

Utterance ambiguity as a speech strategy

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Abstract. The article outlines approaches to the phenomenon of ambiguity from various language perspectives. It states that ambiguity may serve a strategic purpose in the dialogical discourse with special focus on its pragmatic use. The article introduces interlocutors' speech strategies aimed to cause ambiguity. Also, the article argues that ambiguity can be exploited by the speaker and hearer for both cooperative and uncooperative purposes.

Keywords: *ambiguity, dialogical discourse, pragmatic strategy, utterance.*

Introduction. Over the last few decades the studies of communication in the area of pragmatics have greatly expanded and set up the question of communication efficiency and successfulness. Particularly, a number of the studies turn to the issue of clarity as a factor that makes a great contribution to the idea of smooth, cooperative communication. Such scholars as Grice [9, P. 41], Leech [10, P. 68], Weiser [14, P. 723] are among those who brought the issue of ambiguity out into the open. However, the question of ambiguity as a language phenomenon deserves further study.

Being an integral property of the language, ambiguity is based on the principle of the asymmetrical dualism of the linguistic sign formulated by Karcevskij [17, P. 85]. It suggests that a sign is a bilateral unit, represented by the signifier and the signified, i.e. the shape of the language unit and its ideational component that are inseparably connected, although their borders don't fully coincide. In other words, one and the same form can bear a number of meanings and one meaning can be conveyed by various forms, hence their language ambiguity.

Paradoxically, ambiguity is ambiguous between a large number of meanings. According to dictionaries ambiguity is: a) the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion [6]; b) a word or expression that can be understood in two or more possible ways [5]; c) a state of uncertainty [5]. Such terminological uncertainty may be put down to the multifacetedness of the phenomenon that intrigues different domains.

Ambiguity has long been of interest to philosophers who were particularly concerned with the veracity and unequivocalness of logical configurations embedded in natural language units. Back in the IV century B.C. Aristotle addressed the issue of ambiguity ranking it among logical fallacies and proved that ambiguity was to be used judiciously, otherwise it might cause confusion in communication. William Ockam [11, P. 34] suggested the principle known as 'Ockam's razor' stating that extra meanings should be eliminated since they are confusing, even though they might have a property to delineate a situation or an object in a better way.

In literature studies ambiguity is treated as an immanent property of fiction texts that stems from the discrepancy between a denotative and a connotative meaning. In other words, ambiguity arises as the reader assigns meanings to language units in the text that are different from their direct meanings in the way of denoting intended emotive shades of meanings. A similar

view has been proposed by Jakobson [18, P. 198], who linked emergence of ambiguity to the dominance of the poetic function over the referential one. Roughly speaking, when creating a poetic text the author tends to place a priority on the aesthetic aspect of the text, disregarding its referentiality. As a result, vagueness of the reference causes a split of the meanings, assigned by the author and reader of the text.

Ambiguity has also been a hot topic for quite a long time in the realm of semantics. It has been mainly viewed as a phenomenon that arises in discourse due to either word polysemy or ambiguous potential of a syntactic unit that may be subject to variable parsing, have a number of underlying syntactico-semantic relationships etc. This approach holds true, however it disregards that not only is ambiguity naturally inherent in language units but their meanings also multiply under the influence of extralinguistic factors.

The speech act theory provides a different explanation of ambiguity attributing it to co-existence of two or more equally possible illocutionary forces within one utterance. This concept was formulated by Leech, who recognized that illocutionary forces can be "poised on the uncertain boundary" [10, P. 24] and thus remain indeterminable even in the discourse. Another explanation of ambiguity given by Thomas [13, P. 36] is based on the discrepancy between 'what is said' and 'what is meant', meaning to say that asymmetry between the utterance form and its functional use intended by the speaker results in the mismatch between how the speaker and the hearer perceive the utterance illocutionary force.

