Ambiguity refers to a word, phrase, or sentence that has more than one possible meaning or interpretation. It can cause confusion and is a key concept in semantics and pragmatics because it highlights the complexity of meaning in language.

Types of Ambiguity

There are two main types of ambiguity:

1. Lexical Ambiguity

This occurs when a single word has multiple meanings. The ambiguity is resolved by the surrounding context. It's often an example of **polysemy** or **homonymy**.

- **Polysemy:** The word's meanings are related. For example, "The new CEO has a lot of **head**." The word *head* can mean "leadership ability" or "knowledge," and the context of a new CEO makes both interpretations possible.
- **Homonymy:** The word's meanings are unrelated. For example, "I saw her by the **bank**." The word *bank* could mean a financial institution or the side of a river. Without more context, the sentence is ambiguous.

2. Structural Ambiguity (or Syntactic Ambiguity)

This occurs when the grammatical structure of a sentence allows for more than one interpretation, even if the individual words are unambiguous. The ambiguity arises from the way the words are arranged.

- **Example:** "The police shot the man with a gun."
  - **Interpretation 1:** The police used a gun to shoot the man. (The phrase "with a gun" modifies the verb "shot.")
  - **Interpretation 2:** The police shot a man who was carrying a gun. (The phrase "with a gun" modifies the noun "man.")

This type of ambiguity can lead to significant misunderstandings, as the same words can convey entirely different events.

How Context Resolves Ambiguity

Ambiguity is usually not a problem in daily communication because context helps us quickly figure out the intended meaning. The situation, the previous conversation, and shared knowledge all contribute to disambiguation. For example, if you're standing by a river, the meaning of "bank" is immediately clear. In natural language processing (NLP), resolving ambiguity is a major challenge for computers.