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THE ISSUE OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Ambiguity, a language phenomenon which is both natural and complicated, has attracted linguistics in general and language educators in particular. With different ways to categorize, ambiguity can be interestingly manipulated to help individuals achieve some desirable communicative functions on the one hand. On the other hand, the phenomenon may hinder people, including EFL learners, from processing language, leading to misunderstanding or confusion. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of ambiguity in the English language, especially focusing on the different types and examples of the phenomenon. Moreover, a few techniques to resolve the ambiguity issue will be mentioned and clarified.

Key words: *ambiguity, language processing, disambiguation, EFL*

1. Introduction

For communication between individuals to be effectively and comprehensively conducted, different factors need to be taken into consideration. According to Locke (1968), as cited in Brown (1996), “unless a man’s words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them stand for in speaking, he does not speak intelligibly” (p. 6). Explicitly, the “same ideas” as mentioned by Locke can be affected by dissimilar variables, some of which are individual perceptions, contextual elements, environmental factors, and clarity of messages. Demir (2020) especially highlighted the issue of ambiguity in language or, in other words, “linguistic ambiguity” as a remarkable factor that hinders successful communication. When it comes to language learning, particularly English, ambiguity has attracted quite a few studies, each of which directed attention to a different aspect, such as reading, writing, speaking, and literary texts (Williyan, 2022; Demir, 2020; Awwad, 2017; Winter-Froemel & Zirker, 2015; Wasow et al., 2005). In fact, ambiguity has not always been stigmatized in language utilization as several scholars have emphasized the meaningfulness and importance of ambiguity in human interactions, especially literature, advertising, and even in politics (Koniak & Cwalina, 2020; Semiz, 2014). Being a lecturer teaching linguistics at tertiary level, the researcher has been developing a considerable interest in the theme of linguistic ambiguity, not only because of the intriguing features of such phenomenon but also his personal observation of many students facing difficulty in interpreting as well as recognizing ambiguous utterances. This was buttressed by Chele-Mabena (2021) and Awwad (2017), who concluded that students are unaware of ambiguous language, which impedes their ability to process language accurately at many times. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of linguistic ambiguity, especially its different types in English language learning context. Besides, a few strategies which may be helpful in disambiguating and deciphering ambiguity will be provided. It is expected that the study will enrich the existing literature while offering teachers and learners of EFL a better understanding of such an enticing linguistic issue. This was ardently supported by Dunbar (2001), who stated that “ambiguity plays a role in our cognitive understanding and interpretative abilities, so studying this phenomenon and examining how to resolve it can give us an insight in both thought and interpretation” (p.12).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Ambiguity

According to Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2011), *ambiguity* is, briefly, “the state of having more than one possible meaning”. It can also be seen as “a word or statement that can be understood in more than one way”. Besides, McArthur (2005) defined ambiguity as “the actual or potential uncertainty of meaning”, especially on condition that a word, phrase, or sentence could be conceived in two ways (p. 24). For example, the sentence “*They are cooking carrots*” is ambiguous because it can be understood in at least two ways: (1) Some (people) are cooking carrots, and (2) Those are the carrots used for cooking. As Klepousniotou (2002) asserted, ambiguity causes a confusion of ideas in the interlocutor’s mind, since the person has to endeavor to decide on the exact meaning intended behind an utterance. To recapitulate, the term *ambiguity* can be used to describe a word, a phrase or a sentence with multiple meanings (Fromkin et al., 2011).

It is worth noting that the phenomenon can occur at various linguistic levels, and can appear with or without intention (Empson, 2014; Dai, 2021). That was supported by Winter-Froemel and Zirker (2015), who complemented that ambiguity is omnipresent in human language as not only can it be found at different levels of linguistic structures but also in various communicational settings, from daily conversations, advertising slogans, to newspaper headlines and literature. Bavelas et al. (1990) shared the aforementioned notion, stating that sources of ambiguity are abundant, which makes some ambiguity virtually guaranteed. Bavelas and his partners also attempted to list the characteristics of ambiguity, some of which are inconsistencies, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style, and tangentializations (p. 21).

