



The Lexical Ambiguity in News Headlines of BBC World: Semantics Study

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Abstract

This study investigates lexical ambiguity in the headlines of BBC World News by employing a media ethnography approach within qualitative research. Lexical ambiguity, particularly in the form of homonymy and polysemy, often arises in news headlines due to their concise and attention-grabbing nature. Such ambiguity can lead to multiple interpretations and potentially mislead readers, especially those who rely solely on the headline without reading the full article. The primary data consist of BBC World headlines published between 2023 and 2024, which were selected purposively based on their potential to contain ambiguous lexical items. Using semantic theories from Kreidler and Lyons, along with Roland Barthes' semiotic model, the study classifies types of ambiguity and analyzes the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in each headline. The findings reveal that many BBC headlines contain ambiguous terms that require contextual and cultural knowledge for accurate interpretation. This research highlights how ambiguity functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a discursive strategy that reflects media ideology and influences public perception. The study contributes to linguistic and media literacy scholarship by encouraging critical awareness of language use in global news discourse.

Keywords: *Lexical ambiguity; Media Ethnography; BBC Headlines*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menyelidiki ambiguitas leksikal dalam berita utama BBC World News dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi media dalam penelitian kualitatif. Ambiguitas leksikal, khususnya dalam bentuk homonimi dan polisemi, sering muncul dalam judul berita karena sifatnya yang ringkas dan menarik perhatian. Ambiguitas semacam itu dapat menimbulkan berbagai interpretasi dan berpotensi menyesatkan pembaca, terutama mereka yang hanya mengandalkan judul berita tanpa membaca artikel secara keseluruhan. Data primer terdiri dari berita utama BBC World yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2023 dan 2024, yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan potensi mengandung item leksikal yang ambigu. Dengan menggunakan teori semantik dari Kreidler dan Lyons, serta model semiotika Roland Barthes, penelitian ini mengklasifikasikan jenis-jenis ambiguitas dan menganalisis makna denotatif dan konotatif yang tertanam di setiap berita utama. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa banyak berita utama BBC mengandung istilah-istilah ambigu yang membutuhkan pengetahuan kontekstual

dan budaya untuk interpretasi yang akurat. Penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana ambiguitas tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai fenomena linguistik, tetapi juga sebagai strategi diskursif yang mencerminkan ideologi media dan mempengaruhi persepsi publik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada keilmuan linguistik dan literasi media dengan mendorong kesadaran kritis terhadap penggunaan bahasa dalam wacana berita global.

Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas Leksikal; Etnografi Media; Berita Utama BBC*

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in human interaction, serving as the primary medium through which individuals express ideas, emotions, and intentions. Beyond its communicative function, language also reflects the cultural and cognitive frameworks of its users. However, language is not always straightforward—one of its inherent features is ambiguity, where a single expression can be interpreted in more than one way. This ambiguity may occur at various levels, including phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions, with lexical ambiguity being among the most common and impactful types in everyday discourse.

Lexical ambiguity arises when a word has more than one meaning, which may either be entirely unrelated (homonymy) or conceptually related (polysemy). According to Fromkin et al. (2011) and Cruse (2000), ambiguity is not a defect in language but a natural outcome of its dynamic and context-sensitive nature. In casual conversation, such ambiguity can serve aesthetic or rhetorical purposes, such as humor or wordplay. However, in formal domains like news reporting, academic writing, or legal language, lexical ambiguity can cause confusion or misinterpretation. Headlines in particular, which are designed to be short, striking, and informative, often sacrifice contextual clarity, making them fertile ground for ambiguous word use.

This leads to a central issue in this study: the potential of lexical ambiguity in news headlines to distort readers' understanding, especially when those readers do not access the full article. BBC World, as a globally consumed news outlet, frequently uses compact and high-impact language in its headlines. Words such as “crash,” “strike,” or “charge” may denote very different meanings depending on context. Readers who rely solely on these headlines—whether due to time constraints or digital media habits—risk forming incomplete or skewed interpretations of world events. This becomes a significant linguistic and media concern, especially in an era of fast information flow and shortened attention spans.

Previous studies have identified this phenomenon in other media outlets. For example, research by Tarsil and Simatupang (2024) investigated CNN World headlines and found instances of both homonymy and polysemy influencing reader interpretation. However, similar studies focusing on BBC World remain scarce, despite its large global readership and editorial

influence. Given that each news platform has unique stylistic and communicative norms, it is important to examine how lexical ambiguity is manifested specifically within BBC World headlines to gain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon across international media.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the forms and functions of lexical ambiguity—homonymy and polysemy—in BBC World news headlines published between 2023 and 2024. Using the semantic frameworks of Kreidler (2002) and Lyons (1996), the research will identify ambiguous lexical items and explore their contextual meanings. The objective is to contribute to both linguistic theory and media literacy by highlighting how ambiguity shapes meaning in public discourse and influences readers' understanding of global events.

