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M.A. Studies/ Semantics

Ambiguity and Vagueness

Submitted to

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2023 – 2024

Introduction

Ambiguity and vagueness are two varieties of interpretive uncertainty which are often discussed together, but are distinct both in their essential features and in their significance for semantic theory and the philosophy of language. Ambiguity involves uncertainty about mappings between levels of representation with different structural characteristics, while vagueness involves uncertainty about the actual meanings of particular terms. (Maienborn et.al.2019).

(oaks: 2010, 18-19) states when something is vague, Its meaning is not sufficiently specific. It differs from ambiguity which presents more than one interpretation, each of which maybe very specific. Of course those people who engage in evasive language can use either kind of attribute. Different interpretations of the same utterance may result in various interpretations and the difficulty of comprehension of listeners. It is actually, a quite common phenomena among different languages.

1-Ambiguity

Cruse (2006, 10), defines ambiguity as an expression form that is said to have more than one possible distinct meaning. Expressions may have different senses in different conditions. Thus, ambiguity occurs only when it can not be decided which sense is actually intended. (Scheffler:1979,11) says word is said to be ambiguous if it has different meanings or senses, or if it stands for different ideas.

1.1 Lexical ambiguity

It is the simplest type of ambiguity. Trask (1999:8) says that Lexical ambiguity results merely from the existence of two different meanings for a single word. Example: “The sailors enjoyed the port”. Here “port” can mean either ‘fortified wine’ or ‘city by the sea’, and the entire string of words accordingly has two different interpretations, but the structure of the sentence is exactly the same in both cases. (Kreidler:1998,55) says when homonyms can occur in the same position in utterances, the result is lexical ambiguity,

as in, for example, “I was on my way to the bank.” This example is likely to carry information about depositing or withdrawing money, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, fishing or boating.

1.2 Structural ambiguity

A situation in which a single phrase or sentence has two or more different underlying structures and interpretations. Phrases can be structurally ambiguous, as in expressions like, - Small boys and girls. The underlying interpretation can be either:

" small boys and (small) girls".

Or "small boys and all girls".

Our syntactic analysis will have to be capable of showing the structural distinction between these underlying representations. These two different versions of events can actually be expressed in the same surface structure form. (Yule, 1998) Syntactic ambiguity may be in the surface structure of a sentence: words can cluster together in different possible constructions. For example construction containing the coordinators (and, or) - John and Mary or Pat will go. [John] and [Mary or Pat], [John and Mary] or [Pat].

Syntactic ambiguity may also be in deep structure: one sequence of words may have more than one interpretation, generally because the rules of sentence construction allow ellipsis, the deletion of what is 'understood'. For example,

Adjective + infinitive, tied to subject or complement:

- The chicken is too hot to eat.

(Too hot to eat anything or too hot for anybody to eat it).

1.3 Referential ambiguity

(Kreidler: 1998, 151-152) states misunderstandings occur when a speaker has one referent in mind for a definite expression like George or the papers, and the addressee is thinking of a different George or some other papers. Referential ambiguity occurs when,

A) an indefinite referring expression may be specified or not; “I wanted to buy a newspaper”.

Here a newspaper may refer to a specific newspaper or some newspaper, any newspaper. The ambiguity disappears if we add, on the one hand, but I couldn't find it. Or , on the other hand , but I couldn't find one.

B) anaphora is unclear because a personal pronoun, he, she, it or they, can be linked to either of two referring expression.

“Jack told Ralf that a visitor was waiting for him.”

C) the pronoun “you” is used generically or specifically:

- If you want to get ahead, you have to work hard.

(is you the addresses or is this sentence a general platitude?)

D) a noun phrase with every can have distributed reference or collected reference:

-I'm buying a drink for everybody here.

(one drink for all or one drink for each).

1.4 Phonological ambiguity

This type of ambiguity is known as phonetic ambiguity that arises out of the fact that words sound identical, but they have different meanings. In spoken language, ambiguity is caused by either homophones that share identical pronunciation with different meanings, or more than one way of isolating set of sounds into words in cases of connected speech. Example:

-I went to see shore.

-I went to sea shore.

Both sentences have two interpretations of the phonemic transcription because these two sentences have the same phonemic transcription; The word see and sea are homophones. There is a type of phonological ambiguity in which a person can only understand the sentence through the pauses, juncture or even the spaces between the words ,as we have short pause which occurs between clauses and long pause between sentences, for example:

-Ice cream, I scream

-It is a nice ball, it is an ice ball.

1.5 Local and standing ambiguity

In this type of ambiguity, receivers could use background knowledge and personal experience to interpret an ambiguous sentences. Example:

-john chased the dog with the bones. This sentence is still ambiguous since

readers cannot decide whether john held the bone or the dog did, it can be clearly predicted in practice, depending on the common sense of shared knowledge about the nature of john and the dog that will enable the reader to understand this sentence as (It was the dog which held the bone). This type is called temporal or local ambiguity .The second type is Standing or a global ambiguity ,a sentence has an ambiguity that is not resolved within the sentence, but only through using information from the context. Example/ -the spy watched the man with the binocular. This is a standing ambiguity because without further information it is not clear who holds the binoculars, the spy or the man.

