation should be avoided in a communication context. This is because words are capable of having physical, emotional and cognitive effects on people.

At this juncture, the need arises to make it clear that there are certain features about many words in the English language that require special mastery for a speaker to avoid being misconstrued or his words misinterpreted. The skills include knowing, recognizing and using words that have the same or different meanings (synonyms /antonyms) as well as those that look and sound alike, words that are pronounced in the same way though they are different and even the ones that are different but are pronounced alike (homographs /homophones). Of focus here are homonyms, homophones, synonyms, malapropisms and homographs.

Homonyms

Homonyms are words with the same spelling and pronunciation but are different in meaning. Many words are homonyms in the English language such as:

- capital - the most important town or city of a country
- capital - money or property especially when it is used to start a business
- corn - plant producing a grain
- corn - a small painful area of hardened skin on a foot
- bumper - a bar fixed to the back and front of a motor vehicle
- bumper - unusually and pleasantly large
- man - a male person
- man - to work at

The implication of homonyms is that a sender and a receiver need to give due attention to both the grammatical function as well as the contextual meaning of a word in order to obtain its right meaning. Ezenwanebe (2005) refers to contextual meaning as the meaning of a word in the midst of other words surrounding it as well as its meaning as part of the whole text (the immediate and the remote context).

Giving appropriate consideration to the environment within which a word is situated enables the transceivers to obtain that exact meaning a word is meant to have as determined by the setting. Illustrated below are homonyms:

Accra is the capital of Ghana. The company has a huge working capital. This is not a season for corn. Tight shoes

can give you corn.

A lorry hit the bumper of my car. We had a bumper harvest at the farm this year.

He is a dirty old man. Kindly ask two men to man the gate. (Longman, 2005).

Homophones

Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings. They constitute a major source of confusion, distortion of message, difficulty and delay of message in written communication. Use of co-homophones also exposes the user to undue embarrassment.

The sentences below serve as an illustration to how homophones could cause distortions to messages and confusion for the receiver.

- (a) There was know weak when a knew principle officer did not right to give a peace of complement to the grate work we where doing their.
- (b) I desire to no weather I will knead a knew tyre for my stationery car which I packed in the plain beside the see sure.
- (a) There was no week when a new principal officer did not write to give a piece of compliment to the great work we were doing there.
- (a) I desire to know whether I will need a new tyre for my stationary car which I parked in the plane beside the seashore.

Some homophones, which are often confused, are:

Their/there, known/no, grate/great, tyre/tyre, hear/here, sale/sail, meat/meet,

whether/weather, write/right/rite weak/week, peace/piece, stationary/stationery, complement/compliment, sow/sew, prey/pray, alter/altar, principle/principal, sea/see, pack/park, sew/so/sow, plain/plane, sight/cite (Heinemann, 2002).

Homographs

Homographs are words with the same spelling but with different pronunciation and meaning. Errors with homographs show up in oral communication, especially when people have to read aloud, and pronounce words.

Examples of homographs:

- Lead** - a metal
 - leather strap for dogs
 - to guide somebody
- Live** - having life, broadcast which was not recorded in advance
 - exist
- Minute** - the sixtieth part of one hour
 - very little, insignificant amount.

These sentences demonstrate homographs

- a. Both men always lead the police to the place where the stolen lead is hidden.
 b. He spent every minute of the meeting explaining minute details of his plan.

Synonyms

Synonyms in English comprise a group of words, which is capable of causing ambiguity in communication. They are words which are similar in meaning but are not exactly the same. In other words, there are no perfect synonyms in English language. (Onaye, 1998).

Certain factors like the idea the speaker wants to express, the purpose of his message and the context under which he speaks

influence the choice of a particular word over the other synonyms. For instance, “**killing**” is a deliberate act, which results in the death of somebody/something. Possible synonyms for this word are: **murder, assassination, slaying, suffocation, strangulation, hanging, manslaughter, bloodshed, butchery, taking life, destruction**. On close observation, however, it will be seen that each of these words listed above indicates a cause of death which differs from the others in the list.

