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EXPLORING AMBIGUOUS STRUCTURES IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The current trend in ELT (English Language Teaching) is though discussing issues pertaining pedagogical approaches, curricular-design, blended use of technology, views and roles of ELT practitioners, etc. but there is an area, namely *ambiguity* that goes unheeded in an EFL classroom. As a result, both the teachers and the learners remain deprived of decoding the phenomena of ambiguities to convey intended message in English. Therefore, this study aims to explore the probable ambiguities that become incomprehensible for an EFL learner in terms of decoding the intended meaning. In doing so, the study used content analysis as part of data collection; whereas, analytic induction was used as the method of data analysis. Under findings, the study reveals ten types of ambiguities that an ELT practitioner must discuss with the learners to understand ambiguous expressions.

Keywords: *Ambiguity, Disambiguation, Co-text, Context, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ELT (English Language Teaching)*

1. Introduction

The ELT world is not merely concerned with asking the learners to develop language skills and mimic native English speaker, an ELT practitioner is also supposed to teach ambiguous structures of English sentences. It has often been found that both the teachers and the learners fail to decode ambiguous sentences in English which in turn impair the intended message to be conveyed.

Assuming the fact that the ambiguity of English may or may not be the ambiguity in other languages, it is plausible to add that ambiguities can be natural or unintentional. By saying natural I mean a structure may be well formed but gives more than one reading. Most of the structural ambiguities are of this type. On the other hand, unintentional ambiguities are caused by sloppy or ill formed constructions due to wrongly placed modifiers as in *dangling ambiguity* below. In such cases, one needs to correct the structure in the light of intentionality of the text. In case of both natural and unintentional ambiguities, one should try to avoid any possible misunderstandings by reducing vagueness with the help of context. Thus the important thing of investigation for a human is to understand the *source of ambiguities* in terms of different grammatical constructions in English because of which ambiguity takes place.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to explore the probable ambiguities that become incomprehensible for an EFL learner in terms of decoding the intended meaning. To attain the objective set above, the study poses a pertinent research question below.

1.2 Questions of the Study

What are the types of ambiguities that become incomprehensible for an EFL learner in terms of decoding the intended meaning?

2. Literature Review

Ambiguity is the presence of more than one possible meaning in a single word, phrase, clause, or sentence. In speech and writing, there are two basic types of ambiguity (Nordquist, 2016): **lexical** (the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word) and **syntactic** (the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single sentence or sequence of words). The following are some examples of ambiguous expressions from the article of Nordquist (2016).

- "*We saw her duck* is a paraphrase of *We saw her lower her head* and of *We saw the duck belonging to her*, and these last two sentences are not paraphrases of each other. Therefore *We saw her duck* is **ambiguous**." (James, 2007)
- "Leahy Wants FBI to Help Corrupt Iraqi Police Force"
  (headline at CNN.com, December 2006)

- Prostitutes Appeal to Pope
  (newspaper headline)

The reason of introducing ambiguities and disambiguation as a part of ELT curricula is that ambiguity causes a great deal of misinterpretation in semantic translation- a type considered to be of utmost perfection. The phenomenon of disambiguation makes the text more explicit and unambiguous. Like ordering of paragraph as part of cohesion, disambiguation can be viewed as part of text coherence. It is the text coherence, which may prove as a vital tool for solving almost all types of ambiguities. A simple example may illustrate the fact in a case when the default category of a lexeme shifts to other categories causing lexical or word-class ambiguities. As in the following sentence from Scott (1973:66),

*I think we had better put the **glass** there.*

It is difficult to say whether the word glass has been used as mass noun or countable noun. But such an uncertainty can be removed with the help of context or co-text. Thus, the above sentence shows that the meanings of sentence will increase as per the number of probable meanings of a lexical item.

