The Effect oF Linguistic Ambiguity on English Utterance Comprehension

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1.1 Introduction

There seems to be a consensus among linguists in general and psycholinguists in particular upon the effect of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects on the choice of the appropriate interpretation of English ambiguous utterances . Native as well as non-native speakers of English are equally subject to the effect of this phenomenon , though in different degrees (Foss , 1970 ;Foss and Jenkins , 1973) .

Ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon that refers to the case when a single utterance is understood in two or more ways or to an utterance that can have more than one meaning . Hartman , (1972) asserts the same fact when he states that a construction is said to be ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be assigned to it . The sentence .

1- I saw her in the street .
can be either associated to " I saw her when I was in the street " or " I saw her when she was in the street "

Thus , the above example a stisfies the condition to be ambiguous owing to the fact that it can be interpreted in two ways .

This study is conducted to provide an account of the effect of different types of linguistic ambiguity on the comprehension of some Iraqi postgraduates of English when dealing with some ambiguous utterances .

1.2 The Term " Ambiguity "

As a term , ambiguity is used to refer to " a word or other expressions whose meaning is doubtful , uncertain , capable of being misunderstood or of being understood in more than once " (Shaw , 1970 : 274") .

Another definition is provided by Crystal (1985 : 15) as he states that the term "ambiguity" refers to "a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning " As for the ambiguity of words , many examples can be found such as :
bank : 1- edge of a river
       2-financial institution .
can : 1- an auxiliary verb .
      2- a metal container .
      3- put into a can .
Table: 1-four-leg piece of furniture
       2- diagram showing numbers , items , time , etc .

Examples of ambiguous sentences and expression can be easily found in the English language as well , e.g.

2- Visiting relatives can be tiring .

A- (To visit one's relative) can be tiring .

B- (When relatives visit someone) can be tiring .

3- old men and women visited the museum .

A- Both , men and women are old .

B- (Old men) and women , i.e. only men are old .

4- This is a beautiful girl's dress .

A- The girl who is beautiful has a dress .

B- The dress of the girl is beautiful .

The notion of "multiple meanings" of ambiguous constructions is referred to by all linguists who deal with this phenomenon (Cf. Foss , 1970 , : 966 ; Mackay , 1966 : 427 ; Simpson , 1981 : 120 ; Radford , 1988 : 66 , and others) .

Another common feature in the treatment of this phenomenon carried out by the above - mentioned authors is to set a distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic ambiguity . The former refers to the structures that are ambiguous due to the failure of the linguistic markers or to the signals which manifest the meaning intended . Such type of ambiguity

can be avoided if one sets clear the syntactic , semantic , and phonological relationships among the units of the sentence . The paraphrase of the ambiguous sentences above is a good example . The second type , i.e. non-linguistic ambiguity relates to those ambiguous constructions owing to the inadequacy of the paralinguistic markers which are supposed , to accompany the utterance delivered . In such a case an analyst has nothing to comment on syntactic , semantic or phonological factors but on the paralingustic signals required . Furthermore , lingustic ambiguity can be illuminated in face-to-face communication whereas in non-linguistic ambiguity the paralinguistic elements which can disambiguate the utterance are superimosed on the utterance involved . Consider the following example :

5- The train is long .

When the above sentence is uttered at a railway station where a bride is waiting , it will be ambiguous since the hearer doesn,t know whether the speaker means the train of passangers or the part of the dress which lies behind the wearer . But if the speaker points to the bridal gown while uttering the same sentence , the sentence will be non-ambiguous . Thus , pointing has the role of disambiguating the utterance .

Ullman (1969 : 55) notes that a confusion might happen if an

utterance is not accompanied by paralinguistic signals . To elucidate this , he gives an example . A little girle was asked by her mother whether the doll she was holding was her "son" . To answer the question , the little girl went to the window and pointed to the sky saying , "That is my son" . It is abvious that the ambiguity arises since the mother had not pointed to her girl,s doll when she asked her question .