Other factors which are considered for picking a word among a list of synonyms are

- (i) the narrowness of application of a particular word which will make ‘**illicit**’ and not ‘**illegal**’ for example, be chosen in a certain context;
- (ii) the intensity or degree of the words as shown by the relationship between **devastate/old/worn out/scrawny or scold/blame/punish/condemn** and
- (iii) the emotional connotation as demonstrated in these paired words: **skinny/thin, strong heart/hardened, fat/plump, child-like/childish, generous/extravagant, bold/audacious**.

Malapropism

Still another factor capable of causing confusion in communication at the level of word choice is malapropism – a term used to identify words used in error for other words that are somewhat like them in sound or spelling. The term was coined from the name of a female character, Mrs. Malaprop, in a play, **The Rivals** written by Richard Sheridan. (Ezenwanebe, 2005). In the drama, Mrs. Malaprop describes another character as ‘**the very**

pineapple of politeness and she hopes her daughter who was told to “illiterate a young man from her memory” will never become “a progeny of learning”. The correct version of this expressions should be “**a pinnacle of politeness**”, “**to obliterate a young man from her memory**” and become “**a prodigy of learning**”.

With this backdrop, care should be taken by communicators not to confuse pairs of words such as: - **celebrate/deliberate mention/pension, supplementary/complementary, marriage/manage, treasury/treachery, detest/defect, exempt/except, profusion/provision, instruct/mistrust, mitigate/militate** etc (Ezenwanebe, 2005). Imagine the striking opposite effect produced by the advertisement handbill of a hair dresser which ends with “**A trial will confuse you**” which should otherwise be “**A trial will convince you**” or the one on the signboard of a boutique that reads: “**Come in here, this is an erotic boutique**” which should have read “**Come in here, this is an exotic boutique**”.

When reading a text aloud, a communicator will have to be extra careful so as not to mispronounce homographs and if he does, he should be quick enough to detect and correct his mistake promptly.

Still on ambiguity at word level, Jegede (2004) points out that wrong use of words stress in English could lead to misunderstanding and distortions of meaning. For instance, stress can be used to differentiate the class of English words:

ⁱ export (n)	ex ⁱ port (v)
ⁱ august (n)	au ⁱ gust (adj)
ⁱ import (n)	im ⁱ port (v)

ⁱ subject (n)	sub ^j ject (v)	If the stress is otherwise placed on “ money ”, the implication is that Bayo sent ‘money’ to his parents and not any other thing.
ⁱ record (n)	re ⁱ cord (v)	

Stress position brings about a change in the grammatical meaning of words. It is of utmost importance that communicators know and use the necessary stress pattern in speech rightly. Failure to note stress distinction in speech may cause semantic noise at the point of encoding, make nonsense of an utterance as well as ridicule the sender of the message.

Ambiguity at Sentence Level

As mentioned earlier, ambiguities can occur at the sentence level as a result of the following factors:

(1) Intonation – Intonation refers to changes in the pitch pattern which indicate the speaker’s mood, emotion, feelings and attitudes towards the receiver(s). The impacts of intonation are exerted on phrases, clauses and sentences. Various speech situations require specific intonation. The audience, the issue at stake, as well as the content determine what intonation to use. Using a wrong intonation causes ambiguity, bringing about misinterpretation of the intended meaning. It has a way of betraying the speaker’s mood and attitude towards his audience. For instance, the utterance of the expression “**Good bye**” with various intonation patterns could imply an ordinary “bye”, “**good riddance**”, or “**get out of my sight**”.

Stress is also used to indicate emphasis or contrast in a sentence. For example, the utterance of the sentence, “**Bayo sent the money to his parents**” with an emphasis on “**Bayo**” will imply that it is Bayo and not any other person who sent the money.

