



UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Linguistic Ambiguity as a Resource for Humour

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ABSTRACT

This end-of-degree thesis is aimed at explaining the origins of the concept of *ambiguity* and what it implies. For that purpose, the distinction between ambiguity and vagueness is explained at the beginning, together with the explanation of the difference between ambiguity, pun and word-play, in order to clarify what an ambiguous utterance actually is.

Following the clarification of the concept, an account of theories of language philosophers and linguists like Paul Grice, George Kingsley Zipf, and John L. Austin and John Searle, is provided, namely ‘The Cooperative Principle’ (1975), ‘The Principle of Least Effort’ (1949), and ‘The Speech-Act Theory’ (J.L. Austin, 1960; J. Searle, 1969, 1979), respectively. The thesis will make reference to these theories in different occasions, when dealing with the explanation of the four types of linguistic ambiguity –phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic– and the areas in which they can be found.

Key words: phonological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, pragmatic ambiguity, the Cooperative Principle, the Principle of Least Effort, the Speech-Act Theory, newspaper headlines, advertisement slogans, jokes.

RESUMEN

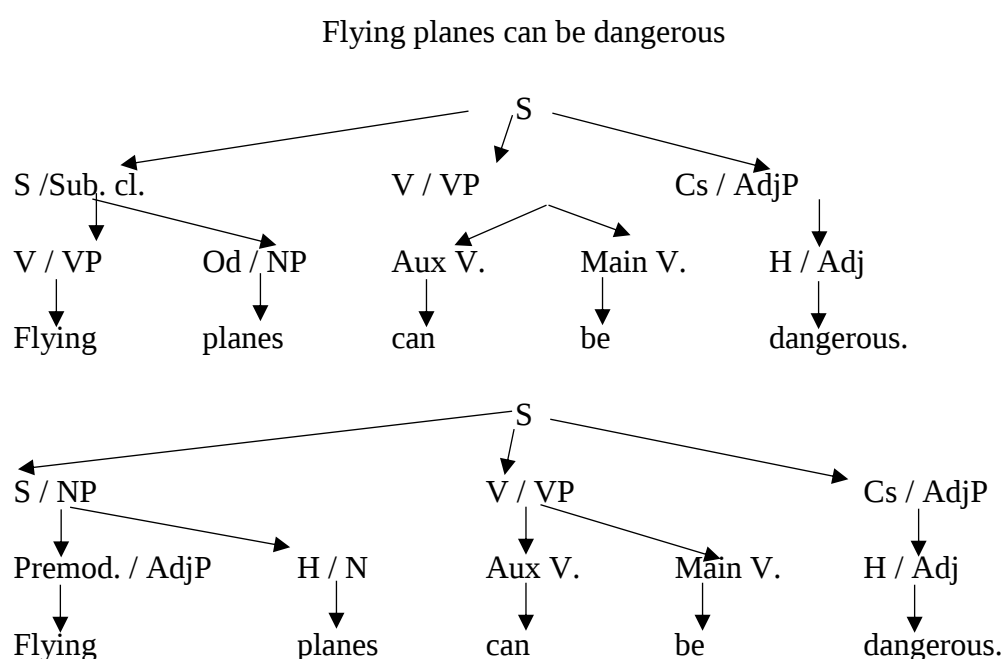
El objetivo de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado (TFG) es explicar el origen del término *ambigüedad*, y lo que significa. Para ello, se tratará la diferencia entre ambigüedad y vaguedad, junto con la explicación de las diferencias entre ambigüedad, calambur y juegos de palabras, para clarificar así lo que es realmente la ambigüedad lingüística.

Después de dejar claro este concepto, se abordarán las teorías de los filósofos y lingüistas Paul Grice, George Kingsley Zipf, y John L. Austin y John Searle, siendo estas las teorías del ‘principio de cooperación’ (1975), el ‘principio del mínimo esfuerzo’ (1949), y la ‘teoría de los actos de habla’ (J. L. Austin, 1960; J. Searle, 1969, 1979), respectivamente. Esta tesis hará referencia a estas teorías en distintas ocasiones, cuando se expliquen los cuatro tipos de ambigüedad lingüística –fonológica, léxica, sintáctica y pragmática– y cuando se aborden los ámbitos en los que se pueden encontrar.

Palabras clave: ambigüedad fonética, ambigüedad léxica, ambigüedad gramatical, ambigüedad pragmática, el principio de cooperación, el principio del mínimo esfuerzo, la teoría de los actos de habla, titulares de los periódicos, eslóganes publicitarios, bromas.

1. Introduction

Linguistic ambiguity is a prominent phenomenon in everyday language, as this thesis demonstrates. Some areas in which it can be found are newspaper headlines, slogan advertisements or jokes. However, language speakers may also face ambiguity in daily conversation, by saying, for instance, “I saw the bank this morning” or “Flying planes can be dangerous” (Ovu, 2011: 2-3), which exemplify lexical and syntactic –structural– ambiguities, respectively. In the first case, the ambiguous element lies on the meaning of the word *bank*, which can denote “an organization that provides various financial services for example keeping or lending money” or “the size of a river, canal, etc. and the land near it” (Hornby, 2015: 105-106). Opposite, the ambiguous element in “Flying planes can be dangerous” (Ovu, 2011: 3) lies on the syntactic interpretation of “flying planes”, which can be analysed as:



What these syntactic analyses imply is that, in the first case, it is the action of flying the planes what is dangerous whereas, in the second case, the planes which are flying are dangerous. Additionally, in the first case, the first person singular may be executing the action whereas in the second case, the action is something external to the speaker.

Besides, lexical and syntactic ambiguities can happen together, for instance, the example: “You know, somebody actually complimented me on my driving today. They left a little note on the windscreen; it said, 'Parking Fine.' So was nice.” (Ruiz & Alvarado, 2013: 72), in which case the ambiguity lies on the lexical interpretation of *fine*, which can be understood as an adjective, meaning “of high quality; good”, or as a noun, as “a sum of money that must

be paid as punishment for breaking a law or rule” (Hornby, 2015: 581). At the same time, the syntactic ambiguity lies on the fact that taking into account the interpretation of *fine* as an adjective, *parking* would work as a main verb, whereas understanding *fine* as a noun implies interpreting *parking* as a noun, which modifies and accompanies *fine*. In fact, ambiguities in the lexical and syntactic level are the commonest, even though phonological and pragmatic ambiguities do also exist. For this reason, the four of them –phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ambiguities– are studied in this thesis, together with some examples illustrating the theoretical part.

