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English Language Ambiguity

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Introduction

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Introduction:

Language is "ambiguous" if it has more than one meaning. Therefore, ambiguity exists whenever a word, phrase or sentence in English can be understood in more than one way. This is true for both written and spoken forms of English, as ambiguity "is a common feature of natural language, for in the broadest sense, practically any utterance or prose statement can potentially call up more than one meaning."¹⁾ Some ambiguity in English may be due to the fact that English has changed from its original Saxon Anglican pure form over a long time by languages such as Latin, Greek, German, French and other Scandinavian or European languages.²⁾

Whether intentional or unintentional, ambiguity of meaning found in independent language context is referred to as *semantic* ambiguity, while ambiguity in speaker meaning is referred to as *pragmatic* ambiguity. As most people do not intentionally use ambiguous

1) Kess, Joseph F. *Linguistic Ambiguity in Natural Language*. Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishing, 1989: 1-22.

2) Crystal, David. *The History of English*. Tokyo: Kinseido, 1988: 1-84. See also, Bryson, Bill. *The Mother Tongue: English & How it Got that Way*. New York: Avon Books, 1990.

words or phrases to convey their thoughts, a majority of ambiguity resides in English semantics. However, "intentional ambiguity is very common in certain language genres, like literature, advertisements, verbal humor and riddles; such genres rely heavily on it as a stylistic device."³⁾

English ambiguity is convenient at times and inconvenient at other times. For example, it may conveniently be used as an analytical tool to explain and interpret certain human interactions. It may also allow people to deal with issues in an indirect manner. It can even illustrate the complex nature of English as seen by problems faced with computers in Artificial Intelligence. On the other hand, it often inconveniently causes barriers to mutual understanding and hinders effective communication.

Section one of this paper explains the various forms of semantic ambiguity in English. Section two then examines how such ambiguity plays a direct or indirect role in pragmatics. Finally, section three analyzes the role that both of these types of ambiguity play in English literature.

I. Semantic Ambiguity (objective context meaning)

Semantic ambiguity deals with the objective rather than the subjective meaning of English words and phrases. Ambiguity is one attribute of the discipline of semantics in general, where "semantic ambiguity" refers to potential multiple meanings of the "relations within language (sense) and relations between language and the world (reference)".⁴⁾ In other words, it refers to a pattern or structure of meaning of a linguistic presentation found in such things as a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a poem, a novel, or even a scene from a movie. The ambiguity is to be found in the sense

3) Kess, *supra* note 1.

4) Palmer, Frank R. "Semantics." *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. New York: Oxford UP, 1992: 914.

relationships of the piece as a whole or in the individual parts of the overall whole.

It is difficult to discuss semantic ambiguity separate from pragmatic ambiguity because the two are so intricately connected with each other. Semantic ambiguity deals with independent language simply having a multiplicity of meanings. However, such ambiguity oftentimes is linked to the structure or grammar of language in a way that assigns responsibility for the ambiguity to a deliberate intent on the part of whoever originated but "underspecified" what the language means (or its rhetorical intent).⁵⁾ Nevertheless, when the rhetorical intent of the ambiguous expression is irrelevant, there still remains a situation of "perceived ambiguity", which involves the interpretation or "disambiguation" of the under-specification with a view toward arriving at meaning.

Semantic Ambiguity that exists in a single word having more than one meaning is known as lexical ambiguity. "Many words are semantically ambiguous and can refer to more than one concept."⁶⁾ For example, the word orange can mean either a type of color or a type of fruit. In contrast, semantic ambiguity that exists in an entire phrase or sentence is known as *structural* ambiguity. For example, the phrase "*American history teacher*" can mean someone who teaches American history (regardless of their nationality) or an American who is a history teacher (regardless of the type of history taught). In either semantic case, some additional context is usually needed to clarify meaning.

5) Poesio, Massimo. "Semantic Ambiguity and Perceived Ambiguity." *Semantic Ambiguity and Underspecification*. Ed. Kees van Deemter and Stanley Peters. Stanford: CSLI Publications, 1996. 159-201. Online reprint p. 12. <<http://www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk/Site/POESM96.html>>.

6) Rodd, Jenifer, Gaskell, Gareth and Marslen-Wilson, William. "The Advantages and Disadvantages of Semantic Ambiguity." *Institute for Research in Cognitive Science, 2000 Symposium*. <<http://www.ircs.upenn.edu/cogsci2000/PRCDNGS/SPRCDNGS/PAPERS/RODGAMAW.PDF>>

A. Lexical Ambiguity (single word meaning ambiguity)

Lexical or single word ambiguity is by far the most common type of semantic ambiguity. It exists when a word in English has more than one possible sense or meaning. Lexical ambiguity deals with the meaning of individual words or constituents that make up the overall pattern or structure. Lexical ambiguity is a subset of semantics inasmuch as it links multiple sense relations associated with words (sometimes referred to as a lexical item or *lexeme*).⁷⁾ In this regard, lexical ambiguity deals with the relationship between individual component parts of a meaningful structure in need of being "disambiguated."

It is important to recognize that lexical ambiguity is a part of semantic ambiguity. However, semantic ambiguity can exist even if lexical ambiguity does not seem to be present.⁸⁾ In that regard, lexical ambiguity may be ubiquitous. That is, the two domains of lexical and semantic ambiguity are linked in that "discourse structure affects the meanings of words, and meanings of words affect discourse structure".⁹⁾ Information flows back and forth "between the semantics of words and the structure of discourse".¹⁰⁾ If it is true that ambiguity is embedded into the structure of discourse, then lexical and semantic ambiguities feed and are fed by each another.