In spite of what has been mentioned , linguists seem to agree that there is no clear-cut between linguistic and non-linguistic ambiguous constructions . For this reason , many linguists and scholars such as (Empson , 1957 ; Palmer , 1976 ; Fakhry , 1988) deal with this phenomenon in terms of "types of ambiguity" since they talk about ambiguities rather than about ambiguity alone . As this study is mainly concerned with linguistic ambiguity , the following section will only deal with the micro types of this broad class .

1.3 Types of Linguistic Ambiguity

It is a well-known fact that all grammatical components are , in one way or another , subject to this phenomenon . Thus , it seems difficult to speak about a certain type of ambiguity without making any reference to other types . However , most linguists seem to agree to the classifaction that comprises the phonological , morphological and syntactic ambiguities .

In order to save as much space as possible , the above types are going to be discussed very briefly :

1- Phonological Ambiguity .

Since this type of ambiguity refers to the spoken language , it will be out of the scope of this study which is only concerned with the analysis of the written language . Never-theless , the writer finds it useful to give the reader a general idea about this type of ambiguity which emanates from words or utterances that have similar pronuncation but different graphic forms and different meanings . Words like "night rate" and "nitrate" "bear" and "bare" , "weak" and "week" , "tail" and "tale" , "whole" and "hole" , "meat" and "meet" , etc . are ambiguous when they are said alone . This type of ambiguity can be easily solved by using the above words in their right contexts or the speaker can be asked to solve the ambiguity .

2- Morphological Ambiguity

In morphological ambiguous constructions it is the word that causes the ambiguity . This is emanated from the fact that each word in the construction has its own meaning corresponding to the whole meaning of that construction . Thus , ambiguity of this kind results from either the use of certain words that may refer to more than one word class or a single word that is liable to be

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interpreted in more than one lexical meaning . An example of the first type is :

6- They are hanging curtains .
The interpretation of the above sentence indicates that "hanging" refers to two word classes , i.e. as an adjective modifying the noun "curtains" or as the main verb of the sentence .

An example of the second case of this type of the ambiguity is :

7- She cannot bear children .
which either means .

a- She cannot give brith to chlidren .

or

b- She cannot tolerate children Thus , the two meanings of the word "bear" are responsible for the ambiguity of (7) .

3- Syntactic Anbiguity .

In syntactic / structural ambiguity , it is the structure of the sentence that permits more than one interpretation rather than the words of the sentence . Hence , to say that a sentence is structurally ambiguous means that the arrangement of words is the cause of the ambiguity , i.e. it is difficult for the reader or listener to assign which word in a sentence goes with which , e.g.

8- The shooting of the hunters was terrible .

Here , the sentence does not reveal whether .

a- The way in which the hunter shot something was terrible or

b- The fact that the hunters were shot was terrible .

Syntactic ambiguity may arise from the following :

1- Time-tense relationship :

9- You cut the meat .

10- You put it there .

2- Noun phrase modification :

11-Sally is an English teacher

12- Look at the French Lecturer .

3- Noun premodification :

13- That is the burning place I told you about .

14- Listen to that religious leader .

4- Gentive constructions :

15- The dull boy's knife is there .

16- that is John's picture .

5- Noun postmodification :

17- The girl in the garden that needs water .....

18- The student from the college I mentioned .... .

6- Verb phrase modification :

19- The girl who sat with children sometimes sang songs .

20 He decided on the boat .

7- Multi-modification :

21- They cleaned the vase in the store .

22- She found a book on the street .

8- Coordination :

23- I like ice-cream and cake .

24- Suha likes Basma more than Noor .

Mackay and Bever (1967) have differentiated between surface structure and deep structure ambiguities . Number (25) below is an example of the first type :

25- They kept the care in the garage .

One reading of the above sentence considers the prepositional phrase "in the garage" as a modifier of the noun "the car" . Thus , the sentence will be interpreted as :

a- They kept the car which was in the garage .

The second reading considers "in the garage" as a separate constituent of the verb phrase , so it will be interpreted as :

b- It was in the garage that they kept the car .