Furthermore, this thesis also covers some theories of meaning and use closely tied to linguistic ambiguities, for instance, Grice’s theory of ‘The Cooperative Principle’ (1975), according to which speakers must follow some rules or principles so that communication can take place correctly. In agreement to this theory, there are four Maxims which must be followed, these being the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner. In other words, speakers “must speak informatively, truthfully, with relevance, clearly, and unequivocally” (Fredsted, 1998: 528-529). As a matter of fact, ambiguity is studied within the Maxim of Manner. However, speakers and listeners do not always follow these maxims in their conversations and that is why, when they flout the Maxim of Manner, ambiguity occurs.

According to Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort (1949) –which is also analysed in relation to linguistic ambiguities– speakers try to make their utterances economic by means of uttering fewer words in their speeches, meanwhile this can increase the effort that listeners must make in order to understand what speakers imply with their utterances, as they may contain ambiguous elements due to the fact that speakers want to abbreviate very much. For this reason, Zipf talks about the opposing Forces of Unification and Diversification, which aim at facilitating the roles of the speakers and listeners.

Finally, J.L. Austin (1960) and J. Searle’s (1969, 1979) ‘Speech-Act Theory’ is also studied under the relation it has with ambiguous utterances –on the pragmatic level. What is of relevance for the study of linguistic ambiguities is the fact that any illocutionary force –belonging to direct or Indirect Speech Acts– has a performative deep structure. In other words, there are sentences which are formulated as questions but actually behave as commands, like the indirect request ‘Could you pass me the salt?’.

Therefore, this end-of-degree thesis is aimed at analysing linguistic ambiguities, the relevance that the already mentioned theories have in connection to this feature, and how humour arises as a result of ambiguous utterances.

2. The concept of ‘ambiguity’ and linguistic theories related to it

Two utterances are linguistically ambiguous if they can be interpreted differently due to their phonological, lexical, syntactic or pragmatic meanings. Therefore, ambiguity is a prominent feature in every single language in the world.

This section will deal with linguistic ambiguity as a journey which both speakers and hearers must go through and in which they will find different alternatives or meanings for the same utterances; one alternative will be more suitable than the other depending on the road they have to travel. Besides, it will also cover linguistic theories –dealing with semantics and pragmatics–, namely ‘the Cooperative Principle’ (Grice, 1975), ‘the Principle of Least Effort’ (Zipf, 1949) and ‘the Speech-Act Theory’ (Austin, 1960; Searle, 1969, 1979), which will be of great importance for a further study of ambiguities.

2.1. Definition of ambiguity

In general terms, the concept ‘(linguistic) ambiguity’ refers to the property of language by which two possible meanings of one utterance are possible. Gorfein states that “the English word *ambiguous* derives most immediately from the French *ambiguïté*, which comes from the Latin word *ambiguus*” (1989: 205).

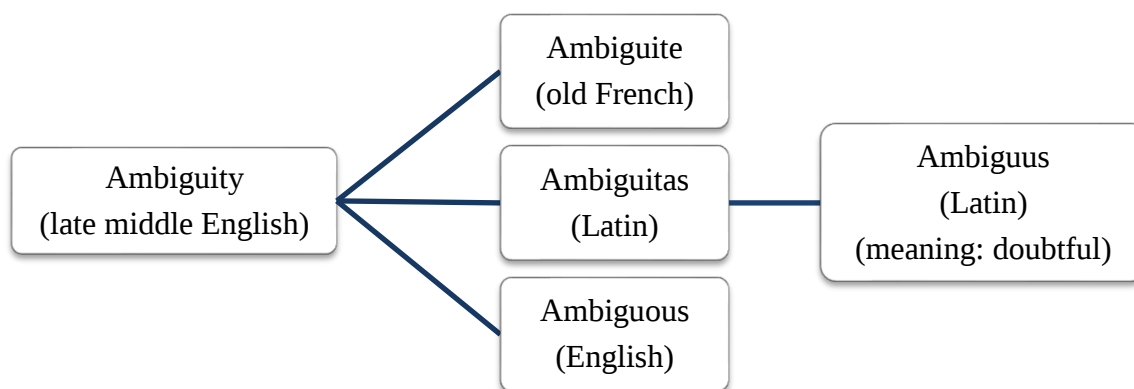


Figure 1: Origin and evolution of the term *ambiguity*.

Besides, “this word combined the stems *ambi-* (*on both sides*) and *agree* (*travel or drive*) which taken together mean *to wander about* or *to drive on both sides*” (Mish, 1984; Partridge, 1996, as cited in Gorfein, 1989: 205). Therefore, a statement or phrase being ambiguous is a metaphor of the speaker and listener wandering about different interpretations of one utterance,

both of them being accurate; however, due to the utterance's context (i.e. the travelers' journey), speakers choose one of them, which will be the most suitable reading. For instance:

(1) "Two men going past a café:

1st man: 'Let's go inside and take something.'

2nd man: 'But the place is full of people!'"

(Partington, 2006: 121)

where the ambiguity lies on the interpretation of the verb *to take*. The first interpretation of "take something" would be "eat something". Nevertheless, the second man treats "take something" as "remove + unspecified object" (Partington, 2006: 121). Hence, the journey—in a metaphorical sense—of this sentence, would be the fact that the second man has to choose between interpreting "take something" as "eat something" or as "remove + unspecified object". Therefore, the collocation "take something" is ambiguous. Context makes language speakers think that, as far as the place is full of people and nothing can be removed or stolen from a busy place without taking too many risks, the meaning of "take something" is to eat something, the ambiguity being solved. Besides, the answer that the second man gives creates humour, as it is somehow nonsensical in that context to reply in the way he does.

Besides, Gorfain explains that "since the incorporation into English of the word *ambiguity*, the word has lost its reference to journeys and paths. As some may might say, the word has become 'literal'" (1989: 206). Literally then the term *ambiguous* means that a word "can be understood in more than one way; having different meanings" (Hornby, 2015: 45). Therefore, the meaning of ambiguity would be that a statement can have two possible meanings due either to the lexis of a phrase, the syntactical structure, the pragmatic component, etc. without taking paths into consideration anymore. Then, a sentence is ambiguous when it has different senses or denotations. For instance, the term *bank* can denote either the "rim of a river" or a "financial institution" (i.e. two senses or denotations) meanwhile the concept *long* can be used to refer to the "size along one dimension" (noun) or to the meaning of "yearn" (verb) (Wasow et. al., 2003: 2). It will be the context what will help the listener or reader of the message to decode it.

In this respect, Quiroga-Clare, believes that "language cannot exist without ambiguity" (2003), ambiguity being a universal of formal languages. She must be right because languages consist of words that frequently have more than one meaning—being lexically ambiguous. This aspect has been illustrated in the terms *bank* and *long*. That is to say, languages are made up of ambiguous words and this property is present in every day communication. In fact, Wasow et. al. claim that ambiguity lies on natural languages whereas formal languages are unambiguous

(2003: 1) –examples of natural languages being French, English or Spanish– whereas formal languages fulfill the function of expressing computations. Thus, natural languages, which do not have a strict one-to-one correspondence between sounds and word meanings, are likely to suffer from ambiguity. So, phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ambiguities will be further developed in this text.

