

Ambiguity: How Ibri College Students View it?

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Abstract

“Ambiguity” exists when some words, sentences, utterances, and certain usages have more than one meaning. The listeners become incapable of understanding the exact meaning the interlocutor aims to, but they can have their own understanding or guessing to uncover this type of riddles or puns. In order to have a sufficient and in depth comprehension of language usage, a questionnaire is distributed among (20) male and female students at Ibri College in the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the Sultanate of Oman. The researchers have found that ambiguity occurs when the speaker uses words that have more than one meaning which mislead and confuse the audience. Discussion, implications, and recommendations will be highlighted throughout the article.

Keywords: ambiguous, confusion, efficient, foreigners, literature, liver, structure, utterance,

Introduction

Ambiguity emerges out when interlocutors use utterances that have more than one meaning. The audience, on the other hand, do their best to reach the possible meaning of what they hear. The term **Ambiguity** covers a number of language elements: lexical, literary, structural, etc. Lexical ambiguity normally refers to two or more words that have the same form with meanings. Structural ambiguity results when the construction of a certain utterance has more than one syntactical structure. This paper discusses, in depth, the term “Ambiguity” and highlights different examples used in nowadays writings, readings, and conversations.

Literature Review

“Ambiguity, or fallacy of ambiguity is a word, phrase, or statement which contains more than one meaning. Ambiguous words or statements lead to vagueness and confusion, and shape the basis for instances of unintentional humor”. (Anonymous, (n.d.), Para. 1).

Using Ambiguity means a lot; it could serve as a sort of both stimulation and motivation in responding to some issue. Writers, speakers, lecturers, orators, etc. normally let their audience think, ponder, consider, and expect what to come. This is a useful way of sharing and caring. In

classrooms, teachers may use ambiguous constructions in order to see how students respond. Plays performed on the stage seem to be a good example of igniting the audience's feelings to expect what to come, especially at the end of the performance.

In speech or writing, however, ambiguity can be a useful tool. In your speech, you may want to use ambiguity to make your audience consider things for themselves. In a creative writing piece, you'll be dealing with some sort of conflict, climax, and resolution. Within that story arc lies the opportunity to be a bit ambiguous while setting the stage for the conclusion. (Kittelstad, (n.d), Para.2).

Ambiguity deals with ambiguous situations, but good readers or listeners are those who can guess the closest meaning of such utterances. All of this, mainly, depends on following the flow of the speech on one hand, and understanding the context thoroughly, on the other hand.

-Marcy got the bath ready for her daughter wearing a pink tutu.

Was Marcy wearing the tutu? Or was her daughter?

-Well, I've certainly never tasted chicken cooked that way before!

Was the chicken good or bad? (Kittelstad, (n.d), Para.4).

The above sentences are really confusing and misleading, as both choices are possible, but the only one who knows the exact answer, or meaning, is the speaker. However, some ambiguous cases depend on LOGIC; in that it depends on whether the context makes sense or not. Generally, nobody has ever seen a horse wearing clothes, pajamas, in particular, but might be in few situations like the circus. Take for example the following:

For instance, it is ambiguous to say "I rode a black horse in red pajamas," because it may lead us to think that the horse was wearing red pajamas. The sentence becomes clear when it is restructured as, "Wearing red pajamas, I rode a black horse". (Anonymous, (n.d.), Para. 1).

Ambiguity plays an important role in Literature and it is normally used on purpose so as for the audience to think, or speculate a certain thought.

When found in literature, ambiguity is sure to be intentional, forcing the reader to contemplate a central idea.

Thou **still** unravished bride of quietness...

-“Ode On a Grecian Urn,” John Keats

Does “still” mean “unmoving “or” not yet changed”? (Kittelstad, (n.d), Para.5).

In his play; Hamlet, Shakespeare gets into the inner part of the characters, especially Hamlet. The most famous utterance of his is “To be or not to be, that’s the question”, which has many ambiguous meanings: to kill or not to kill, to live or not to live, to commit suicide or not, etc., so all that has different meanings for the reader who finds it ambiguous to agree on ONE specific meaning. To take revenge is risky, but he thinks he has to do something to live, and let his father’s soul rest in peace.

Shakespeare’s continuous use of ambiguity throughout the play heightens our understanding of an individual’s struggle with a tortured psyche and emotional turmoil from the conflict of revenge in a changing world. The protagonist, Hamlet displays an ambiguously divided nature as his tradition dictates the necessity of avenging his father’s murder but his renaissance sensibility shrank from the idea in horror as illustrated through his acute inner anxieties and mental anguish. (Zhang, 2018, Para. 1).

