Ambiguity: Insight from the English of Unizik students

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Abstract

Ambiguity in language has been defined by Webster (1992:18) as "the quality of having more than one meaning; an idea, statement or expression capable of being understood in more than one sense". Ambiguity could be structural or lexical. Ambiguity in terms of structure would involve the ability of that structure to be assigned to two or more phrase markers. When a lexical item can be assigned two or more interpretations, it means that the lexical item is ambiguous. Producing ambiguous items or sentences is often an unintentional act; though it is seldom employed as an artistic device (Madulke, 2001). Most Nigerians unintentionally use ambiguous lexical items and sentences when they speak or write in English. This often leads to a situation where what the speaker / writer intends is not what the hearer / reader understands. One would think that errors in the light of ambiguity in the use of English as a second language are committed by people with less than secondary school education. However, the error analysis of the scripts of some thirty students of the Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK), Awka shows that these students commit errors of both lexical and structural ambiguity. The main aim of this paper is to help students to be aware and conscious of their errors for them to improve on their use of English.

1.1 Introduction[1]

An ambiguous expression is one that has more than one meaning. Hence, a listener might give it one of its possible interpretations. The meaning he assigns to the sentence may not be in consonance with the speaker's intended meaning. Alternatively, the listener might recognize the sentence as ambiguous and thus be confused as to the actual meaning intended by the speaker. In any of these cases, effective communication is hampered, blurred or even marred.

One who unintentionally utters an ambiguous sentence does not know the problem the listener is going through in trying to decode the meaning of the sentence because the speaker himself fails to notice any other possible interpretation of the utterance apart from that interpretation which he has in mind. This explains why 'ambiguity' is being treated in this paper as 'error'. According to Ifejirika (2000:97), "Errors are . . . mistakes which students can neither identify nor correct if asked to do so". For him, ambiguity error is one of the commonest errors that students commit. The

paper aims at basically helping students overcome ambiguity problem in their use of English.

The researchers intend to achieve the set objective through a careful step - by - step error analysis of 30 scripts of the students in their second, third and final years of study in the Linguistics Department of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK), Awka during the 2005/2006 academic session. The researchers asked the students to each write an essay on "An interesting film I have watched" or any other topic of their interest. 10 scripts were randomly selected from each of the three levels. The 30 scripts were subjected to an error analysis that comprises seven steps. In Corder (1974), Ajayi (1998), Ifejirika (2001) and Obidiebube (2003), three stages of error analysis are popularized. For this research, however, the researchers enhanced the stages to arrive at the seven steps used in this paper. These steps are definition, identification, examination, correction, description, classification, and analysis of errors. The steps are followed in the analysis of the selected scripts, as seen below in sections 2.1 to 2.6. The summary and conclusion form the concluding part of the paper.

2.1 Definition of errors

In this first step of error analysis we try to make it clear what would constitute an error in the light of ambiguity. We feel that this could be achieved through a proper definition and explanation of what is meant by ambiguity, ambiguous word and ambiguous sentence. Definitions of these terms abound in the literature; all having the same line of thought. For instance, Langacker (1967: 123) says, "When a sentence can represent two or more different conceptual structures, we recognize it as being ambiguous, having alternative semantic interpretation".

According to Hurford and Heasley (1986: 121), "A word or sentence is ambiguous when it has more than one sense... A sentence is ambiguous if it has two (or more) paraphrases which are not themselves paraphrases of each other". For them, the paraphrase of a sentence is that sentence which expresses the same proposition as another sentence. This, therefore, means that an ambiguous sentence could be decomposed into two or more sentences that do not actually entail each other such that in their truth function it is possible for one to be true and the other false.