Awwad (2017) proposed that the issue of ambiguity can be considered both fascinating and debatable. This is because on the one hand, such phenomenon can enrich the language, giving desirable flexibility to the texts or utterances and even help people adeptly add humor when necessary. Gioia et al. (2012) buttressed that view, reporting that “equivocation is a good solution to a bad situation” (p. 159). Manipulating linguistic ambiguity in a skillful way proves especially beneficial in composing newspaper articles as it can considerably capture people’s attention. Ferreira (1996) illustrated that with such a concise newspaper title as “*Iraqi heads seek arms*” (p. 35). The utilization of ambiguity undoubtedly captivated the readers because “*head*” can refer to either a chief or a common body part, and “*arms*” can be interpreted as weapons or parts of a human body. Furthermore, the proper and intentional employment of ambiguity also does wonders for politicians as it can help them flee away from being convicted of any obligations (Awwad, 2017). On the other hand, ambiguity is widely known as a problematic issue because it hampers language processing, leading to misinterpretations or confusion. Koniak and Cwalina (2020) referred to ambiguity as a source of “poor communication” (p. 85) while Awwad (2017) asserted that the phenomenon, although natural and common, can make the language learning process more arduous (p. 188).

It should be noted that there is a discrepancy between ambiguity and vagueness. Despite some conspicuous similarities, the two issues are different in some aspects. Laconically, as Kennedy (2012) summarized, ambiguity entails “uncertainty about mappings between levels of representation with different structural characteristics”, whereas vagueness encompasses “uncertainty about the actual meanings of particular terms” (p. 236). In other words, expressions are considered vague if their denotations do not have fully well-defined boundaries. Thus, vagueness emerges when what is meant appears unclear, while ambiguity involves something with many possible meanings.

2.2. Different ways to categorize ambiguity

Like many other linguistic concepts, ambiguity can also be classified in a number of ways, depending on which aspect is under consideration. First and foremost, Empson (2014) made it explicit that there are two basic kinds of ambiguity, namely intentional one and unintentional one. According to him, the former can be utilized in an advantageous way, especially by authors, politicians, and diplomats. On the contrary, the latter is usually referred to as an impediment to communication.

Bauer, et al. (2010) made an attempt to differentiate between two broad types of ambiguity: ambiguity in the language system and ambiguity in discourse. According to these scholars, ambiguity in the language system is associated with linguistic structures and abstract signs while the other type refers to utterances which can be interpreted in different ways.

The most popular approach to categorize ambiguity is to look at different linguistic levels of human language. Dai (2021), in his efforts to clarify the causes of ambiguity in the English language, focused on four different aspects, namely phonetic, lexical, syntactical, and pragmatic ones. Awwad (2017) also highlighted four categories of the phenomenon; however, he placed a great emphasis on lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic ambiguity. Below are the brief explanations of the common concepts related to ambiguity:

2.2.1. Phonetic ambiguity

According to Dai (2021), phonetic ambiguity (or verbal ambiguity) is mainly caused by the lack of visual aids as well as necessary context of written language and text (p. 3). Such kind of ambiguity often results from *homonymy*, which refers to words with identical pronunciations but different spellings and meanings. A great example of this type is the English conversation between Alice and a mouse in the well-known story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865).

E.g. "Mine is a long and a sad *tale*!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing.

"It IS a long *tail*, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's *tail*; "but why do you call it sad?"

In the researcher's class of General English, there was once a situation like this:

E.g. Student A: To make a yummy cake, we need some *flour*.

Student B: Really? Why do we need *flower* to make a cake? Can it be a rose?

It is clear that homophones like *tale* – *tail* or *flour* – *flower* are not uncommon in the English language. Phonetic ambiguity, although undesirable in ordinary conversations, can be tactfully used to add humor when necessary. Without a doubt, the issue of verbal ambiguity will be tackled when the sentences are written down.

2.2.2. Lexical ambiguity

According to Hurford & Heasley (2007), "any ambiguity resulting from the ambiguity of a word is a lexical ambiguity" (p. 135). In other words, lexical ambiguity emerges when a single word has at least two meanings, or when a word can be interpreted in more than one sense. As stated by Dai (2021), while English symbols are finite, the nature of things is infinite, leading to the fact that one word often corresponds to multiple referents, resulting in ambiguous lexical items. According to Vitello and Rodd (2015), the term "*semantic ambiguity*" is often employed instead of "lexical ambiguity" because this highlights that it is the meaning of the word that is ambiguous and not its form or structural properties.