Hence , there can be two possible groupings of the units of the same sentence as in

25- They [(kept) (the car)] [(in the garage)] .

Since the ambiguity of the above sentence results from two different surface structures associated with the same string of words , such ambiguity is called surface structure ambiguity .

Sentence (26) below is an example of deep structure ambiguity:

26- The elephant is ready to lift.

The two possible readings of the above sentence are :

a- the elephant is ready to lift something .

b- Someone has just prepared the elephant to lift it somewhere .

It is obvious that this type of ambiguity is different from the above-discussed type since it derives from an alternation in the functional relations between the sentence constituents and their semantic roles . So , (a) and (b) are derived from different deep structures .

1.4 Theories of Ambiguity Comprehension

Many hypotheses have been proposed to account for the effect of ambiguity on comprehension . The most three common of these hypotheses and theories are discussed below .

1.4.1 The Garden Path Theory

The flourish of this theory (sometimes referred to as one meaning theory) is associated with the work of Garrett (1976) .

The essence of this theory involves the claim that people usually compute only one reading and structure for the ambiguous construction at a time . Usually , This interpretation is mantained unless it is not confirmed by subsequent input . In such cases , readers/listeners abandon their first interpretation and go back to compute another meaning in the light of the new input .

One support of this theory is the observation that even though many everyday sentences are actually ambiguous , we are rarely aware of this fact . Another support for this hypothesis comes

from two studies ; the first one was conducted by Foss et. al (1968) and the other was carried out by Garey et. al (1970) . Both studies try to measure the effect of ambiguity on reaction time . It was found that the verification time required for ambiguous sentences was not slower than the verification time for non-ambiguous ones provided that the picture shown demonstrated the meaning expected . It was also found that when the picture shown represented the unexpected meaning , verification time was longer than that required for the corresponding control sentence .

1.4.2 Perceptual Support Theory

The one meaning theory stated above has been challenged by various experimental data . Mackay (1966) , for instance , has found evidence that the presence of ambiguity in a sentence slowed the processing of that sentence . His subjects were presented with sentence fragments typed on index cards . The task was to think of a relevant completion for each fragment and then say the entire sentence aloud . When the task was over , Mackay found that though the subjects were unaware of the ambiguity while completing sentences , they take more time to complete ambiguous sentences than unambiguous ones . Another finding was the degree of difficulty in completing ambiguous sentences . This is due to the liguistic level at which the ambiguity takes place . Sentences of two ambiguous constituents are more difficult to complete than those containing only one ambiguous constituent . Still , when the ambiguous constituents are of different types , the sentences that contain them are harder to complete than those having two ambiguous constituents of the same type .

1.4.3 Perceptual Suppression Theory

The underlying principles of this theory are cleary identified by Mackay (1971 : 86) stating .

> The basic assumption of the theory is that in order to perceive one meaning of an be suppressed and the time to suppress a meaning varies with the salience of the meaning in the context of a sentence .

This means that the two possible meaning of an ambiguous sentence copmete with each other to pop out . The meaning that wins is the one that is enhanced by the surrounding context . This implies that the copmetition of the two meanings will delay the processing time and a state of "no meaning" will be created until one of the meanings is chosen .

1.4.4 Choice Point Decision Hypothesis

This hypothesis is presented by Foss and Jenkins (1973) as an alternative for the "one meaning theory" (1.4.1) . They explain their viewpoint as follows :

Both (all) interpretations of an ambiguous word (sentence) are always activated and transferres to the working memory . A decisionis then made as to which meaning best fits with prior (or subsequent) contexts In this case , then , prior context has its disambiguating effect after the ambiguous item occurs . Hence , the choice point for deciding about the appropriate meaning occurs at or after the ambiguity , not prior to it .

In order to make a compromise among the hypotheses stated above , Bever , Garrett , and Hurting (1973) state their argument as follows :

During an ambiguous clause , both meaning are processed , but immediately after the clause is over , it is recorded with only one meaning retained .

1.5 The Experiment and the Test
In order to achieve the obectives of the study , an experiment was conducted to evaluate the responses of fifteen postgraduate students of English to a three-question test .