Webster (1992:18) defines ambiguity as "the quality of having more than one meaning; an idea, statement or expression capable of being understood in more than one sense". Harley (1995) categorized ambiguity into two: structural or syntactic ambiguity and lexical ambiguity. Ambiguity in terms of structure involves the ability of that structure to be assigned to two

or more phrase markers. When a lexical item is assigned two or more interpretations, it means that the lexical item is ambiguous. Whenever it appears in a sentence without explication, the sentence would definitely have as many meanings as those of that ambiguous word. Such is the case with homonymous and polysemous words which constitute the broad categories of lexical ambiguity, (Fromkin and Rodman, 1978).

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2001:114) present the following as examples of ambiguous structures in English and Igbo respectively.

1. Old men and women
2. Nwoke na nwanyị ọma
   'man' 'and' 'woman' 'good'

For (1) above, there are two paraphrases that do not mean the same thing:

1a. Old men and women (unqualified)
b. Old men and old women.

In 1(a) only the men are indicated as old. It may or may not be true that the women, too, are old. But in 1 (b) both the men and the women are old.

The possible interpretations for example 2 are:

2a. Nwọke na nwaanyị ọma
   'Men and a good woman'
b. Nwọke ọma na nwaanyị ọma
   'A good man and a good woman'.

We can see that in paraphrase 2(a) only 'a woman' is qualified as 'good' while in paraphrase 2(b) 'a man' as well as 'a woman' have the quality 'good'. In other words, in paraphrase 2(a) only 'nwaanyị' is specified as having the semantic feature [+ good] i.e. [+ ọma] but in paraphrase (b) both 'nwọke' and 'nwaanyị' are specified as bearing the semantic feature [+ good].

On his part, Agbedo (2000: 100-101) gives examples of ambiguous structures as:

3. Good boys and girls
4. I can fish. (This is ambiguous only in the written form)

For example 3, he says that the structure "may either refer to 'good boys' and 'girls' of any type of character or to 'good boys' and 'good girls' ". In explaining example 4 in terms of Immediate Constituent (IC) analysis, he says that an IC analysis which has labelled nodes "would show that in one sense, 'can' is a modal and 'fish' is a verb, while in the other sense, 'can' is a verb, and 'fish' is a noun".

With the knowledge derived from all these definitions, we shall be able to identify the errors of ambiguity in the scripts of the students. This

leads us to the next two steps in error analysis-identification and examination of errors.

2.2 Identification and examination of errors.

Under identification of errors, the error analyst should pick out the errors seen in the material he is investigating. We identified the errors of ambiguity as seen in the students' scripts under review. To achieve this, the scripts were read over and over again. The errors were underlined immediately they were identified or recognized. They were later copied out from the scripts. Those errors that appeared more than once were written out only once. The identified errors were then examined under the third step in error analysis i.e. examination of errors. This entailed going through the errors and their contexts of occurrence to make sure that they are actually errors, and not slips of the pen. After this, only the errors were left in our list.

To avoid repetition, the already identified and certified errors are not written out in this section. This is because they must be written out under correction of errors.

2.3 Correction of errors

Correction of errors is a very crucial step in error analysis. At this point, the errors are corrected to enable the students know the correct forms since they cannot correct the errors themselves. The correct forms are placed in such a way that the students can easily refer to them while looking at the errors. Thus, the correct forms are better placed either beside or directly below the errors. This saves the students the problem and boredom of having to flip through so many pages before they find the correct form of an error. The correction of the identified errors through disambiguating them is seen below.

	Errors	Correct Forms
1.	Visiting lawyers can be awful.	a) To visit lawyers can be awful b) Lawyers that come on a visit can be awful.
2.	Rotating fans can be dangerous.	a) Fans that are rotating can be dangerous b) To rotate fans can be dangerous.
3.	She gave me a red pencil.	a) She gave me a pencil that writes