1.6 Cultural ambiguity

This kind of ambiguity occurs when a word or linguistic expression in different cultures has the same referent with different meanings, for instance, "Jesus" in English while in Arabic "النبي عيسى" have the same referent, though they have different meanings in each culture. "Jesus" for English people is the son of God, where as in Arabic he is the prophet of God.

2. Vagueness.

Vagueness is the unclear use of language, it is the opposite word or contrast with clarity and specificity. (Kempson,1977,123-124) "vague or abstract word can create wrong or confusing meanings in your receiver's mind. They state a general idea but leave the precise meaning to the receiver's interpretation. Vagueness related to any place where a collection of people live, made up of a certain number of houses. Towns can be small or large, but cities are big by definition (just as villages are small by definition). Now even if we can agree that the meanings of the items need to have a specification, we shall certainly find difficulty in individual cases in deciding whether or not some place is a city, or a town. There are four main types of vagueness, though they are not unrelated to each other:

2.1.Referential vagueness

where the meaning of the lexical item is in principle clear enough, but it may be hard to decide whether or not the item can be applied to certain objects; for example the lexical items “city” and “town”. Presumably we can at least roughly agree that a city is a place where a large collection of people live, and it is made up of a large number of houses; whereas a town is simply any place where a collection of people live, made up of a certain number of houses. Towns can be small or large, but cities are big by definition (just as villages are small by definition). Now even if we can agree that the meanings of the items need to have a specification, we shall certainly find difficulty in individual cases in deciding whether or not some place is a city, or a town. Is Salisbury a city? (Kempson:1998,124).

2.2 Indeterminacy of meaning of an item or phrase

Where the interpretation seems itself quite intangible and indeterminate. Perhaps the most extreme example of this in English is the possessive construction ‘John's book, John's train, John's sheets’. John's book can be used to describe the book John wrote, the book he owns, the book he has been reading, the book he has been told to read, the book he was carrying when he came into the room, etc. John's train can be used to describe the train he normally goes to work on, the train he is going to catch, the train he drives, the train he is guardsman of, the train he owns, the train he made, or is making, the train he designed, etc. John's sheets may be used to describe not only the sheets John owns, made, or designed, but also the sheets which go on the bed which he is going to sleep in. In the face of this 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 the „possessed“. The meaning is otherwise quite indeterminate(ibd:125).

2.3 Lack of specification

It's lack of specification in the meaning of an item, where the meaning though in principle quite clear is very general. The simplest example of lack of specification is an item like “neighbour” which is unspecified for “sex”, or for that matter, race, or age, etc. It can be applied to people as disparate as a tiny, five-foot Welshman studying Philosophy, and a six-foot Ghanaian girl who has seven children and who only did four years of schooling. Perhaps

less obvious examples are verbs such as go and do which both have a clearly specifiable meaning and yet cover a wide variety of actions, since this meaning is so general. The sentence He went to the station can be used to describe actions as dissimilar as walking, running, going on a bicycle, going on a motor-bike, or going in a Rolls-Royce, to mention but a few, for go is quite unspecified as to the specification of the action. It simply has a meaning of directional motion. I've done the sitting-room can be used by the speaker to imply that he/she has dusted the sitting-room, cleaned it, painted it, laid the floor in it, emptied it, set alight to it, stolen the silver out of it, etc., depending on whether the speaker is a cleaner, a painter, a floor-layer, a furniture remover, a pyromaniac, or a thief. Despite this, the meaning of the item do is not itself indeterminate. The expression to do some object - to do the engine, to do the dishes, to do the cupboard - means to carry out some action involving that object; but what the action is quite unspecified (ibid:125-6).

2.4 Disjunction in the specification of the meaning of an item

Where the meaning involves an “either-or” statement of different interpretation possibilities. The meaning of an item involves the disjunction of different interpretations. Now it may seem as though this distinction between a disjunct specification within a single lexical item, and cases of ambiguity characterized by discrete lexical items remains quite unclear, particularly against such disjunct specification in the case of an item such as “run”, which is a central example of a word with multiple interpretations. Disjunction within a single lexical item leads to a prediction that where more than one of these disjunctions can be interpreted, then such interpretations should be possible simultaneously. This was not for most cases of multiple meaning. However, there are a few cases of lexical items which have this property. To see the validity of this type of characterization consider what is perhaps the central example:

- (1) The applicants for the job either had a first-class degree or some teaching experience.
- (2) All competitors must either be male or wear a one-piece swimming costume.

In each of these cases, the implication that or contributes to the sentence as a whole is that one of the two conjuncts is true. In (1), the applicants are implied to have had either a first-class degree but no teaching experience, or teaching experience but not a first-class degree, or

possibly both. In (2), the implication is similar. It would imply that a male competitor had either to wear nothing or a two-piece costume! On the contrary, the sentence allows the following types of competitor: male competitors(whether wearing a one-piece costume or not) and non-male competitors wearing a one-piece costume.

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