Ambiguity takes many forms; lexical which deals with words, and structural that concentrates on the syntactic usage of a certain construction. Sometimes, the lexical usage and **PUN** have things in common, or are interchangeably used. The word “light” could have two, or more meanings; the opposite of “heavy “, and the electric lamp. Structural ambiguity is seen in whole sentences with extreme focus on grammar.

Structural ambiguity occurs when the misperception is due to the grammatical structure of the sentence... Semantic ambiguity occurs when more than one meaning can be assigned to a word. This is common in the business world; how a word is used by one group has a different meaning for another group. Consider the example:

To place an order, a new customer must complete an application.

The term ‘new’, ‘order’, ‘customer’, and ‘application’ are open to interpretation. (Cole, (n.d.) Paras. 3-4).

Writers and speakers should be as plain and clear as possible when addressing their audience. Confusing others is not a merit, unless that is done for certain purposes. Here are some hints to follow in order to reduce, or eliminate confusion or misunderstanding, particularly in surveys:

“In order to eliminate confusion in your survey questions you should:

-be direct

-avoid ambiguous questions

-ask one clear topic at a time... (DeFranzo, (n.d.), Para. 3).

Though the term “Ambiguity” means “Vagueness”, there is a legitimate reason beyond using it. The speaker needs to send so much information, or messages in a short time and less words and expressions, on one hand, and the receiver wishes to get as much explanation and information in a short time on the other hand. Both - speaker and listener- do their best to get what they need. Could it be “Selfishness”? Might be?

To understand why ambiguity makes a language more efficient rather less so, think about the competing desires of the speaker and the listener. The speaker is conveying as much as possible with fewest possible words, while the listener is aiming to get a complete and specific understanding of what the speaker is trying to say. (Finn, 2012, Para. 9).

A number of speakers tend to be clear while delivering speeches, or giving lectures, by referring to the word “**MEAN**”. This happens when talking about legal paraphrasing of some articles and paragraphs, or any important issue that has important details. The word **Mean** might be substituted by the expression “in other words”, which clarifies the utterances being used.

For somewhat ironic example of ambiguity, consider the word “mean”. “It can mean, of course, to indicate or signify, but it can also refer to an intention or purpose (“I meant to go to the store”); something offensive or nasty; or the mathematical average of a set of numbers. Adding an ‘s ‘ introduces even more potential definitions: an instrument or method(“a means to an end”), or financial resources(“to live within one’s means”).(Finn, 2012, Para. 5).

In the above word “Mean” has more than two meanings that depend on the context. However, native English speakers, normally, do not get misled or confused when they hear the word “Mean” because they are so familiar with it. The ones who suffer, to some extent, in getting that clear are normally the learners of English, especially beginners. Do machines, like computers, mislead users by giving ambiguous words or expressions?

In fact, depending on certain machines in doing humans’ work has, sometimes, negative results. Computers are not working by themselves; they depend on what people provide them with, so they may give contrary words to what is required, especially in computational analysis and machine translation. (Clare, 2013).

Ambiguous words are helpful, because they do not require us to come out and criticize other people forcefully when we want to give them bad news. Instead, we can soften the blow and make the conversation go more smoothly by giving the hearer some wiggle room in how they interpret what is said. (Markman, 2014, para.15).

Grammar is the backbone of any language; it should be clear, exact, and to the point when used, but sometimes ambiguous usages occur. If the antecedent is clear, the pronoun, however, should be clear. The following sentence has no vagueness or ambiguity:

Mary met her brother in the mall, then she left.

The pronoun “She” refers to the antecedent *Mary* with no vagueness. Ambiguity occurs in sentences like:

*Mary chatted with **Alice** near the park, then **she** took the bus home.*

Who took the bus home? Mary, or Alice? An ambiguous construction normally occurs when more antecedents exist.

Some arenas need understanding people who avoid using ambiguous usages, and absorb all vague utterances that might hinder the specific meaning of words and expressions. “Those with a strong ability to deal with ambiguity are often described as adaptable, flexible, and comfortable with uncertainty”. (Osborn, 2018, Para. 2). The ultimate priority in any issue is the ability to absorb unclear ambiguous, and vague words that have many meanings. Leaders almost always emerge throughout circumstances in order to help team members comprehend gloomy issues.

