



Semantic Ambiguity Affects Interpretation in Everyday Conversations

Sarah Theodora Wahyuni Lumbantobing,*¹ Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²

¹²Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

Email: Sarahlumbantobing49@gmail.com, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id

Abstract

Semantic ambiguity is a pervasive feature of natural language that arises when words, phrases, or sentences carry multiple possible interpretations. This study aims to explore the nature, types, and communicative implications of semantic ambiguity in everyday conversations through a descriptive qualitative approach and library research method. Findings indicate that semantic ambiguity manifests in lexical, structural, and pragmatic forms, which may cause confusion if not resolved using contextual cues, prosodic elements, or clarification strategies. However, ambiguity is not merely a communication obstacle it also serves as a rhetorical device in humor, advertising, indirect speech, and cross-cultural interactions. Understanding how ambiguity operates in language enhances our awareness of context, social dynamics, and cultural variation in meaning-making. This study contributes to the field of linguistics by emphasizing the importance of pragmatic competence and interpretive flexibility in effective communication.

Keywords: *Semantic Ambiguity; Pragmatic Competence; Language Interpretation*

Abstrak: Ambiguitas semantik merupakan ciri khas bahasa alami yang muncul ketika kata, frasa, atau kalimat memiliki lebih dari satu kemungkinan makna. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji karakteristik, jenis, dan implikasi komunikasi dari ambiguitas semantik dalam percakapan sehari-hari dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dan metode studi pustaka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas semantik muncul dalam bentuk leksikal, struktural, dan pragmatik yang dapat menyebabkan kesalahpahaman apabila tidak diselesaikan melalui petunjuk kontekstual, unsur prosodik, atau strategi klarifikasi. Meski demikian, ambiguitas bukan sekadar hambatan komunikasi ia juga berfungsi sebagai alat retorika dalam humor, iklan, ujaran tidak langsung, dan interaksi lintas budaya. Pemahaman tentang cara kerja ambiguitas dalam bahasa meningkatkan kesadaran terhadap konteks, dinamika sosial, dan variasi budaya dalam pembentukan makna. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi bidang linguistik dengan menekankan pentingnya kompetensi pragmatik dan fleksibilitas interpretatif dalam komunikasi yang efektif.

Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas Semantik; Kompetensi Pragmatik; Interpretasi Bahasa*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful yet inherently imprecise tool, often characterized by the phenomenon of semantic ambiguity, where words, phrases, or sentences can possess multiple meanings simultaneously. This ambiguity arises not from linguistic error, but from the richness and flexibility of natural language. According to Rodd, Gaskell, and Marslen-Wilson (2002), the human brain initially activates multiple interpretations when encountering ambiguous expressions a process known as semantic competition. Contextual clues then aid in suppressing irrelevant meanings and selecting the most relevant one. While this mechanism usually works intuitively and efficiently, it can falter in situations where contextual cues are limited or when interlocutors rely on differing assumptions, potentially leading to misinterpretation and communication breakdowns.

The cognitive processing of ambiguity is especially demanding. Degani and Tokowicz (2010) note that ambiguous words impose a greater cognitive load on the listener, who must inhibit alternative meanings and resolve the intended one. This becomes more problematic in second language acquisition, where learners often lack sufficient pragmatic knowledge to navigate nuanced interpretations. Despite these challenges, ambiguity is not merely a communicative flaw; it can serve as an intentional rhetorical strategy. In humor and irony, for instance, semantic ambiguity enhances engagement by allowing for multiple layers of meaning. Puns and double entendres, such as the classic “Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana,” playfully exploit lexical and structural ambiguity to generate humor. The successful appreciation of such linguistic play relies on metalinguistic awareness and the listener’s ability to fluidly shift between interpretive frameworks.

Ambiguity also extends beyond interpersonal conversation into public discourse. Politicians, advertisers, and influencers frequently utilize vague or ambiguous language to reach broader audiences while avoiding direct accountability. Phrases like “Change is coming” are deliberately open-ended, encouraging audiences to interpret messages according to their own values or expectations. Fromkin et al. (2018) explain that syntactic ambiguity where sentence structure allows for more than one grammatical interpretation can particularly hinder clarity, especially in written communication where vocal intonation and visual cues are absent. In such cases, misinterpretations are more likely to occur, revealing the practical consequences of unresolved ambiguity in both personal and public settings.

