

Chapter Four

Semantic Ambiguity

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4.0 Introduction

Semantics was basically confined to historical study of changes in the meaning of words. Malinowski (1893) was the first in history to use this term in a non-historical sense while Breal (1900) gave this word its present sense of a systematic study of what “meaning” is and how it operates in language. A great deal of research has been done in the field of semantics during the last few decades, and nowadays this discipline has established itself as one of the primary branches of language study. Nevertheless, historical semantics continues to be of vital importance in the study of language, but semantics as such is no longer restricted to the study of meaning from a historical point of view.

Outside the profession of linguistics, there are people who use the word “semantics” in a non-technical sense: they tend to project either a laudatory or an excessively pejorative view of the subject. Some people think that the study of semantics enables them to have a proper understanding of the speakers’ or writers’ intention. This belief raises misunderstanding among individuals and nations. In this respect Leech (1981: xi) states that “Semantics was popularized in the 1930s and 1940s by a school of thought—that of general semantics—which holds the study of communicative processes can be a powerful force for good in the resolution of human conflict, whether on individual, local or international scale.” However, others use the word “semantics” in a pejorative sense. Crystal (1987: 100) explains this by saying “when people talk about the way language can be manipulated in order to mislead the public.” It is necessary to emphasize, here, that semantics is a branch of linguistics, which

has little to do with the mistaken expectations created by such popular uses of the word. In short, semantics is a systematic study of what meaning is and how it operates. According to Leech (1982:4) grammar relates phonology and semantics. It is quite natural that there arise ambiguous sentences and semantics helps in disambiguating them.

Semantics is a serious academic discipline like any other branch of theoretical knowledge. It aims at providing a clear understanding of how language works at the level of meaning. It is a serious and systematic study of how meaning is structured, expressed and understood. So it has some practical application. "If it is studied in a proper spirit, it can certainly help us to improve our linguistic behaviour" (Thakur, 1999: 3).

It is true that semantics enables us to control the pathological and destructive elements in communication and that it can help us to foster the forces that make for concord. But basically, semantics is a theoretical study of what meaning is and how it works. Its avowed aim is to enrich our understanding of how language functions at the level of meaning.

4.1 Semantics and Ambiguity

There are some semantic terms and concepts such as: denotation and connotation, proposition, utterance, entailment, vagueness, paraphrase, and sense and reference, etc; which represent the core of the theory of semantics. Since some of these concepts are least related to ambiguity, they are not dealt with here. Generally, semantic ambiguity can be looked upon from two angles: word ambiguity and sentence ambiguity. Richards (1978: 116) believes that an ambiguous word in a sentence makes it correspondingly ambiguous. For instance he uses nine meanings for the word 'spring', on the basis of verbal or non-verbal cues in the context.

Sentence ambiguity may arise due to the structural relationship of one word to the other(s). Let us see the following example used by Sandt (1988: 66).

113. The man is a bad thief.

Does it mean: 'a man who is bad and thief' or 'bad because a thief' or 'his thieving is worse than the thieving of the others' or 'he is less successful'?

Hence word ambiguity differs from sentence ambiguity in the sense that a word has more than one meaning or reference. In sentence ambiguity, a word might cause the ambiguity either due to its relations with other words or due to the lack of a particular kind of words. Thus, these two are in "a state of complementation" (Thakur (1999: 7). It is clear that these disciplines have a considerable area of overlap. The meaning of a word becomes operative only when that word is used in a certain context. Wittgenstein (1953:49) states that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language.'

4.2 Significance of Semantics in Resolving Ambiguity

Semantics lays heavy emphasis on the study of meaning as a starting point. One of the first obstacles linguists encountered in their attempt to define 'meaning' is ambiguity. Leech (1978: 1) points out that Ogden and Richards in The Meaning of Meaning propose a list of about twenty-two definitions for 'meaning'. These definitions reflect the confusion and misunderstanding caused by such basic terms as meaning, which in turn, are due to ambiguity. Kimpson (1977: 180) says 'Ambiguity is however a semantic phenomenon.' Semanticists' main concern is word meaning and sentence meaning with their relatedness to objects and the real world. On the other hand, it deals with their relatedness to each other according to some semantic notions. Bierwisch (1975: 17) comments on this very point saying:

All semanticists would agree that, whatever else might be included within a study of meaning, it should certainly deal,

on the one hand, with the way words and sentences are related to objects and processes in the world and, on the other, with the way which they are related to one another in terms of such notions as ‘synonymy, entailment, and contradiction’.

In addition Palmer (1981: 32) thinks that a semantic theory must account for “ambiguity”. Moreover “Ambiguity” constitutes an area of controversy between generative semanticists and interpretive semanticists concerning the status of the lexical aspect of DS (see Palmer, 1981: 153-155). According to general semanticists the base consists of a categorical component and a lexical component that generates DSs, and that only after this are the DSs converted to SSs by “transformations”. Whereas interpretive semanticists propose that lexical items themselves are to be derived by transformations and not directly supplied to the base by the lexical component. This can be supported by the triple ambiguity of:

114.I almost killed him,

which is based upon the verb kill, which is suggested to be analyzed as ‘cause ... to become not alive’. It implies: I. If I shot at him, but missed (I almost caused the subsequent event, but did not), II. If I hit him and recovered after narrowly avoiding death (he almost became dead), III. If I shot him and he was in a state of proximity to death (he became almost dead). Subsequently, the verb kill must be interpreted in terms of three different sentences signaling three different DSs.

4.3 Semiotics and Ambiguity

Semiotics is the systematic study of linguistic and non-linguistic signs (Hartman and Stock, 1976: 205). The study of semiotics has led to controversy among linguists. Some linguists advocate that semiotics is a branch of semantics. Others state that semiotics is a rather sophisticated subject, which

consists of three main branches: pragmatics, semantics and syntax. Since, the visual system is well established in human beings; we need only think of all the facial expressions and body language exploited in daily communications. And we are all familiar with the kinds of ambiguity, which arise when we cannot see the person we are talking to or listening to in a telephone conversation, for instance, or when watching television with ~~the~~ picture temporarily missing. What complicates the subject of semiotics is that sign and body language may convey meanings, which differ from one society to another. (Chilton & Miller, 1974:81). This, in turn, will give rise to possibility of ambiguity, for example, an Arab may shake his head to show disagreement whereas, a Japanese shakes his head to show agreement.

4.4 Synonymy and Paraphrase

For the purpose of getting at the meaning of an utterance one should be able to relate sound sequences to their corresponding meanings. The task of a linguist in Grinder's view is "the construction of an explicit statement that will specify which sound sequences are associated with which meanings" (1973: 17-18).

The phenomena of ambiguity, synonymy and paraphrase make it clear that the pairing of sound and meaning is not a simple matter of one-to-one mapping (Ibid). When two SSs have the same semantic representation, we refer to the relation between them as a synonymous or paraphrasing relation. Example:

115a. Miss Murdstone gave me her chilly finger-nails and sat
severely rigid. (DC: 513)

115b. Miss Murdstone gave ~~me~~ her chilly finger-nails to me and sat
severely rigid.

The above examples have the same semantic interpretation, i.e., they are synonymous or paraphrase of each other. But the converse situation results in ambiguity where an SS has more than one semantic interpretation, i.e., more than one DS as in example (1). Culicover (1976: 15) refers to Katz and Postal's

claim that transformationally-related sentences would be paraphrases of one another and that synonymous sentences do not always share the same underlying structures.

Hurtford & Heasley (1982: 121) state that words or sentences are ambiguous when they have more than one sense. They add that, ‘A sentence is ambiguous if it has two (or more) paraphrases which are not themselves paraphrases of each other. We can paraphrase (116) either (a) or (b):

116. We saw her duck.

116a. We saw her lower her head.

116b. We saw the duck belonging to her.

Though (a) and (b) are paraphrases of (116) they are not paraphrases of each other.

As for the ambiguity of single words and phrases, Huford & Heasley (op. cit: 122) make the following statement:

“in the case of words and phrases, a word or phrase is “ambiguous”, if it has two or more “synonyms” that are not themselves synonyms of each other”. For more clarification one can see the word train in:

117. The train is long.

It is synonymous with means of transportation and with bridal gown, but these two are not synonymous with each other.

Stockwell (1977: 121) thinks that ‘ambiguity is a one-to-many relation wherein a single surface structure has two or more meanings’, and that ‘synonymy / paraphrase is a many-to-one relation wherein two or more surface structures may have a single meaning’.