Our overview of the theoretical background of ambiguity investigations proves that ambiguity is subject to comprehensive interdisciplinary research owing to its complex nature, although its functional role still remains open. That is to say, some scholars [3; 4; 5; 14; 18] try to countenance ambiguity, advocate its importance as a means of communicative effort economy and a powerful tool that enables the speaker to achieve a rhetorical effect, whereas others [2, 8] consider a multiplicity of meanings to be a hindrance that may result in a communicative failure, hence should be avoided. We adhere to the point of view that ambiguity is an important tool that helps the speaker and hearer to actualize their communicative intent in the discourse. The research of discursive use of ambiguous utterances within the frameworks of speech strategies constitutes the **aim** of this article.

Method and Materials. In our task to outline speech strategies of using ambiguous utterances, we find it

sensible to choose dialogical cinema discourse as the material for the research. The motivation behind the choice is that utterance ambiguity can be only identified by the feedback, provided by the hearer in the form of a reactive utterance. Such utterances either can explicate a range of utterance meanings inferred by the hearer or demonstrate discrepancy between the meaning intended by the speaker and that treated as relevant by the hearer. Therefore, structural peculiarities of the dialogical discourse, i.e. its being split into turns, alternately taken by the speaker and the hearer, allowed us to objectively identify utterances that subject to dubious understanding. Moreover, the fact that the research has been carried out on the material of cinema excerpts made utterance ambiguity more palpable, as the non-verbal component of the communicative interaction available in films highlights the asymmetry between the literal meaning and the intended one.

Results. As has been mentioned above, this paper regards ambiguity as a tool exploited by the speaker and hearer for fulfilling a particular communicative purpose. Having analyzed multiple instances of the ambiguity use a number of interlocutor's strategies are set up.

1. The speaker's strategies. Here belong:

1.1. Dodging the explicitness. This strategy has a lot to do with the speaker's unwillingness to speak out his/her mind, which manifests itself in incomplete information layout in an utterance. The research revealed that speakers resort to ambiguous utterances mostly when being reluctant to discuss personal issues:

(1) *Mrs Koothrappali: She told us you're spending all our money on your new girlfriend.*

Raj: I just got her a couple of things. She gives me things, too.

Dr Koothrappali: Yeah, yeah, I'm a gynaecologist. I know exactly what she gives you (The Big Bang Theory, episode 6, 11 min.).

By using the word *thing* Raj attempts to avoid revealing the fact that his girlfriend has a sexual relationship with him for money.

1.2. Self-defence. Speakers tend to obscure their intention to defend themselves against a probable negative hearer's response to the utterance, explicating an unacceptable intention. In other words, speakers avoid taking responsibility for their words by sheltering themselves behind a side meaning that coexists in the utterance along with what is actually meant by the speaker:

(2) *Salieri: Did my work please you?*

Mozart: I never knew that music like that was possible.

Salieri: Is it bad?

Mozart: No, no! One hears such sounds and what one can say but: Salieri! ("Amadeus").

According to the context, Salieri competed with Mozart, but never achieved such virtuosity as Mozart did. In the film, when asked how he feels about Salieri's music, Mozart gives an ambiguous answer which may be interpreted in two ways: he never knew that music could be so great OR so bad. In doing so, Mozart tells not only the truth about his disliking Salieri's musical works, but he also defends himself against his interlocutor's negative reaction, which might result in a communicative failure.

1.3. Checking the interlocutor for a cooperative

disposition. Speakers express themselves with ambiguity when it comes to committing impositive speech acts such as requests, suggestions or invitations. This being the case, ambiguity helps to mitigate the threatening of the hearer's face and estimate his/her readiness to accept the imposition. Technically, this strategy is brought into effect by using presequences that prefigure a particular sort of action. Their illocution ambiguity allows the speaker to orchestrate the discourse and take decisions as to the further communicative steps, depending on the interlocutor's response:

(3) *Chandler: Do you have anything planned for tonight?*

Rachel: Well...nothing special. Are you asking for the sake of it or you want to go out?

