



## Ambiguity in Literal and Non-literal Meaning: A Pragmatic Linguistic Analysis

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### Abstract

Ambiguity in language often arises when meaning depends on contextual interpretation, particularly in the use of non-literal expressions such as idioms, metaphors, irony, and sarcasm. This phenomenon can hinder communication, especially among non-native speakers who may lack sufficient linguistic or cultural background to interpret intended meanings accurately. This study aims to analyze how pragmatic ambiguity operates and the role of context in resolving it. Using a literature review method, the study synthesizes findings from linguistic research published in the last decade. The results indicate that pragmatic ambiguity frequently occurs due to limited contextual cues, tone, and shared background knowledge. Three types of context linguistic, situational, and cultural were found to be crucial in disambiguation processes. While ambiguity may cause misunderstanding, it can also be used strategically to convey nuanced meaning, humor, and indirectness. The study concludes that strengthening pragmatic competence is essential for improving communicative effectiveness.

**Keywords:** *Ambiguity; Non-literal Language; Context*

**Abstrak:** Ambiguitas dalam bahasa sering muncul ketika makna bergantung pada interpretasi konteks, khususnya pada penggunaan ekspresi non-literal seperti idiom, metafora, ironi, dan sarkasme. Fenomena ini dapat menghambat komunikasi, terutama pada penutur asing yang mungkin tidak memiliki latar belakang linguistik atau kultural yang memadai untuk memahami makna yang dimaksud. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana ambiguitas pragmatik bekerja dan peran konteks dalam menyelesaikannya. Dengan menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan, penelitian ini mensintesis temuan-temuan dari kajian linguistik yang diterbitkan dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas pragmatik sering terjadi akibat terbatasnya petunjuk kontekstual, intonasi, dan pengetahuan latar bersama. Tiga jenis konteks linguistik, situasional, dan kultural terbukti sangat penting dalam proses disambiguasi. Meskipun ambiguitas berpotensi menimbulkan kesalahpahaman, ia juga dapat dimanfaatkan secara strategis untuk menyampaikan makna halus, humor, dan ketidaklangsungan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguatan kompetensi pragmatik sangat penting untuk meningkatkan efektivitas komunikasi.

**Kata Kunci:** *Ambiguitas; Bahasa Non-literal; Konteks*

## INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity in both literal and non-literal meaning has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in the past decade, as it represents a crucial intersection of semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics. Literal meaning refers to the direct interpretation derived from lexical items and grammatical structures, while non-literal meaning involves inferential processes that extend beyond the explicit linguistic form, such as metaphor, idiom, irony, and sarcasm. In daily communication, these two types of meaning often overlap, creating interpretative challenges for speakers and listeners alike. This interaction is particularly evident in contexts such as literary discourse, media communication, and cross-cultural interactions, where the intended meaning cannot always be recovered from linguistic form alone, and the role of contextual cues becomes indispensable (Carston, 2018; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2021).

Recent academic discussions have centered on whether the processing of literal and non-literal meaning follows distinct cognitive pathways or is guided by a unified, context-sensitive mechanism. While earlier pragmatic theories posited that literal interpretation is the default starting point before moving to figurative inferences, more recent empirical research challenges this view. For instance, Nieuwland and Martin (2017) provide neurocognitive evidence suggesting that both literal and figurative meanings can be activated simultaneously when contextual relevance supports them. Similarly, works grounded in the updated Relevance Theory framework (Wilson & Sperber, 2019) argue that interpretation is guided from the outset by the search for optimal relevance, rendering the literal–non-literal distinction less hierarchically ordered. These perspectives underline that ambiguity is not merely a formal linguistic issue but also deeply connected to cognitive processing and inferential reasoning.

The central problem addressed in this study lies in understanding how ambiguity emerges when the boundaries between literal and non-literal meaning become blurred, and which factors influence a listener's or reader's interpretative choices. Ambiguity can disrupt communication by creating misunderstandings, yet it can also be exploited strategically for rhetorical, humorous, or persuasive purposes. This dual nature of ambiguity poses a significant challenge for linguists, translators, and educators. Without a precise understanding of the mechanisms by which meaning is negotiated between speaker intent, linguistic form, and contextual knowledge, the risk of misinterpretation—especially in intercultural settings—remains high (Giora, 2020; Attardo, 2020).