4.5 Ambiguity and Vagueness

Ambiguity and vagueness are two semantic qualities, which stand in the way

of any attempt to isolate single, unmistakable meanings (Salmon, 1966: 36).

4.5.1 Distinction between Ambiguity and Vagueness

Although the concepts of ambiguity and vagueness sound synonymous for most interlocutors, they can be distinguished from each other.

Lehrer (1974: 90-91) refers to Lakoff's proposed test, which involves the addition of and so did NP in (118) below:

118. John and Bill hit the wall.

119. John hit the wall and so did Bill.

In the first example hit the wall can either mean John struck the wall or John fell against the wall. Whereas, the second example can either mean:

119a. John and Bill struck the wall.

Or 119b. John and Bill fell against the wall.

but it cannot be the case that:

119c. John struck the wall and Bill fell against it.

It can be inferred that in case of ambiguity the conjoined elements should share the same semantic interpretation, while in the case of vagueness the conjoined elements do not necessarily share the same semantic interpretation as in (119c).

Kimpson (1975: 12) argues that 'If a sentence is ambiguous, the two conjuncts must agree in their interpretation of the ambiguous sentence'. She also believes that 'if a sentence is vague in some part of its semantic interpretation, the interpretation of the pronominalized conjunct need not agree with the first conjunct'. (Ibid) To support her claim Kimpson has given the following examples:

120. John likes music and Harry does too.

121. John likes pop and Harry classical.

122. John paid a lot for his clear, and Harry did too.

123. John paid 3,000 pounds and Harry 6,000 pounds.

124. John has one neighbour and Mary has one too.

125. John's neighbour is a spinster, and Mary's is a widower.

4.5.2 Vagueness

Vagueness is another matter where an exact judgement on the intended interpretation cannot be given. Solomon has this to say about vagueness:

While ambiguity may be either shunned as in science or
cultivated as in poetry, vagueness is another matter, arising
not from the way we impute meanings to linguistic symbols
but from the fact that the word itself is not made up into neat
separate packages like items on a grocery shelf.

(1966:39)

An ambiguous sentence is recognized as having two quite different meanings, whereas a vague sentence is the one, which is characterized semantically by a disjunction (Kimpson, 1975: 16). Yet, she adds that the distinction between “disjunct specification within a single lexical item, and cases of ambiguity is characterized by discrete lexical items remains quite unclear.”(For more information see 4.9)

4.6 Types of Semantic Ambiguity

4.6.1 Lexical Ambiguity

In English many words have multiple meanings. Multiplicity of meaning is a very general characteristic of any language (Palmer, 1981: 70-71). The phenomenon of having more than one meaning to a word is referred to as “polyvalency”. The use of such words in the language leads to the production of lexical ambiguity. Panman (1982: 106) describes it in this way; ‘we can see that lexical ambiguity is a result of the occurrence of one or more polyvalent words in that sentence.’ In contrast to syntactic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity

does not depend on structural differences or formally identical sentences or phrases. A look at examples (9,10,11, 126 and 127)

9. The dress is light. 10. She cannot bear children.

11. -“Mine is a long 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?”

(Fromkin,1978:88)

126. peace talks

127. pea stalks

reveals that these examples are lexically ambiguous and that their ambiguity is associated with polysemy or homonymy. In addition, sameness of sounds and meanings is not only confined to lexical items as in (126 and 127) but also to phrases and sentences as in (64, and 65).

64. The sun’s rays meet.

65. The sons raise meat.

Ullmann (1977: 49) presents the flowing examples:

128. Will you join us for dinner tomorrow?

When the question is put to someone who is married, it may sound vague to him, and hence motivates him to respond,

129. Do you mean you in the singular or plural?

The above response may come in a query asking for clarification.

130. Are you inviting me alone or with my wife?

The same type of ambiguity has been detected by Chomsky (1977: 67) and he calls it “idiosyncratic ambiguity”. He states that it results when a word has two different denotations like the word “trunk”: a big suitcase or an appendage of an elephant.

Gleason (1965: 462) considers lexical ambiguity “vocabulary ambiguity”, whereas Ruby refers to it as “simple ambiguity”, which results from the use of

a single words or a phrase to convey more than one sense. (See Ruby, 1962:42)

Concerning resolving ambiguity, sometimes the non-linguistic situational context is helpful. If the sentence The train is long is said in a wedding party, the word train means a bridal gown, and if it is said at a railway station, it means a means of transportation.

4.6.1.1 Polysemy

Lexical ambiguity, which is based on polysemy emanates from the difference of word meaning. Kimpson (1977: 65) remarks that sameness of meaning is not very easy to deal with as there is no complete synonymy, but there seems nothing inherently difficult about differences of meaning.

As preliminary definition of polysemy, Kimpson (1979: 7) declares that “a polysemous item is one whose semantic representation involves a disjunction between all the interpretations that the lexical item may be or each listed with the context which determines the particular interpretation”. Consider the following polysemic ambiguous sentences:

131. I saw the spring in the spring near the spring springing as a spring.
132. They passed the port at midnight. (DC: 217)

In (131) the word spring is a polysemic word with five different meanings, these meanings are respectively: sort of duck, a season, a water place, jump and an elastic material. In (132) the word port can either mean an airport or a seaport or a sort of fortified wine. Here context plays an important role in resolving the ambiguity. We can see that spring and port are ambiguous words. But is it necessary that all sentences, which contain ambiguous words are always ambiguous? The answer is in the negative. For

clarification, one can convert the second sentence above into:

133. They drank the port at midnight.

134. They reached the port at midnight.

which still have ambiguous words, but these sentences are not ambiguous, i.e., they cannot be interpreted in more than one way. What guarantees the disambiguation of (133) and (134) is the use of the verbs: drank and reached. The verb drank asserts that port means a sort of wine, but not a harbour. In (134) the use of reached instead of passed confirms that port means harbour and not a sort of wine.

4.6.1.2 Homonymy

“Homonymy” is far less common and far less complex than polysemy (Ullmann, 1977: 176). Panman (1082: 107) defines homonymy as the phenomenon where two or more words have the phonological similarity. The phonological realization of words enables listeners to understand their meanings. However in the case of homophonous words, ambiguity may confront us in examples like:

135. son sun /sⁿ/

136. rain reign /rein/

Not only words may have homophonous forms, which create ambiguity, phrases and sentences may also be ambiguous because of their phonological realization, as in the following examples:

137. keep apart /ki:p epa:t/ 138. keep a part / ki:p e pa:t/

(DC: 427)

64. The sun’s rays meet.

65. The sons raise meat / e sⁿs reiz mi:t/

There is some complication in the fact that we do not make the distinction of homonymy in writing and speech. Thus lead and read are spelt in the same way but pronounced differently. Lead (metal) and read (p.p.) are pronounced respectively as /led/ and /red/, whereas lead in lead a quite life, for instance, and to read (infinitive) are pronounced in the same way /li:d/ and /ri:d/. Conversely the pairs of examples, above (135), (136) and (137 and 138) are spelt differently, but pronounced in the same way. For the former pair Palmer uses the term “homography” and for the latter “homophony” (1981: 68).

4.6.1.2.1 Distinction between Polysemy and Homonymy

A problem arises when a form has several meanings. It is difficult to decide the proper meaning as it is the case in the examples of polysemy or homonymy. In the case of ambiguous words, a distinction is sometimes made between polysemy and homonymy. Hurford and Heasley (1983: 123) assert that the distinction can be drawn according to the closeness or relatedness of the sense of the ambiguous words. They (*Ibid*) see that ‘A case of HOMONYMY is one of an ambiguous word, whose different senses are far apart from each other and not obviously related to each other in any way’. Cases of homonymy seem very definitely to be matters of mere accident or coincidence. For instance the English word mug means a drinking vessel or a gullible person. It can be noticed that there is no obvious conceptual connection between its two meanings.

On the other hand, ‘A case of POLYSEMY is one where a word has several closely related senses’ (*Ibid*). For elucidation, consider the polysemic word mouth, which can be used to refer to a river or to animals. The two senses are clearly related to be the concepts of an opening from the interior of some solid mass to the exterior, and of a place of issue at the end of some long narrow channel. Panman (1982: 106-107) gives the following examples to distinguish

between polysemy and homonymy

139a. The bank of the river was full of flowers.

139b. He brought his money to the bank.

140a. The city was near the mouth of the river.

140b. Don't speak with your mouth full.