The benefits of having leaders who are ambiguity absorbers include allowing team members to focus attention on the areas where they shine and maintain focus on their areas’ top priorities. The virus will dissipate and we will go back to a still volatile but less ambiguous world at some point in the not too distant future. When that happens, these practices to absorb ambiguity will continue to distinguish you from others. But in the uncertain times we’re facing now, teams need ambiguity absorbing leaders who create the conditions for shared action. (Smallwood, 2020, Para. 9).

Questionnaire Analysis

In order to gather more information about the topic, a survey was conducted among (14) Foundation Program students, enrolled at Ibri College of Applied Sciences. The study is conducted by means of a questionnaire that consists of 10 items. The first part contains 5 (agree/disagree) questions, while the second one consists of 5 (yes/ no) questions.

The analysis for the first part of the questionnaire, (agree/disagree) questions, shows that (92.9%) of the participants agree that ambiguity occurs when speakers use words that have more than one meaning. It has been found that the teaching of academic vocabulary can be difficult, according to research in applied linguistics (Hyland & Tse, 2007, as cited in Kaplan, Rogness, & Fisher, 2014), since each discipline produces field-specific definitions for widely used terms. This is an important issue as misunderstanding some words may hinder students’ comprehension of certain topics. This is supported by what has been found in this study as (64.3%) of the respondents agree that ambiguity hinders the exact meaning of a certain word, sentence, utterance, etc. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to explain the exact meaning of key terminologies to enable students to develop strong understanding of these words. In

addition, most of the participants (92.9%) believe that some people, particularly politicians and business people, use ambiguity to avoid answering direct questions. It is also noticed that the majority of students (92.9%) think that in classrooms, teachers have to teach, explain, discuss, the term **Ambiguity** with authentic example.

Moreover, with regard to the second set of the questions, (yes, no) questions, the results are as follows: A significant percentage of the respondents, (**100%**) agree that ambiguity, sometimes, is used in creating funny issues, or solving riddles and puzzles. Furthermore, (71.4%) of the participants think that the following sentence "The hunter killed a fox in blue jeans is ambiguous, while 28.6% of them think it is not. Finally, (85.7%) of the students believe that **only** the speaker him/herself knows the exact meaning of what he says.

1. Ambiguity occurs when speakers use words that have more than one meaning. يحدث الغموض في

الجملة حينما يكون هناك أكثر من معنى، فيلتبس الأمر على القارئ.

14 responses

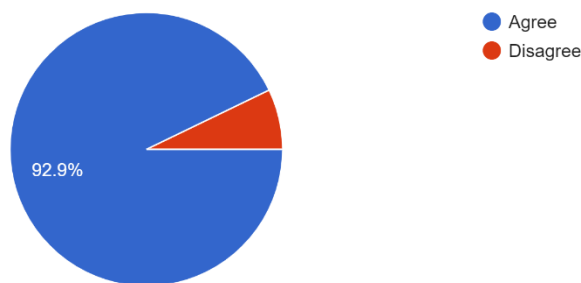


Figure 1

2. Some people, particularly politicians and business people, use ambiguity to avoid answering direct questions. بعض الناس، خاصة أهل السياسة وأرباب الأعمال، يستخدمون الأجوبة الغامضة لتفادي قول الحقيقة.

14 responses

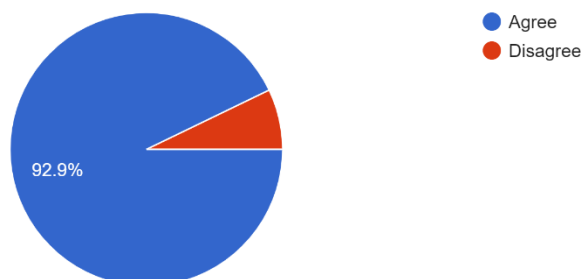


Figure 2

3. The speaker tends to use ambiguity when he wants to send much information with less words.

يستخدم الشخص الجمل الغامضة حينما يريد ان يبعث بمعلومات كثيرة بجمل قصيرة

14 responses

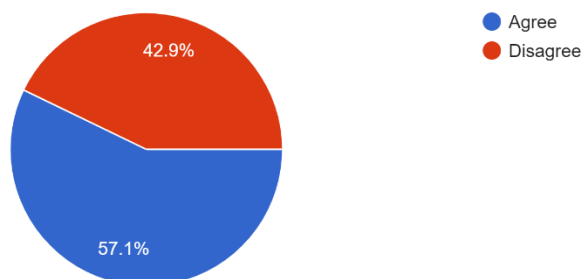


Figure 3

4. In classrooms, teachers have to teach, explain, discuss, the term Ambiguity with authentic

example. أثناء اعطاء المحاضرة، يتوجب على المدرس ان يعلم الط...م ويناقش معهم مصطلح الغموض عن طريق ضرب امثلة واقعية وملموسة.