2.1.1. *Ambiguity vs. vagueness*

It has previously been mentioned that languages consist of words with more than one meaning, which is a glaring truth. Nevertheless, this fact may mix the concepts of ambiguity and vagueness.

According to Wasow et al., “expressions are vague if the regions they denote do not have perfectly well-defined boundaries” (2003: 2). Besides, according to them, the difference between vague expressions and ambiguities is that “the denotations of linguistic expressions typically have fuzzy boundaries, making them vague; but ambiguity requires more than one denotation” (2003: 2). In order to illustrate this difference, Wasow et. al. (2003) state that the concept *tiny* is vague because it will always mean that something very small, but it is not clear how small something is (i.e. it is not easy to be measured). The same can be applied to the sentence “the coffee in Rome is expensive” (Kennedy, 2009: 30), which may be true in some cases (for instance, if the cost of the coffee in Rome is more expensive than in Madrid), but the degree in which coffee is more expensive remains unknown.

Besides, Kennedy argues that “ambiguity involves uncertainty about mappings between levels of representation with different structural characteristics, while vagueness involves uncertainty about the actual meanings of particular terms” (2009: 1), that is to say, whereas ambiguity deals with different meanings of the same concept –for instance, the different meanings of the term “to take something” or the different senses of the words *bank* or *long*–, vagueness deals with different senses of the same meaning –e.g. there is vagueness within the concept of something being *small*).

Furthermore, a word can be ambiguous and vague at the same time. If the concept *long* is considered –which has been explained as an example of ambiguity as it has different meanings or denotations, one of them being the size or dimension something has– vagueness can also result, as how long something is not clear –it is a difficult task to explain how long something is.

2.1.2. *Wordplay, pun and ambiguity*

It is important to pay special attention to these three concepts, which have been discussed by several scholars in terms of their similarities or differences.

According to Giorgadze, a pun is one form of wordplay (2014: 271). Giorgadze mentions Leppihalme's (1997) explanation of the fact that plays of words are characterized for breaking the grammar rules and other linguistic factors (as cited in Giorgadze, 2014: 271). Besides, Giorgadze (2014: 271) argues that one of the ways of expressing plays of words is through ambiguous verbal wit. Thus, ambiguity is one way of playing with words.

Furthermore, scholars have not reached an agreement about the differences or similarities between the concepts of pun and wordplay. Some of them believe that they are synonymous and could be used interchangeably while others do not agree with this position. Giorgadze discusses wordplay in its narrow and broad senses. On the one hand, she says that "wordplay in its narrow sense is equal to pun" (2014: 272). On the other hand, "discussion of this phenomenon in a broad sense implies wordplay and its categories. Namely, from this point of view, wordplay includes pun, wellerism (tom swifty), spoonerism, anagram, palindrome, onomatopoeia, mondegreen, malapropism, oxymoron, etc." (Giorgadze, 2014: 272). Therefore, from a narrow perspective, a pun would be the same as a wordplay (i.e. synonymous) whereas, from a broad perspective, a pun would just stand for one type of wordplay. Besides, a pun (also called paranomasia) can be defined as "the cleverer or humorous use of a word that has more than one meaning, or of words that have different meanings but sound the same" (Hornby, 2015: 1246).

Regarding the already discussed differences and similarities between the concepts of pun, ambiguity and wordplay, it could be said that ambiguous words will constitute examples of puns at the same time, for our purposes, as the humorous or rhetorical effect of the ambiguous utterances will be searched for, and that they both (i.e. puns and ambiguities) are examples of plays of words, as far as a wordplay can emerge in this form, but there are other ways (e.g. through orthographic peculiarities) of creating plays of words.

2.2. **Linguistic theories of meaning and use**

Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), Zipf's Principle of Least Effort (1949) and Austin's (1960) and Searle's (1969, 1979) Speech Act Theory aim at giving justifiable arguments supporting why linguistic ambiguity takes place.

According to Grice's Cooperative Principle, speakers may flout the Maxim of Manner, leading to ambiguity—one of the reasons for this to happen is that speakers may opt for flouting

this Maxim not to flout other ones, for instance, the Maxim of Quantity, as in the case of newspaper headlines, which will be further explained below. Besides, Zipf's Principle of Least Effort (1949) explains that speakers may be linguistically ambiguous in order to avoid employing too many words in a given utterance. Finally, Austin and Searle's 'Speech Act Theory' explains that ambiguous utterances may emerge from Indirect Speech Acts, which are utterances that allow more than one interpretation –as it is the case when dealing with pragmatic ambiguities.

2.2.1. Paul Grice: the Cooperative Principle (1975)

Herbert Paul Grice's (1913-1988) most important distinction within his theory is the difference between what is *said* and what is *implicated* or *suggested*. This issue is covered in his work *Logic and Conversation*.

Grice defines conversational (in which case the specification of the implicature falls outside the specification of the conventional meaning of the words used) and non-conversational or conventional implicatures (implicated by virtue of meaning of some word or phrase which the speaker has used) (1991: 118).

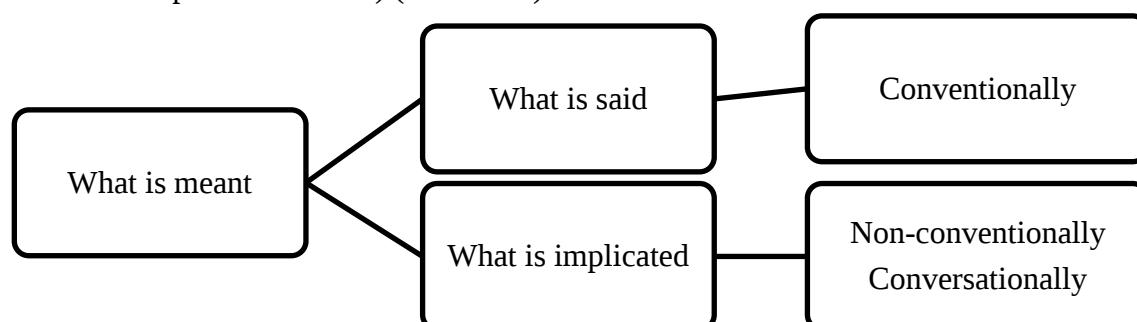


Figure 2: What does “what is meant” suggest?

To put it differently, a non-conversational implicature is a semantic phenomenon, as it is generated by the agreed meaning of the words employed in a sentence, corresponding to the literal meaning. Hence, it covers what a speaker says (i.e. the content of the utterance). Opposite, conversational implicatures are Indirect Speech Acts¹. They deal with what a speaker implies with his or her utterance –what is not explicitly uttered, but implicitly. That is why conversational implicatures are also known, simply, as *implicatures* –meaning being implicated in the utterance. In fact, “Grice’s main contribution to the theory of meaning was his original, non-conventional way of treating meaning in conversation, *non-natural meaning*” (Moeschler,

¹ For a more detailed study of Indirect Speech Acts, see section 2.2.3 below: ‘Speech-Act Theory’ (J.L. Austin, 1960; J. Searle, 1969, 1979).