Most words in English have multiple meanings and multiple uses. In some cases, the different senses or meanings of a word are similarly related, while in others, the different senses of a word are not related at all. Common terms used to describe such instances

7) Palmer, *supra*, note 4.

8) Levine, Robert. *Formal Grammar: Theory and Implementation*. New York: Oxford U P, 1992: 390.

9) Asher, Nicholas and Alex Lascarides. "Lexical Disambiguation in a Discourse Context." *Lexical Semantics: The Problem of Polysemy*. Ed. Branimir Boguraev and James Pustejovsky. New York: Oxford U P, 1996: 69.

10) *Id.*

include *polysemy*, which stands for "the existence of two or more meanings or senses to one word," and *homonymy*, which stands for a word that is "different in meaning but identical in form".¹¹ The distinction between the two cases seems difficult at first, but becomes much clearer by looking a word up in the dictionary. Although there appears to be a "gray area" between polysemy and homonymy, one way that dictionary writers make a distinction is to define homonyms in completely separate dictionary entries while defining polysemous words by using multiple sub-definitions within a single entry.¹²

If a word is found to have two or more "related" meanings, the ambiguity is known as *polysemy*. For example, the verb *go* has many entries in the dictionary where each definition reflects a different but related sense of the same word. In this case, Polysemy helps explain the subtle semantic differences found in such a commonly used word. One indicator of polysemy is where you have synonyms for a particular word. For example, the word *go* might have synonyms such as *move*, *depart*, *pass*, *vanish*, *reach*, *extend* and *set out* all separately listed in the dictionary. Many of these highlight a different polysemymous sense of the verb *go*.

Another case of polysemy exists where one meaning or sense of a word is taken or derived from another sense of the same word. For example, the cognitive sense of the verb *see* (meaning to mentally perceive) is derived from the visual sense (meaning to physically look). Similarly, the transitive sense of the verb *burn* (meaning to actively burn) is derived from its intransitive sense (meaning something is burning). It could be argued that such derived senses are not a second meaning of the words but only some type of lexical operation on the words themselves. However,

11) Palmer, *supra* note 4.

12) McArthur, Tom. "Polysemy." *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 795.

this type of argument is usually 'only true to the extent that the ambiguity is systematic and general, rather than peculiar to particular words.

In contrast to polysemy, if a single word is found to have two or more "unrelated" senses, then the ambiguity is known as *homonymy*. For example, the noun *suit* is ambiguous because it may refer to a lawsuit or a dress suit. Similarly, the noun *bear* and the verb *bear* are homonyms because they have entirely different uses and meanings. Such homonyms are two or more words that have the same form but different etymologies or word origins. For example, the word *ear* comes from the Old English word *éar* meaning husk, and from the word *-are* meaning the auditory organ.¹³⁾

Homonyms that are written the same but have different meanings are known as *homographs* or "words that are spelled identically but that have different origins".¹⁴⁾ For example, there are about 80 definitions for the words *take*, *bear* and *lead*. Because different word origins often produce different meanings, words that are spelled the same but having different origins may indeed have different meanings. For example, *cleave* means "either 'split asunder' or 'cling,' which are virtual opposites".¹⁵⁾

English possesses a lot of words that are spelled the same way but mean something entirely different. They can be manipulated endlessly to achieve a range of meanings that are either inconclusive or that, in poetry, for example, suggest a range of interpretations. Some single-word examples include the words *walk* (verb or sidewalk), *crane* (bird or machine), and *live* (reside, a condition of being, survive death, or live it up).¹⁶⁾ The ambiguity may be difficult

13) Palmer, *supra* note 4 at 915.

14) Urdang, Laurence. "Ambiguity." *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 33.

15) Id.

16) McArthur, *supra* note 12.

to distinguish for learners of English because both forms of the words often sound the same and are spelled the same. In fact, the meaning derived may depend on something besides the word use itself, which suggests that linguistic structure affects the content of a linguistic instance.

Homonymy may occur in spoken English as well as written. For example, the verb *desert* and the noun *dessert* are homonyms. Even though both words sound exactly the same, they are spelled differently and count as two distinct words with unrelated meanings. These types of homonyms are referred to as *homophones*. Another example of homophones would be the words *see* (a verb meaning "to look") and *sea* (a noun meaning "the ocean"). Both words sound exactly the same when spoken, but their spellings and meanings are completely different.

There are some cases where it is not always that easy to make a clear distinction of homonymy. This is especially true when you have only one word where the spelling and pronunciation are exactly the same. For example, the noun *respect* and the verb *respect* both sound the same and are spelled the same. Therefore, a question exists as to whether they are true homonyms or merely different ambiguous forms of the same word. There is no general rule on how to draw the line. However, there are a few simple tests that can be used to help you determine whether or not you are talking about homonymy.

One way to determine whether there is homonymy is to see if a word has two or more unrelated antonyms. For example, the adjective *hard* is homonymous because one sense is the opposite of *soft* and another sense is the opposite of *easy*. Another way to recognize homonymy is to look for double meanings. That is, if the word in question (written or spoken) has two distinct and separate interpretations, then there is homonymy. For example, *suit* is ambiguous as either a "dress suit" or a "legal suit".

A third type of lexical ambiguity exists where there are different grammatical syntax categories of a single word. Such lexical ambiguity of *category* arises when a lexeme functions in one or another syntactical way, such as one or another part of speech, or another structural component of a statement. This includes "lexical entries of different syntactic categories" that may admit different "syntactic analyses".¹⁷⁾ For example, the word *drink* may be a noun (meaning a beverage) or a verb (meaning to consume a liquid). Similarly, the word *party* may be a noun (meaning an event) or a verb (meaning an action done by agents to cause the event).