However, as Nerlich and Clarke (2001) argue, ambiguity should not always be seen as a defect in communication. In fact, it often functions as a strategic linguistic tool to promote politeness, soften critique, or navigate sensitive topics. In interpersonal settings, saying “That’s an interesting perspective” instead of “That’s a bad idea” illustrates how ambiguity can help

preserve social harmony. In educational contexts, fostering the ability to recognize and manage semantic ambiguity is essential to developing communicative competence. Students must not only master grammar and vocabulary but also learn to interpret tone, indirectness, and multiple meanings through pragmatic cues. Similarly, with the increasing prevalence of AI-driven communication tools such as chatbots and virtual assistants, the challenge of processing ambiguity becomes more pressing. Machines still lack the subtle inferencing skills required to interpret sarcasm, irony, or culturally dependent references, highlighting an ongoing gap between human and artificial communication abilities.

Ultimately, semantic ambiguity is not simply an obstacle to clarity but a reflection of how meaning is co-constructed through social interaction, cognitive processing, and contextual negotiation. It plays a central role in daily conversations, political rhetoric, advertising, literature, and digital communication. Its pervasiveness calls for interdisciplinary attention from linguistics, cognitive science, education, and artificial intelligence. By understanding how ambiguity operates and how it can be resolved or used strategically we enhance not only our communicative effectiveness but also our sensitivity to the deeper mechanisms that govern human interaction. This article investigates how semantic ambiguity affects interpretation in everyday conversations, arguing for the importance of pragmatic awareness and contextual reasoning as key components of communicative competence in both native and second language contexts.

METHOD

The method used in this study is library research, which aims to explore and analyze the phenomenon of semantic ambiguity in everyday conversations. Primary sources of data include scientific journal articles, books, dissertations, theses, undergraduate papers, and mass media that are relevant to the study of semantics and pragmatics. All sources were selected based on their relevance to the topic of ambiguity and their ability to provide examples and theoretical insights into ambiguous expressions in both spoken and written communication.

The data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on the explanation and interpretation of linguistic phenomena based on theory and contextual usage. The analysis process involved three main stages: data reduction (selecting and filtering relevant information), data presentation (categorizing the data according to types of ambiguity, such as lexical, structural, and pragmatic), and conclusion drawing, which aimed to identify patterns, meanings, and linguistic implications of the ambiguity. This approach allows the researcher to provide a comprehensive understanding of how semantic ambiguity occurs and is resolved in real-world communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Definitions and Types of Semantic Ambiguity

The findings of this study confirm that semantic ambiguity is a common phenomenon in everyday communication and can be categorized into three main types: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has multiple meanings, such as the word “bank” referring to either a financial institution or the side of a river. Structural ambiguity arises from sentence construction that allows multiple grammatical interpretations, while pragmatic ambiguity depends heavily on the listener’s interpretation of the speaker’s intent within a given context.

Examples from daily conversation illustrate how ambiguity can influence interpretation. These examples support the identification of the main types of semantic ambiguity observed in everyday speech. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word carries more than one meaning, as shown in the sentence, “I saw him brought bananas at the bank.” The word “bank” is lexically ambiguous, potentially referring to either a financial institution or a riverside location. how ambiguity can influence interpretation. In the sentence, “I saw him brought bananas at the bank,” the word “bank” is lexically ambiguous. Without additional context, the listener cannot determine whether the location refers to a place for financial transactions or the riverside. This ambiguity can be resolved by providing clarification about the setting or purpose of the action. Such examples show how meaning negotiation is crucial in everyday discourse.

Pragmatic ambiguity presents a greater challenge as it often involves hidden meanings, sarcasm, or emotional undertones. A phrase such as “He is very smart” can either be sincere or sarcastic depending on tone and facial expression. In another example, “Wow, you’re heavy, huh?” the term “heavy” could refer to physical weight or a metaphorical burden. These expressions reveal how interpretation relies not only on words but also on tone, context, and the relationship between speakers.

Structural ambiguity further complicates interpretation when sentence elements allow multiple syntactic readings. For instance, “I saw the man through binoculars” can mean the speaker used binoculars to see the man, or that the man was holding binoculars. Without clarifying who possessed the binoculars, listeners may draw different conclusions. This demonstrates how sentence construction can mislead or confuse listeners even when vocabulary is clear.