The first part of the test is set to measure the ability of the subjects to point out ambiguous from non-ambiguous sentences (App.1) . This part consists of thirty three items to which the subjects have to provide their responses within fifty-minute session .

The second part , based on the pilot carry-over of the first part , seeks to identify the effect of various type of ambiguous sentences set in isolation on the amount of the subjects, recall of the same sentences (App.2) . In other words , the aim of this part of the test is to find out if there is one-to-one correspondence part between the type of ambiguity coded in a particular item and the amount of recall revealed by the respone of a non-native speaker of English .

At its third part , the test tands to examine the subjects, "active strategies" when asked to solved the ambiguity of the sentences (App.3) . The same types of ambiguity are introduced in this part to find out if there is any relationship between the type of ambiguity and the strategy employed by the subjects to solve it .

1.5.1 Subjects of the Test
Fifteen postgraduate students of English have been chosen as the subjects of the experiment . Variables such as linguistic background , age , sex , vocabulary storage , amount of foreign language instruction , etc . hve been highly controlled in order to achieve a high degree of test validity . All subjects are graduates of English departments at Bghdad , Mosul and

Al-Mustansiriyah Universities . Arabic is the mother tongue of all the subjects . The choice of the subjects was at random .

1.5.2 The Battery of the Test

When constructing the items of the test , the writer tries to deal with all types of linguistic ambiguity . The objective behind this is to find out the degree of difficulty faced by the subjects when dealing with each type . Based on this assumption , the analysis of the subjects' performance is carried out with reference to groups of ambiguous sentences manifesting the same type of ambiguity .

1.5.3 The Objectives of the Test

The test aims at at providing answers to the following questions :

1- To what extent does the linguistic ambiguity affect the processing of an ambiguous utterance ?

2- Do non-native speakers of English realize ambiguity and if so , do they compute all the possible interpretations of any ambiguous construction ?

3- What is the relationship between the types of ambiguity and the capability of the subject to understand them ?

4- What are the strategies adopted by the subjects to solve ambiguous utterances ?

1.5.4 Result Analysis

In part 1 of the test , only twenty three sentences are ambiguous . The other nonambiguous sentences are included as distractors . The table below shows the number of subjects that are able to find out the ambiguity of the items and those who fail to realize that ambiguity .

Table 1

Number of ambiguous items	Number of subjects who are able to find out ambiguity	Number of subjects who are unable to find out ambiguity
1	9	6
4	3	12
5	6	9
8	0	15
10	15	0
12	12	3
13	9	6
15	0	15
16	15	0
19	6	9
20	6	9
22	6	9
24	6	9
25	6	9
26	9	6
27	6	9
29	6	9
30	6	9
32	6	9
34	3	12

Table (2) below elucidates the subjects, responses classified according to the various types of ambiguity :

Type of ambiguity	Number of subjects realizing such type of ambiguity
1- Lexical/morphological ambiguity. 2- Syntactic ambiguity.	63 96 (classified as follows)

Type of syntactic ambiguity	Number of subjects realizing such type of ambiguity
a- Genitive construction. b- Verb-phrase modification. c- Multi-modification. d- Coordination. e- Time-tense relationship. f- Noun-phrase post modification.	24 27 15 12 12 6

Table 2

With reference to the two tables above , the following observations are inferred :

1- Many ambiguous items have not been recognized by the subjects . This validaets the hypothesis stated by the Garden Path Theory (see p.7) . As table(1) shows that none of the subjects is able to recognize the ambiguity in items 5 and 10 . Dealing with the other items , the subjects show different degrees of awareness . While all the subjects are aware of the ambiguity in items 7 , 12 and twelve of them are able to realize the ambiguity in items 8 and 25 , only three of the subjects can recognize that items 3 , 24 and 34 are ambiguous .

2- The range of awareness of ambiguity stated above can be attributed to the different type of ambiguity which the items manifest . This is clearly designated by the numbers set opposite each item in table (2) . This observation is also supported by the results got from part One of the test . In table one , for instance , items 7 , 12 and 13 appear to be the most evident for all the sample to identify . This proves that these items are the most problematic though they belong to different types of ambiguity , namely , lexical ,

genitive , and verb-phrase modification successively .

