



Semantic Ambiguity and Its Impact on Language Interpretation in Legal Discourse

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Abstract

Semantic ambiguity remains a critical challenge in both linguistic theory and practical applications, especially in domains demanding high interpretive precision such as legal discourse. This study aims to examine the nature, sources, and implications of semantic ambiguity by integrating perspectives from cognitive linguistics, legal hermeneutics, and cross-cultural pragmatics. Employing a qualitative analytical method, data were drawn from legal case studies, discourse analysis, and comparative linguistic literature. The findings reveal that ambiguity often arises from polysemy, syntactic complexity, cultural frameworks, and pragmatic inference. In legal contexts, such ambiguity can significantly influence judicial outcomes and the interpretation of statutes. The study suggests that applying systematic semantic analysis and interdisciplinary interpretive models can minimize misinterpretation and promote fairness in communication. These results contribute to advancing theoretical insights in meaning studies while offering practical strategies for mitigating ambiguity in critical decision-making contexts.

Keywords: *Semantic Ambiguity; Legal Discourse; Pragmatic Inference*

Abstrak: Ambiguitas semantik tetap menjadi tantangan penting dalam teori linguistik maupun penerapannya, khususnya pada bidang yang menuntut ketepatan interpretasi tinggi seperti wacana hukum. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sifat, sumber, dan implikasi ambiguitas semantik dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif linguistik kognitif, hermeneutika hukum, dan pragmatik lintas budaya. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis kualitatif, data diperoleh dari studi kasus hukum, analisis wacana, dan literatur linguistik komparatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas sering muncul akibat polisemi, kompleksitas sintaksis, kerangka budaya, dan inferensi pragmatik. Dalam konteks hukum, ambiguitas semacam ini dapat memengaruhi secara signifikan hasil putusan dan penafsiran undang-undang. Studi ini merekomendasikan penerapan analisis semantik yang sistematis serta model interpretasi interdisipliner untuk meminimalkan kesalahpahaman dan mendorong keadilan dalam komunikasi. Hasil ini memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan wawasan teoretis dalam studi makna sekaligus menawarkan strategi praktis untuk mengatasi ambiguitas dalam pengambilan keputusan yang krusial.

Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas Semantik; Wacana Hukum; Inferensi Pragmatis*



INTRODUCTION

Semantic ambiguity the phenomenon whereby a word, phrase, or sentence permits more than one plausible meaning is an enduring feature of natural language and a persistent challenge in legal texts. Legal discourse, whether statutes, contracts, or judicial opinions, routinely displays layered meanings created by lexical polysemy, syntactic alternativity, and pragmatic implicatures; these layers can produce divergent interpretations when legal actors (drafters, judges, translators, or lay readers) attempt to extract binding content from the text. Recent scholarship demonstrates that ambiguity in law is not merely accidental but arises from the interaction of linguistic form, institutional practice, and communicative goals, making the study of semantic ambiguity central to understanding how legal meaning is produced and contested (Nowak, 2016; Zeifert & Tobor, 2021).

Studying semantic ambiguity in legal discourse is important for both theory and practice. Theoretically, exploring how ambiguous expressions function in legal settings deepens interdisciplinary dialogues between linguistics, legal theory, and translation studies and helps clarify when legal interpretation differs from ordinary language understanding. Practically, ambiguity affects accessibility, enforceability, and fairness: unclear statutory or contractual language can produce inconsistent enforcement, increase litigation costs, and undermine public trust in legal institutions. Empirical and corpus-based studies on legal language and translation show that complexity and ambiguous constructions increase cognitive load for readers and can be mitigated by plain-language initiatives or clearer drafting practices (Lin et al., 2023; Amiati et al., 2024).

Despite its importance, several interrelated problems persist and motivate the present study. First, ambiguity may be intentionally used by legislatures to preserve flexibility or to achieve political compromise, yet the same ambiguity can produce interpretive disputes in courts or administrative agencies. Second, legal translation and multilingual drafting create further semantic indeterminacy, as terms that are clear in one legal culture may map imperfectly onto another. Third, ambiguity influences compliance behavior and regulatory outcomes: research indicates that perceived ambiguity interacts with perceptions of enforcement certainty to shape whether people comply with the law (Barnum & Nagin, 2021; Amiati et al., 2024). These issues point to a need for systematic, interdisciplinary analyses that link forms of semantic ambiguity to concrete interpretive effects in legal contexts.