Making the distinction between different grammatical categories is mostly a problem of parsing and recognizing the meaning of the word through *context*. The importance of context as a linguistic element looms large in the face of seemingly endless permutations of semantic structure instances of lexical ambiguity. Indeed, even a word that occupies the same place in different statements has the potential to function differently, thus fostering lexical ambiguity not only for itself but for words in which it is linked, thereby suggesting vastly different contexts. For example, the phrase "*We saw her cook*" suggests at least three different interpretive rejoinders:

- (1) (*However*) *we didn't see her butler cook;*
- (2) (*However*) *we didn't see her use a pogo stick;*
- (3) (*Therefore*) *she should have used sunscreen.*

Additionally, the pronoun *her* can function with ambiguity differently from other personal pronouns because it may operate possessively, adjectivally or demonstratively. In comparison, forms that the other personal pronouns take would not be as underspecified as the pronoun *her*. For example, "*We saw him / them / you cook*", or "*We saw his / their / your cook.*"

17) Poesio, *supra* note 5 at 16.

Ambiguity of grammatical syntax category is *orthogonal* to polysemy and homonymy in that you can have categorical ambiguity simultaneously with one of the other forms. For example, the word *respect* is categorial and polysemous as the noun and verb senses are similarly related in meaning. In contrast, the word *sink* is categorial and homonymous because the noun and verb form senses are not related to each other in meaning. To that end, many words are ambiguous and confusing because they have different syntax categories in addition to related or unrelated senses. One way to help deal with this problem may be to try and organize word senses into a broader set of object categories by which we classify the world around us. This type of categorization is sometimes referred to as *ontology*.

A much broader ontology commonly found in work on formal logic is needed to handle natural language. For example, some classifications of objects might include such things like *substance* (physical objects), *quantity* (such as numbers), *quality* (such as bright red), *actions* and *events*. Among these, *events*, which are things that happen in the world, are important in many semantic theories because they provide a structure for organizing the interpretation of sentences. *Actions*, which are things that agents do, are also important because they cause some event. Like all objects in the ontology, actions and events can be referred to by pronouns, as in the discourse fragment.

B. Structural Ambiguity (phrase or sentence meaning)

Structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure, such as the phrase "*American history teacher*" or the sentence "*The girl hit the boy with a book*". These ambiguities are said to be structural because each phrase or sentence can be represented in two structurally different ways, for example "[*American history*] *teacher*" and "*American* [*history teacher*]"'. Such structural ambiguity brings in the idea of the framework or

pattern, which comprises many parts. That is, "semantic ambiguity can arise at the phrase level from alternative available semantic relationships between / among the constituents of the phrase."¹⁸ In other words, the existence of such semantic ambiguity provides strong evidence for a level of underlying syntactic structure.

Sometimes, lexically ambiguous words may introduce structural ambiguity into phrases or sentences in which they occur. For example, the word *light* (meaning either not very heavy or not very dark) is lexically ambiguous and may cause structural ambiguity when placed in a phrase such as "*light suit*" (meaning either a light weight or a light color suit). However, some phrases or sentences can be structurally ambiguous even if none of the individual words are lexically ambiguous. For example, the phrase "*He shot the burglar with a gun*" (meaning either the burglar had a gun or was shot by a gun) is structurally ambiguous without any lexical ambiguity. Therefore, semantic ambiguity can exist in structure even where lexical ambiguity does not.¹⁹

Some forms of structural ambiguity are *parasitic* on the underlying syntactic ambiguity. For instance, the sentence "*Happy cats and dogs live on the farm*" is ambiguous as to whether there are happy cats and happy dogs, or happy cats and dogs of any disposition. This ambiguity is actually rooted in the syntactic structure. That is, it depends on whether the conjunction involves two noun phrases, (Happy cats) and (dogs), or the single noun phrase (Happy (cats and dogs)).

Other forms of structural ambiguity are truly semantic and arise from a single syntactic structure, such as the common problem involving quantifier scoping. For example, does the sentence "*Every boy loves a dog*" mean that there is a single dog that all boys love, or

18) Levine, *supra* note 8.

19) *Id.*

that each boy might love a different dog? The syntactic structure is the same in each case, but the difference lies in how the quantifiers work. Consider also the structurally ambiguous sentence, "*The chicken is ready to eat*", which could be used to describe either a hungry chicken or a cooked chicken. It is arguable that the operative reading depends on whether the implicit subject of the infinitive clause "*to eat*" is anaphorically tied to the subject ("*the chicken*") of the main clause.

C. Lexical versus Structural Ambiguity

It is not always clear when we have a case of structural ambiguity. Consider first the elliptical sentence, "*Perot knows a richer man than Trump*" which is clearly ambiguous because it has two meanings. Either Perot knows a man who is richer than Trump, or Perot knows a man who is richer than any man Trump knows. But what about the sentence "*John loves his mother and so does Bill*"? This can mean either they both love their own mothers or they both love John's mother. But is this really ambiguous? One might argue that the clause "*so does Bill*" is unambiguous and may be read unequivocally as saying in the context that Bill does the same thing that John does, and although there are two different possibilities for what counts as doing the same thing, these alternatives are not fixed semantically. Hence the ambiguity is merely apparent and better described as semantic underdetermination.