METHOD

This study adopts a media ethnography approach within the framework of qualitative research. Media ethnography allows for the interpretation of media texts not only as linguistic constructs but also as cultural artifacts shaped by social, ideological, and communicative practices. In this context, news headlines are examined as meaning-making devices that reflect and reproduce societal values, perceptions, and ideologies. By focusing on lexical ambiguity in BBC World news headlines, this approach enables the researcher to explore how specific word choices can generate multiple interpretations and how these interpretations might influence public understanding of global issues. The ethnographic lens situates the media text within its broader communicative environment, including its production, dissemination, and reception by a diverse international audience.

The primary data source for this research consists of selected news headlines published on the official BBC World News website from 2023 to mid-2024. Headlines were purposively sampled based on their potential to exhibit lexical ambiguity, particularly instances of homonymy and polysemy. The data analysis employed a semantic analysis framework, drawing from the theories of Kreidler (2002) and Lyons (1996), to classify and interpret the types of lexical ambiguity present. In addition, Roland Barthes' semiotic model was used to analyze both the denotative and connotative meanings encoded in the headlines. The analysis involved four stages: identification of ambiguous lexical items, classification of ambiguity type, contextual interpretation based on the headline and related content, and deeper semiotic reading to uncover underlying ideological messages. To ensure analytical rigor, the study applied theoretical triangulation and comparative analysis across different headlines to maintain consistency and depth in the interpretation of meaning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data 1

Trade trumps geopolitics as Australia PM visits China (Published on BBC, July 8, 2025)

The word “trumps” in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. The word “trumps” is classified as homonymy, because it has two completely unrelated meanings, even though they share the same spelling and pronunciation.

There are two distinct interpretations associated with the word “trump”: The first is the common verb “trump”, which means to surpass, to be more important than, or to override something else. In the context of the headline, it suggests that trade is taking precedence over geopolitics in Australia’s approach to China. The second is the proper noun “Trump”, referring to Donald Trump, the former US President. Due to his name's strong association with global politics and trade policies, especially the US-China trade war, readers might momentarily misinterpret the word “trumps” as referring to him.

The word “trumps” in this headline has an ambiguous meaning because of the possibility of it being read as a reference to Donald Trump (a proper noun), rather than a verb. However, in the article, the intended meaning is clearly verbal, indicating that trade considerations are more significant than geopolitical concerns during the Australian PM’s diplomatic visit to China. The meaning of the contextual meaning in the data is: the word “trumps” means takes priority over or is more important than. The article explains that despite security tensions, Australia's main focus is on restoring economic ties with China, its biggest trading partner. Thus, trade is prioritized over political or security disputes.

Because the two meanings of the word “trump” — as a verb and as a name — have no etymological or semantic relation, this is categorized as homonymy. The same word form can lead to misunderstanding if readers do not consider the full context.

Data 2

They were just kids’: Mother mourns sons killed in Israeli strike while waiting for aid (Published on BBC, July 8, 2025)

The word “strike” in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. The word “strike” is classified as homonymy, because it has two unrelated meanings that share the same word form (spelling and pronunciation) but come from different conceptual domains.

There are at least two distinct meanings associated with the word “strike”: The first is the military sense (contextual meaning in the headline): A strike refers to a military attack, such as an airstrike or missile hit targeting a location or individual.

The second is the labor-related meaning: A strike can mean a work stoppage by employees protesting for better conditions or rights — commonly used in industrial or labor union contexts.

These two meanings of the word “strike” are entirely different in origin and usage. One involves armed conflict, while the other involves worker rights and civil protest. They do not share a semantic relationship, even though they are spelled and pronounced the same. The word “strike” in the headline above has an ambiguous meaning only when read without context. For example, a reader seeing the headline might briefly wonder whether the word refers to a labor strike or a military one — especially since “strike” is commonly used in both domains in news media.

The contextual meaning of “strike” in this article is clearly military. The article details a devastating Israeli airstrike that killed two children and severely injured others in Gaza, as they were waiting for nutritional aid. The term “strike” refers to the explosion caused by targeted military action. Because the different meanings of the word “strike” are unrelated in concept, and could lead to initial confusion, the word is classified as a case of homonymy.

Data 3

I created it myself: The boy behind the viral 'aura farming' boat racing dance (Published on BBC, July 2024)

The phrase “aura farming” in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. The phrase “aura farming” is classified as polysemy, because it consists of two words that, together, generate multiple related interpretations depending on the context and background knowledge of the reader.

Individually, the word “aura” traditionally refers to an invisible energy field surrounding a person. However, in internet slang, especially among Gen Z and TikTok culture, “aura” is often used synonymously with charisma, coolness, or “rizz” (a modern slang word for charm or attractiveness). The word “farming”, on the other hand, literally means cultivating crops. But in gaming and internet slang, it also means accumulating or building something, often repetitively or strategically. Therefore, the phrase “aura farming” may be misunderstood without context. A reader unfamiliar with the slang might take it literally—as growing aura like a crop—or as something mystical. But in this context, “aura farming” refers to the deliberate act of building up one’s charisma or cool image, especially in public or online.