Classification of the Effects of Ambiguity on Communication

The effects of ambiguity in conversation can be both negative and positive. On the one hand, unresolved ambiguity can lead to miscommunication, frustration, or conflict. Listeners may interpret an

utterance in a way that the speaker did not intend, resulting in confusion or social tension. On the other hand, speakers may use ambiguity deliberately to add humor, indirectness, or persuasive force to their messages, particularly in storytelling, advertising, or irony. The listener is left to infer meaning based on their expectations, assumptions, and surrounding context. This simple yet illustrative example demonstrates how meaning is not solely encoded in the linguistic form but also constructed interactively between speaker and listener.

Cruse (1986) emphasizes that the inherent flexibility of natural language allows lexical items to develop multiple related or unrelated meanings, making ambiguity a natural outcome of everyday communication. Everyday conversations are especially prone to ambiguity due to their spontaneous, informal, and context-dependent nature. Unlike written language, spoken discourse lacks visual punctuation, often includes incomplete sentences, and heavily relies on prosody, facial expressions, gestures, and situational knowledge. In such settings, ambiguity is not only common but expected. The interpretation process becomes a negotiation, wherein interlocutors continuously interpret and re-interpret utterances in light of what has been said, how it was said, and what is known or assumed by the participants. This interpretative flexibility is what makes natural language so powerful and adaptive. Yet, it is also the reason why misunderstandings occur. In one moment, a sentence like "You're unbelievable!" can serve as a genuine compliment; in another, it may be dripping with sarcasm. Without attention to tone, facial cues, or shared history, the risk of misinterpretation becomes very real. Listeners are constantly engaging in an inferential process, weighing possible meanings, testing assumptions, and adapting their understanding in real time. The cognitive processes involved in interpreting semantic ambiguity are equally complex.

Ambiguity Resolution Strategies

Listeners use a variety of strategies to interpret or resolve ambiguity, including asking for clarification, observing intonation and facial cues, and relying on shared knowledge or experience., including asking for clarification, observing intonation and facial cues, and relying on shared knowledge or experience. In the example "You like him?" with the reply "Yes, I like him," the ambiguity may lie in whether "like" refers to friendship or romantic interest. Intonation and expression help clarify such meanings. These cues are critical for effective communication, especially when words alone are insufficient.

Ultimately, the study reveals that semantic ambiguity is not simply an obstacle to understanding but also a linguistic resource. When managed effectively, ambiguity can enrich communication, support politeness strategies, and enable speakers to express complex or layered meanings.

Therefore, awareness of how ambiguity functions—and how to interpret or resolve it is essential for both speakers and listeners in everyday conversation.

Conversations	Types Of Ambiguity	Interpretation 1	Interpretation 2	Completion
A: I saw him brought bananas at the bank	Lexical	Bank: financial institution	Bank : Riverside	Clarification of location or situation
B: I think You like him. C: Yes, I like him.	Pragmatic	Really really like the feeling	Just like as a friend	Intonation and facial expressions
D: I saw the man through binoculars	Structural	D Using binoculars to see people	The man was carrying binoculars.	Clarification who brought the binoculars
E: Wow, you're heavy, huh?	Pragmatic	Physically correct (weight)	Heavy in the sense of Complicated or / Big problem	Intonation, expression and the context of the conversation
F: He is very smart	Pragmatic	His praise is sincere	Satire or sarcasm	Tone of voice, expression and the context of the situation

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a reflection of thought, culture, context, and interpretation. In everyday conversations, speakers engage in a rich, often spontaneous exchange of utterances that rely on shared assumptions, background knowledge, and contextual inference. Within this dynamic environment, semantic ambiguity emerges not as a flaw, but as a fundamental feature of human language. It is an intrinsic element of how language operates, allowing a single expression word, phrase, or sentence to carry multiple meanings. This phenomenon, while linguistically fascinating, also introduces challenges and opportunities in communication. Semantic ambiguity, as defined by Riemer (2010), refers to the phenomenon in which a single word or expression can convey more than one possible meaning, depending on context. Words like "bank," "light," "match," or "fair" are inherently ambiguous because they are polysemous or homonymous.

