

AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity (pronounced am-big-YOU-it-tee) is the presence of two or more possible meanings in a single passage. The word comes from a Latin term which means, "wandering about" and the adjective form of the word is *ambiguous*. Other terms used for ambiguity are *amphibologia*, *amphibolia*, and *semantic ambiguity*. In addition, ambiguity is sometimes regarded as a fallacy in which the same term is used in more than one way.

For example:

(1) Mahatma Gandhi's Statue.

Meaning 1 – Statue of Mahatma Gandhi.

Meaning 2 – The statue that is in possession of Mahatma Gandhi.

(2) Dr. Ambedkar's Book.

Meaning 1 – The book written by Dr. Ambedkar

Meaning 2 – The book written on the topic of Dr. Ambedkar.

Types of Ambiguity

In speech and writing, there are two basic types of ambiguity:

1. **Lexical ambiguity** is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word
2. **Syntactic ambiguity** is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single sentence or sequence of words

Examples and Observations

- "Brave men run in my family."
- "As I was leaving this morning, I said to myself, 'The last thing you must do is forget your speech.' And, sure enough, as I left the house this morning, the last thing I did was to forget my speech."
- "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed meeting your husband."
- "*We saw her duck* is a paraphrase of *We saw her lower her head* and of *We saw the duck belonging to her*, and these last two sentences are not paraphrases of each other.

Therefore, *We saw her duck* is ambiguous."

- "Thanks for dinner. I've never seen potatoes cooked like that before."

Ambiguity due to words:

Because

The word "*Because*" sometimes can be ambiguous.

For example:

'I didn't go to the party because Mary was there'

Meaning 1- Mary's presence dissuaded me from going.

Meaning 2- I went to sample the food.

Ambiguity due to Phrases:

For example:

I ran over the dog *crossing the square*.

Ambiguity due to Pun and Irony

"An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense: any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language... We call it ambiguous, I think, when we recognize that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading. If a pun is quite obvious it would not be called ambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling. But if an irony is calculated to deceive a section of its readers, I think it would ordinarily be called ambiguous."

References

Nordquist, Richard. "Definition and Examples of Ambiguity." ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/ambiguity-language-1692388](https://www.thoughtco.com/ambiguity-language-1692388).
<https://www.thoughtco.com/ambiguity-language-1692388> Access date: 27/04/2020.