	though I asked her to give me a blue one.	red though I asked her to give me the one that writes blue. b) She gave me a pencil that is painted red though I asked her to give me the one that is painted blue.
4.	White men and women love swimming.	a) White men and women from all races love swimming. b) White men and white women love swimming.
5.	He asked me to wait for him at the bank.	a) He asked me to wait for him at the bank of the River... (e.g. Niger) Or: He asked me to wait for him at the river bank. b) He asked me to wait for him at the Bank (e.g. Trusted) Or: He asked me to wait for him at the commercial bank.
6.	Nigerian rubber sandals are durable	a) Rubber sandals made in Nigeria are durable. b) Sandals made from Nigerian rubber are durable.
7.	The parents of the girl and the boy were told to go home.	a) The parents of the girl, together with the boy, were told to go home. b) The parents of the girl, who are also the parents of the boy, were told to go home.
8.	I thank my lecturers: Dr. B.I. Mmadike, my HOD, Dr. R. O. Ezeuko, my academic adviser, Dr. C. A. Eme, and others.	a) I thank my lecturers: Dr. B.I. Mmadike, my HOD; Dr. R.O. Ezeuko, my Academic Adviser; Dr. C. A. Eme, and others. b) I thank my lecturers: Dr. B. I. Mmadike; my HOD, Dr. R. O. Ezeuko; my Academic Adviser, Dr. C. A. Eme; and others.
9.	Flying antelopes cannot be seen.	a) Antelopes that fly are non-existent b) Antelopes that fly are invisible (see comment in 2.4 below).
10.	Frames are expensive.	a) Door frames are expensive

		b) Window frames are expensive c) Sunglass frames are expensive (see comment in 2.4 below)
11.	Get a black book.	a) Get a book that has a black cover page b) Get a book in which to write the names of the people that are not in your favour..
12.	My mother bought a bat.	a) My mother bought, for eg, a live bat. b) My mother bought, for eg, a dead bat. c) My mother bought a baseball bat.
13.	My aggressive father returned.	a) My quarrelsome father returned. b) My undaunted father returned. c) My hardworking father returned.
14.	He saw the door open	a) The door was open when he saw it. b) He saw the door while it was opening.
15.	Do you want to join the line?	a) Do you want to join the queue? b) Do you want to repair the broken fish line?
16.	My brother told me to call him Mr. Oribe..	a) My brother told me to call Mr. Oribe for him. b) My brother told me that his name is Mr. Oribe and I should call him by that name.
17.	The seat is hot.	a) The chair is hot (because it was left too long in the sun). b) The position (in the office) is so demanding.
18.	It is difficult for her to bear male children.	a) It is difficult for her to give birth to male children. b) It is difficult for her to tolerate male children.

19.	That is my staff.	a) That person is my staff member. b) That stick is my staff. c) That is my walking stick.
20.	The chicken is ready to eat.	a) The chicken is ready to start eating. b) The chicken is ready to be eaten.
21	There are many people before her.	a) There are many people that came earlier than she did. b) There are many people standing in front of her.
22.	These students fetched a jerrycan of water	a) All the students fetched one bucket water. b) Each of the students fetched a bucket of water.
23.	She is a criminal lawyer.	a) She is a lawyer that indulges in crime. b) She is a lawyer that specialized in criminal law.

2.4 Description of errors

This step in error analysis involves making it clear to the students why the identified errors are really errors. This would, in a way, give them insight into why the correct forms are correct. The ambiguity in the identified errors has already been shown in the preceding section where each of the sentences has more than one interpretation. In sentence 1, we see that it is either that the lawyers that come visiting are themselves awful, or that the act of visiting the lawyers is awful. For sentence 6, it could be that the durable sandals are made from Nigerian rubber or that the rubber sandals are made in Nigeria.

The ambiguity in sentence 8 is caused primarily by improper punctuation, as shown in the correction. Alternatively, the sentence could be made more explanatory thus: I thank my lecturers like Dr B.I. Mmadike who is my HOD, my academic adviser in the person of Dr. R.O. Ezeuko, Dr. C.A. Eme, and others. Here, nobody is in doubt who your HOD and academic adviser are. For example 9, the ambiguity arose because 'flying antelopes'

may exist in the world of make-believe. For instance, in the script from where this example is taken, the student was narrating an interesting film he had watched. In the film, there are two antelopes that fly. They act as mail runners for two lovers that were held in bondage by their rivals. Both the antelopes and the mails they carry are invisible to the lovers' jailers. They could only be seen by the lovers. This idea of there being some invisible antelopes was what the student expressed with the ambiguous sentence, 'Flying antelopes cannot be seen'.