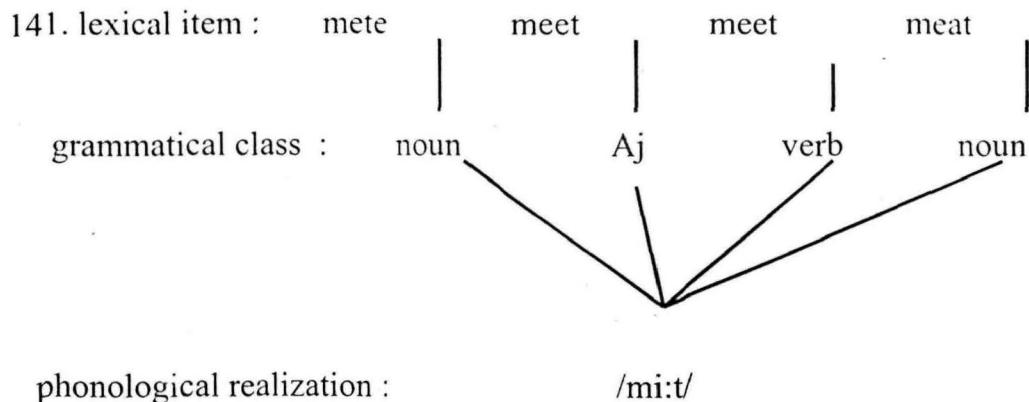
The question can be raised pertaining to the underlined words above whether they are two different words or two uses of the same word. The two forms of bank in the first sentence pair are considered to be different uses of the same word. So, in the first pair sentence it is a case of polysemy, while in the second it is a case of homonymy (See Kess and Hoppe, 1977: 125-140; and Panman, 1982: 105-136 for further details).

Jacobson comments on the two semantic phenomena of polysemy and homonymy, and schematizes them as follows:

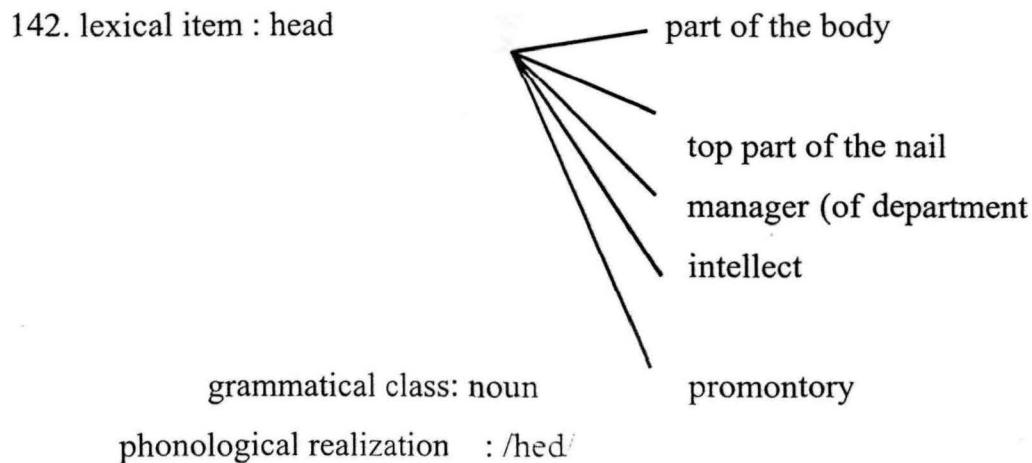
The semantic relation holding between lexical items are completely independent of phonological factors. However, phonological considerations are relevant to two important semantic phenomena: homonymy and polysemy. Homonymy implies phonological identity between different lexical items with different meanings (and frequently different grammatical considerations). Polysemous items have one phonological shape, one grammatical classification, but several meanings and senses.

(1978:215)

Consider these examples: **Tree-diagram (20)**



Tree-diagram (21)



4.6.2 Analysis of Lexical ambiguity

Linguists have suggested the following methods to analyze the lexical ambiguity:

4.6.2.1 Lexical Ambiguity and Componential Analysis

Componential analysis is used by Katz and Fodor in The Structure of a Semantic Theory to analyze the different forms of words and sentences. The analysis is based on mathematical notions of (+) and (-) signs, referred to as

semantic markers or semantic features. Palmer (1981: 103-106) believes that “Katz and Fodor use componential analysis to characterize anomalous and ambiguous sentences”. He (Ibid : 89) adds “The argument is, however, very largely based upon ambiguity showing that a sentence may have two readings”. Consider the ambiguous sentence below whose ambiguity may be attributed to the use of the ambiguous word bill. It can be disambiguated by adding but need not be paid.

143. The bill is large.

143a. The bill is large, but need not be paid.

As for word structures, a dictionary supplies us with the different meanings for each entry. For instance, a dictionary distinguishes four meanings for the word

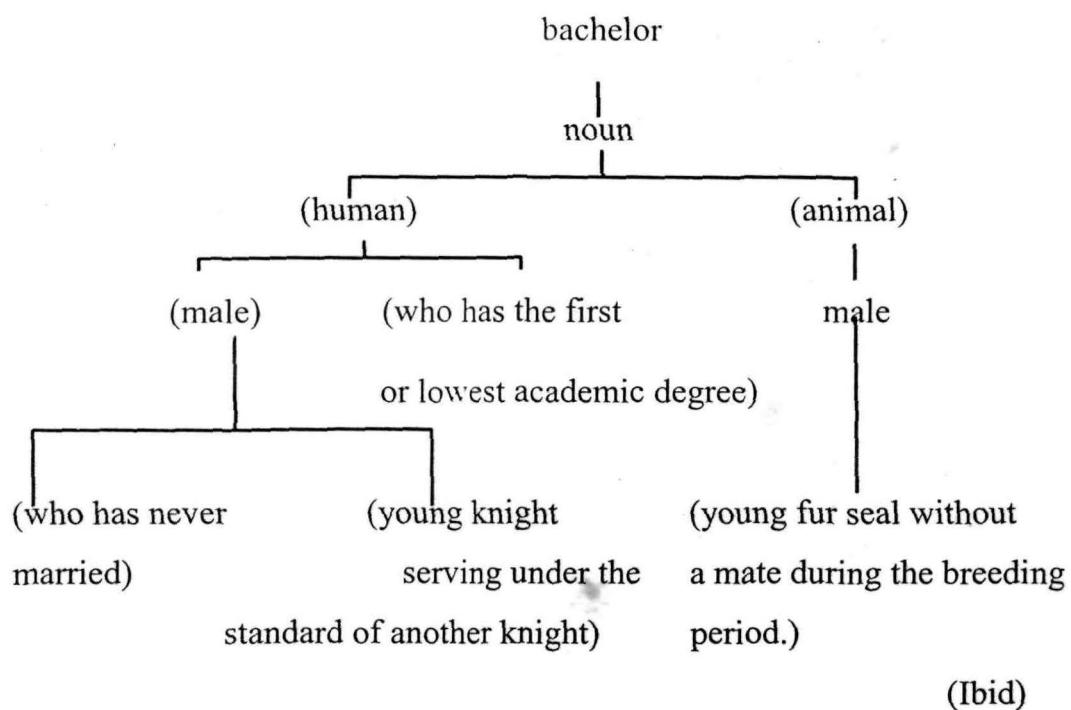
bachelor:

- (i) A man who has never married.
- (ii) A young knight serving under the banner of another.
- (iii) Someone with a first degree.
- (iv) A young male unmated for seal during the mating season.

One can establish any of the above senses of bachelor in terms of componential analysis by a set of markers which are shown in parentheses e.g.