2012: 408). He might have thought that non-conventional implicatures carried a non-natural meaning because meaning is not implicitly stated. Consider the following examples:

(2) “MRS. SMITH (accusingly): ‘Did you eat all the chocolates?’

BILLY (defensively): ‘I ate some’” (Davis, 1998: 116).

(3) “A says X is a fine friend” (Grice, 1991: 34) –sarcastically uttered.

On the one hand, example (1) is a case of conventional implicature as there is not implied meaning, but the meaning is explicit –that Billy did not eat all the chocolates, but some. On the other hand, example (2) corresponds to conversational implicatures, taking for granted that A does not really mean X is a fine friend, rather the opposite, as she or he is being sarcastic or ironic about this issue. If A had spoken seriously, she or he would have meant that X was actually a fine friend and it would then constitute an example of conventional implicature.

Hereof, a speaker *S* implicates *p* iff:

“(i) *S* implicates *p*;

(ii) *S* is presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle (cooperative presumption);

(iii) The supposition that *S* believes *p* is required to make *S*’s utterance consistent with the Cooperative Principle (determinancy); and

(iv) *S* believes (or knows), and expects *H* to believe that *S* believes, that *H* is able to determine that (iii) is true (mutual knowledge)” (Davis, 1998: 13)

In this regard, conversational (non-conventional) implicatures deal with the Cooperative Principle and Grice’s maxims, being of great importance for the study of ambiguity. Anyway, talk exchanges have common purposes or set of purposes, meaning that speakers and hearers communicate ideas, beliefs, etc. For that reason, Grice posited the concept of the Cooperative Principle (CooP) and formulated it as follows: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1991: 26). What Grice tried to do was to explain how human communication takes place and how interactants can communicate and understand each other. On this point, the Cooperative Principle (CooP) is made up of four maxims, which are:

“Quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.”

(Fredsted, 1998: 528)

That is to say, “the well-known maxims listed above specify what a participant must do in order to conduct a conversation effectively, rationally and co-operatively: s/he must speak informatively, truthfully, with relevance, clearly, and unequivocally.” (Fredsted, 1998: 528-529). The following example can now be considered:

(4) “Husband: ‘Where are the keys?’

Wife: ‘They’re on the table on the hall.’”

(Thomas, 1995: 64)

It can be said that both the husband and the wife have followed Grice’s Cooperative Principle as far as they have answered clearly, truthfully, have made their contribution as informative as it was required (no more, no less), and have been relevant. As Thomas puts it:

“The wife has answered clearly (Manner), truthfully (Quality), has given just the right amount of information (Quantity) and has directly addressed her husband’s goal in asking the question (Relation). She has said precisely what she meant, no more and no less, and has generated no implicature (i.e. there is no distinction to be made here between what she says and what she means, there is no additional level of meaning).” (1995: 64)

However, speakers may flout Grice’s maxims of conversation if they do not follow them. “When people lie, say something sarcastic, or describe something or a person with unusual utterances, it means that they break the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims” (Al-Saedi, 2013: 25). Actually, even Grice noticed that people do not always obey the Maxims but rather they fail to fulfill them, intentionally or unintentionally, for instance (Davis, 1998: 32):

(5) “A: ‘Where does C live?’

B: ‘Somewhere in the South of France.’”

In this example, B knows he is not as informative as the situation requires (Maxim of Quantity) and the reason may be that he does not really know where A lives, just that it is

somewhere in the South of France. Hence, in order not to violate the Maxim of Quality, he infringes the Maxim of Quantity. Furthermore, the Maxim of Manner can be flouted as well, consequently stating an ambiguous utterance. For example:

(6) “Judge: ‘Order! Order! Order in the court!’

Prisoner: ‘I’ll take ham sandwich on rye and beer!’”

(Chao & Xinghua, 2013: 668)

In this example of lexical ambiguity, the Maxim of Manner has been violated by the ambiguous interpretation of the word *order*, which can mean “something that sb is told to do by sb in the authority” or “a request to make or supply goods” (Hornby, 2015: 1086). In fact, the ambiguity lies on the first statement, the second statement being the response to it as it is the word *order* what has different senses.

Besides, Taghiyev argued that the Maxim of Quantity is also violated in the first line (where the ambiguity lies), because “if a single word or phrase that contains clarifying information is added to the first line, ambiguity can be avoided” (2017: 287). Hence, the ambiguous element would have been eluded if the speaker had employed more words. However, the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Quality are violated in the second line. This happens because it is in the second interlocutor’s response where the humorous effect lies, the first interlocutor not saying anything which he believes to be false (Maxim of Quality) or irrelevant (Maxim of Relation).

A different example which reflects how the Cooperative Principle is flouted is:

(7) “A: ‘Let us eat up the street.’

B: ‘No, thanks. I do not like concrete.’”

(Sánchez Roura, 1995: 211, as cited in Taghiyev, 2017: 286)

Nevertheless, this time we are dealing with syntactic ambiguity, as it lies on *up the street* which can be analyzed as *up* working as a preposition, meaning “at the top of this street”, or as a phrasal verb, together with *eat*, meaning “to eat all of something” (Hornby, 2015: 486). Besides, the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner are flouted, in the same way as in the previous example.

2.2.2. George Kingsley Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort (1949)

According to Zhu, Zhang, Wang, Li, and Cai (2018), the Principle of Least Effort was first discovered by Guillaume Ferrero in 1894 but it is better known for George Kingsley Zipf’s work, who developed it in his work *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (1949) –this principle also being known as Zip’s Law. This principle seeks to distribute word use in

order to “communicate efficiently with least effort” (Zhu et al., 2018: 1). As Zipf (1965: 22) puts it,

“The Principle of Least Effort means, for example, that a person in solving his immediate problems will view these against the background of his probable future problems as *estimated by himself*. Moreover, he will strive to solve his problems in such a way as to minimize the total work that must be expended in solving both his immediate problems and his probable future problems. That in turn means that the person will strive to minimize the *probable average rate of his work-expenditure* (over time). And in so doing he will be minimizing his *effort*, by our definition of effort. Least effort, therefore, is a variant of less work”

(as cited in Fortuny & Corominas-Murtra, 2013: 18).

Hence, if there is only one word expressing a wide variety of possible meanings (*m*), a speaker’s work would be minimized regarding verbal communication. This would lead to a least effort to accomplish the task of communicating for the speaker. In other words, “speakers can minimize their effort if all meanings are expressed by one simple, maximally ambiguous word, say, *ba*” (Piantadosi et. al., 2012: 281). Then, to say “the accordion box is too small” or “it will rain next Wednesday”, speakers would only need to say “*ba*”. This lessens the speaker’s effort.