Considering the importance of intonation in the English language, Egbe (1996:246) warns that “when one acquires the English Language, one also acquires these stretches of intonation contours, which one then manipulates and spreads over the utterances one makes while speaking the language with what others know about it.” Non-compliance of the message sender with this advice leads to confusion for the receiver of the message.

(2) Vague references to pronoun as demonstrated in the sentences below:

- (a) **Ayo told Victor that he had passed the examination.**
- (b) **If the baby does not thrive on fresh milk, boil it.**

In the first sentence it is not clear who passed the examination, Ayo or Victor?, while the second meaning produced by the ambiguous sentence (b) sounds absurd – which is to be boiled – the baby or the milk?

(3) Failure to observe the rule of proximity concord. The sentences below aptly illustrate this point.

- (a) **There are reading tables for sale by Ade with crooked legs. Who has the crooked legs – Ade or the table?**
- (b) **I placed the present beside the book, which I intended for Lola. What was intended for Lola – the present or the book?**
- (c) **The man standing near the statue**

in a blue, stripped shirt is amazing. Which is in blue, stripped shirt – the man or the statute?

Better options for these sentences are:

- (a) **There are reading tables with crooked legs made by Ade for sale.**
- (b) **I placed the present which I intended for Lola beside the book.**
- (c) **The man in a blue, stripped shirt standing by the statute is amazing.**

To prevent ambiguous constructions, it is important that communicators should place words modifying other words as close as possible to the words they modify.

(4) Wrong placement of adverbs in sentences as in:

- (a) **That student passed only in Business Communication (had only one success and failed the others).**
- (b) **Only that student passed in Business Communication (only one candidate was successful).**
- (c) **That student only passed in Business Communication (He did not get a very high mark).**

It should be noted that adverbs like **almost, even, hardly, merely, rarely** or **only** should be placed near the words they modify.

(5) Faulty punctuation of sentences. When a sentence is wrongly punctuated, it can alter its meaning and cause confusion. Examples:

a (i) **He likes both coffee and rolls in bed.** (He likes both coffee and bread rolls)

(ii) **He likes coffee, and rolls in bed.** (He likes coffee and he rolls (an action) while in bed)

b (i) **Hijacked planes can be dangerous.** (Only the hijacked ones can be dangerous)

b (ii) **Hijacked, airlines can be dangerous.** (Airlines can be dangerous only when hijacked)

(6) Dangling modifiers – a modifier dangles when there is no relationship between the subject and the predicate of a sentence as in:

a. **Being late to class the teacher sent me away. Who was late to class, the teacher or the speaker?**

b. **Seen under the bridge playing, his father was ashamed. Who was seen under the bridge is not clear.**

(7) Treating a non-defining relative pronoun as a defining one and vice versa.

(a) **I have a sister who lives in Abuja** (there are others)

(b) **I have a sister, who lives in Abuja** (one sister)

A non-defining relative clause is separated by comma but a defining relative clause is not.

Failure to mention poor, illegible writings and wrong spelling of words as palpable sources of ambiguity would make this write-up incomplete. Consequently, communicators need know that good writing earns a double plus for the communicator – making his work naturally attractive to the reader and preventing his message from being misconstrued. Also, the use of a good dictionary will assist in ascertaining

the spelling of words. Dictionaries do not only give meanings, they assist in spellings, usages, pronunciation, classification and etymology. With this, a good dictionary becomes an indispensable tool for effective communication, especially where correct choice of words to give sincere, accurate, clear expressions void of ambiguities is concerned.