3- Throughout the whole items , lexical ambiguous items prove to be the easiest to identify by the subjects (see table 2) . This is in line with the hypothesis stated previously , i.e. lexical ambiguity is more problematic for non-native speakers of English than to native speakers owing to the fact that the former do not possess the same intuition of the latter .

4- Out of what has been said and the results mentioned in table 1 and 2 , there seems to be a sort of correlation between the type of ambiguity and the subjects' competence to identify it . Table 2 shows the hierarchy of such correlation begining from lexical ambiguity and ending into noun-phrase post-modification .

Part 2

Though intentionally the subjects in this part are informed that the items they are dealing with are ambiguous , the majority of them do not show their ability to find out such ambiguity . This indicates that they either lack the intuition of finding out ambiguous constructions or they are incompetent in using and comprehending the English language to give all the probable interpretations . Sometimes , the subjects have tried to give more than one interpretation but actually they state the same meaning though using different paraphrases . A good example of this case is item 6 :

Item 6 : Raja thinks that she failed in the exam .

When dealing with this item , ten of the subjects , i.e. 75% , provide the following interpretations :
a- "Raja suspects that she failed in the exam" .
b- "Raja did not answer well in the exam , so she thinks that she failed" .
c- " Raja thinks that she failed when she was in the exam" .

Another example illustrating this fact is item 9 :

Item 9 : What disturbed john is being disregarded by his friends . The following interpretations are given by nine subjects :
a- " Being disregarded by his friends disturbed john" .
b- "john is disturbed because he is diregarded by his friends" .

What has been stated above elucidates the fact that the subjects fail to provide the proper interpretations for the majority of the items in Part 2 because in their competence there is only one meaning which is brought out when the subjects are forced to interpret such ambiguous items . This , in fact , supports the hypothesis provided by the Garden Path Theory .

The analysis of the subjects, responses in Part 2 shows that out of the 14 items , eleven have been correctly interpreted by a few subjects . These items are : 2 , 3 , 4 , 5 , 7 , 8 , 9 , 10 , 11 , 12 and 14 . In terms of the types of ambiguity , these items are grouped as follows :

Lexical ambiguity : items 2 and 10 .

Genitive ambiguity : item 3 .

Word Class ambiguity : item 4

Noun phrase modification ambiguity : items 5 , 11 and 14 .

Co-ordination ambiguity : item 7 .

Verb phrase modification : items 8 , 9 and 12 .

The numbers of the subjects who are capable of interpreting each type of ambiguity properly are illustrated in the following table :

Number and type of ambiguos items	Number of subjects interpreting properly
2- lexical .	7
3- genitive .	5
4- word class .	9
5- non phrase modification .	2
7- co-ordination .	11
8- verb phrase modification .	3
9- verb phrase modification .	1
10- lexical .	8
11- noun phrase modification .	2
12- verb phrase modification .	6
14- noun phrase modification .	7

Table 3

which emanates from the above table is that syntactic ambiguity seems to be more difficult for the subjects to interpret than lexical ambiguity . This might be attributed to the syntactic relationships among the constituents of the ambiguous constructions which can hardly be captured by non-native speakers of English . In the case of lexical ambiguity , the subjects have to focus on individual elements which cause ambiguity .

Part 3

In this part , the subjects are informed that all the items included in this part are ambiguous and thus they are to be revised in a way or another to remove their ambiguity . In other words , the task of the subjects is to locate where the ambiguity lies and then to choose the route they find suitable to ambiguity resolving

It is worth mentioning that most of the subjects have made serious attempts to disambiguate the items of this part though they choose the simplest routes in doing that . This leads to the fact that people might pass ambiguous constructions as unambiguous unless they are informed of their ambiguity . This validates the hypothesis stated by the Garden Path Theory (Mackay , 1966 and Garrett , 1970) .