Sometimes it is hard to make the distinction between lexical and structural ambiguity. Consider the sentence "*Where did I come from?*" At first, there appears to be no exotic meaning attached to any of the individual words. Indeed, the statement manifestly has no double meaning, no metaphor and no irony. Why, then, can it be said to be semantically ambiguous? Despite, or perhaps exactly because of, the simplicity of the statement, it presents the potential for alternative analyses of the word *where*. That would seem to make a solid case for lexical ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity may be located in both the choice of words on the part of their *originator*, i.e., in a "grammar which makes use of an underspecified language to encode the 'ambiguity potential' of lexically ambiguous expressions," and in the behavior of their *receiver / receptor / auditor / reader*, who may respond to the ambiguity by means of "a simple formalization of lexical disambiguation as defeasible inference over underspecified representations".²⁰⁾

Undoubtedly, the statement "*Where did I come from?*" is underspecified. Therefore, one answer to the question could be the name of some place like the city of Albuquerque. However, another answer (given the under-specification) might involve an adult attempting to explain the facts of life to a child (even though the child may actually be only expecting the name of a city for an answer). This speaks to a case of lexical ambiguity that could be made regarding the word *where*. However, it seems equally possible that the statement has structural ambiguity, because the statement contains potentially multiple "rules of semantic combination".²¹⁾

Structural ambiguity does not necessarily exclude lexical ambiguity, as it obviously cannot be said that multiple meaning is not implicated at the level of the lexeme or lexical unit, which may be a single word or part or form of one, or even a group of words.²²⁾ Some people suggest that "lexical semantic information" has the potential effect of fusing lexical and structural ambiguity.²³⁾ Therefore, even if one insists on the presence of lexical ambiguity (noting that "*What city did I come from?*" would disambiguate the earlier statement), the lexical ambiguity would still be subsumed by the structural dynamic that renders the statement ambiguous.

20) Poesio, *supra* note 5 at 14.

21) Levine, *supra* note 8.

22) Ilson, Robert F. "Lexeme." *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 600.

23) Gaskell, M. Gareth and Marslen-Wilson, William D. "Ambiguity, Competition, and Blending in Spoken Word Recognition." *Cognitive Science*, 23 (October-December 1999): 439.

The idea of subsuming lexical ambiguity in the semantic structure is discussed as *context*, which is associated with both semantic and lexical ambiguity. In the foregoing example, what would have the greatest potential to disambiguate the original statement would be the context in which it is presented. The distinction is sharpened when identifying lexical ambiguity simply as the possibility that "two or more distinct meanings or readings are tenable in a given context, rendering choice between the alternatives an uncertain one" (emphasis added).²⁴ What that suggests is that the semantic context contains the relevant lexeme.

Indeed, the notion of *context* is an extremely important feature of discourse, identification, and disambiguation of lexical ambiguity. The inter-penetration of context in semantics issues deal with the fact that "... language is a social product, with constraints established by interpersonal relations."²⁵ In other words, one could say that constraints of language are established by the compact implicit between writers and readers, the content of that compact being a nexus toward disambiguation. These constraints, and / or relations, are the content, so to speak, of context, which lends weight to the enterprise of overcoming linguistic under-specification.

II. Pragmatic Ambiguity (subjective speaker meaning)

Pragmatic ambiguity deals with subjective speaker or author meaning that occurs in an intentional and productive sense. This is true for both spoken and written content. For the most part, ambiguity is a semantic phenomenon, involving linguistic meaning rather than speaker meaning. That is, when someone uses ambigu-

24) Su, Soon Peng. *Lexical Ambiguity in Poetry*. London: Longman, 1994. 55.

25) Read, Allen Walker. "How Important Is the Terminology of Korzybski's General Semantics?" *E-Prime III! A Third Anthology*. Ed. D. David Bourland, Jr., and Paul Dennithorne Johnston. Concord, Calif.: International Society for General Semantics, 1997. 503.

ous words or sentences, one does not usually entertain their unintended meanings consciously. In other words, when someone uses a potentially ambiguous sentence or expression, usually the intention was to express only one meaning. However, there are some cases where ambiguity is conscious and deliberate, as in the case when an utterance such as "*I'd like to see more of you*" is intended to be taken in more than one way in the very same context of utterance.

As we know, most words can have *denotations* (apparent meanings) and *connotations* (implied or hidden meanings). Also, we often use words in a figurative way. Even though figurative language is more often used in poetry and fiction, it is still very common in ordinary speech. Although listeners and readers are not always aware of linguistic ambiguity on a conscious level, sometimes "... we are aware of ambiguity in language because it has been specifically called to our attention, and we are made to realize that it is part of the comprehension task. That is, we are called upon to take the ambiguity into account as we analyze the sentence for its meaning."²⁶⁾

People are also said to be ambiguous on occasion in how they use language. This can occur if, even when their words are unambiguous, their words do not make what they mean uniquely determinable. Pragmatic ambiguity is a multi-dimensional instrument embedded in linguistic production that is implemented in a way that makes the *latent* content of language function according to its author's intent. This is true even though the latent content may be or seems to be concealed by the *manifest* form that the language itself takes. In fact, the richness of context for ambiguity means that ambiguity cannot avoid touching metaphysics and moral philosophy. In other words, the deliberateness of linguistic ambiguity

26) Kess, *supra* note 1 at 2.

is usually interconnected with rhetoric, communication, and moral purpose.