Table 1: Types and Causes of Ambiguity

TYPES OF AMBIGUITY		CAUSES OF AMBIGUITY	
	WORD LEVEL AMBIGUITY	EXAMPLES	ILLUSTRATIONS
Lexical			
Semantic	Homonyms	Capital	Accra is the <u>capital</u> of Ghana.
Syntactic		Capital	The company has a huge working <u>capital</u> .
Pragmatic	Homophones	No	There was <u>know</u> way the man can <u>no</u> the truth.
		Know	
	Homographs	Lead	Both men always <u>lead</u> the police to the place where the <u>lead</u> is hidden.
		Lead	
	Synonyms	Bold	Kola is so <u>bold</u> , he speaks the truth always.
		Audacious	Kola is so <u>audacious</u> ; there is no one he cannot withstand.
Malapropism	Convince	Sow your dress here a trail will <u>confuse</u> you.	
		Confuse	
CAUSES OF AMBIGUITY AT SENTENCE LEVEL			
Intonation			
Vague reference to pronoun			
Failure to observe the rule of proximity concord			
Wrong placement of adverbs in sentences			
Faulty punctuation of sentences			
Dangling modifiers			
Treating a non-defining relative pronoun as a defining one and vice versa			

(Jegade, 2008)

Table 1 above encapsulates the different types of ambiguity there are along with certain factors responsible for their production.

Implication to Nigerian Education system

In Nigeria, the English Language remains the official language used for education, broadcast, politics, science, technology and law. As the lingua franca, it is the language employed for communication across the geographical divisions and ethnic groups within the country. For individuals' effectiveness and efficiency at work or for social interaction, a good command of the language is required. This is more so in this era when communication skills are rated paramount for functionality in every sphere of human endeavour.

Also, it should be noted that right from the elementary school to tertiary institution, students as learners of English language as a second language should be exposed regularly and systematically to the problem of ambiguity inherent in the English language, their types and causes. Adequate exercises as drills on the topic should be given with the objective of preparing students for the challenging demands of today's use of English as non-native speakers both at school and at work. It is hoped that when this training begins early in life, Nigerian students and workers will be better equipped for effective communication void of distortions, misinterpretations and misunderstanding.

In addition, when reading, speaking, reading or listening, users of English must be sensitive to the context of the discourse in order to grasp what the speaker or writer intends. This calls for the giving serious attention to Pragmatics – the study of how words are used, and what speakers mean depending on the context and situation

(Longman, 2005). Furthermore, effective communication involves one's ability to listen carefully so as to adequately comprehend the intended meaning and to respond in turn with the appropriate words, implying that the teaching of listening skill should not be handled with levity.

Similarly, the importance and regular use of good dictionaries should be stressed for students. We are unfortunately in an era when students consider consultation of a dictionary a cumbersome task. The fact that a dictionary is a student's companion cannot be overemphasized and students at all levels need to be encouraged to consult it regularly as an indispensable aid for language mastery.

CONCLUSION

Wrong choice of words causes lexical ambiguities; hence choice of words should be made in a way that they will accurately transmit meanings.

Structural ambiguities occur when the various rules that guide syntax are broken or when words are ordered incorrectly resulting in a pattern which blurs the meaning or worse still leads to a ridiculous second meaning as illustrated above. When communicators are not careful to observe these rules, clarity of expressions is hindered and this gives rise to communication breakdown.

Ambiguity causes difficulty in meaning, may suggest things to the receiver never intended, it may expose the sender of a message to ridicule, waste the time of the decoder and even generate ill feeling between communicators and place the speaker in an inferior position to the re-

ceiver.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion above, it is recommended that:

- (i) Every communicator should endeavour to get familiar with the causes of ambiguities in language use.
- (ii) Communicators should strive to produce sentences that have only one meaning when they speak or write.
- (iii) Ambiguity in communication will be minimal when communicators work hard at observing grammatical rules for effective transmission and reception of information.
- (iv) Punctuation marks should also be judiciously applied.
- (v) Such words which are inherently capable of producing ambiguities in constructions because of their relativity should be used with care, for example: **fine, good, nice, clever, cheap, dear, rapid, fast** and **slow**.
- (vi) Every communicator should make a dictionary his/her true and close companion. A lot of problems enumerated above can be handled by consulting a good dictionary. No one is above its use.

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