However, the existence of just one word to convey several meanings would not help the hearer to understand the message but it would complicate his or her task. Instead, from the point of view of the listener, work is minimized if there is only one word expressing one possible meaning, this is to say, “if each meaning maps to a distinct linguistic form, assuming that handling many distinct word forms is not overly difficult for comprehenders” (Piantadosi et al., 2012: 281). Thus, the listener seeks for word-meaning correspondence. “In that type of system, the listener does not need to expend effort inferring what the speaker intended, since the linguistic signal would leave only one possibility” (Piantadosi et. al., 2012: 281). In a scenario in which one single word could express only one single meaning, linguistic ambiguity would not exist. Otherwise, if one word (*ba*) denotes different meanings, ambiguity is more likely to appear in an utterance.

Due to the controversies between speakers and listeners’ roles, Zipf coined the concept of “the opposing Forces of Unification and Diversification”, according to which the different interactants of the conversation –speakers and listeners– would negotiate the existence of a number of words which is between the interests of both of them, that is, the employment of a number of words which makes easier the task of communication for both interactants (Wasow

et. al., 2003: 8). Besides, as Wasow et al. state, the opposing Forces of Unification and Diversification imply the existence of ambiguity, because the number of meanings for one word would be more than one but less than m (all the possible meanings) (2003: 8). This would trigger the presence of lexical ambiguity by means of, for instance, polysemous words (i.e. words with different senses), namely *bank* –which can denote “an organization that provides various financial services, for example keeping or lending money” or “the side of a river, canal, etc. and the land near it” (Hornby, 2015: 105, 106)–, or of syntactic ambiguity, for instance, the word *bear*, which can function as a verb or noun, with differences in meaning –(v) “to be able to accept and deal with sth unpleasant”; (n) “a heavy wild animal with thick fur and sharp claws” (Hornby, 2015: 118-119).

Concerning the following examples, if the word *bank* was taken out of context, hearers would not know what it refers to; nonetheless, the fact that A mentions *money* and *picnic*, respectively, allows hearers to know that in example (8), the speaker meant commercial bank while in example (9), s/he meant a river bank –therefore, context plays a leading role in solving linguistic ambiguity²:

(8) “A: ‘Let’s stop and get some money for groceries.’

B: ‘The bank was flooded yesterday, so it may not be open’” (Davis, 1998: 125).

(9) “A: ‘Let’s stop and have a picnic by the river.’

B: ‘The bank was flooded yesterday, so it may not be open’” (Davis, 1998: 126).

Nevertheless, whether Zipf’s principle requires more or less effort is controversial because, if a speaker used one word to refer to different meanings, he or she would have to explain and clarify those meanings, requiring greater efforts than employing different words for different meanings. Otherwise, this principle can lead to linguistic ambiguity and interlocutors not understanding (even, misunderstanding) each other. There are other ways of helping participants minimize their efforts in talk exchanges, for instance, giving the information which is necessary –being concise–, so that communication is effective. This aspect is connected with Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CooP) and the Maxim of Quality, since there are controversies concerning the fact whether the Maxim of Quantity should be considered as a transgression of the Cooperative Principle or not. According to Grice, it is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but just a waste of time (1991: 27). Hence, the most important thing is that the speaker understands the hearer, by being clear and concise.

² This reinforces how useful Grice’s maxims may be as by adding the words which are needed for an utterance to be understood –the enough and precise account of words– ambiguous utterances may disappear.

2.2.3. Speech-Act Theory (Austin, 1960; Searle, 1969, 1979)

Speech-Act theory was introduced by J.L. Austin (*How to Do Things With Words*, 1962) and further developed by J.R. Searle. Generally speaking, the study of Speech Acts is connected to the terms locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.

Firstly, Oishi explains that locutionary acts are made up of phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts which are, respectively, the acts of “pronouncing sounds”, “uttering words or sentences in accordance with the phonological and syntactic rules of the language to which they belong”, and “uttering a sentence with sense and more or less definite reference” (2006: 4), respectively. Hence, the purpose of locutionary acts is to create meaningful sentences, to create spoken messages which the speaker can utter and which are understood by the listener.

Secondly, Oishi discusses that perlocutionary acts refer to the “effect of uttering a sentence” (2006: 4) –the result; the effect the Speech Act has on the listener. Perlocutionary acts are the result of locutionary acts. For example, if somebody shouted “Fire!”, the consequence would be going out of the building; i.e. the perlocutionary act would be convincing the people of leaving the building (Nordquist, 2018b).

Finally, Oishi argues that illocutionary acts have a *force* (the so-called illocutionary force) on the speaker whereas locutionary acts have *meaning*, and perlocutionary acts have *effects* (2006: 4). Then, illocutionary acts deal with what is done. Besides, illocutionary acts can be vague, as Richard Nordquist (2018a) explains. He argues that by saying “I’ll be there”, the audience cannot ascertain whether it is formulated as a promise or not. This fact is connected with Indirect Speech Acts (Leech, 1983: 199). However, this issue will rather be covered under the label of pragmatic ambiguities as it is the interactants of the conversation who decide which interpretation to choose, the phonological, lexical and syntactic analysis being the same either if that utterance is considered to be a promise or not.

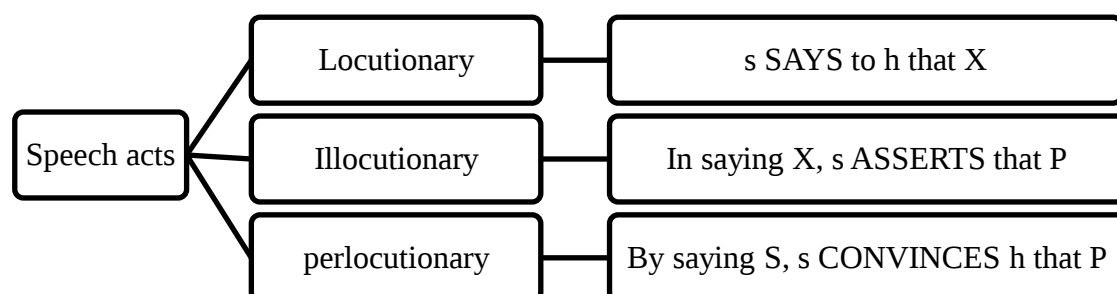


Figure 3: Properties found within Speech Acts

On this point, Leech explains that, according to the extended performative hypothesis, any illocutionary force (either of Direct Speech Acts or Indirect Speech Acts) can be formalized

in a performative deep structure (1983: 193), for instance, the indirect request “Can you close the window?” could be understood as a question (“I ask you if you have the ability to close the window”) or as an order (“I request that you close the window”) (1983: 193). Thus, it is pragmatically ambiguous. In this regard, Indirect Speech Acts are “standardly used to denote any illocutionary act performed by uttering a sentence whose mood is primarily associated with a different illocutionary force” (Davis, 1998: 166). For instance, by saying “Is it possible for you to drive me home?”, an interrogative sentence which is *literally* asked as a question has been performed. Therefore, the extended performative hypothesis and, consequently, indirect speech-act conventions, would give rise to pragmatic ambiguity in some degree. “The door is over there” (Bach & Harnish, 1979: 70) constitutes another example of Indirect Speech Act as it has the surface structure of a statement with the deep structure of the order to leave the room.