(human) (animal) and (male). Moreover, to have the specific meaning or distinctive meaning, we use specific elements called distinguishers used in square brackets e.g. (first degree) to mean ‘academic’. It is the use of these distinguishers, which enables us to distinguish the intended meaning. It is the use of distinguishers that makes it possible to characterize a case of lexical ambiguity. Palmer diagrammed the semantics of bachelor as follows:

Tree-diagram (22)

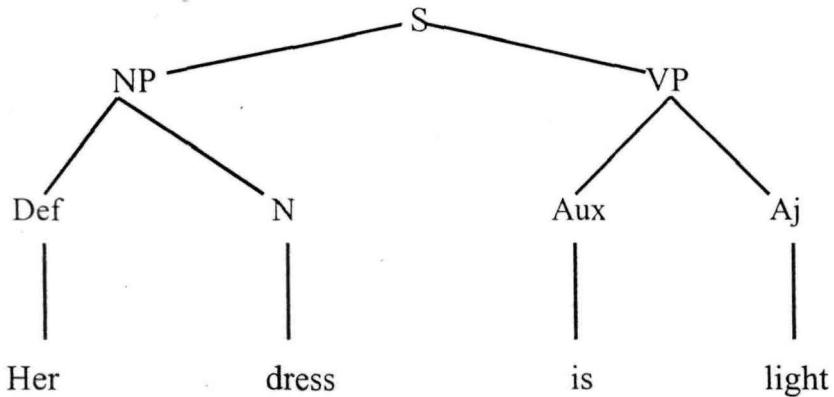


Grinder (1971: 112) points out that “If a particular lexical item was itself ambiguous, it would be found in the lexicon with a series of conjunctions of these semantic markers”. Each member of these conjunctions specifies one of the meanings of the word.

In the case of lexical ambiguity one cannot assign more than one DS, so one has either to resort to componential analysis or rephrase the sentence which contains a lexical ambiguous item. For more clarification, let's go back to example (9), the syntax will assign to both possible meanings expressed in (9a-b) the same underlying tree representation.



Tree-diagram (23)



Though the above sentence has one tree representation; yet it is ambiguous, and has two readings. These readings are due to the possibility that light can bear two senses. Katz and Fodor (1964) take the position that:

The basic fact that a semantic theory must explain is that a fluent speaker can determine the meaning of a sentence in terms of the meanings of its constituent lexical items.

(Grinder, 1973: 111-112)

Componential analysis is significant for the derivation of meaning. Chomsky uses it in his selectional restrictions. Consequently, Katz and Fodor in their “Projection Rules” employ them to derive the meaning of a sentence from the meaning of words.

4.6.2.2 Ambiguity and Projection Rules

As has been seen selection analysis is essential for determining lexical meanings, projection rules are also necessary for combining lexical items to form sentence meanings. In other words, componential analysis may stress the dictionary, whereas, projection rules depend on the rules of grammar that link

word constituents of a sentence. Grinder quotes Katz and Fodor 1964:

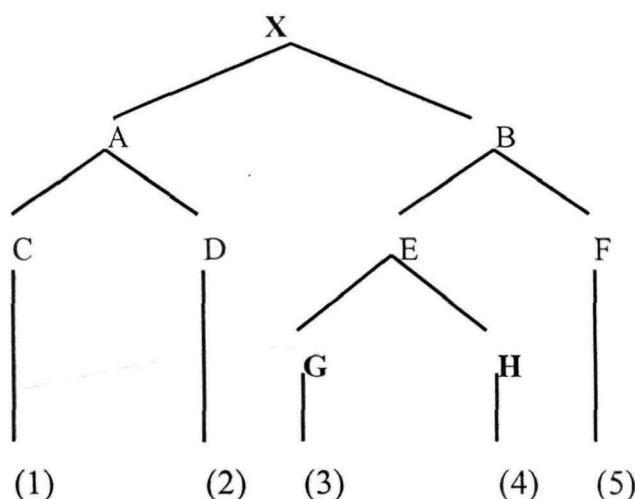
a dictionary of the lexical items of the language and a system
of rules (projection rules) which operate on fully grammatical
descriptions of sentences and on dictionary entries to produce
semantic interpretations for every sentence of the language.

(1973:112)

Projection rules combine words into combinations referred to as “amalgamations”, and meanings are called “path”. The paths are no more than the structural analysis of the meaning, and the amalgamation is thus a combination of the markers and distinguishers. Projection rules are needed because it is necessary to state what may be amalgamated with what, and in what order.

With reference to ambiguity, projection rules seem effective in the analysis of syntactically ambiguous constructions, since they operate on the DS level before the application of any transformation. For instance, passive transformation would distort the structural information needed. Here, two of the argument positions at least can be shown to interchange in a given tree structure. The projection rules can be roughly illustrated by the following abstract DS, which is proposed by Jacobson (1978: 44):

Tree-diagram (24)



Here the capitals should be interpreted as syntactic categories and the bracketed integers as complexes of semantic features. We can notice that the projection rules cannot account for the ambiguity of example (9). The reason is = R4 + R3 + R1 that the logical relations holding between the two arguments (the suit and light) are accurately reflected in (7), since its ambiguity seems to be associated with no structural considerations but rather with the fact that the word light is itself ambiguous. Grinder (1973: 117) raises the following question. How do the two components (lexicon and projection rules) of the semantic theory handle this fact? The lexical entry for light is:

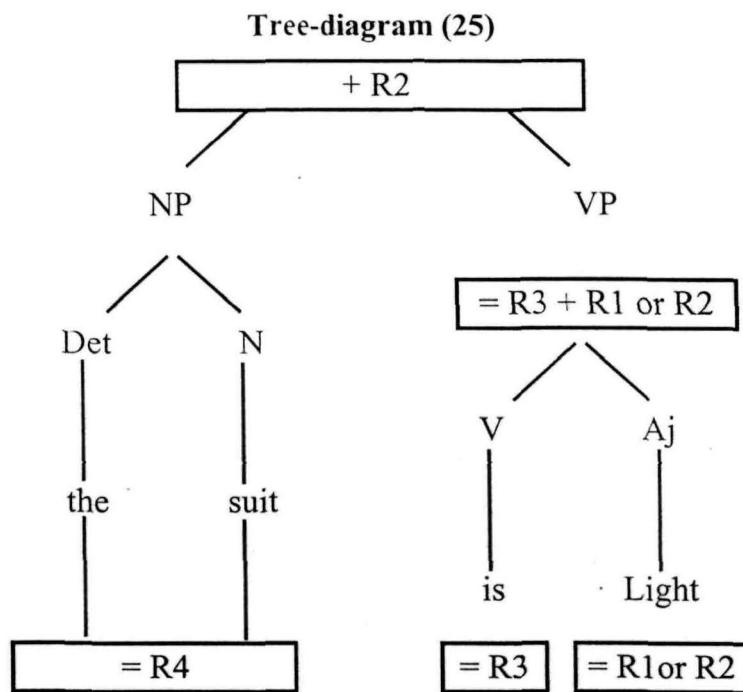
Light (phonological markings); (+Aj..); (Riv R2)

Where R1= SM1, SM2,..., SMn;

and R2= SM1, SM2,..., SMn. (Ibid)

The meaning of light as a property of weight is represented by the set of semantic markers R1 and that of colour is represented by R2 set. Distinguishers which are attached to each set of semantic markers specify the semantic environments in which they may not occur without deviance. The projection rules work as follows on the tree diagram below which is suggested

by Grinder:



(Ibid: 118)

The final amalgamated path for the above diagram indicates that the whole tree means whatever the constituents ($NP = R4$), ($V = R3$) + either ($Aj = R1$) or ($Aj = R2$) mean. It can be inferred that the semantic environment would not forbid the occurrence of any reading of light, which is responsible for the ambiguity of (9). It is also worth mentioning that the ambiguity of (9a-b) stems from the semantic environment too, which would block the occurrence of the distinguishers.

4.6.2.3 Ambiguity and Selectional Restrictions

Selectional restrictions or co-occurrence relations, as they are sometimes called, are very essential for building up well-formed sentences, i.e., sentences

that are grammatically correct and semantically well-accepted. To Lyons (1981: 156) “The meaning of a sentence is the product of both lexical and grammatical meaning, i.e., the meaning of the constituent lexemes and of the grammatical constructions that relate lexemes, syntagmatically to one another”.

Selectional restrictions that indicate the occurrence of one item in a sentence permit or exclude the occurrence of another item. According to Bach, selectional restrictions generally deal with all the relations of dependency between items in a string (1964: 35). Koutsoudas argues that co-occurrence relations can be grouped into three basic types: simple, mutual and mutually exclusive relations (1966: 95). Katz and Fodor’s projection rules, which are used for the derivation of meaning of sentences from the meanings of words, depend mainly on the componential analysis and selectional restrictions. Selectional restrictions would enable us to give judgment on the deviation of the following sentences.

*144. I drink the book.

*145. I drinks the juice.