It is imperative to raise a question here "Do the ambiguities found in the expressions of one language make the expressions of other languages ambiguous too?" The answer, in terms of language pair like English-Hindi, will considerably be 'no'. The reason is that not all types of English ambiguous construction seem ambiguous in Hindi too (Jha, 2004). Let us examine some of the noted examples at syntactic level:

ENGLISH   Flying planes can be dangerous
HINDI   *(a) uṛte hue jahāj khatarnāk {sābit} ho sakte hẽ*
     (b) jahāj uṛānā khatarnāk sābit ho saktā hē

The English sentence causes two paraphrases whose Hindi translations have been given above. It is noteworthy that none of the Hindi sentences gives two or more readings as an example of ambiguities. For a Hindi speaker, (a) *uṛate hue jahāj* and (b) *jahaj uṛānā* are two distinct events unlike <u>*flying*</u> in English which gives two probabilities in terms of adjectival modifier as well as infinitival subject. Interestingly, an English ambiguous construction may sometimes make Hindi construction ambiguous too. For example,

ENGLISH   I have better taste in films than girls.
HINDI   *laṛkiyõ kī apekshā mujhe philmõ mẽ jyādā rūcī hē.*
     (a)mujhe laṛkiyõ se jyādā philmõ mẽ rūcī hē
     (b) phhilmõ mẽ merī rūcī laṛkiyõ se jyādā hē

It is noteworthy that like English sentence, Hindi sentence is also ambiguous as it gives two readings in the form of (a) and (b). It is difficult to determine whether the person's taste in films is better than his taste in girls, or he had better taste in films than girls had?

3. Findings and Discussion

In what follows, the study discusses ten major types of ambiguous expressions explored as part of findings.

(1) Anaphoric ambiguity

Anaphoric ambiguity arises because of uncertain referent as seen in the following example.

- He scolded his son.

The source of the ambiguity in the above sentence lies in the form of pronominal adjective 'his', as it does not make clear whether 'his' has been used for one's own son or for other's son. If the structure is construed as co-referential then there is no question of ambiguity.

(2) Attachment ambiguity

Attachment ambiguity is caused due to multiple grammatical function of preposition as follows:

- They saw the girl with the binoculars.
- The girl found a book on Main Street.

The first sentence gives two readings in which '*with the binocular'* is either functioning as an adverbial for the verb *see* or as an adjectival qualifier of '*girl'*. In the second sentence, *'a book on Main Street'* is a complex construction in which either *the book* involves the subject matter of *Main Street* or it describes the physical location in a sense that 'the book' was lying on '*Main Street'*.

(3) Coordinating ambiguity

Coordination ambiguity is also known as structural or syntactic ambiguity. However the present study restricts the term with reference to ambiguity at phrase level.

- Old men and women were invited to the party.

The above sentence can be paraphrased in two ways as shown in the following bracketed representations.

Old [men and women] were invited to the party.
[Old men] and women were invited to the party.

The first paraphrase indicates that men and women of the same age were invited, whereas the second paraphrase indicates that 'old men' and 'women probably of any age' were invited. Such an ambiguity is caused because of single modifier like 'old' used for coordinating construction.

(4) Homonymous ambiguity

Homonymous ambiguity is caused when a word has more than one unrelated meaning.

- He went to the <u>bank</u>.

The sentence above has ambiguity in the form of homonyms. Lexical ambiguity of this kind can be easily solved by collocational conditions. For example, 'bank' in the sense of 'place for money transaction' as in 'He went to the <u>bank</u> to withdraw some money' or 'bank' in the sense of 'river's bank' as in 'By the time we reached the opposite <u>bank</u>, the boat was sinking fast.' is easily comprehensible because of the context.

(5) Polysemous ambiguity

Unlike homonymous ambiguity, polysemous ambiguity arises because of related lexical meanings. More precisely, a lexeme shows a meaning variant with respect to the basic meaning of the lexeme.

- Go ask the butcher if he's got any <u>brains</u>.
- John <u>lost</u> his friend in the overcrowded subway station.
- John <u>lost</u> his friend in a tragic car accident.
- John <u>lost</u> his friend, as he could never suppress making bad jokes about him.

The ambiguity in the first sentence arises because of the polysemous senses of 'brain'. In one case, it may refer to the intelligence used by a person. In other case, it may refer to the biological organ probably of goat as a food item. As for the second, third, and fourth sentences, the common part 'John lost his friend' has three different readings due to the respective sentence contexts. In (1) 'lose' means a loss of contact; in (2) it means no longer exists; in (3), the friend is supposed to live on but stops entertaining a friendly relationship with John. Adding more and more contexts can eliminate such a phenomenon of differentiation.