A growing body of recent studies has begun to address these problems from different angles. Corpus-based research documents the syntactic and lexical features that make legal texts difficult to parse and shows how plain-language reform reduces misinterpretation. Legal-theoretical work has examined the conceptual boundary between translation and interpretation

demonstrating that many interpretive disputes stem from differing assumptions about meaning, context, and the role of authorial intent. Empirical social-science studies complement these insights by measuring how ambiguity shapes compliance and judicial decision-making. However, the existing literature still lacks integrative studies that classify semantic ambiguity in legislation and adjudicative texts and empirically link those types to distinct interpretive outcomes (Lin et al., 2023; Zeifert & Tobor, 2021).

Accordingly, this article aims to (1) classify the principal forms of semantic ambiguity encountered in statutory and contractual language used in legal discourse; (2) analyse how those forms affect interpretive strategies employed by judges, lawyers, translators, and lay readers in selected case samples; and (3) propose drafting and pedagogical recommendations to reduce harmful misinterpretation while preserving necessary legal flexibility. By combining descriptive linguistic analysis, targeted corpus evidence, and discussion of practical implications, the paper seeks to bridge theoretical debates and real-world legal communication problems—both in international contexts and in national settings where ambiguous drafting has produced contested outcomes (Nowak, 2016; Amiati et al., 2024).

METHOD

This study employs a library research (literature review) design, which systematically collects, evaluates, and synthesizes relevant scholarly works to address the research problem. The approach focuses on analyzing published materials such as peer-reviewed journal articles, legal texts, books, and authoritative reports pertaining to semantic ambiguity and its implications for language interpretation in legal discourse. The scope of the review covers publications from the last ten years to ensure the relevance of the findings, although seminal works predating this range are also considered when conceptually necessary. This method allows for the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives from linguistics, law, and translation studies, forming a comprehensive theoretical framework.

The research process began with systematic data collection through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and national indexing services such as SINTA and GARUDA. Keywords such as semantic ambiguity, legal discourse, language interpretation, and legal translation were used in various combinations. Inclusion criteria required that sources be peer-reviewed, published within the defined time frame, and directly address the relationship between semantic ambiguity and interpretation in legal contexts. Exclusion criteria eliminated non-academic sources, opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical grounding, and articles that addressed ambiguity in non-legal settings without a clear transferable framework.

After the literature was gathered, the materials were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Each source was reviewed to identify the types, causes, and effects of semantic ambiguity, as well as proposed strategies for mitigation in legal drafting and interpretation. The analysis process involved coding thematic categories, comparing perspectives across disciplines, and synthesizing findings to reveal common patterns and notable divergences. This methodological approach not only organizes the existing body of knowledge but also highlights research gaps, thereby providing a foundation for the conceptual model and recommendations presented in the discussion section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semantic Ambiguity and Its Impact on Judicial Interpretation

Semantic ambiguity within legal discourse emerges when statutory or contractual language can plausibly yield multiple interpretations. This linguistic indeterminacy may arise at the lexical level, where a single term carries distinct senses, or at the syntactic level, where sentence structure allows divergent readings. In legal contexts, such ambiguity is particularly consequential because it can directly influence judicial reasoning, contractual enforcement, and legislative clarity. Courts, therefore, frequently confront the task of determining which meaning best aligns with legislative intent, contractual purpose, or established legal principles (Cruse, 1986; Lyons, 1977).

A prominent illustration is the United States Supreme Court case *Lamps Plus, Inc. v. Varela* (2019), in which the Court examined whether an ambiguous arbitration clause could authorize class-wide arbitration. The agreement's wording allowed for multiple interpretations, but the Court held that such procedural mechanisms could not be imposed absent explicit consent, reflecting the doctrine that ambiguity should not expand contractual obligations beyond what the parties clearly intended (Barnum & Nagin, 2021). Similarly, the classic English contract case *Raffles v Wichelhaus* (1864) known as *The Peerless* case turned on latent ambiguity. The parties referred to two different ships named "Peerless," and the court determined there was no binding agreement because the ambiguity prevented a true "meeting of the minds" (Nowak, 2016).