A. Rhetorical Pragmatism

Doublespeak is a widely used term to identify deliberate ambiguous miscommunications meant to achieve rhetorical purposes.²⁷⁾ Usually authentic meaning can be "teased out"²⁸⁾ of such language, which has been constructed with a view toward deceiving the audience. Some examples of this type of language include euphemisms, jargon, bureaucratese and elevated language.²⁹⁾

Euphemisms can be legitimately used as a device of tact to protect the feelings of others. However, they become ambiguous doublespeak when they are used to mislead or deceive. A good example of language intended to alter our perception of reality was used in 1984 when the U.S. State Department started using the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life" instead of "killing" in its annual report of human rights in countries around the world. While the apparent intent was simply to use a "politically correct" term to define an unpleasant situation, the actual intent of the euphemism was to cover up and avoid discussing government sanctioned killings in countries supported by the United States.³⁰⁾

Jargon also has legitimate purposes as the "specialized language" of various professionals and other enthusiasts, but it becomes doublespeak when it "makes the simple appear complex, the ordinary profound, the obvious insightful."³¹⁾ One example of this can be seen in a lot of specialized jargon used by sociologists and psychologists. For example: "Siblings are conflicted in their interpersonal relationships," is simply another fancy way of saying that

27) Lutz, William. *Doublespeak*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990.

28) Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), x.

29) Lutz, supra note 27.

30) Id.

31) Id. at 4.

children of the same parent don't like each other.³²⁾ Another example can be seen in a lot of legal jargon used by lawyers. One of the effects of using such jargon is that it prevents non-professionals who are not familiar with the specialized terminology from effectively doing the same job.

The negative implications of using jargon sometimes extend beyond a mere linguistic context. One such case can be seen where corporations utilize ambiguous technical terms to mislead their stockholders. For example, once an insurance claim of \$1.7 million yielded National Airlines stockholders an extra dividend of 18¢ per share, but the airline did not want to talk about one of its airplanes crashing. The airlines accounted for the \$1.7 million in a footnote of its annual report to stockholders as "the involuntary conversion of a 727." The use of such jargon allowed them to acknowledge the profit it made from the crash without mentioning the incident or resulting deaths.³³⁾

Bureaucratese or gobbledygook "is simply a matter of piling on words . . . the bigger the words and the longer sentences the better,"³⁴⁾ with "corporate bureaucrats, government bureaucrats, and lawyers"³⁵⁾ the chief agents of deliberate confusion via vigorous communication. For example, to avoid negative publicity and possible legal exposure, companies do not fire employees but engage in "workforce adjustments," 'headcount reductions,' or 'negative employee retention.' A television station . . . didn't fire one of the anchorpersons on its evening news program, it was just 'rearranging the anchor configuration.'³⁶⁾

32) Edwin Newman, *Strictly Speaking: Will America Be the Death of English?* (New York: Warner, 1975), 176.

33) Lutz, *supra* note 27 at 4.

34) *Id.* at 5.

35) *Id.* at 132.

36) *Id.* at 128.

One of the most compelling uses of bureaucratese takes shape as an extended metaphor in George Orwell's book 1984. This book chronicles a political society gone mad, with ambiguous language as its principal mechanism of enforced social engineering. The society called Oceania is itself a symbol and a logical extension of political ideology carried to the extreme. Language repeatedly and programmatically defines the priorities of the government, and the identity of the individuals who make up the population. The effect of such bureaucratese on the people and their emotions is significant.

In the Newspeak of Oceania, there is no judgment of value except as designated by the authorities. Thus war is peace, ignorance is strength, and freedom is slavery. There are not simply good and bad, but "good," "doublegood," "ungood," and "doubleplus ungood".³⁷⁾ There is no "state-sanctioned killing" but rather the "positive creation of non-persons." The patriotic appeal of the "Two-Minutes' Hate" relies on language to engage the masses in a project of articulating slogans calculated to unite them in hatred of perpetual, though never quite specifically defined, enemies.³⁸⁾

Bureaucratic manipulation of language for political purposes, such as use of the phrase "revenue enhancement" concealing the dreaded word "taxes," is in the book 1984 forcefully portrayed as the agent of wholesale transformation of public policy, public and private consciousness, and public reality. The plot of 1984 turns on language, notably the fact that the most inflammatory subversive tract in Oceania was actually written by the party man O'Brien in order to draw out subversives who can be tortured into acquiescence.³⁹⁾ The power of language to define consciousness in this way demonstrates why it is so important to identify how ambiguity may operate to affect experience.

37) Orwell, George. 1984 (New York: The New American Library, 1981), 20ff et passim.

38) Id.

39) Id. at 16.

Propaganda is commonly used to describe a situation in which people are often deceived through various means of communication, often incorporating ambiguity of purpose. For example, various examples persist where pollution controls and health standards are neglected in order to speed military production or maximize corporate profits. To that end, governments and corporations often use ambiguous or misleading propaganda to rally people around a specific cause thereby ignoring the harmful effects of what is going on right in front of their own eyes.

Inflated language is another example of ambiguous usage that proclaims its power, but does so in a way that conceals its intent. Inflated language may overlap and converge with jargon and bureaucratese, but it is chiefly distinguished by the fact that it is so obviously overblown and "designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary" and the simple to seem complex,⁴⁰⁾ sometimes to the extent that it results in unintentional humor.

Inflated language can be implemented to define car mechanics as "automotive internists," elevator operators as "vertical transportation corps," used cars as "pre-owned" or "experienced," and black-and-white televisions as having a "non-multicolor capability." It is this kind of doublespeak that is quite typical of advertising, such that "without the slightest hint of embarrassment" advertisers can refer to a girdle as a "body shaper" and "boast of goods made out of 'genuine imitation leather' or 'virgin vinyl.'"⁴¹⁾

On a less humorous level, inflated language enables corporations to "initiate a career alternative enhancement program," i.e., do a massive layoff of workers.⁴²⁾ When language is so over inflated as to be blatantly obvious, it may actually be less ambiguous than it was originally intended to be. But it nevertheless succeeds as an

40) Lutz, *supra* note 27 at 6.