In terms of strict semantics, there are several phenomena that can potentially cause lexical ambiguity, such as polysemy, homonymy, or homography. As defined by Hurford & Heasley (2007), *polysemy* is a relation in which "a single word has two or more slightly different but closely related meanings". For

example, the word “mouth” can be used to describe a part of a river or an animal. Without a doubt, the two senses, though different, are somewhat related to each other. *Homonymy*, on the other hand, is a sense relation in which words have the same (sound and written) form but have different meanings. The word “bear /beə/”, which has three dissimilar meanings (large animal with fur/give birth to/tolerate) is a typical example of homonymy. As for *homography*, various words have the same written form but have different meanings and sound forms. To illustrate, the word “wind” can be pronounced as /wind/ (a current of air moving) or /waɪnd/ (cause something to turn).

Lexical ambiguity appears to be common in human language in general and in English in particular. Without enough contextual information, it can easily lead to misinterpretations or conversation break-down. Below are a few examples of sentences with lexical ambiguity:

(1) *They were waiting at the bank.*

Due to the issue of homonymy, the word “bank” can be understood in two ways: (1) They were waiting at the financial institution, or (2) They were waiting at the shore of the river.

(2) *That woman can't bear children.*

Since “bear” can be either “give birth to” or “tolerate”, the sentence can be interpreted in two ways.

(3) *We liked the ball.*

The sentence, although quite simple, can also become ambiguous as “ball” can have different meanings. Thus, “We liked the ball” can be understood as “We liked the object in shape of a sphere” or “We liked the formal social gathering for dancing.”

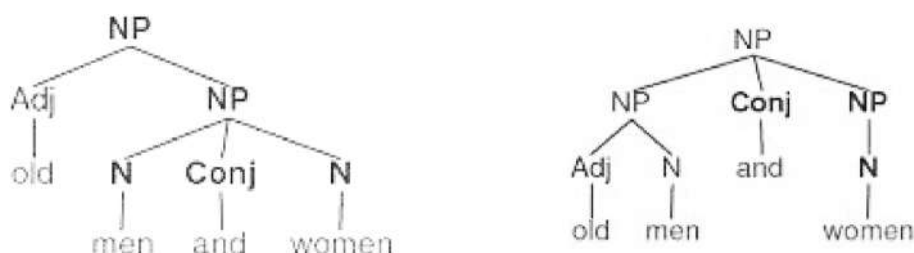
2.2.3. Syntactic ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity can also be known as grammatical or structural ambiguity. Zelta (2014) explained that syntactic ambiguity occurs when a sequence of words can be grammatically analyzed in more than one way, and each structure has a different meaning. Hurford & Heasley (2007) adopted another way to define the phenomenon, stating that “a sentence which is ambiguous because its words relate to each other in different ways, even though none of the individual words are ambiguous, is structurally ambiguous” (p. 135). It is noteworthy that structural ambiguity is primarily a question of “what goes with what” in a sentence, and this can be illustrated by different kinds of diagrams (p. 136).

Examples of structural ambiguity are abundant. Grammatically, the phrase “old men and women” is ambiguous as it can be interpreted as “women with old men” or “old men and old women”. The two aforesaid senses can be described with square brackets:

(1) [old men] and women and (2) old [men and women].

Moreover, linguists can use tree diagrams to depict and represent the internal structure of ambiguous phrases and sentences. Below are the two tree diagrams that help to distinguish the two different interpretations of “old men and women”.



Another example of structural ambiguity is “*Bobby will meet Daisy or Mary and Jenny*”. The sentence can be understood as “Bobby will meet **Daisy or both Mary and Jenny**” or “Bobby will meet **both Daisy or Mary and Jenny**”. In this case, logic formulae can be employed to represent the differences: (1) **(b MEET d) V (b MEET m & b MEET j)**