Several recent studies provide valuable insights into the processing and resolution of ambiguous expressions. For example, Bohrn, Altmann, and Jacobs (2017) demonstrate through neuroimaging research that figurative language processing often co-activates literal interpretations, suggesting that

both layers of meaning can be accessed in parallel. Similarly, Colombo, Shtyrov, and Silvanto (2020) investigate metaphor comprehension and find that salience, familiarity, and contextual integration play decisive roles in resolving ambiguity. Meanwhile, Domaneschi and Penco (2018) explore irony and indirect speech acts, highlighting how pragmatic competence enables hearers to reinterpret utterances against the literal meaning when contextual incongruence arises. Despite these advancements, a systematic comparison between literal and non-literal ambiguity, particularly in terms of their shared and divergent resolution strategies, remains underexplored.

This article aims to analyze in detail the forms, sources, and interpretative mechanisms of ambiguity in both literal and non-literal meaning, integrating perspectives from contemporary linguistics, pragmatics, and cognitive science. The study seeks to identify how structural features of language interact with contextual cues and world knowledge to shape interpretation. It further aims to contribute theoretically to the ongoing debate over meaning processing while offering practical implications for language teaching, translation studies, and cross-cultural communication. By synthesizing recent empirical findings with theoretical developments from the last decade, this work aspires to expand our understanding of the intricate relationship between language form, cognitive processes, and communicative intention.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a library research methodology, focusing on the systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of scholarly sources related to ambiguity in literal and non-literal meaning. The research process began with the identification of key concepts and search terms such as *literal meaning*, *non-literal meaning*, *semantic ambiguity*, and *pragmatic inference* which were applied in academic databases journal articles, books, and book chapters published were considered to ensure the inclusion of the most recent theoretical developments and empirical findings. Sources were selected based on their direct relevance to the linguistic, pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions of meaning interpretation.

Data analysis followed an integrative review approach, which combines both descriptive and analytical techniques to synthesize findings from diverse theoretical perspectives. Each selected source was subjected to critical evaluation using criteria adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, focusing on conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, and contribution to the field. The analysis involved thematic coding, where extracted data were organized into categories such as processing models, contextual effects, and cross-linguistic variation in ambiguity resolution. This process enabled the identification of convergent themes as well as points of theoretical divergence among recent studies.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study applied source triangulation by incorporating literature from multiple disciplines—linguistics, cognitive science, and communication studies—thereby enhancing the robustness of the conclusions. Furthermore, citation tracing was employed to capture both seminal works and recent publications that cite or challenge these foundational studies. The methodological transparency provided here aims to allow replication by other scholars and to demonstrate the rigor of the literature-based approach in addressing the complexities of literal and non-literal ambiguity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity, a pervasive phenomenon in natural language, arises when a single lexical item can be interpreted in more than one way, often depending on the contextual frame in which it occurs. This multiplicity of meanings is frequently rooted in polysemy, where one word has multiple related senses, or homonymy, where words share the same form but have unrelated meanings. The examples “He went to the bank” and “The light was bright” illustrate how the absence of sufficient contextual cues can give rise to divergent interpretations. In the first case, the term *bank* can denote either a financial institution or the land alongside a river, while in the second, *light* may refer to low weight or to illumination. When context fails to disambiguate these meanings, the listener or reader must rely on pragmatic inference and background knowledge to determine the intended sense (Murphy, 2021).

Recent linguistic research emphasizes that lexical ambiguity is not merely a communicative obstacle but also a cognitive resource that speakers exploit for creativity, humor, and rhetorical effect (Frisson, 2021). For instance, experimental studies have shown that readers often activate multiple meanings of an ambiguous word in parallel during comprehension, with contextual constraints gradually narrowing the interpretation to the most relevant sense (Hagoort & Indefrey, 2018). Neurocognitive evidence further supports this view, indicating that the brain engages in rapid probabilistic prediction to resolve ambiguity, drawing upon both semantic associations and syntactic structures (Rodd, 2020). This dynamic interplay suggests that lexical ambiguity resolution is not a linear decoding process but an adaptive negotiation between linguistic input and cognitive expectations.