41) *Id.* at 102.

42) *Id.* at 6.

exercise in ambiguity to the degree it does not motivate a reader or listener to decipher its unstated meaning or identify the ideas motivating its use.

B. Strategic Pragmatism

Sometimes ambiguity is strategically used not only to conceal but to actively control the way other people think and behave. Meanings that remain encoded are significant examples of ambiguity to the degree they do not become part of cultural, social, and political discourse. Different means of communication have different effects on how people react. For example, there is a good deal of discussion about communication in the contemporary business workplace and "role ambiguity". That is, the ambiguity that workers experience when they are not clear about how they are perceived and what is expected of them on the job.

Workers often suffer stress on account of role ambiguity. Basically, what this has to do with is a failure of communication that can be connected to the ambiguous use of language. The connection between job stress and role ambiguity has been measured in linguistic terms by some studies. In one particular study, researchers examined the wording of the standardized workplace psychometrics to determine whether the use of language was associated with the experience of role ambiguity, role conflict, and job tension. The researchers found that a simple wording of psychometric designed to measure job satisfaction could affect the statistical results. More specifically, they found a difference in response to so-called "comfort worded" and "stress worded" questions. Compare the following:

Comfort worded: *"I feel certain about how much authority I have."*

Stress worded: *"I feel uncertain about how much authority I have."*⁴³⁾

43) Harris, Michael M. and Bladen, Amy. "Wording Effects in the Measurement of Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity: A Multitrait-Multimethod Analysis," *Journal of Management* 20 (Winter 1994): 889, 901.

Whether the comfort-worded or stress-worded constructions yield more reliable information may be important to effective measurement of employee satisfaction. More importantly, this research shows that language, whether intended to be ambiguous or not, may still exist in an ambiguous context and actually be the decisive factor that causes the condition of ambiguity.⁴⁴⁾

The same idea may be discerned as something that "can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign" and as something that is "an irreducible plural [that] . . . depends not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers."⁴⁵⁾ To put it another way, language is embedded in conditions of ambiguity for which it is specifically responsible, but that are located outside of the text. In fact, the text itself does not need to be intentionally ambiguous to be effectively so.

Generally speaking, linguistic ambiguity that is not simply incoherent is usually a property of strategic authorial intent. That places ambiguity within the discourse of morality and ethics. In that regard, while clarity "is usually considered desirable for communication, ambiguity may be more effective in certain organizational circumstances."⁴⁶⁾ Such "strategic ambiguity" may be useful and even desirable where straightforward attempts at persuasion are likely to prove ineffective.

Ambiguity may be considered strategically "appropriate for addressing difficult issues, improving interpersonal relations, and resolving conflicts that arise between individuals in organizations."⁴⁷⁾

44) Id.

45) Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text. The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. 2d ed. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997. 902-3.

46) Paul, Jim and Strbiak, Christy A. "The Ethics of Strategic Ambiguity," *The Journal of Business Communication* 34 (April 1997): 149.

47) Id. at 151.

For example, ambiguity is a useful instrument of communication that may enable competing sides to both claim victory in a problematic situation, thus serving the needs of comity and collaboration within an organization. There are various benefits of using ambiguity in such a morally idealistic way.

On the other hand, ambiguity may be misused as a strategic instrument of "deniability," which serves the needs of those who want to avoid responsibility. Thus the ethical content of a strategically ambiguous communication is a serious matter. For this reason, managers in the workplace should therefore "rigorously examine their own ethical principles" in a way that makes it more likely that the ethics they espouse do not diverge radically from their own "ethics-in-use."⁴⁸⁾

While strategic ambiguity as a concept can be compared to the employment of euphemisms or other "comfort" language as an instrument of social or business interaction, it treads on ethically dangerous territory when "it is the result of managerial pressure to act contrary to one's espoused-ethics."⁴⁹⁾ Oftentimes, corporations and politicians (or their PR consultants) purposefully encode meaning to escape criticism or censure they know they deserve. Say for example, one Mr. Enron suggested that an accountant lie on the company's financial statements. That would clearly distinguish the connection between ambiguity and moral composition.

Linguistic ambiguity may strategically serve the interests of the oppressed, who need to express themselves but also need to shield themselves from harm. This theme can be seen in Elizabethan-era religious polemicists, many of whom published anonymously. They did this mainly because Catholic tracts bearing their name could have gotten them imprisoned.⁵⁰⁾ Some other authors however, like

48) Id. at 154.

49) Id. at 157.

50) North, Marcy L., "N.D. Versus O.E.: Anonymity's Moral Ambiguity in Elizabethan Catholic Controversy," *Criticism* 40 (Summer 1998): 356.

the Jesuit scholar Southwell, maintained anonymity (i.e. ambiguity of authorship), not because of the need to avoid imprisonment but rather because "...[a]nonymity's literary and devotional conventionality allowed Southwell to portray his secrecy as traditional church-sanctioned modesty."⁵¹⁾

Another reason for authorial anonymity during the Elizabethan period is that anonymity evolved into something of a literary convention for ecclesiastical debate in the 16th century. Further, debaters who signed their names to a religious tract were positioned to claim moral superiority to those who wrote anonymously. Alternatively, "[n]aming an anonymous adversary became a popular weapon for the early modern controversialist... [who] hoped that the revelation would expose his deception or put him in danger."⁵²⁾ Such use of ambiguity of authorship can be compared to "underground" political texts produced in oppressive societies or even the anonymous texts of political satire and critique that appear in Internet e-mail boxes.