Chandler: Y'know what, I've got two tickets to tonight's Rangers game, you wanna come with me?

Rachel: Cute guys in little shorts? Sure (The Friends, episode 2, 15 min.).

Before inviting Rachel to the football match, Chandler asks her if she is free in the evening in order to estimate her inclination to go out anywhere and therefore the appropriateness of his invitation. Ambiguity of the communicative aim of Chandler's question forces Rachel to clarify the pre-conditions of posing this question, whether he asks about it out of idle curiosity or with a view to inviting her. Perceiving Rachel's reaction as a sign of interest and having made sure she has no plans, Chandler makes an invitation.

2. Hearer's strategies. Here belong:

2.1. Imitating misunderstanding. The hearer may take advantage of an ambiguous utterance produced by the speaker so as to suppress his/her intended perlocutionary effect. In the event that the hearer finds the speaker's communicative goal unacceptable, s/he may pretend that they fail to understand which of the existing utterance meanings is relevant in a particular context. By applying this strategy the hearer takes the leading role in assigning a favourable vector to the discourse, which would comply with his/her communicative expectations:

(4) *Chilton: Will you be in Baltimore overnight...? Because this can be quite a fun town, if you have the right guide.*

(Clarice tries, unsuccessfully, to hide her distaste for him and pretendingly fails to understand what he means).

Clarice: I'm sure it's a great town, Dr. Chilton, but my instructions are to talk to Lecter and report back this afternoon.

Chilton: (pause, sourly) I see. Let's make this quick, then. I'm busy (The Silence of the Lambs, 25 min.).

Chilton gives Clarice a hint at a date. Since Clarice feels distaste for her colleague, she exploits the ambiguity underlying his indirect invitation and pretends to have inferred just the literal meaning of his utterance – a mere question whether she has any time to spare, to which she gives a negative reply.

2.2. Turning a conversation into a joke. Ambiguity produced by the speaker can lay the foundation for the hearer's jokes. It is important to emphasize that the propositional content of the joke bears little communicative significance, whereas the very fact of telling it conveys a pragmatic meaning, namely exhibits the

hearer's attitude to the speaker or what s/he said. The use of this strategy necessitates great intellectual effort, as the hearer must be capable of identifying ambiguities and immediately utilize them for producing a joke.

(5) *Sheldon: Hello? Oh, Chancellor Morton, how are you, sir? Yes, I was expecting your call (aside) three years ago. I see. Wait. What happens if I choose not to give a speech? Uh-huh. And if I don't want to forfeit the award? Well, you've got that tied up in a neat little bow. All right. Thank you. (Hangs up) Problem.*

Leonard: What?

Sheldon: They expect me to give a speech at the banquet. I can't give a speech.

Howard: Well, no, you're mistaken. You give speeches all the time. What you can't do is shut up.

Sheldon: No, seriously, I'll have to give a public speech (The Big Bang Theory, episode 5, 15 min.).

Sheldon complains about his fear to give speeches, however Leonard disagrees with Sheldon, ironically saying that the only thing he does is give speeches, meaning to say that Sheldon is forever lecturing.

Conclusions. This research shows that ambiguous utterances serve a vital strategic purpose in dialogical interactions. Depending on the communicative situations, ambiguity may underlie both cooperative and uncooperative speech strategies used by the speaker and the hearer.

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Речевые стратегии употребления двусмысленных высказываний

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Аннотация. В статье изложены подходы к явлению двусмысленности с позиции разных наук. В статье утверждается, что двусмысленность может играть стратегическую роль в диалогическом дискурсе, следовательно, основное внимание уделено прагматическому аспекту двусмысленности. В статье представлен ряд речевых стратегий говорящего и слушающего, основанных на использовании двусмысленных высказываний. Также в статье продемонстрировано, что говорящий и слушающий могут использовать двусмысленность как в кооперативных, так и в некооперативных целях.

Ключевые слова: высказывание, двусмысленность, диалогический дискурс, тактика.