(6) Metonymical ambiguities:

Metonymical ambiguity occurs because of meaning shift in the varied functions of word class and contextual contiguity as explained below.

- Chomsky is difficult to understand.

The above sentence has at least two readings as the proper name Chomsky refers to Chomsky's work or Chomsky himself. The interpretation in context is due to a meaning shift generally available for all names of people. Such a meaning shift is referred to as metonymical shift.

(7) Metaphorical ambiguities:

Metaphorical ambiguity occurs where the metaphor is taken literally. The following are some examples of metaphorical ambiguity.

1. They were China's cowboys.
2. The swaggering, fast-talking dealmakers threw around grand projects.
3. Walls have ears.

The sentences (taken from Newsweek, 19th Oct 1998:30 cited from Lobner, 2002) are about Chinese investment institutions. The expression *China's cowboys* in (1) has been used in metaphorical sense. The persons referred to are not cowboys, but in some way like cowboys. According to (2), they resemble 'cowboys' in that they are swaggering, fast-talking and throwing things around. Every metaphor is the construction of a parallel comparison i.e. the dealmakers in (2) are likened to cowboys in certain respects, mainly their public behaviour.

The majority of idiomatic expressions like <u>kick the bucket</u>; proverbs like <u>a rolling stone gathers no moss</u> are metaphorical. There are tens of thousands of words that can undergo metaphorical shift. It has been seen that metaphorical ambiguity is more difficult to translate than metonymical ambiguity.

(8) Structural ambiguity

Structural ambiguity is most often found at finite clause level as in the following sentence.

(1) I'll tell you when they arrive.
(2) She wants to marry a Norwegian who is rich.

In the first sentence above, it is not clear whether the subject will inform "the time of arrival" or "after arrival". Ambiguities of this kind can be resolved with the help of intonation in speech, but in written text, it requires context to make out the intention of the expression. As for the second sentence (Bache, 1997: 23), '*She wants to marry a Norwegian who is rich*' shows that there are sometimes different interpretations of referring expressions: either [a Norwegian who is rich] refers to a particular person (e.g. Knut Flo from Oslo) or it refers to anyone who qualifies as a rich Norwegian, i.e. any member of the class of rich Norwegians.

(9) Dangling ambiguities

Dangling ambiguities occur because of the wrongly placed modifiers in the sentence.

- While smoking a pipe, my dog sat with me by the crackling fire.
- Swimming at the lake, a rock cut John's foot.

In both the sentences, it seems that 'dog' and 'rock' are doing the action of smoking and swimming respectively. Whereas, the actual agent should be 'I' and 'John' respectively. A modifier that opens a sentence must be followed immediately by the word it is meant to modify. Otherwise, the sentence takes on an unintended meaning.

(10) Pragmatic ambiguities

Referring to Newmark, (1998: 219), pragmatic ambiguity is more common in written than in spoken language. It arises when the tone or the emphasis in a sentence is not clear. For example, we all know that "there is a bull in the field" may mean 'let's get out', but such a pragmatic signal is not necessarily available in all languages, so one ought to avoid any literal translation as an equivalence. Similarly, the following expression will keep us thinking what the word "meeting" connotes unless we come to know the real context.

"I can't tell you how much I enjoyed *meeting* your husband."
(William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1947)

For lack of context, one may find ambiguities in almost every sentence. Believing in the notion that a word does not have its meaning in isolation, so is the case of a sentence in isolation. Such an assumption gives strength to the phenomenon of text coherence.

4. Conclusion

In its endeavor to explore major types of ambiguities in English, the paper presents ten types of ambiguities, namely: *Anaphoric , Attachment , Coordinating , Homonymous , Polysemous , Metonymical , Metaphorical , Structural , Dangling , and* Pragmatic**.** To sum up, The context in which a word is used restricts and determines its meaning at the particular occasion. As Henrik Nikula (1986: 41) puts it, 'context is co-text plus situation. The indications as to the precise meaning of a word in a text should thus be sought first in the surrounding text; and secondly, in extratextual information'. For a human, it is easy to be aware of mono and contrastive ambiguities at cognitive level to see the co-text and context. It is hoped that any kind of ambiguities can be solved by finding coherence in a text.

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