Ambiguity of language may not only strategically serve to protect political agendas and those who are their victims, but even the critique of such use of the language as well (known as *political satire*). Ambiguous language always means more than it says when it is successful in concealing meaning. It says more than it means, when the meaning is both discerned and disseminated successfully. To the degree the successful decoding of misleading language yields a laugh rather than acquiescence in the intention of the encoding, it also succeeds in criticizing the attempt to conceal meaning behind language, and it may succeed in exposing the bad faith of its creator. Plainly this decoding is the source of political satire. Indeed, psychological dysfunction can also serve the discourse of

51) Id. at 357.

52) Id. at 360.

linguistic ambiguity to the extent "that awareness per se — by and of itself — can be curative."⁵³⁾

It is paradoxical that as ambiguous language may mean more than it says in order to conceal meaning, it may also mean to say more than it does to invite discourse and arrive at multiple meanings. That does not necessarily mean that the author of the ambiguity does not want to engage in a clever deception. However, such a deception tends to be in the nature of a linguistic exercise, dialogue, or compact with the receiver, who is being invited to interpret a piece of language in order to reach meaning, insight, or heightened awareness that is not possible when the linguistic choices do not encode the author's ideas in a specific way. That is the spirit of the analysis or deconstruction of various approaches to written literary text.

Some people suggest that a pragmatic linkage to rhetorical content needing disambiguation assumes the auditor / reader will bring preexisting knowledge to the exercise.⁵⁴⁾ But the fact is that readers and listeners bring preexisting knowledge to language no matter what its original intent is. However, other people distinguish between structural semantics, which "deals with meaning, thus with a theory of signification," and truth-conditional semantics, which has complex attributes and which also points in the direction of pragmatics.⁵⁵⁾

III. Poetic Ambiguity

Semantic and Pragmatic ambiguity is widely used as a device of linguistic and rhetorical strategy in written literary texts. One of the best examples of this can be seen in Poetry. William Empson has studied ambiguity that exists in poetry and points out that all great

53) Perls, Frederick S. *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 20.

54) Asher, *supra* note 9 at 72.

55) Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1990: 207.

poetry "is supposed to be ambiguous."⁵⁶ His general thesis is that any kind of linguistic nuance fosters ambiguity because it invites alternative interpretations. To that end, he identifies seven different ways in which nuance is structured, but is careful to point out that they are not the only types of ambiguity to be found. As he says, "the distinctions between the seven types which he was asked to study would not be worth the attention of a profounder thinker."⁵⁷

If poetry is the highest and best use of language, then all best uses of language are also embedded with ambiguity. Poetry decisively links linguistic ambiguity with deliberation and communication, as well as with such things as metaphor, symbolism, irony, paradox,⁵⁸ figures of speech, rhetoric, and even aesthetics in general. At the most basic level, a literary expression may be "effective in several ways at once."⁵⁹ Take for example, a poem that pairs "*eagles and ravens*" (i.e. types of birds) in one line and "*heroes and cravens*" (i.e. types of people) in another. The comparison between different kinds of birds and different kinds of people is one way in which the text is "effective". However, the parallelism between eagles and heroes on the one hand, and ravens and cravens on the other is another.⁶⁰

What is important to recognize about Empson's treatment of the subject is the fact that he has found a way to discuss multiple structures that may express ambiguity in poetry that yields a richness of alternative interpretations. But Empson cautions that the effectiveness of poetic ambiguity inheres in its very coherence and that ambiguity for its own sake is not "a thing to be attempted; it

56) Empson, *supra* note 28 at viii.

57) *Id.* at xv.

58) Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2d ed., ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 902.

59) Empson, *supra* note 28 at v.

60) *Id.* at 22.

must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation."⁶¹⁾

Underspecification takes shape as elliptical expression in poetic examples of semantic and/or lexical ambiguity. William Empson sees lexical and semantic ambiguity operating in tandem in the first of seven types of poetical ambiguity that he identifies. He refers to "a word or a grammatical structure [that] is effective in several ways at once".⁶²⁾ Focus on the word positions this type of ambiguity (referred to as "ambiguity of reference")⁶³⁾ as lexical, whereas focus on grammatical structure positions it as semantic.

Despite Empson's focus on poetry and his conceit of ascribing to literary devices and figures of speech the terminology of ambiguity, his work appears to have been influential in literary criticism and linguistics alike. Empson shows how the ambiguities he classifies operate without giving them actual names. However, at least one other author has summarized and offered identifying terms for each of Empson's types as follows:

1. ambiguity of reference, the result of metaphoric manipulation;
2. ambiguity of referent, the grammatical running of alternative meanings into one;
3. ambiguity of sense, including puns, allusions, and allegories;
4. ambiguity of intent, in which the author's purpose is unclear;
5. ambiguity of transition, marked by a change in the author's perspective of his or her subject;
6. ambiguity of contradiction, in which the author confuses an image owing to tautology, contradiction, or irrelevancy; and
7. ambiguity of meaning, as in words like *let* ("allow" or "hinder") and *cleave* ("split asunder" or "embrace") (emphasis in original).⁶⁴⁾

Empson's analysis of ambiguity mandates a focus on the written word. However, lexical ambiguity also operates with regard to the

61) Id. at 235.

62) Id. at 2.