Moreover, the difference between covert collateral acts and Indirect Speech Acts is that covert collateral acts succeed only if their second meaning is not recognized whereas Indirect Speech Acts are performed with the intention of being understood by the listener (Bach & Harnish, 1979: 101). Similarly, Weiser (1974) explains that deniability, also known as “deliberate ambiguity”, is employed by the speaker to protect himself or herself from suffering embarrassment; for instance, if somebody asks a girl “are you doing anything tonight?”, the speaker can hid his intentions until he knows the answer to that question (as cited in Bach & Harnish, 1979: 101). Then, “if the hearer does recognize his intention, she can determine how the utterance has to be taken, by saying such things as ‘Yes, but I’m free tomorrow night’ or ‘No, I’d rather stay home and read tonight’” (Bach & Harnish, 1979: 102). In any case, linguistic ambiguity is instrumental in communication.

3. Theoretical framework: forms of ambiguity

Once some linguistic theories closely linked with linguistic ambiguity have been covered, this section will be dealing with the theoretical differences between phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ambiguities so that the theoretical knowledge can later on be put into practice with the study of some areas in which these ambiguities may be found.

3.1. Classification of ambiguity

As has already been discussed, linguistic ambiguity is of great relevance when studying the structure of languages. Actually, the fact natural languages are inherently ambiguous justifies the reason why this phenomenon should be dealt with.

“Linguistic ambiguity can be said to occur whenever a given sentence possesses two or more distinct semantic interpretations” (Shultz & Pilon, 1973: 728), and that can be due either to phonological, lexical, grammatical or pragmatic reasons. Ambiguity, as a semantic property, will influence the utterances’ meanings. As claimed by Shultz and Pilon (1973), the number of different levels of linguistic ambiguity was the result of recent developments in Chomsky’s transformational theory, whose nucleus was constituted by the Universal Grammar (UG) Theory, according to which the rules that govern the sentences are limited: “the speaker can use certain and limited rules to form unlimited sentences, and this necessarily means to use the same rule more than once” (Malkawi et. al., 2013: 78). According to them, “it can be assumed that the number of words in the language are limited, and that the speaker does not need all the words of the language, and so there are active words and passive words” (Malkawi et. al., 2013: 77), which would explain some details in Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort –the employment of not so many words, just those which will be useful for both the speaker and the listener, also known as active words; even though this could lead to ambiguous utterances.

3.1.1. *Phonological ambiguity*

Phonological ambiguity is the result of words sounding identical or similar but portraying different meanings. Thus, if phonologically ambiguous words are taken out of context, the hearer or listener would not know what they refer to, as they sound very similar; otherwise, the context helps to decode the words’ meaning. Consider:

(10) “I can hear the sea in this shell. Can you see this shell here?” (O’Brien, 2009)

In this example, the phonological ambiguity lies on the terms *hear* (v.) and *here* (adv.)³, which are pronounced as /hɪə(r)/. Because of the fact that the context in which these words appear is given, the hearer of this message can appreciate that the first /hɪə(r)/’s function is being the main verb, meaning “to listen or pay attention to sb / sth”, and the second /hɪə(r)/ works as an adverbial phrase, being understood as “in, at or to this position or place” (Hornby, 2015: 726). Furthermore, phonological ambiguities can result due to different reasons.

Shultz and Pilon claim that this type of ambiguity can result as a confusion about the boundaries between words (for instance, *eighty cups* and *eight tea cups* (1973: 728), both sounding approximately as /’erti kʌps/, or because of the condition of homophony, which occurs when two words happen to sound alike, which may differ in their meanings and may –*pear* and

³ This is a case of phonological ambiguity through homophony.

pair (/peə(r)/), *eight* and *ate* (/eit/), etc.– or may not –*rose* (/rəʊz/) as a flower and as the past simple of the verb *to rise*– differ in their spellings.

Besides, phonological ambiguities can also arise from homographs, which are groups of words which share the same spelling and pronunciation, but which do not share their meanings, for example, *can*, *bear* or *lock* (Ovu, 2011: 6-7). The term *can* can be used as an auxiliary verb, to indicate “that it is possible for sb / sth to do sth, or for sth to happen” or as a noun, meaning “a metal container in which food and drink is sold” (Hornby, 2015: 214), the concept *bear* can be employed as a verb, meaning “to be able to accept and deal with sth unpleasant” or “to give birth to a child” (Hornby, 2015: 118) and the word *lock* can be employed to denote “a few hairs that hang or lie together on your head” or “a player in the second row of the scrum” (Hornby, 2015: 916) –among other meanings.

Needless to say, phonological ambiguities occur only in spoken language, where the interactants cannot appreciate the written words –spelling–; otherwise, phonological ambiguity would not exist.

3.1.2. *Lexical ambiguity*

In Shultz and Pilon’s words, “lexical ambiguity or polysemy occurs when a given lexical item has more than one semantic interpretation (e.g., *club* can refer to either a large stick or a social organization)” (1973: 728). So according to these authors, lexical ambiguity takes place when one word has more than one meaning. Additionally, Ovu argues that lexical ambiguity may also result from homophones, homonyms or homographs (2011: 3). Nonetheless, homophones, homonyms and homographs have been studied within phonological ambiguities. The fact is that some linguists consider phonological and lexical ambiguity as two different types of ambiguities and study them separately, but phonological ambiguity could be studied within lexical ambiguity.

On the one hand, the reason for considering them as two types would be that phonological ambiguity deals with the interface between spoken and written English, participating of these two modes, meanwhile lexical ambiguity is more focused on written English.

On the other hand, the reason why phonological and lexical ambiguities should be studied together would be that the differences in speech sounds have an impact in the words’ meanings. It is how single words are pronounced and written what affects phonologically ambiguous utterances; therefore, lexical ambiguities have an influence on phonological

ambiguities. In other words, the way in which terms are written is closely tied to their pronunciation; hence, phonological ambiguity is closely linked to lexical ambiguity.