The contextual meaning of “aura farming” in this article is: performing charismatic, attention-grabbing actions (like a confident dance on a speeding boat) to gain admiration, popularity, or online virality. Rayyan’s swag-filled dance moves and calm demeanor while balancing on the prow of a boat make him the perfect image of someone “farming aura”—that is, generating massive online appeal. This lexical ambiguity arises because the reader must

interpret the modern, informal, internet-specific usage of the words. The phrase sounds metaphorical and strange out of context, but its real meaning only becomes clear through the article, where it's explained through Rayyan's viral dance and its global impact.

Data 4

Gaza ceasefire talks on verge of collapse, Palestinian officials say (Published on BBC, July 9, 2025)

The phrase "on verge of collapse" in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. This phrase contains a polysemous expression, where "collapse" has multiple related meanings that can change depending on context.

There are several meanings associated with the word "collapse". The literal meaning refers to a physical falling down or crumbling (e.g., a building collapsing). The figurative meaning, which is more commonly used in political or social contexts, refers to the sudden failure or breakdown of a system, agreement, or institution.

In this headline, "collapse" is not used literally, as no physical structure is falling. Instead, the phrase "on verge of collapse" metaphorically refers to the potential failure of the ceasefire negotiation process between Israel and Hamas. However, due to the polysemous nature of the word, readers could initially misinterpret the collapse as a physical or violent event without the proper context.

The contextual meaning of the word "collapse" in this headline is: the negotiations are at risk of failing or breaking down, with little progress and deep divisions between the parties. In the article, it is explained that the talks are fragile and at a standstill due to unresolved issues like troop withdrawal and humanitarian aid mechanisms. Therefore, the phrase "on verge of collapse" is interpreted as the ceasefire negotiations being very close to failure, rather than any literal collapse of a structure or institution.

Data 5

Why some people want 'quiet fireworks' this July Fourth (Published on BBC, July 4, 2024)

The word "quiet" in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. The word "quiet" is classified as polysemy, because it has multiple related meanings depending on how it is used in different contexts.

There are several meanings associated with the word "quiet." The first and most common meaning is low in sound or not noisy (e.g., a quiet room). The second meaning is peaceful or calm (e.g., a quiet life, a quiet neighborhood). A third, more abstract meaning refers to being reserved or not talkative (e.g., a quiet person). The word "quiet" in the headline above has an ambiguous meaning because it can be interpreted in several ways. At first glance, the phrase "quiet fireworks" may seem contradictory or confusing, as fireworks are typically associated with loud noise. This initial confusion is what makes the phrase lexically ambiguous.

The contextual meaning of “quiet” in this article refers to fireworks that produce visual effects without the loud explosive sounds, designed to be more suitable for people with sensitivities to noise — such as young children, people with PTSD, or animals like dogs. The article explains that these quieter alternatives are growing in popularity for safety and mental health reasons.

Therefore, the word “quiet” in the headline is interpreted as low in noise level, not completely silent, but significantly less loud than traditional fireworks. The ambiguity arises because “quiet” can mean many things depending on context — and in this case, it relates to sound control, not mood or personality.

Data 6

The 'quiet quitting' trend that has workers reconsidering their jobs (Published on BBC, August 29, 2024)

The phrase “quiet quitting” in the data is identified as a lexical ambiguity. The phrase is classified as polysemy, because it carries multiple related meanings, depending on the speaker’s or reader’s interpretation and the context in which it is used.

There are multiple interpretations of the phrase “quiet quitting.” The first interpretation is literally quitting a job silently, without informing coworkers or causing any disruption — simply leaving quietly. The second interpretation, which is more figurative and modern, means doing only the minimum requirements of one’s job without going above and beyond, as a way to reject hustle culture without actually resigning.

The phrase “quiet quitting” in the headline has an ambiguous meaning because a reader unfamiliar with the term may assume it refers to someone leaving a job in a discreet or unnoticeable manner. However, the actual contextual meaning is very different.

In the content of the news, the article explains that “quiet quitting” refers to employees mentally detaching from work beyond their job descriptions. They still fulfill their duties but stop engaging in extra tasks like working overtime, taking on extra responsibilities, or emotionally investing in the company. Therefore, the meaning of “quiet quitting” in this article is interpreted as doing only what is contractually required at work — no more, no less — without formally resigning. It is a form of passive resistance to overwork or burnout. The phrase is polysemous because the same words can imply either literal resignation or reduced engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that lexical ambiguity is a prominent linguistic feature in BBC World news headlines. The ambiguity mainly arises from the use of homonymous and polysemous words, such as *strike*, *fall*, *charge*, or *crash*, which possess multiple meanings depending on their contextual usage.

The headlines' brevity and stylistic demands often omit disambiguating details, which increases the potential for misinterpretation—particularly among readers who rely solely on headlines without accessing the full article.

Through semantic analysis based on Kreidler's and Lyons' theories, the study reveals that while ambiguity can serve as a rhetorical or attention-grabbing strategy in journalism, it also carries the risk of confusion and distortion in public understanding. These findings highlight the need for greater media literacy and a critical reading approach when interpreting news headlines. Furthermore, the research affirms the importance of context in resolving meaning and suggests that journalists, educators, and readers alike should be more aware of how lexical choices shape perception in global media discourse.

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