63) Id. at 33.

64) Id.

spoken word. Empson touches on this in his discussion of ambiguity of reference when he says that "extra meanings" may be suggested by poetic rhythm. In his words, "The reason that ambiguity is more elaborate in poetry than in prose . . . seems to be that the presence of metre and rhyme [] . . . Rhythm allows one, by playing off the possible prose rhythms against the super-imposed verse rhythms, to combine a variety of statements in one order."⁶⁵

Rhythmic variation is relevant to written and spoken language alike. Consider poetry recitations or dramatic presentations. In the research literature of cognition, the spoken word has been implicated in the experience of lexical ambiguity, in the shape of "transient ambiguity of the speech signal".⁶⁶ The cognitive experience has to do with processing the lexical ambiguity that the speech signal sends to the auditor in a way that yields meaning satisfactorily enough to foster a stable linguistic experience "across phonological [what is heard], semantic [what the meaning is], and orthographic [what is written] nodes".⁶⁷

The transient ambiguity referred to is not the same as Empson's ambiguity of transition. Rather, it is what could be called the least of lexemes, i.e., initial phonemes, and the transition from the first part of an utterance (speech signal) to its subsequent part(s). For example, "kapt" is the first phoneme/lexeme of the words *captain* and *capture*; and "wik" precedes "et" and "ed" in the words *wicket* and *wicked* respectively. These examples show how lexical ambiguity is an ever-present possibility whenever speech signals are sent and received.⁶⁸

Some people say that the partial (underspecified) information becomes more complete as the "lexical phonological information"

65) Id. at 30.

66) Gaskell and Marslen-Wilson, *supra* note 23.

67) Id.

68) Id. at 440.

is "output,"⁶⁹⁾ for example, as the rhythms and cadences of speech signals shift in presentation. That is, as the speaker continues to speak, the hearer / perceiver can "access lexical semantic information"⁷⁰⁾ (i.e., can get an idea of what the words mean). One study in support of this used the phoneme "kapt" which is the first syllable of the words *captain* and *captive*. The discussion, which is very technical and involves a lot of statistical analysis, comes down to the idea that the meaning initially attached to a word spoken has to do with the way the auditor is accustomed to hearing it completed.

The more a word completed falls outside the auditor's experience, the more the auditor has to sort through other cues in the presentation to reach meaning. For example, lexical meanings may be discerned from the presence of other, similar-meaning words that effect "semantic priming"⁷¹⁾ and enable the decoding of meaning. While this may seem like an obvious fact not in need of highly technical analysis, the "noisy blend" of lexical units whose meaning may not be immediately apparent points to a situation of increased ambiguity. Accordingly, there is a low degree of coherence (in other words, a high level of "noise"), or "regularity involved in the mapping from the speech wave onto lexical knowledge".⁷²⁾

Such presence of ambiguity emphasizes the importance of context. It is tempting to assert that context is always decisive in semantic disambiguation. Indeed, lexical ambiguity of one word may be overcome because of surrounding words or the social situation in which the communication takes place.⁷³⁾ However, in some cases lexical ambiguity may overwhelm the context (as in cases of vocabulary word that are simply unknown). "Although

69) Id. at 441.

70) Id. at 445.

71) Id. at 459.

72) Id. at 460.

73) Read, *supra* note 25.

context resolves ambiguities most of the time, it does not always do so, and the amount of context required for resolution varies" (emphasis added).⁷⁴⁾ There are various types of literary, dramatic, and poetic language, where a context the size of a limerick, pop song, or haiku on one hand, and small phrases on the other, might retain its ambiguity throughout and even beyond its lexical and semantic course.

In short, Empson describes what he calls "the increasing vagueness, compactness, and lack of logical distinctions in English."⁷⁵⁾ Another author, agreeing with Empson says that "nothing is more important to a society than the language it uses--there would be no society without it."⁷⁶⁾ Indeed, language functions in a precarious environment, challenging all of its auditors and readers to derive meaning in a context where the stakes may be very high. Empson makes the case that a "machinery" to use on language more generally that is consistent with the machinery employed in his *Seven Types* "is going to become increasingly necessary if we are to keep the language under control."⁷⁷⁾

Conclusion

Ambiguity is a fact of linguistic life where many forms of semantic and pragmatic ambiguity exist. Despite the potentially endless supply of words, many words do double duty or more. And despite the unlimited number of sentences, many have several meanings, and their utterance must be disambiguated by considering the various lexical and structural possibilities and eliminating the irrelevant meanings after taking things into context. Sometimes this involves analyzing the speaker's likely intentions.

74) Urdang, *supra* note 16 at 33.

75) Empson, *supra* note 28 at 236.

76) Newman, *supra* note 32 at 32.

77) Empson, *supra* note 28 at 237.

Most of the time people try to avoid ambiguity in English as they wish to convey their thoughts clearly in order to prevent a failure of communication. Therefore, the larger amount of ambiguity found is not created on a conscious level. Nevertheless, there are many circumstances in which ambiguity may be rhetorically or strategically used to control the way other people think. Such intentional ambiguity found in both spoken words and written text is often intricately linked to morality and ethics.

Ambiguity is often used as a literary device in things like poetry to invite alternative interpretations in the use of language. However, if it is the case that the highest and best use of language occurs when the expression has ambiguity, it is equally the case that not all instances of ambiguous expression represent the highest and best use of the language. For one could say that out-of-control linguistic ambiguity, or an ambiguity that does not easily (or does not intend to) yield to the machinery of interpretation is implicated in social organization that is also increasingly out of control.