The first example is not acceptable semantically, because the verb drink requires a liquid noun as an object. Whereas, the second example is grammatically deviant since the subject is not a third person singular pronoun; therefore, there is no need for the (-s) morpheme to be attached to the verb. Chomsky (1905: 95) affirms that a grammar would generate all the grammatical sentences. Selectional restrictions govern not only the use of all parts of speech in a sentence, but also the use of a sequence of items, which belong to the same part of speech. For instance, when more than one adjective occur within a sentence, their usual order is from the more general to the more specific. Quirk et. al. gives a table which displays restrictions on the use of adjectives in pre-nominal positions. (Quirk et. al., 1972: 925 and Quirk Greenbaum, 1979: 123-125)

Selectional restrictions work on the three levels of language; phonology (distinctive features), Syntax (sub-categorization features) and semantics (semantic features). Selectional restrictions can be used for removing lexical ambiguity as in the example below:

146. green ball.

147. colourful ball.

The word green in the first example above may have three senses, they are:

- a. Predicate colour may only apply to physical objects.
- b. Predicate inexperience only to people.
- c. Predicate un-ripeness only to fruit.

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These senses can be used to disambiguate the phrase green ball. Here the sense colour is attached to the sense physical object of ball. The same sense of green as colour will not attach to ball when it has another sense of a formal dance. Katz and Fodor name the properties, which specify such selectional restrictions as semantic markers, which are enclosed within parentheses. So the senses of green can be specified by the semantic markers as:

green (physical object)

(human)

(fruit)

Selectional restrictions are not only useful with adjectives, but they can also be applied to verbs and nouns. Hayes (1976: 44) enumerates the restrictions below for the noun ball:

Ball-concrete noun → (social activity) → (large) → (assembly) → (dance)

Ball-concrete noun → (physical object) → (sphere)

Ball-concrete noun → (physical object) → (cannon-ball)

Selectional restrictions of colourful can be shown in the dictionary as follows:

Colourful → adjective → (colour) → (highly coloured) < (physical object) or (social activity)

Colourful → adjective → (evaluative) → (distinctive) < (aesthetic object) or (social activity) (Ibid: 45)

The combination of any two members of a set is allowed under the control of selectional restrictions. Thus, combinations forbidden by selectional restrictions should be excluded. Accordingly the amalgamation of colourful with ball in (147) will give four meanings for the concrete noun node according to the lexical entry of each of them

- 1.brightly coloured sense of colourful + three senses of ball.
- 2.distinctive sense of colourful + the dance sense of ball.

Simultaneously, selectional restrictions will rule out the combination of the distinctive sense of colourful plus two physical object senses of ball. (See Hayes, 1926: 41-53).

4.6.3. Non-Linguistic Ambiguity

This type of ambiguity relates to those ones which arise from factors other than those pertaining to phonology, morphology, syntax or lexicon. This sort of ambiguity is attributed to context (ambiguity of significance), or to referentiality of certain words (referential ambiguity). This is why it is included within the “Semantic Ambiguity” in Chapter Four.

Lyons (1979b: 398) considers ambiguities of proper names, personal and demonstrative pronouns, or definite descriptions as “referential ambiguity” based on non-linguistic factors.

148. “Charles lived in Paris.”(TTC:211)

149. "The old man kissed her".(TTC:259)

The above examples are non-linguistically ambiguous because the exact referentiality or identity is not determined as the subjects Charles in (148) and the old man in (149) refer to an indefinite number of people.

"Referential ambiguity" is held to be linguistic only in so far as it depends on distinction (e.g. reflexive vs. non-reflexive), which is grammaticalized in the language system.

150. Mary thinks that she passed the exam.

This example can be described as linguistically ambiguous according to whether she is construed as being reflexive or not. Lyons also classifies non-linguistic ambiguity as follows:

ambiguities that are introduced into utterance-signals by
channel-noise, by deficiencies in the language user's
competence or performance or by particular contexts in
which the utterances occur.

(op.cit.:398)

The first type of ambiguity is traced to the misplacement of suprasegmentals, but the second is attributed to a defect in the competence or performance of the speaker or writer. The third type is related to the situational context in which an utterance is used as in:

117. The train is long.(For disambiguation,see 4.6)

Ruby (1962: 475-482) mentions ambiguity of significance as non-linguistic ambiguity. This type of ambiguity emanates from the inability to realize the factual significance of a statement in spite of its being clear semantically. The following example does not become evident unless we see it in relation to

other similar events.

151. There were 454 deaths due to traffic accidents in the United States during the Thanks giving holiday weekend last year.(op.cit:80-82)

If seen in isolation, the number of deaths is deplorable, but compared with the number of deaths at usual weekends, it seems reasonable; therefore, such a kind of ambiguity is due to non-linguistic factors.

4.6.4. Word-Class Ambiguity

This type of ambiguity can be regarded as a type of syntactic ambiguity as it is related with the class of words; however some linguists study the subject from a semantic point of view because the change of class entails a change in the meaning of the constituents. There are two types of word-class ambiguity: CS and DC. The First type can be part of syntactic ambiguity as it deals with the word relations, but the second is basically part of semantic ambiguity.

4.6.4.1 Distributional Classification (DC)

Word-class ambiguity results from the liability of belongingness of a certain word to more than one word-class as used in a certain context.

Stagerberg, 1970:474)

To elucidate word class ambiguity, we can use the following example.

23. I can fish.

Here the ambiguity is due to the obscure belongingness of can and fish, can may belong either to the auxiliary class of words or to the lexical verbs, whereas fish may be realized either as a noun or as a verb. The sentence can be interpreted as follows:

23a. They are able to fish.

23b. They put fish in cans.

The same analysis can be set for the following examples.

152. Box leaves.

The example can be either an imperative sentence or a declarative one. If perceived as imperative, then box is a verb and leaves is an object/noun. If perceived as a declarative sentence, box is a proper noun/subject and leaves is a present tense verb with a third person singular (-s).

It can be inferred that class ambiguity may simultaneously be lexical and syntactic. It is lexical when the ambiguity lies in a single word in a sentence. Moreover, it is of a syntactic nature, because the multiple meanings a single word may have can be grasped from the arrangement of words.

4.6.4.1.1 Resolving Word-Class Ambiguity (DC)

Ambiguity may spring from the belongingness of an item to more than one word class (Miller, 1984:82). To demonstrate it, let us resort to example (23) which is repeated in the last page and its disambiguation.

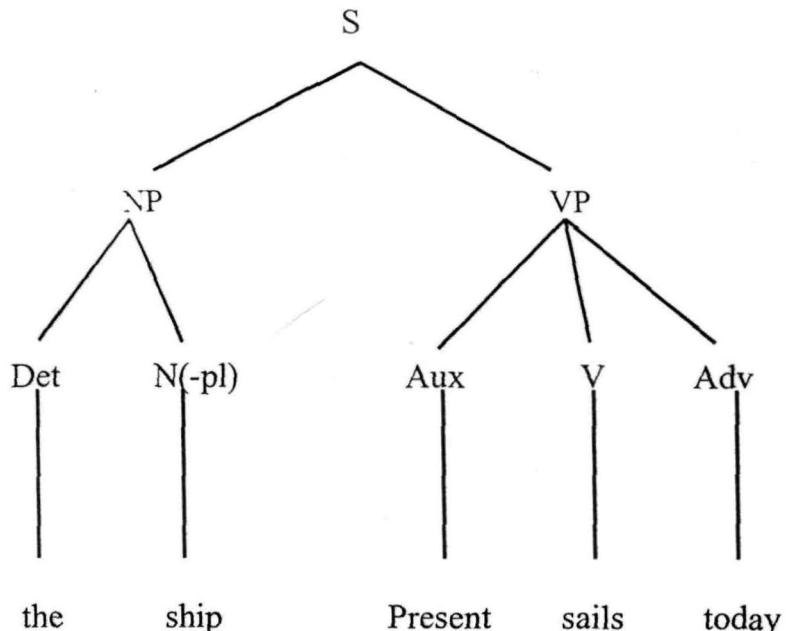
Resolving this type of ambiguity is rather easy compared with other types. What is needed is recognition of the word class to which a certain constituent of a construction belongs. In English, words may belong to more than one word class, a fact that may give rise to ambiguity. Such a type of ambiguity can be accounted for and resolved by reference to SS only without resorting the DS. Tree-diagramming is an ideal device of accounting for such a type of ambiguity, as the labeling of the nodes indicates explicitly the type of word class to which each item belongs, i.e., whether it is a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb (diagram 1). Furthermore, disambiguation depends, to a great extent, on the

identification of category and subcategory features. Consider the following examples:

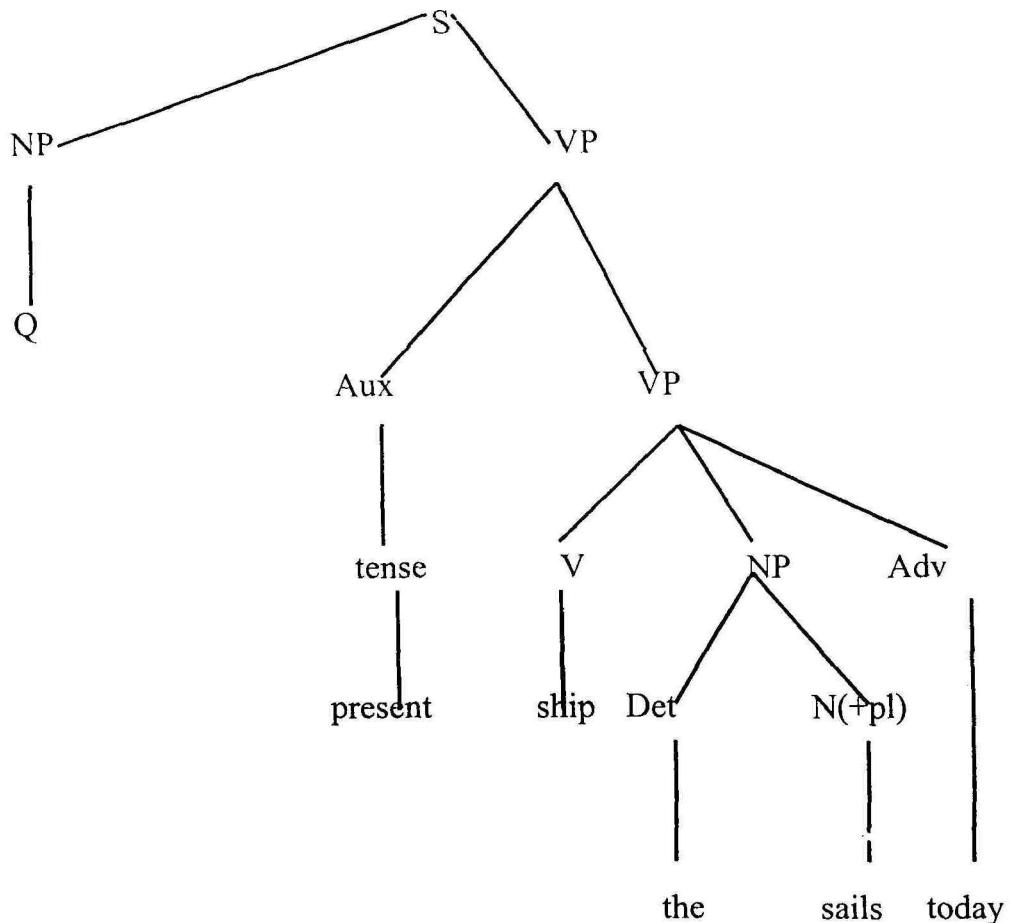
39a. The ship sails.(GE:312)(Also check in 3.5.1)

39b. Ship sails today.

Tree-diagram (26)



Tree-Diagram (27)



Under the title word-class some other categories ought to be explained and their methods of disambiguation is necessarily mentioned despite the overlap between semantic and syntactic aspects of views, i.e., the line that links morphological, syntactic and semantic aspects. The study aims at introducing as many samples of ambiguous utterances as possible.

4.6.4.2 Constituent Structure (CS)

This type of ambiguity emanates from word-class belongingness and the structural relationship between the constituents of the structure involved. For illustration consider the example below:

153. Some more violent effort.(OT:151)

This phrase can be disambiguated by writing it either as:

153a. Some effort which is more violent.

Or 153b. Some more effort, which is violent.

But together with this difference of constituent-structure there goes another difference in distributional classification of the elements. This can be clarified by substituting less for more and good for bad etc., convincingly. The following are ambiguous alternatives for (153):

153c. Some less violent effort.

153d. Some worse violent effort.

153e. Some more effort.

153f. Some more good effort.

Morphologically speaking, the word more belongs to at least two distributional classes:

- a) Like less, it may combine with adjectives to form adjectival phrases.
- b) Unlike less, it may form a pre-modifier of a noun or NP, i.e., a noun determiner.

4.6.4.2.1 Resolving Ambiguity of (CS)

In this case, it is the structural relationship between the constituents rather than the distributional classification, which is responsible for the ambiguity. Consider example (154):

154. The thin girl's coat. (TTC: 299)

Ambiguity in this example is to be accounted for not in terms of the (DS) of the elements thin, girl and coat, but in terms of a difference in (CS). Under one interpretation, it will read:

154a. The girl's coat which is thin.

The words girl and coat form a single constituent, while under another, it will read:

154b. The coat of the thin girl.

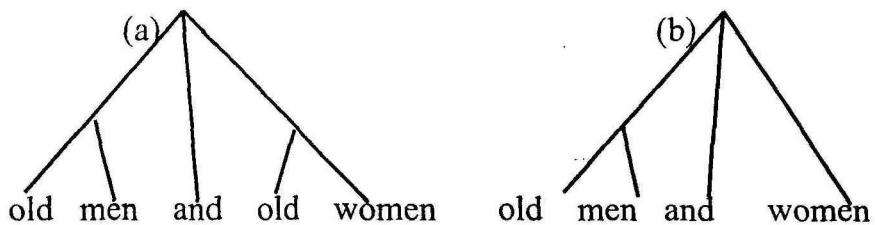
in (154a), the girl's coat makes a single constituent. For similar examples, we repeat example 97(you can find its diagram in 3.6.3.2.1):

97. Old men and women.

It is possible to resolve the ambiguity of the example by using tree-diagramming or bracketing technique. One can tell the difference in meaning and structure from the surface realization of a construction.(See:3.6.3.2.1)

Tree-diagram (28)

97.



4.6.5. Ambiguity Arising from Referentiality

Referentiality is a syntactico-semantic phenomenon. It is syntactic in the sense that it refers to the anaphoric and cataphoric relations between words. But it is sometimes semantic as the construction may refer to different objects to yield an ambiguous meaning.

One of the commonest kinds of ambiguity is that one in which the reference of a pronoun is not clear. Pronouns often appear in the SS as a result of a “Pronominalization Transformation” that substitutes a pronominal form for a specific NP (Falk, 1978: 202). Consider the examples below:

155. Emily told her mother that she had acted foolishly.(DC:412)

156. When I tried to remove the dog's fish, it bit me.

(Roberts, 1962: 146)

In the above examples, we are not sure to which of its antecedents either of the pronouns she or it refers. We do not know whether she refers to Emily or to her mother. Similarly, we cannot tell whether it refers to the dog or to the fish. Sometimes, any one of several NPs, is liable to be mistaken for the antecedent of a specific pronouns. In terms of TG, the deleted subject NP is unrecoverable. Therefore, we should make sure, then that our deletions have not obscured the relationship between a pronoun and its antecedent. Consider the example below:

157. The wife of a new neighbour from up the corner came down and walked up to my wife and started acting nice, which has exhausted her.

(Meyer, 1974: 124-125)

In (157) her could refer either to the speaker's wife or to the neighbour's wife. Indefinite pronouns can be confusing too, simply because they are indefinite, as in:

158. All of us had a room. (TTC: 105)

159. Everybody came in a coach. (DC: 222)

In (158), it is not clear whether there was one room for all of us or a single room for each separately. Similarly in (159) the example does not indicate whether people come together or separately.

Again one should be careful when using demonstratives, since demonstratives may give rise to ambiguity. Consider the following example:

160. He greeted me by my first name and handed me a letter,

but this does not surprise me. (DC: 97)

It could be interpreted in three ways according to the referentiality of this, as follows:

160.a I was not surprised by his using my first name or by his handing me the letter.

160b. He greeted me by my first name and handed me a letter, but familiarity didn't surprise me.

160c. He greeted me by my first name and handed me a letter, the content of which did not surprise me.

Roberts states that "The demonstratives this and that, unlike personal pronouns, often refer, quite properly, not to nouns, but to whole sentences or ideas expressed in verb clusters". (1962: 148)

4.6.6 Systematic Ambiguity

In Essays on "Form and Interpretation", Chomsky recognizes two types of ambiguity: Systematic and Idiosyncratic. (1977: 67).