14 responses

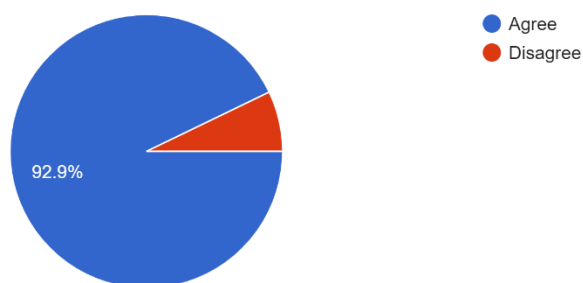


Figure 4

5. Semantic and structural ambiguity are misleading and difficult to understand. المعنى والغموض.

مصطلحان لا يعطيان الاجابة الحقيقية للجملة وهما خادعان للقارئ

14 responses

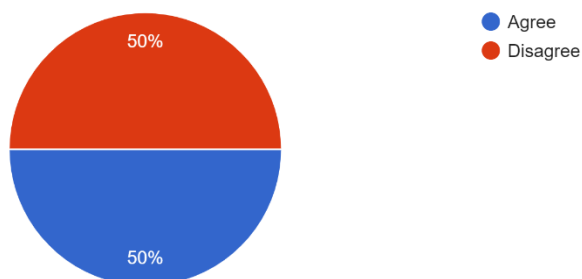


Figure 5

6. Ambiguity, sometimes, is used in creating funny issues, or solving riddles and puzzles. يستخدم

الغموض احيانا في المواقف الهزلية، او لحل بعض الالغاز

14 responses

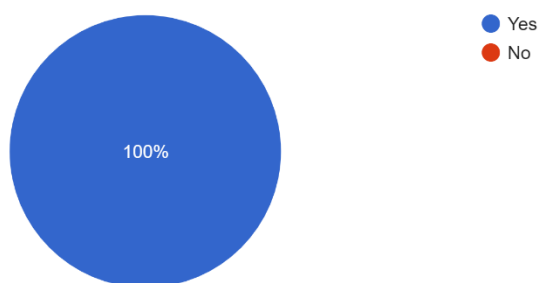


Figure 6

7. The following sentence is clear and has no ambiguity: All people respect Mary because she helps others. الجملة التالية واضحة ولا غموض فيها: الجميع يحترم ماري لأنها تساعد الكل.

14 responses

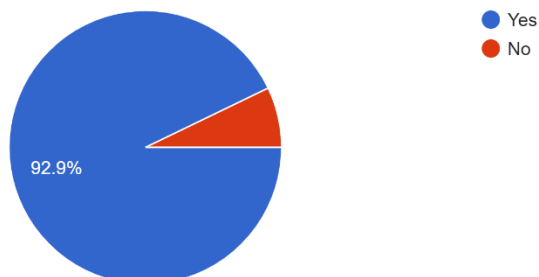


Figure 7

8. Ambiguity hinders the exact meaning of a certain word, sentence, utterance, etc. ان الغموض في الجملة الواحدة لا يعطي المعنى المقصود

14 responses

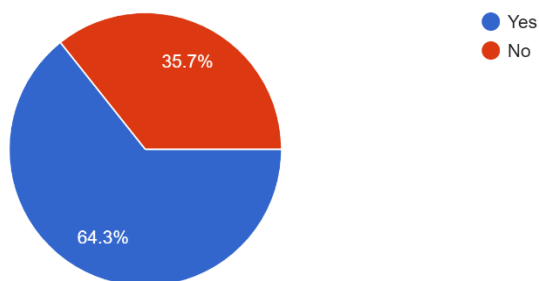


Figure 8

9. The following sentence is ambiguous: "The hunter killed a fox in blue jeans. الجملة التالية غامضة والمعنى غير واضح تماماً لأننا لا نستطيع ان نعرف من يلبس الجينز الازرق، هل هو الصياد ام الثعلب