In statutory interpretation, semantic ambiguity often compels judges to apply interpretive canons, such as the plain meaning rule, to give words their ordinary sense unless context dictates otherwise. Where the plain meaning remains indeterminate, extrinsic aids, such as legislative history, precedent, and purposive reasoning, are brought into play (Zeifert & Tobor, 2021). For instance, in Indonesia, ambiguity in legal terms such as *kepentingan umum* ("public interest") has sparked interpretive debates in constitutional and administrative law. Judicial review cases before the

Constitutional Court have demonstrated that this phrase may be interpreted broadly to justify large-scale infrastructure projects or narrowly to protect community rights, with significant implications for land acquisition disputes (Amiati et al., 2024).

Importantly, ambiguity in legal drafting is not always detrimental. Legislatures sometimes intentionally employ ambiguous wording to maintain flexibility, accommodate future contingencies, or forge political compromise (Lin et al., 2023). However, while deliberate ambiguity can facilitate adaptive governance, it also risks enabling selective or biased interpretation. Legal semiotics scholars argue that such ambiguity reflects the inherently dynamic and negotiable nature of legal meaning, wherein textual openness allows competing actors to project their preferred interpretations, thus shaping the application of law in practice (Tampubolon, 2025).

Comparative analysis across jurisdictions reveals that while some legal systems embrace ambiguity as an interpretive resource, others impose stricter drafting standards to minimize uncertainty. In common law jurisdictions, courts tend to resolve ambiguity through precedent and interpretive principles, whereas in civil law systems, codified definitions and hierarchical interpretive rules often limit the scope of potential meanings. This comparative insight reinforces the necessity of precise legal drafting, robust interpretive frameworks, and, where multilingual legal systems are involved, careful translation practices to preserve intended meaning and avoid costly disputes.

The Role of Context in Determining Semantic Meaning

Language meaning is never fully contained within individual words or isolated sentences; rather, it is constructed through the interaction between linguistic expressions and their communicative environments. This phenomenon, known as contextual meaning, reflects the dynamic relationship between a text and the situational, cultural, and pragmatic conditions in which it is embedded. Halliday and Hasan (1985) emphasize that context consists of three essential dimensions: field (the activity or situation taking place), tenor (the social roles and relationships of participants), and mode (the channel or medium of communication). These dimensions collectively guide how interlocutors assign meaning to linguistic forms and resolve potential ambiguity.

Polysemy the presence of multiple related meanings in a single lexical item demonstrates the necessity of contextual interpretation. For example, the adjective *hot* can signify a high temperature (“The soup is hot”), a spicy taste (“The curry is hot”), physical attractiveness (“She looks hot”), or danger (“It’s getting hot in here” in the sense of heightened risk). Without contextual cues, the intended sense remains indeterminate. The interpretive process relies on semantic disambiguation strategies informed by the speaker’s

intention, the listener's background knowledge, and situational factors (Cruse, 2004).

Pragmatics further illuminates how meaning emerges in context. Speech acts such as "Can you pass the salt?" illustrate the divergence between literal form and intended function. While the sentence appears to question the hearer's ability, the illocutionary force as conceptualized in Searle's Speech Act Theory signals a polite request when uttered at a dining table. Similarly, in contemporary digital discourse, the word *fire* in "That movie was fire" departs from its literal associations with combustion and instead denotes excellence, a shift facilitated by the shared linguistic norms of online communities. Such examples underscore the importance of sociocultural and genre-specific contexts in shaping interpretation (Taguchi, 2015).

Literary discourse offers a rich domain for examining contextual meaning through symbolism and metaphor. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the recurring image of the *green light* transcends its literal denotation as a physical object. Within the narrative framework, it embodies Gatsby's idealized vision of the American Dream and his unattainable aspirations. This interpretive depth arises from the interplay between textual elements and the reader's awareness of plot, character motivations, and socio-historical background (Leech & Short, 2007).

Finally, cross-cultural communication highlights how neglecting contextual factors can result in misinterpretation. The advertising slogan "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux" is an oft-cited example where literal translation overlooked colloquial connotations in American English, where *sucks* conveys strong negativity. This semantic mismatch illustrates that context operates not only at the situational and interpersonal level but also at the cultural level, where differing linguistic norms and idiomatic expressions may alter reception and meaning (House, 2016). Recognizing and incorporating contextual dimensions is thus essential for accurate meaning construction, effective communication, and the prevention of semantic ambiguity across domains.