Systematic Ambiguity is an outcome of the interaction between syntax and semantics. Chomsky adds that, 'It seems to be a property of certain types of common nouns that they can be used with their abstract or concrete reference'. (Ibid)

To illustrate this point, Chomsky cites the following examples:

161. John wrote a book.

162. The book weighs five pounds.

163. Joe sank his voice into a whisper and looked at the door GE:175)

164. He leaned at the door.

In (163) the reference of door is abstract, on the assumption that Joe may have looked at space in front which represented an opening. In (164) the reference of door is concrete; it refers to a specific material object that has weight. This type of systematic ambiguity results when a certain subcategory of words is involved.

4.6.7 Genitive Constructions

‘Genitive’ is a grammatical notion. Genitive constructions can be ambiguous if they occur with adjectives inside an NP, as in:

154. The thin girls coat. (TTC: 202)

In Hawkins’ view (1981: 248), Chomsky sees genitive contractions as three-way ambiguous, citing the example below:

165. John’s picture.

This can be disambiguated as follows:

- 165a. Picture belonging to John.
- 165b. Picture depicting John.
- 165c. Picture painted by John.

We may add an example from (TTC):

166. Tellson’s bank. (256)

In this respect genitive is semantically ambiguous. Nilsen & Nilsen (1975: 64) state that genitive constructions can also be ambiguous, but the matter lies in what sense is something possessed. Consider the following example:

167. Mr. Brownlow’s books. (OT: 111)

It can be the books which *is* owned by Mr. Brownlow or the books which are written by Mr. Brownlow.

4.6.8 Negation Scope Ambiguity

Negation is clearly an operation that affects propositions. It does so in ways that cannot be captured in strictly logical positive-negative terms. Let us look

at just a few aspects of the negation problem. First, negation could often be replaced by a semantically near-equivalent positive form, but the choice is rarely neutral. (Verschueren (1999: 189). Consider these examples:

168. Thomson's report is not true.

169. Thomson's report is false.

These sentences appeal to the same set of norms of which Thomson's report is being evaluated. But though false, when talking about reports, is one of the many possible opposites of true, the negation not true is at most a semantic approximation, and by no means a usage equivalent to false. The intricate relationship between such seemingly opposite terms, where the negation of one should, theoretically, be equal to the other in its positive form, becomes even clearer when we try the other way around: not false is not at all equivalent to true.

A second interesting fact is the potential 'scope ambiguity' of negation, when a German leader is reported to have said:

170. We Germans will not let ourselves be divided. (*Ibid*)

Different interpretations are possible depending on the context:

1. There are attempts to divide the Germans, but 'we Germans' will not let ourselves be divided, with the entire predication within the scope of negation,
2. Germans being perfectly capable of dividing themselves on their own initiative will not let themselves divided by others;
3. There may be others who let themselves be divided, but not we Germans.

Third, there are different ways of handling negation in discourse, which are sometimes language-specific. Consider a regular question-answer pair as in the following example.

171. "Q: What do you want from me?"

172. "Wouldn't she weep for you?" said Carton.

"Yes, yes, thank God..." answered Mr. Lorry. (TTC: 301)

Depending on the negation system one may use the answer Yes which either expresses agreement with the predication within the scope of not, namely that she did indeed 'weep for him'. or it may accept the negation Not, and thus contradicting any suggestion that 'she wept for him'. Meauwis (1994) has documented a case in which different negation styles lead to misunderstanding between Flemish instructors and Korean engineers in the context of a training programme in a multination company. By and large negation suggests possibilities and thus it is included in our choice of semantic ambiguity.

4.6.9 Time-Tense- Relationship Ambiguity

The relation between time and tense has been an issue for controversy among linguists. Someone may consider that there is no distinction between the two. Harrison (1947: 64) demonstrates that tense is that property of a verb which signifies the time which the verb expresses'. Others believe that tense is not the same as time: time is much more complicated (Jacobs and Rosenbaum, 1968: 121). Lester (1971: 52) differentiates between time and tense, he asserts that: Tense does not mean time. Every language can make the distinction between past, present and future time, but there is no obligation for the distinction to be carried solely by the inflection of the verb.

According to Transformational linguists there are two tenses in English: the present tense and the past tense. The traditionally so-called perfect and future tenses are, in TG, termed aspects. (See Fowler, 1977: 68-70). In the re-write rules time and tense appear as follows:

Aux → tense (M) (have + en) (be +ing)

Tense → { present
 past }

(Liles, 1971: 27)

According to this rule Aux is not a time indicator, but it is a tense carrier. The form of the verb in English does not explicitly indicate time, especially with irregular verbs, such as: cost, cut, put etc. These verbs will lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding, when they are used with the first and the second personal pronoun as in :

173. I told him I had not gone today, fearing to lose the chance of
being of any service to him, ... (DC:428)
174. You put it there.

The above examples are ambiguous as it is not clear whether the tense expressed is present or past. In this regard, Aurbach et al . (1971:55) comment:

The same word, the same form, can express present time, past time, or future time, or it can refer to an action started in the past, now is going on , and will continue into the future. So a form that contains the present tense morpheme does not necessarily have to express present. And a form that is labeled past tense morpheme does not necessarily have to express past time.

In other words tense in English is not an exact indicator of time. Consider the following:

175. I am accustomed to it. (TTC: 182)
176. “He is my husband.”, said Madam Defarge. (TTC: 183)

177. "Well" said Miss Havisham, "And you have reared the boy.."

(GE: 103)

The ambiguity of (175) and (176) correlates with the use of the present simple. In these examples the present expresses facts or habits, so the duration of time refers to the past, present and future. In (177) the form of the verb is present, but it is used to express an event that happened in the past.

In this respect Meyer (1974: 26) states that 'Time is not directly related to the verb form and should not be mistaken for it. Tense is not the only indication of time, but at least' three other devices are involved: models, aspect and time adverbials'. (See also Naji, 2000).

Since ambiguous examples related to tenses are always a field of suspicion this means one can choose any example and claim it or discuss its being ambiguous.

4.7 Types of Vagueness:

No information available reveals that anyone other than Kimpson, ¹⁰⁰ have ever tried to classify vagueness into different types. She (1977: 123-138) recognizes four types: referential vagueness, indeterminacy of meaning, lack of specification and distinction in specification. It is not easy to draw clear distinction between these types since they are not unrelated. However this research introduces a simple idea about vagueness due to its strong relationship with semantic ambiguity.

4.7.1 Referential Vagueness:

In some case of vagueness it is hard to relate certain lexical items to certain objects, though the meaning of the lexical item is clear enough (Ibid: 124-125).

Regarding this, Hurford & Heasley (1983: 124) say that ‘some nouns and adjectives are gradable: examples are: mountain and hill, and tall and short. Just as there is no absolute line drawn in the semantics of English between tall and short, there is no absolute distinction between mountain and hill'. Similarly we cannot distinguish between city and town by number of houses or inhabitants.

4.7.2 Indeterminacy of Meaning

As its name indicates, the meaning of such vague item or phrase seems quite indeterminate. A good example representative of this sort is the possessive construction (See 3.6.3.1.1). In such a construction, the resultant meaning may only show the relationship between the modifier and the head noun. Kimpson comments:

In the face of the variety, it seems clear that we can say little about the meaning of possessive constructions other than that there must be some relation of association between the “possessor” and “possessed”. The meaning is otherwise quite indeterminate.

(Ibid)

Example (167) Mr. Brownlow's books and the above account reveal that the construction is vague. Here Mr. Brownlow's books would have an indeterminate number of interpretations, It would refer to the books which he bought, read, wrote, stole, tore.. etc.

4.7.3 Lack of Specification

Certain lexical items have clear meanings; yet they may have general meanings,i.e., they may be used in certain situations to denote different meanings. For instance, the verbs go and do have specifiable meanings; however, they may be used to cover a wide variety of actions. In example

(213) the verb is used to imply a meaning of directional motion.

178. "So you are going to London, David.", said Mr. Murdstone. (DC: 143)

Here, the verb can be used to describe dissimilar actions such as walking, running, going by coach or by other means of transportation (Kimpson, 1977: 125-126). Similarly though the verb do in (179) does have a determinate meaning, it has the implicit meaning of carrying out some unspecifiable action involving the object:

179. "I have done the cloth-shop.", said Em'ly. (DC: 566)

In (179), the speaker's career is the only means available which specifies accurately the intended meaning. If the speaker is a dustman, a painter, a thief ...etc, the verb do will respectively mean dusted it, painted it or stolen it.