14 responses

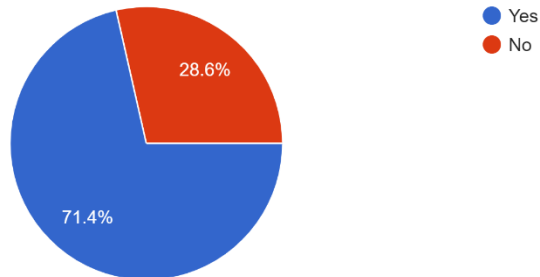


Figure 9

10. Only the speaker him/herself knows the exact meaning of what he says. فقط المتكلم هو الذي يعرف. المعنى المقصود حين يتكلم

14 responses

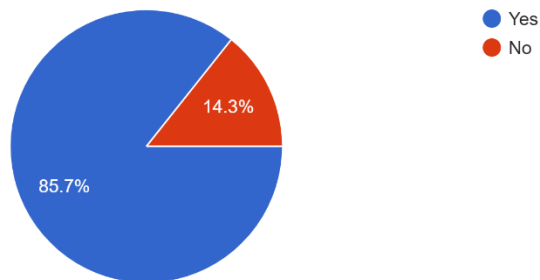


Figure 10

Recommendations

-using ambiguous utterances leads to confusion and misunderstanding; utmost care should be taken.

-ambiguity, sometimes, is vital to escape from giving direct answers. Normally politicians follow this policy.

-the audience should be aware of the different usages of Ambiguity and vagueness; ambiguity refers to a double meaning of a certain utterance, while Vagueness refers to an utterance which the audience fails to understand; unclear and problematic.

-semantic ambiguity could be used in the field of business when more than one meaning are assigned to a certain word, but this usage almost always is to trick and mislead customers.

-ambiguity, sometimes, is used in creating funny issues, or solving riddles and puzzles.

-creative writers tend to use a direct, or indirect sort of ambiguity, especially in preparing the audience for the concluding phase.

Conclusion

Though ambiguity, sometimes, leads to vagueness, it plays a vital role in saving interlocutor's, politicians in particular, replies to certain question. They might give evasive answers to mislead a certain audience. Philosophers, on the other hand, follow specific utterances to have their own way in dealing with the audience in certain domains, while linguists, are the ones who exert efforts and do their best to explain all language elements and make them palatable for students in classrooms, or the public. Care should be taken when speakers, or writers use the term "Ambiguity"; failure and confusion in understanding the proper meaning might cause troubles and hatred for the audience.

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About the researchers

Dr Mohammed Al Ghafri is a full-time lecturer of English at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences at the English Department at Ibri College of Applied Sciences- Oman. He holds a PhD in teaching English (TESOL) from the University of Leeds where he also got his MA in Education. He has had different positions: assistant dean, English supervisor and head of follow- up and training in Oman. His research interest is classroom interaction and participation, identity, classroom context and teachers' supervision.

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Mr. Younes Audeh is the head of the translation committee and a lecturer at the Department of English at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibri College of Applied Sciences - the Sultanate of Oman. He is an M.A. holder in Applied Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania- USA. He has been teaching English as an ESL/EFL for a long time. He has taught at a number of colleges and universities in different countries: Jordan, Kingdom of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and the Sultanate of Oman. His research interest is —academic writing.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Hello all,

The following is a questionnaire that highlights an important issue; Ambiguity. It is conducted for one group in the Foundation Year Programme (24 male & female students), at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibri College/ Sultanate of Oman. This questionnaire consists of two kinds of questions (Agree/Disagree / Yes/ No). This study is just for pure academic purposes. Your cooperation is appreciated. You don't have to mention your names.

Ambiguity

Agree, or disagree?

1. Ambiguity occurs when speakers use words that have more than one meaning.

A. Agree

B. Disagree

2. Some people, particularly politicians and business people, use ambiguity to avoid answering direct questions.

A. Agree

B. Disagree

3. The speaker tends to use ambiguity when he wants to send much information with less words.

A. Agree

B. Disagree

4. In classrooms, teachers have to teach, explain, discuss, the term Ambiguity with authentic example.

A. Agree

B. Disagree

5. Semantic and structural ambiguity are misleading and difficult to understand.

A. Agree

B. Disagree

Yes, No questions

6. Ambiguity, sometimes, is used in creating funny issues, or solving riddles and puzzles

A. Yes

B. No

7. The following sentence is clear and has no ambiguity:

All people respect Mary because she helps others.

A. Yes

B. No

8. Ambiguity hinders the exact meaning of a certain word, sentence, utterance, etc.

A. Yes

B. No

9. The following sentence is ambiguous:

“The hunter killed a fox in blue jeans.

A. Yes

B. No

10. Only the speaker him/herself knows the exact meaning of what he says.

A. Yes

B. No