The other observation emanating from the subjects' responses analysis in this part is that there seems to be a wide-spread agreement among the subjects on the

way each item is revised .

This might be attributed to the relatively same opportunities to which the subjects have been exposed for learning English .

Concomitant with the above point , the writer finds the relatively similar interpretations given by the majority of the subjects as another evidence validating the Garden Path Theory hypothesis . It becomes obvious that when dealing with these items , there seems to be a sort of consensus among the subjects to give the same interpretation owing to the fact that they have been thinking of that very interpretation . This indicates that in the minds of the subjects there are no other alternative options .

1.6 Conclusion

Linguistic ambiguity of different types manifests itself as a hinderance in the way of English utterances comprehension . It has been proved by this piece of work that this linguistic phenomenon exerts a subtle influence on Iraqi learners of English even post graduate ones for the sake of English ambiguous utterances realization , interpretation and resolving .

The experimental work done by the writer shows a hierarchy of difficulty in accordance with each type of ambiguity . In this regard , lexical ambiguity proves to be the most problematic and hence

non-native speakers of English face some sort difficulty when asked to give all the intrepretations of a lexically ambiguous utterance .

The other fact emanating from this study is that the Garden Path Theory proves to be the most valid of all other theories for the explanation of the effect of ambiguity on sentence comprehension . It is evident that when non-native speakers of English come across ambiguous constructions , they cannot recognize them so owing to the fact that in their minds , there is only one interpretation .

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Part 1

Examine the following list of ambiguous and non-ambiguous item and if the item is ambiguous , write (am) opposite to its number , if not , write (non.am) :

1- He decided on the boat .

2- He decided to leave the hall .

3- They are eating apples .

4- They washed the car in the garage

5- Will you join us for dinner tomorrow ?

6- They washed themselves in the bath .

7- She cannot bear children .

8- The suit is light .

9- The dull boy,s knife is there.

10- I promise to phone you this night .

11- He could not understand the lesson .

12- That is John,s picture .

13- She answered the people who questioned her honestly .

14- She answered all the questions honestly .

15- The girl who sat with the children sometimes sang songs to them .

16- She found the book on the street .

17- Ahmed was the firt swimmer who reached the bank .

18- She can read one page per minute .

19- They cleaned the vase in the store .

20- I like ice-cream and cake.

21- He hit the blind man unexpectedly .

22- Bricks and stones make strong walls .

23- The girl whose dress is yllownis my sister .

24- It is difficult to find the right page .

25- Box Leaves today .

26- Jafar went to the bank .

27- They can finish .

28- Both Suha and Ahmed leave today .

29- We put it here .

30- You cut the meat .

31- This is a burning house .

32- The student from the college I mentioned is the family friend .

33- This is a reading passage.

34- They passed the port at minight .

Part 2 :

Examine the following ambiguous expression carefully and then write all the interpretations you can make for each :

1- Flying planes can be dangerous .

2- Thair is my old friend .

3- The love of God is appreciable .

4- They are cleaning machines

5- He is a criminal lawyer .

6- Raja thinks that she failed in the exam .

7- Old men and wemen attended the party .

8- Antonio likes bassanio more than lorenzo .

9- What disturbed John is being disregarded by his friends .

10- Thedetective looked hard .

11- He greeted me by my first name and handed me a letter but this does not surprise me .

12- I promised to meet the supervisor at seven o,oclock .

13- They shot the man with a pistol .

14- I met the German history teacher .

Part 3 :

The following are ambiguous expressions . Try to resolve the ambiguty in the way you like ;

1- They are moving a sidewalks .

2- Parking is restricted to customers only after midnight .

3- Sand looked at the table .

4- New car salesman .

5- The gils with the children who are laughing are nurses .

6- I can see the man from the upstairs flat .

7- The people who read my work frequently praise it .

8- The requirements of the courses which are listed will be typed .

9- George should find Isabella a good secretary ?

10- The horse is ready to ride.

11- There was one picture and one glass for everyone at the airport .

12- They called him a doctor.

13- The children moved round the tables each is adroned with flowers and candles .