4.7.4 Disjunction

It refers to "the cases where the meaning of an item involves disjunction of different interpretations" (Kimpson, 1977: 126). This fourth type of vagueness requires the recognition of a discrete interpretation of a lexical item. There are a few cases of lexical items in which one can make a disjunction, which may in turn lead to appropriate interpretation. Sentences with or can be cited to confirm this:

180. The applicants for the job either had a first-class degree
or some teaching experience.

181. All competitors must either be male or wear a one-piece
costume. (Ibid)

The above sentences can be interpreted in terms of truth conditions. Thus, we can interpret (180) in a way which the applicants should either have or first-class degree with no teaching experience or vice versa, or possibly both. Similarly, (181) would imply that the competitors were wearing a one-piece costume. Kimpson sums up the truth-condition in this way:

Any sentence of the form PVQ (where P and Q represent sentences) will be true if and only if either P is true, or Q is true, or P and Q are true.

(Ibid)

4.8. Disambiguation and Types of Contexts

Most words and sentences are ambiguous out of context. Palmer (1911: 43-44) points out “that the meaning of a sentence, or the fact that it is ambiguous or anomalous, can be known in isolation from any context.” Context is the most appropriate alternative for disambiguation. There are two types of context, which can be taken into consideration: linguistic context and situational context (Ibid). Linguistic context refers to syntax, which governs the construction of sentences. This type of context can account for syntactic ambiguity. While situational context has relevance to semantic and pragmatic ambiguities, i.e., ambiguities arising from lexical items and knowledge of the real world, there is no proof that knowing the meaning of a sentence does not entail knowing the context in which it is used. Most people think that meaning is primarily or wholly concerned with the relation between language and the world in which we use it. There is a viewpoint, which indicates that we can derive meaning independently of context: On the assumption that speakers of a certain language know the meaning of a sentence before they use it in any given context. But this viewpoint seems inadequate, for we cannot understand a meaning of a sentence clearly out of context, whether linguistic or situational. Rivers & Temperly state that, “Ignorance of cultural context can be an impediment” (1979: 70). Consider the ambiguity of (182), which is due to the use of bill, which has more than one meaning. It can be disambiguated within a linguistic context by extending the sentence either by the addition of but need not be paid as in (182a), or by modifying bill by another noun like parrot as in (182b):

182. The bill is large.

182a. The bill is large, but need not be paid.

182b. The parrot's bill is large.

Not all ambiguous sentences can be resolved by consulting the linguistic context, situational context or encyclopedic knowledge of the real world would be of great use for disambiguation as in examples (22, 183, 117 and 184).

22. They are moving sidewalks.

183. "Joe, put the sweater on.", said she. (GE: 43)

177. The train is long.

184. 'How is bread made'

"I know that" Alice cried eagerly, "You take some flower".

"Where do you pick the flower?" The white Queen asked.

(Fromkin & Rodman, 1978:88) .

The ambiguity of (22) and (183) many constitute problems to certain speakers of English who do not possess such inventions like 'electric sweaters' or 'sidewalks' which can go up and down; whereas, the ambiguity of (177) can be eliminated through the situational context, whether (177) is uttered at a railway station or a wedding party. The ambiguity of the last example consists in the fact that we participants belong to different worlds (a layman and an intellectual). Bott states that a human reader resolves ambiguity by context, by his knowledge of what is likely, and of the real world (1975: 27). For further examples of this kind of ambiguity refer to examples (185, 186 and 187).

185. They are eating apples.

186. The guests were ready to eat. (GE: 38)

187. Fire.

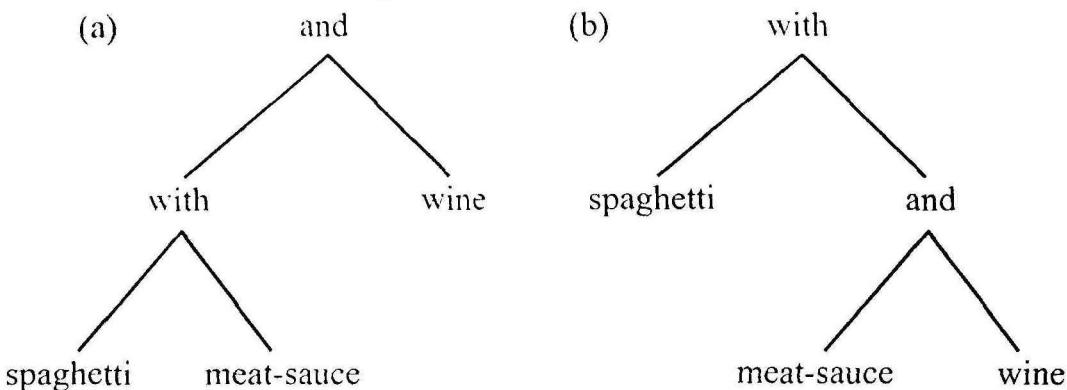
The ambiguity of the examples above can be resolved by realizing the situational contexts in which they are uttered or through knowledge of the real world. The ambiguity of (185) and (186) can be syntactically resolved in two

ways, but speakers of the language would not accept one of the interpretations in which the apples is the subject of (185) and guests is the object of eat in (186). Yet, the intuitive ability would enable native and most non-native speakers of English to accept these interpretations by speculating that they are uttered in an imaginary world. Example (187) is a one-word sentence or an elliptical sentence; such a sentence is vague, it can be a command, warning, exclamation or request. Charniak (1976: 2-3) cites the following example, which may be considered ambiguous according to both contexts: linguistic and situational.

188. Waiter, I would like spaghetti with meat, sauce and wine.

One would not expect to be served a bowl of spaghetti floating in meat, sauce and wine. The above sentence can be analyzed as follows:

Tree-diagram (29)



One expects the meal to be presented in the way that can be identified in the structure shown in (29.a) rather than in (29.b). To disambiguate sentence (188), a waiter must make an inference on his knowledge of food.

The above discussion reveals the significance of context (both linguistic and situational) for disambiguation: Johnson argues that:

The crucial point, however, is that apparent ambiguity, vagueness or obscurity direct the listener to those aspects of context relevant to rendering the sentence unambiguous.
In this way a sentence may be said to define its own context.

(1975: 225)

4.9 Theories of Subjective Ambiguity Resolving

According to (Pynte, 1978: 109-127 and Langendoen, 1977: 225-238) there are several hypotheses all ^{been proposed} been proposed to account for how listeners may comprehend ambiguous constructions.

4.9.1 Garden Path Theory

The Garden Path Theory is also called the One Meaning Theory. (See Marcus, 1980:ch 9). According to this theory, an ambiguous construction has one

interpretation only and if this interpretation is not plausible, another interpretation may be sought, and if the second does not seem plausible, a third may still be sought. Consider the following example:

189. "I hand him the file." (GE: 29)

Ambiguity may occur if one takes file as a paper folder.

Clark and Clark (1977:82) sum up the Garden Path Theory as follows:

- a) When listeners or readers encounter an ambiguous construction, they compute multiple interpretations.
- b) Depending on the context, listeners or readers then attempt to select the most plausible interpretation.
- c) If the ambiguity has not been resolved before a clause ends, they select one interpretation and stick to it.
- d) If later a context contradicts the selected interpretation, they try to retrieve the surface structure of a prior clause and compute a new compatible interpretation.

4.9.2 Many Meaning and Non-meaning Theories

Clark & Clark (1977: 80-84) refer to the experiment conducted by Mackay, as a result of which two new theories were formulated :The Many Meaning : The Many Meaning Theory. The first one claims that “listeners compute two or more readings for each ambiguous construction, and then immediately pick one on the basis of context.” (ibid: 81) and the Non-Meaning Theory, or (Perceptual Suppression Theory) in which “listeners compute no meaning for an ambiguous construction at first, but let the context “give weight” to reading until it pops out.” (See also Hassan, 1981)

4.9.3 Mixed Theory

As its name suggests, this new theory is a combination of the Many-Meaning and No-Meaning Theories.

Depending upon the Mixed Theory people may recognize and resolve ambiguity once a clause is ended. Then, they capture the intended meaning and stick to it, without need for the verbal contact. Consider these examples:

190. The merchant put his straw beside the machine.
191. The merchant put his hay beside the machine.
192. The farmer put his tress beside the machine. (Ibid)

Example (190) is ambiguous as straw can have two meaning grain stalk or drinking tube. Here the context does not indicate clearly which meaning is intended. Whereas, examples (191) and (192) are not ambiguous.

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