(2) **(b MEET d V b MEET m) & (b MEET j)**

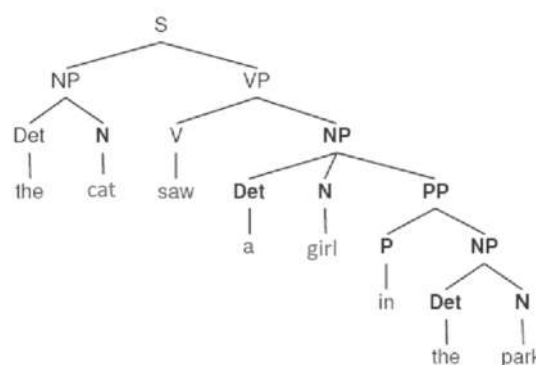
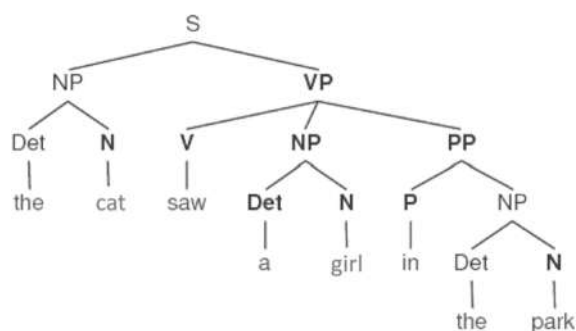
It is claimed by some linguists that structural ambiguity emerges when people use sentences lacking formal signals to clarify the sentence structures. To illustrate, such ambiguity can occur due to the utilization of coordination structures or prepositions.

Firstly, the inconsiderate use of coordinate conjunctions is one of the reasons why a sentence or a phrase can become grammatically ambiguous. For example, “*Peter is Mary’s father or David’s grandpa and Susan’s uncle*”. The different ways of grouping can lead to different ways of understanding, as shown in the two logical formulae:

(1) **(p FATHER m) V (p GRANDPA d & p UNCLE s)**

(2) **(p FATHER m V p GRANDPA d) & (p UNCLE s)**

Secondly, the use of prepositional phrases is also a common cause of syntactic ambiguity. Regarding the example “*The cat saw a girl in the park.*”, it is the phrase “in the park” that makes the sentence unclear. The structural difference can be evident with the tree diagrams below:



After examining a large number of ambiguous cases, Hirst (1987) concluded that (syntactic) ambiguity occurs due to the “uncertain attachment relationship” between/among the components in the surface structure. According to Hirst’s attachment theory, structural ambiguity can be caused by (a) adjective phrases, (b) adverbial phrases, (c) comparative factors, (d) the same verb forms, (e) parallel parts, and (f) unclear negative centers. Below are the examples to clarify the given cases:

(a) There is a *big brick house* at the foot of the mountain.

It is unclear whether the adjective BIG modifies “brick house” or only “house”.

(b) The director promised a bonus for each employee *later*.

The sentence can be understood in two ways: “*The director promised that a bonus will later be given to each employee*” or “*Later the general manager promises to give every employee a bonus*”.

(c) Peter loves video games *more than* Mary.

The comparative structure serves as the root of ambiguity. The sentence can mean “*Peter loves video games more than he loves Mary*” or “*Peter loves video games more than Mary loves video games*”.

(d) *Visiting* relatives can be boring.

As “*Visiting*” can be interpreted as a gerund and present participle, the sentence is thereby ambiguous. On the one hand, the act of going to visit relatives can be boring. On the other hand, the relatives who pay us a visit can be boring.

(e) Mr. Pike was a teacher *and* a singer *of great fame*.

The grammatical relationship between the parallel structure “a teacher and a singer” and the attributive “of great fame” causes ambiguity. This is because “of great fame” either modify only “a singer” or both “a teacher and a singer” at the same time.

(f) I *don’t* teach French because it is easy.

Different understanding of the scope of negation or the center of negation makes the sentence ambiguous. There can be two interpretations of the sentence: “*Because French is easy, I don’t want to teach it*” or “*I teach French NOT because French is easy*”.

2.2.4. Pragmatic ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity arises in the situations where the context of a phrase gives it multiple interpretations (Awwad, 2017, p. 189). Concisely, it can be said that such ambiguity occurs because of unspecific utterances. According to Zelra (2014), it can be further analyzed into referential ambiguity, ambiguity in speech acts, as well as ambiguity in presuppositions.

A typical example of pragmatic ambiguity can be seen in the utterance “*I like you too*”. Depending on the context, it can render dissimilar interpretations: (a) I like you (just like you like me), or (b) I like you (just like someone else does).

Additionally, when the speaker uses pronouns without a clear referent, as in the example “*Mary called her mother yesterday. She said she would come next month.*”, the situation can result in ambiguity. It is not obvious whether “*She*” refers to Mary or her mother. In fact, referential ambiguity is sometimes known as “anaphoric ambiguity”, which arises due to the utilization of anaphora entities in discourse.