As a matter of fact, lexical ambiguity deals mainly with polysemic words –“from Greek, *poly* –i.e. *many*– and *semeion* meaning sign” (Ovu, 2011: 8)–, words which portray two or more meanings or senses. In this regard, “polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry while homonymous senses are given separate entries” (Saeed, 2008: 64, in Ovun, 2011: 8). As Saeed explains, “polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry”, which means that polysemous words have different but related meanings, for instance, the word *head* can refer either to the “person in charge of a group or an organization” or to “the part of the body on top of the neck containing the eyes, nose, mouth and brain” (Hornby, 2015: 723). In this regard, a head is probably the most important part of the body, even though all the parts are important for the performance of the body. The same can be applied to the head or leader of a group and its members or players, being probably the most important figure inside the game, controlling and guiding the other players.

Besides, polysemous words can give rise to lexical ambiguity, which “arises when other words that occur with the polysemous words fail to provide sufficient clue to clarify the meaning of the key words” (Ovu, 2011: 9). For example, “my glasses have broken” (Ovu, 2011: 9), where the word *glasses* can refer either to “lenses in a frame that rests on the nose and ears” or to “a hard, usually transparent substance used, for example, for making windows and bottles” (Hornby, 2015: 663-64). Anyhow, no evidence is provided in order to understand what the speaker is referring to by this concept. Hence, in order to disambiguate the sentence, the speaker should say “my glasses have broken because the water is too hot” (Ovu, 2011: 9) and the listener would know the speaker refers to the cups, or by stating “my glasses have broken, so I can’t read well” (Ovu, 2011: 10), the hearer would know that the speaker refers to the lenses. This is closely linked with Grice’s Maxims, especially with the Maxims of Quality, Quantity and Manner, as the utterance should be clear enough in order to be correctly understood by the listener (Maxim of Quality); therefore, it should include the appropriate amount of words (Maxim of Quantity) –this is, at the same time, connected with Zipf’s Law. Besides, in order not to be ambiguous, the utterance should not flout the Maxim of Manner; then, if the speaker makes reference just to the concept of *glasses* without providing extra information, he or she will probably be flouting Grice’s Maxim.

Tropes such as metaphors –which are discussed by William Empson in his work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1984) as the first type of ambiguity– could also be studied within lexical ambiguity, as far as they can be analysed or understood literally or figuratively –they portray

two meanings, leading to ambiguous utterances, for example, *to feel blue* can be understood as being sad (metaphorically) or as being of the blue colour (literally; however, this would rarely happen). Moreover, idiomatic utterances also illustrate this point; e.g. *break a leg* can mean either good luck (metaphorically) or, literally, to break a leg. Anyhow, according to Austin and to Searle, the receivers of the message, either spoken or written, access first the literal meaning and once they have realised it is not the correct one, they search for the second, metaphorical meaning. What this implies is that when a speaker says something, the hearer tries to understand the utterance literally, but when hearers face an element which is ambiguous –maybe lexically ambiguous– they tend to look for the other, metaphorical, alternative.

3.1.3. Structural ambiguity

Structural ambiguity, also known as grammatical ambiguity, results when two possible meanings of the same utterance are feasible due to more than one syntactic parsing being accurate. Shultz and Pilon clearly state that there are two possible sources of syntactic ambiguity –“one based on surface structure relations and the other based on deep-structure relations” (1973: 728).

On the one hand, “surface structure ambiguity results when the words of a sentence can be grouped or bracketed into different ways with each bracketing expressing a different semantic interpretation” (Shultz & Pilon, 1973: 728). In other words, phrases can be restructured in different ways so that more than one meaning is possible. For instance, the sentence “he sent her kids story books” (Shultz & Pilon, 1973: 728) could mean either that “the woman’s kids are being sent books” (if “her kids” is analyzed as indirect object and “story books” as the direct object of the sentence) or that “the woman is being sent books” (in which case, *her* would work as the indirect object and “kids story books” as the direct object). Another example of surface structure ambiguity would be “flying planes can be dangerous” (Ovu, 2001: 3).⁴

On the other hand, Shultz and Pilon define deep-structure ambiguity as the result of two different structures being mapped onto a single surface structure (1973: 728). In this case, the fact that more than one possible deep structure is possible modifies the meaning of the whole sentence. They exemplify this by means of the sentence “the duck is ready to eat”, where *duck* can function as the logical subject –understanding the sentence in the sense that the duck is going to eat whatever– or as the logical object –the duck being about to be eaten by human

⁴ See Section 1: ‘Introduction’ above for a detailed analysis of this utterance.

beings, probably– (Shultz & Pilon, 1973: 728). Wasow et. al. claim that this type of ambiguities are scope ambiguities, since they “cannot be naturally attributed to the ambiguity of any word, nor to distinct (surface) parses” (2003: 3). Another instance of this is “no student solved exactly two problems”, which can be understood as “there was no student who solved exactly two problems” or as “there were exactly two problems that no student solved” (Wasow et. al., 2003: 3). Thus, as can be proved, this type of structural ambiguity does not lie on the bracketing of elements, but rather with the context of these utterances; i.e. whether it is more logical to think that “the chicken is going to eat” or that “it is going to be eaten”, and that “no student solved exactly two problems” or that “there were two specific problems which were not solved”, respectively.

3.1.4. *Pragmatic ambiguity*

Language is a tool for communication –for language use– which is linked to sociocultural and contextual conditions. As Yule (1996) explains, the fields of pragmatics is the linguistic domain of “the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how context influences what is said” (as cited in Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 2018: 769).

It can happen that speakers may say something but they may implicate a different thing, different understandings of the same message being possible. If these utterances are identical regarding their syntactic, lexical and phonetic structures but their pragmatic function differs, it will be a case of the so-called *pragmatic ambiguity*. As Ferrari et. al. put it,

“A pragmatic ambiguity occurs in a requirement if different readers give different interpretations to it, depending on the context of the requirement. The context of a requirement includes the other requirements of the same document, which influence the understanding of the requirement, and the background knowledge of the reader, which gives a meaning to the concepts expressed in the requirement.” (2014: 1)

Therefore, what Ferrari et. al. (2014) come to mean is that readers of a given message draw one meaning of it in their minds lying on the message’s constituents. This knowledge, at the same time, is based on their background knowledge and it can lead to understanding a different thing from what the speaker meant if the message is ambiguous. Furthermore, Walton (1996) (as cited in Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 2018: 770) argues that “pragmatic ambiguity arises when the statement is not specific, and the context does not provide the information needed to clarify the statement”. Therefore, if the context was more explicit, it would be understood more easily and individuals would not fall into pragmatic ambiguity.