We could have gone further to describe the other ambiguous sentences but for space constraint. We, therefore, move to the next step in error analysis i.e. classification of errors.

2.5 Classification of errors

At this point in error analysis we classify the errors, placing them into broad groups. Since this paper is strictly on ambiguity, we classify the identified errors into two major categories – structural or syntactic ambiguity errors and lexical ambiguity errors. As earlier explained (2.1), structural ambiguity emanates from the grammatical analysis of the sentence while lexical ambiguity arises from the use of a word that has more than one meaning. Bearing this in mind, we now classify the identified errors as numbered in section 2.3 above:

Structural ambiguity errors:

1. Visiting lawyers can be awful.
2. Rotating fans can be dangerous.
4. White men and women love swimming.
6. Nigerian rubber sandals are durable.
7. The parents of the girl and the boy were told to go home.
8. I thank my lecturers: Dr. B.I. Mmadike, my HOD, Dr. R. O. Ezeuko, my academic adviser, Dr. C. A. Eme, and others.
9. Flying antelopes cannot be seen.
14. He saw the door open.
16. My brother told me to call him Mr. Oribe.
20. The chicken is ready to eat.
21. These students fetched a bucket of water.
22. He is a casket building expert.

Lexical ambiguity errors; the ambiguous items are in italics:

3. She gave me a *red pencil* though I asked her to give me a blue one.
5. He asked me to wait for him at the *bank*.
10. *Frames* are expensive.

11. Get a *black book.*
12. My mother bought a *bat.*
13. My *aggressive* father returned.
15. Do you want to join the *line*?
17. The seat is *hot.*
18. It is difficult for her to *bear* male children.
19. That is my *staff.*

The correction of structural ambiguity is achieved through something like an overhaul of the ambiguous structure by addition, subtraction, re-structuring etc of morphemes. It is not so with lexical ambiguity where the ambiguity derives from the ambiguous lexical items themselves.Thus, an explication of the ambiguous item or its replacement with an unambiguous one disambiguates the whole sentence.

2.6 Analysis of errors

This is the explanatory step in error analysis. It can come in diverse forms depending on the kind of errors being analyzed, for instance, tracing the error to the use of pronouns, interference problems, concord/agreement, punctuation, ambiguity, etc. But whichever form that is used as the most appropriate; the ultimate goal would be to produce as many ambilingual undergraduates as possible, (cf. Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1968). But where this fails, the undergraduates would be proficient in English; enough to enable them 'outgrow' certain errors including ambiguity errors. Attaining such a level of competence in English will "equip them effectively for the academic and other challenges of the new millennium", (Anagbogu and Eme, 2000:63).

3.0 Summary and conclusion

This paper is an error analysis of the lexical and structural ambiguities found in the scripts of some UNIZIK undergraduates. Seven steps for error analysis as listed in section 1.1 of this paper were used. The paper showed that undergraduates commit ambiguity errors; their earlier academic attainment not withstanding. The research, therefore, supports Maduike (2001:3) who claims that "the use of ambiguity is not restricted to any set of people or individuals..."

In conclusion, we are of the view that using the error analysis approach would be of immense help both to the L2 teachers and learners in their L2 teaching/learning endeavours. This is because, as Tagbo (2000:105) suggests, errors could serve as 'a useful tool in measuring the

progress of a [second language] learner" (cf. also Corder, 1974). As such, the teachers of English in our universities still have a lot to do to help the students improve their performance in English especially as it concerns avoiding ambiguity errors. It is our hope that a more frequent use of error analysis would do this 'magic'.

Notes

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