2.2.5. Scope Ambiguity

Besides the common types of ambiguity like lexical, structural, and pragmatic ambiguity, there are some others that are much less mentioned in literature, one of which is scope ambiguity. As stated by Kiss and Pafel (2017), a scope ambiguity emerges when two quantifiers or similar expressions can differently take scope over each other in the meaning of a sentence. Horn (1989) agreed with that, asserting that when a sentence includes two quantifiers or operators, scope ambiguity may arise, causing confusion for the listeners or readers. Below are some examples of the phenomenon:

(1) “*Every man loves a woman.*”

(2) “*Every kid didn’t feed the doves in the park.*”

In the first example, the sentence can be understood as “For every man, there is a woman, and each man possibly loves a different woman”. However, another interpretation can be given as “There is only one specific woman that is loved by different men”. In fact, the second meaning can be clarified if we add “..., namely Susan” (for instance).

Similarly, example (2) can also be translated in two ways, respectively:

$\forall x$ [kid (x) \rightarrow \neg fed the doves in the park (x)] (= none of the kids did so)

$\neg\forall x [\text{kid}(x) \rightarrow \text{fed the doves in the park}(x)]$ (= not every kid did so)

2.3. The Effects of Ambiguity on English Language Learning

As demonstrated above, it is conspicuous that ambiguity exists in various types with numerous cases and examples. With regard to English language learning, the influences of the phenomenon have been examined and evaluated by a number of researchers. Above all, it is found that ambiguity is pervasive in English; moreover, ambiguity is supposed to be hard (Wasow et al., 2005). According to Wasow and his partners, both lexical and syntactic ambiguity is ubiquitous in English, although the latter can be less obvious. In fact, over 80 percent of common English words have more than one dictionary entry (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2002). Besides, even functional words could appear ambiguous in sentences. For example, connective words like “since” or “while” can be used to denote temporal and conditional meanings. Likewise, “that” can be ambiguous as a determiner, a demonstrative pronoun, or a complementizer. In short, ambiguity is a complex issue deserving attention of not only researchers but also language teachers.

In a study about the perception of ambiguous sentences by English L2 speakers conducted by Chele-Mabena (2021), it was concluded that students encountered difficulty perceiving ambiguity and that their perception of grammatical ambiguity was better than that of lexical one. Moreover, the study of Awwad (2017) on sixty students preparing for their Master’s degree in English at Lebanese University indicated that the subjects were not aware of ambiguous language, and their ability to process language was often influenced by ambiguity. With the aim to investigate whether structural or lexical ambiguity is more common in students’ writing, Demir (2020) collected and analyzed data from four different exams, then discovered that the students were more prone to the latter issue.

Williyan (2022), who carried out a qualitative study to fathom the issue of ambiguity in students’ narrative texts, found out that the examined texts contained both lexical and grammatical ambiguities. However, such issues did not cause much difficulty for readers as long as a clear context was provided. Lastly, Semiz (2014) studied EFL learners’ understanding of ambiguity in language-based jokes. The findings showed that the subjects could understand the jokes with lexical ambiguity better than those involving grammatical and phonetic ambiguity. In addition, the research indicated that lexical jokes were the funniest of all in teaching.

In short, ambiguity, more or less, exerts an influence on English language learning. As the phenomenon is natural and ubiquitous, it is necessary that EFL teachers spend time raising students’ awareness of the issue and assist them in disambiguating certain common cases.

3. Disambiguating Approaches

While ambiguity can have positive effects in communication in some cases, it indisputably entails impediment or misunderstanding in many others. Therefore, the need to discover how to disambiguate language is rational as well as essential, especially for EFL learners. To cope with ambiguous sentences, Dai (2021) necessitated a careful analysis of the context. Besides, he suggested that logical judgements should be made, which requires a wide range of knowledge. Rodd (2018) shared the same view, emphasizing the ability to make “a best guess” about which meaning is most likely to be exact among the multiple interpretations. According to him, the “best guess” is generated mostly by the immediate context, and is also affected by the overall frequency (or dominance) of the item’s dissimilar meanings as well as the interlocutor’s experience.