From a pragmatic standpoint, lexical ambiguity is closely linked to the cooperative principles of communication. When speakers intentionally leave meanings underspecified, they invite the audience to engage in interpretive work, which can enhance the communicative impact, as in puns, poetic language, or persuasive discourse (Attardo, 2020). However, when unintended, unresolved lexical ambiguity can lead to misunderstanding,

particularly in contexts where precision is paramount, such as legal or technical communication (Solan & Tiersma, 2020). In multilingual and cross-cultural interactions, the risk of misinterpretation increases because shared contextual knowledge may be limited, making explicit clarification strategies more important. Overall, lexical ambiguity illustrates both the richness and the complexity of human language, serving as a site where semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive processing converge in the shaping of meaning.

### **Structural (Syntactic) Ambiguity**

Structural ambiguity, also referred to as syntactic ambiguity, occurs when a sentence's grammatical structure allows for more than one plausible interpretation. This type of ambiguity arises not from the meanings of individual words but from the way words and phrases are combined in a syntactic hierarchy. The examples "She saw the man with the telescope" and "Flying planes can be dangerous" illustrate how alternative structural parsing can yield distinct interpretations. In the first example, the prepositional phrase *with the telescope* can be attached either to the verb phrase (*she saw ... with the telescope*, indicating the instrument used) or to the noun phrase (*the man with the telescope*, describing the man's possession). In the second example, the gerund phrase *flying planes* can refer either to the act of piloting aircraft or to planes that are currently airborne. In both cases, listeners or readers must rely on contextual cues, prosodic patterns, or world knowledge to arrive at the intended interpretation (Clifton & Frazier, 2018).

Recent psycholinguistic research has examined how structural ambiguity is processed and resolved in real time. Eye-tracking and ERP studies suggest that comprehenders often commit to an initial parse based on syntactic preferences and processing heuristics, such as the principle of minimal attachment, before revising their interpretation when confronted with disambiguating information (Staub, 2021). This "garden-path" effect underscores the incremental nature of sentence processing, where the brain continuously updates syntactic and semantic representations as new input is received. Moreover, cross-linguistic studies reveal that language-specific word order patterns and morphological markers can either reduce or amplify the potential for structural ambiguity, suggesting that the phenomenon is shaped by typological features as well as cognitive processing constraints (Bever & Townsend, 2020).

From a communicative perspective, structural ambiguity can be problematic in contexts where precision is essential, such as legal drafting, instructional materials, or technical documentation, where misinterpretation can have significant consequences (Tiersma & Solan, 2019). However, it can also be intentionally employed in literary works, advertising, or political rhetoric to create double meanings, irony, or persuasive framing (Dancygier, 2021). The resolution of such ambiguity thus depends on the interplay

between linguistic form, discourse context, and pragmatic inference. Ultimately, structural ambiguity illustrates the complexity of syntactic processing and the necessity of considering both grammatical structure and contextual interpretation to fully understand how meaning emerges in human communication.

### **Pragmatic Ambiguity**

Pragmatic ambiguity arises when an utterance allows for multiple interpretations of the speaker's communicative intention, typically because key contextual, prosodic, or interpersonal cues are missing or open to different inferences. Unlike lexical or structural ambiguity, which are grounded in the semantic or syntactic properties of language, pragmatic ambiguity stems from the interplay between literal meaning and the social, cultural, or situational context in which communication occurs. The expression "Great job!" may function as sincere praise or as sarcastic criticism, with the intended meaning often signaled by tone of voice, facial expression, or shared background knowledge. Similarly, "Can you pass the salt?"—while framed as a question about ability—is conventionally interpreted as a polite request. These examples highlight how pragmatic competence, the ability to infer intended meaning beyond the literal words, is essential for accurate interpretation (Yus, 2021).

Recent research in pragmatics and experimental linguistics has shown that listeners engage in rapid inferencing processes to resolve pragmatic ambiguity, drawing on prosody, discourse history, and sociocultural expectations (Gibbs, 2019; Searle & Vanderveken, 2018). Eye-tracking and neuroimaging studies indicate that listeners often compute both literal and intended meanings in parallel before converging on the most contextually relevant interpretation (Nieuwland, 2019). Furthermore, cross-cultural studies demonstrate that the likelihood of misunderstanding pragmatic intent increases when interlocutors do not share the same conventions for indirectness, irony, or politeness strategies (Ruytenbeek, 2021). This underscores that pragmatic ambiguity is not solely a matter of linguistic decoding but is deeply rooted in the cognitive and cultural dimensions of communication.