These types of ambiguity are not rare exceptions but common occurrences, especially in spoken interaction where clarification mechanisms may or may not be employed. A phrase like "He's a real player" can evoke

dramatically different interpretations depending on whether the context is a sports commentary, a romantic conversation, or a business negotiation. Thus, the same utterance can be interpreted differently by different listeners, depending on their individual perceptions, intentions, and contexts. This multiplicity of potential meanings is both a reflection of language's richness and a source of miscommunication. In spoken interactions, ambiguity can lead to confusion, humor, conflict, or deeper reflection. When left unresolved, it may distort the intended message and undermine communicative effectiveness. But when strategically deployed, ambiguity allows speakers to be tactful, creative, humorous, ironic, or persuasive. In both cases whether accidental or intentional semantic ambiguity plays a central role in shaping human interaction. For example, consider the conversational utterance: "I saw him at the bank." The term "bank" could refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. Without contextual clues such as a prior mention of a deposit, a fishing rod, or even a location it is impossible to resolve the ambiguity.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, it is evident that semantic ambiguity is a multifaceted phenomenon that not only challenges comprehension in interpersonal communication but also enriches language use through its rhetorical and pragmatic functions. Ambiguity manifests in various forms—lexical, structural, and pragmatic and its successful interpretation depends on multiple contextual factors such as shared knowledge, intonation, facial expressions, and cultural expectations. While ambiguity can momentarily disrupt mutual understanding, it often serves a communicative purpose in humor, indirectness, politeness, and persuasive discourse. This shows that ambiguity, when managed effectively, is not a flaw in language but a functional feature that reflects the cognitive and social complexities of human interaction.

The implications of this research are significant for the fields of linguistics, intercultural communication, and language education. Understanding how semantic ambiguity is interpreted across different cultural settings can help minimize miscommunication, especially in multilingual and multicultural interactions. Moreover, language educators and communicators need to foster pragmatic awareness and contextual sensitivity among learners and professionals to navigate ambiguity strategically. Future research should further investigate the cognitive processing of ambiguity in real-time conversation and examine its role in shaping power dynamics and interpersonal politeness, as ambiguity is not merely linguistic but deeply embedded in social hierarchy and relational intent.

REFERENCES

- Aziz, M. R., & Evansam, R. G. (2021). Learning semantic in English conversations. *JOSAR (Journal of Students Academic Research)*, 1(2), 36–40. <https://doi.org/10.35457/josar.v1i2.1569> ejournal.unisbablitar.ac.id
- Crossley, S. A., & Skalicky, S. (2019). Making sense of polysemy relations in first and second language speakers of English. *Journal of Language and Cognition*, 30(4), 687–691. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006917728396> journals.sagepub.com
- Degani, T., & Tokowicz, N. (2010). Semantic ambiguity within and across languages: An integrative review. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 63(7), 1266–1303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470210903377372>
- Giulianelli, M., Del Tredici, M., & Fernández, R. (2020). Analysing lexical semantic change with contextualised word representations. *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2004.14118> arxiv.org
- Haber, J. (2024). Metaphor and ambiguity. *Philosophical Studies*, 181, 3059–3087. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-024-02252-1> link.springer.com
- Haber, J., & Poesio, M. (2024). Polysemy—Evidence from linguistics, behavioral science, and contextualized language models. *Computational Linguistics*, 50(1), 351–417. https://doi.org/10.1162/coli_a_00500 direct.mit.edu
- Saputri, N. K. D. T., Suastra, I. M., & Putra, I. K. S. (2022). *Lexical ambiguity in news headlines of The Jakarta Post*. *Humanis*, 26(1), 26–33. <https://doi.org/10.24843/JH.2022.v26.i01.p04> ojs.unud.ac.id
- Sitorus, A. O., & Lubis, L. (2023). Language ambiguity and emotional barriers: Semantic and psychological approaches in interpersonal communication. *Literacy: International Scientific Journal of Social, Education, Humanities*, 4(2), ???–???. <https://doi.org/10.56910/literacy.v4i2.2380> jurnal-stiepari.ac.id
- Zhang, T. Pimentel, R. B., & Cotterell, R. (2020). Speakers fill lexical semantic gaps with context. *arXiv*, Preprint. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2010.02172> arxiv.org
- Zhang, Y., Lu, Y., Liang, L., & Chen, B. (2020). The effect of semantic similarity on learning ambiguous words in a second language: An event-related potential study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 1633. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01633> frontiersin.org