Simatupang (2007) particularly brought syntactic ambiguity into focus and proposed the use of “formal signals” to disambiguate sentences. Some of the mentioned signals are punctuation, function words,

juncture, and stress. The following types of syntactic ambiguity were closely examined by Simatupang (2007), each of which was followed by detailed explanation and analysis.

Type 1: VP + NP + PP

Ex: The thief hit the boy with a bottle.

VP NP PP

It is the prepositional phrase that makes the sentence ambiguous: (a) *The thief used a bottle to hit the boy*, or (b) *The boy was holding a bottle when he was hit by the thief*. To resolve such ambiguity, the sentence can be paraphrased, or more information can be added to it.

Ex: The thief hit the boy with a bottle. The bottle hit the boy's left arm.

Type 2: Gerund + VP

Ex: Moving cars can be dangerous.

Gerund VP

The sentence is ambiguous because it is unclear whether "moving cars" means "the act of moving the cars" or "cars which are moving". Erasing such ambiguity in writing seems tough, yet in speaking, the use of stress pattern can help to distinguish between a gerund and present participle.

Type 3: VP + NP + more than + NP

Ex: Tom loves comics more than Susie.

VP NP NP

This sentence pattern is similar to the aforementioned one in Hirst (1987). Due to the comparative structure, the sentence can be interpreted as "*Tom loves comics more than Susie loves comics*" or "*Tom loves comics more than he loves Susie*". In fact, with only a little change, the modified sentence "*Tom loves comics more than Susie does*" becomes unambiguous.

Type 4: VP + NP + PP1 + PP2

Ex: Place the box in the drawer in the kitchen.

VP NP PP1 PP2

The sentence may cause misunderstanding because the modifier "on the table" can modify either NP or PP2. In this case, putting a terminal juncture between the first and the second modifier can help. To illustrate, we can say:

"Place the box in the drawer // in the kitchen" (the box is already in the drawer)

Another interpretation is "Place the box // in the drawer in the kitchen" (the drawer is already in the kitchen).

Type 5: NP + Adj Clause

Ex: Nick got into the car which was parked behind the house.

NP Adj. Clause

The sentence would be clear in written form. However, in speaking, the two following utterances would trigger different interpretations: (a) *Nick got into the car which was parked behind the house*. (There are many cars parked behind the house), and (b) *Nick got into the car, which was parked behind the house*. (There is only one car parked behind the house). This manifests the necessity of proper punctuation in writing and juncture in speaking.

In brief, Simatupang (2007) really helped EFL learners to recognize and resolving grammatical ambiguity. Among many suggestions, it is crucial that sufficient information be provided in sentences and that stress or juncture be used appropriately.

Awwad (2017) also made remarkable efforts to propose some useful strategies that help decipher or disambiguate the issue. According to him, context or “the semantic association between one sense of the ambiguous word and the nearby words” is the essence of disambiguation. For instance, in a context of dinner conversation, the word “pitcher /ˈpɪtʃə(r)/” is more likely to be a liquid container than a baseball player (pitcher). Another example is “*The broken bat lay on the lawn*”. Since the adjective “broken” normally modifies inanimate objects, the “bat” should be interpreted as a wooden club, not the only mammal that can fly. This rule corresponds to the “semantical constraints” technique proposed by Fraizer (1983). Besides the use of context, many other so-called tools were also introduced by Awwad (2017), which are, respectively, “syntactical restrictions”, “minimal attachment”, “recency rule”, and “parallel structure”. Recency rule suggests that “if there are two or more candidate antecedents for an anaphor, the closest to the anaphor must be chosen” (p. 198). As for parallel structure, both Awwad (2017) and Fraizer (1983) recommended that sentences with referential ambiguity should be interpreted in parallel approach. For example, in the sentence “*Peter met Tom and he asked him to dinner*”, it is more likely that “he” refers to Peter while “him” refers to Tom.

4. Conclusion

Ambiguity, which is a natural, fascinating yet complex phenomenon in language, should receive attention from language users, especially EFL teachers and students. As mentioned above, the issue of ambiguity can be seen both in positive and negative ways. However, unless the phenomenon is manipulated intentionally, it may become a real impediment to successful communication. With various types and special cases, ambiguity should be particularly a concern of EFL teachers whose job is to enhance students’ command of English and boost their communicative competence. Although it is not always feasible to completely avoid ambiguity, the need to raise EFL students’ awareness of the issue and familiarize them with some strategies to tackle common cases is of great importance.

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