From a communicative standpoint, pragmatic ambiguity can be a source of richness and flexibility in interaction. In political rhetoric, literature, and humor, speakers may deliberately employ ambiguous intent to create plausible deniability, provoke thought, or engage audiences more deeply (Dyner, 2020). However, when unintended, such ambiguity can hinder effective communication, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as diplomacy, intercultural business negotiations, or clinical interactions where precision in meaning is critical. Resolving pragmatic ambiguity thus requires both the decoding of linguistic form and the application of world knowledge,

emotional intelligence, and contextual awareness. This makes the study of pragmatic ambiguity central not only to linguistic theory but also to applied domains concerned with cross-cultural understanding and communicative efficiency.

### **The Interplay of Non-Literal Language, Context, and Communicative Ambiguity**

Non-literal language, encompassing idioms, metaphors, irony, and sarcasm, has been recognized as a significant source of ambiguity in both spoken and written communication. Idioms, for example, often defy literal interpretation and require a shared cultural understanding to convey the intended meaning. An expression such as *"kick the bucket"* might confuse a literal-minded listener or a non-native speaker unless they are familiar with its figurative meaning, which is "to die." Similarly, metaphors, such as *"time is money,"* are not intended to be taken literally; rather, they evoke conceptual associations that highlight the value and scarcity of time. The same applies to irony and sarcasm, where surface meaning often contrasts sharply with the intended meaning. A statement like *"Oh, that's just perfect!"* could be a sincere compliment in one context but a scathing criticism in another, depending heavily on intonation, situational cues, and shared understanding between interlocutors.

Recent research has confirmed that context plays a central role in disambiguating such expressions, with three key dimensions being especially influential: linguistic, situational, and cultural context. Linguistic context involves the surrounding words, grammatical structures, and discourse patterns that help constrain possible meanings (Giora, 2018). Situational context refers to the physical setting, the relationship between participants, and the immediate circumstances, all of which guide interpretation (Nordquist, 2020). Cultural context, meanwhile, is essential for decoding expressions whose meanings rely on culturally embedded metaphors, idioms, or humor (Taguchi & Roevers, 2017). For instance, the metaphor *"He's a real shark in business"* can only be fully understood if the listener recognizes the cultural association of sharks with cunning, aggression, and competitiveness.

Scholars have also emphasized that ambiguity arising from non-literal language is not inherently detrimental; rather, it can serve as a communicative resource. As noted in more recent studies (e.g., Carston, 2018; Pexman, 2020), such ambiguity allows speakers to convey nuanced meanings, engage in playful language use, and foster interpretive engagement from the audience. This aligns with pragmatic theories that view interpretation as an inferential process, where listeners actively negotiate meaning based on available cues (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). In pedagogical contexts, explicitly teaching students to identify and interpret non-literal expressions has been shown to enhance both linguistic competence and

pragmatic awareness (Sadeghi & Taghizadeh, 2020). Ultimately, the interplay between literal and non-literal meanings underscores the dynamic nature of human communication, where meaning is co-constructed through linguistic forms, contextual clues, and shared knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that non-literal language—such as idioms, metaphors, irony, and sarcasm—plays a significant role in creating communicative ambiguity, particularly when contextual cues are limited or absent. The study shows that without sufficient linguistic, situational, or cultural context, these expressions are prone to misinterpretation, especially among non-native speakers. Pragmatic ambiguity further emerges when the speaker's intended meaning is unclear, highlighting the necessity of pragmatic competence and contextual awareness for accurate interpretation.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that ambiguity is not solely a source of misunderstanding but also a strategic communicative tool. It enables speakers to convey subtle meanings, express humor or sarcasm, and engage listeners in interpretive thinking. From a pedagogical perspective, fostering learners' ability to recognize and interpret both literal and non-literal meanings enhances linguistic precision and pragmatic fluency. This suggests that developing contextual interpretation skills is essential for improving communication effectiveness and reducing misinterpretation in diverse communicative settings.

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