Interdisciplinary and Contextual Dimensions of Semantic Ambiguity

Semantic ambiguity represents a multifaceted phenomenon situated at the intersection of linguistics, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. From a linguistic standpoint, ambiguity is traditionally classified into lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic forms, each influencing interpretation in distinct ways. Cognitive research has demonstrated that human comprehension does not proceed in a linear, single-meaning fashion; rather, the brain activates multiple potential interpretations simultaneously and progressively narrows them through contextual cues (Swinney, 1979). This dynamic interpretive process reflects the brain's capacity for inferential reasoning, cultural knowledge, and pragmatic sensitivity.

In contrast, artificial intelligence systems, such as machine translation engines and conversational agents, still struggle to emulate this human adaptability. Despite advancements in transformer-based architectures like BERT and GPT, computational models often rely predominantly on statistical correlations, lexical frequencies, and pre-learned patterns. This limits their ability to detect subtle communicative intentions, interpret cultural nuances, or resolve ambiguities embedded in figurative language, sarcasm, or context-dependent discourse. Consequently, interdisciplinary collaboration is essential integrating semantic theory, pragmatic analysis, cognitive modeling, and computational innovation to achieve more human-like interpretive capabilities in AI systems.

Furthermore, semantic ambiguity is inherently shaped by cultural relativity. What constitutes ambiguity in one cultural-linguistic context may be perceived as clarity in another. For instance, irony and indirectness are common and socially functional in many Western communicative settings, whereas in several Asian contexts, linguistic clarity and avoidance of potential misinterpretation are prioritized to maintain social harmony. Such differences necessitate culturally informed approaches in both translation and interpretation, requiring professionals to transcend literal equivalence and accurately convey the speaker's intended meaning. A phrase such as "*You're clever*" may oscillate between sincere compliment and sarcastic critique depending on cultural norms, prosody, and situational factors.

Notably, ambiguity should not be regarded solely as a communicative flaw. In creative, literary, and persuasive domains such as poetry, branding, and political rhetoric it can serve as a deliberate rhetorical device that stimulates curiosity, promotes multiple layers of interpretation, and enhances memorability. For example, John Deere's slogan "*Nothing runs like a Deere*" capitalizes on lexical ambiguity in the verb "*runs*", simultaneously invoking mechanical performance and durability. However, in high-stakes contexts like legal drafting, diplomatic negotiation, or medical communication, ambiguity constitutes a significant risk, potentially leading to misinterpretation and adverse outcomes. Thus, the function of ambiguity must be evaluated within its specific communicative purpose, weighing whether it enriches rhetorical effect or undermines clarity and precision.

From these observations, several applied recommendations emerge. Pedagogically, translator and interpreter training should incorporate contrastive text analysis across languages and genres, alongside real-time simulation exercises that foster rapid resolution of ambiguity under pressure. Pragmatic literacy must be strengthened through exposure to naturally occurring ambiguous expressions in social media, literary works, and everyday discourse. Technologically, the development of AI systems demands context-aware language modeling capable of dynamic meaning reconstruction, supported by multilingual annotated corpora encompassing

irony, metaphor, idiomaticity, and multimodal discourse cues. Institutionally, sectors such as law, healthcare, and public administration should adopt explicit language clarity protocols to preempt interpretive risks, while media practitioners should receive training to avoid structurally ambiguous formulations in headlines and reports.

Ultimately, advancing the understanding and management of semantic ambiguity requires not only analytical precision but also a commitment to interdisciplinary integration. By bridging the insights of linguistic theory, cognitive psychology, cultural pragmatics, and computational modeling, researchers and practitioners can better navigate the dual nature of ambiguity as both a communicative challenge and a powerful rhetorical resource.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that semantic ambiguity significantly influences language interpretation across various domains, from everyday communication to specialized legal contexts. The analysis reveals that ambiguity arises not merely from linguistic structures but also from cultural relativity, contextual framing, and the multifunctional use of expressions. Through real-world cases such as judicial rulings where multiple interpretations of statutory terms directly impacted verdicts it becomes evident that ambiguity can shape both meaning and outcome. Such findings affirm the need for precise semantic frameworks and cross-disciplinary approaches to interpretation, particularly in settings where misinterpretation carries substantial consequences.

The implications of these findings extend beyond linguistic theory into applied fields such as law, diplomacy, and translation studies. Addressing semantic ambiguity requires integrating cognitive linguistics, legal hermeneutics, and cross-cultural pragmatics to enhance interpretive accuracy. By recognizing the inherent variability of meaning and incorporating contextual analysis into interpretive methodologies, practitioners and scholars can reduce the risks of misunderstanding and ensure fairer, more reliable communication in critical decision-making environments.

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