Common examples of pragmatic ambiguity deal with Indirect Speech Acts, as explained by Searle (1969, 1979) and Austin (1960). For instance, “Can you close the window?” (Asher & Lascarides, 2006: 26), which is an interrogative sentence in its surface structure with the deep structure of a request. As Asher and Lascarides put it, an Indirect Speech Act is “an utterance in which one Speech Act is performed indirectly by performing another” (2006: 183); therefore, they can trigger ambiguities since the hearer’s response may not correspond to the speaker’s initial intentions. What is more, Indirect Speech Acts aim at promoting Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort, as language users can employ these utterances in order to convey different meanings. In favour of this, even though ambiguity may be perceived as a problem for communication, Dodig-Crnkovic & Burgin state that “once we understand that context disambiguates, then ambiguity is not a problem –it is something you can take advantage of, because you can reuse easy words in different contexts over and over again” (as cited in Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 1995: 227). That is to say, language is economical because the same surface structure may be employed in different occasions to express various meanings due to the deep structure it may convey.

3.2. Some areas in which linguistic ambiguity can be found

The speakers of a given language may face linguistic ambiguity in a wide variety of domains, including newspaper headlines, advertising slogans and jokes. As will be pointed out, ambiguities aim at creating a source of humour within all these domains and at catching the individuals’ attention through that humorous sense. For this purpose, a corpus of twenty-six sentences has been chosen in order to illustrate phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic ambiguities, belonging to different sources.

3.2.1. The case of newspaper headlines

Newspaper headlines have to comprise the information in very little space as they are really short and have to include information which gives readers some clues about what they deal with. In this regard, newspaper headlines take advantage of the Principle of Least Effort leading, sometimes, to linguistic ambiguities. That is to say, “headline writers often violate property ‘be clear, easy to understand, and unambiguous’ to create memorable headlines by being purposely ambiguous, and hence less clear and less easy to understand” (Ifantidou, 2009: 701).

Therefore, newspaper headlines are not absent of linguistic ambiguities; nevertheless, they have a written format with no obvious spoken potential. For that reason, phonological

ambiguities are null or near to null. Therefore, there is no clear reason in analysing them within this domain. Rather, the focus will be placed on lexical and syntactic ambiguities.

On the one hand, the great majority of examples including lexical ambiguity deal with polysemous words. Consider, for instance:

- (11) “Some day you might be sitting on a small fortune: Fashionable young furniture makers of recent years have proved to be worth investing in” (Partington, 2006: 128).
- (12) “Iraqi head seeks arms” (Bucaria, 2004: 288).
- (13) “Man struck by lightning faces battery charge” (Bucaria, 2004: 288).

These four examples’ double meaning is created through polysemy. For instance, in example (11), the gerund *sitting* may be understood figuratively (i.e. on a source of wealth) or literally (i.e. on a piece of furniture), as the noun *fortune* can also be understood literally (i.e. money) or metaphorically (i.e. as the furniture that enterprise provides may be compared with a fortune, employing then the concept to refer figuratively to their goods). On this point, furniture makers compare themselves and their products with the concept of fortune. The metaphorical interpretation of this headline would correspond with the audience sitting on one of their sofas (or any other piece of furniture), which would be the same as sitting on a fortune.

The ambiguity in example (12) depends on the twofold interpretation of the words *head* and *arms*⁵. First, as Bucaria (2004) argues, *head* can mean either “chief” or “the top part of body” and *arms* can be employed to refer to “weapons” or “body parts”. Then, “Iraqi head seeks arms” conveys the meaning that “the Iraqi chiefs are looking for weapons” or “that the top part of the body of an Iraqi troop (i.e. the head of an Iraqi troop) has lost *his* arms and is looking for them in order to have them attached” (Bucaria, 2004:288), this being the ambiguous and humorous interpretation of example (12). However, another meaning –which Bucaria does not mention– is that the head of the Iraqi troop –the leader– may be searching for his or her arms, which creates a humorous interpretation of the utterance.

Finally, example (13) implies also lexical ambiguity relying mainly on the words *battery* and *charge*. *Battery* can refer either to “the crime of attacking sb physically” or to “a device that is placed inside a car engine, clock, radio, etc. and that produces electricity that makes it work” (Hornby, 2015: 115), and *charge* may denote either “an official claim made by the police that sb has committed a crime” or “the amount or type of electricity that is put into a battery or carried by a substance” (Hornby, 2015: 246). Therefore, the sentence could mean either that a

⁵ Polysemous words may have a wide variety of meanings; however, only those which are more suitable for the utterances which have been chosen will be covered.

man has been accused for committing an offense affecting another person, or that a man is facing some kind of electrical charge. Besides, the word *lighting* helps to create the ambiguous utterance and the implicature that “the man struck by the lightning is not accused of having physically attacked someone, but he is to undergo some kind of electrical charge” (Bucaria, 2004: 288), creating in this way the humorous effect of the newspaper headline.

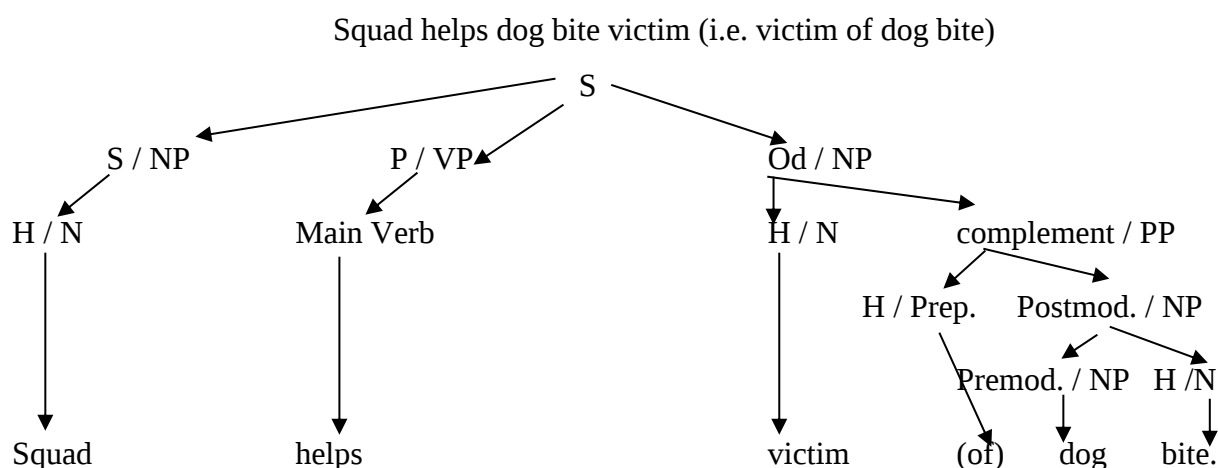
Besides, these three cases of lexical ambiguity exemplify the fact that it may not rely on the meaning of just one word, but every component of the sentence helps to create an ambiguous message and to imply something different from what, literally, the sentence seems to mean. What is more, the Cooperative Principle works between the writer of headlines and the reader of them because, as ambiguous meanings can be perceived, Grice’s Maxim of Manner (avoid ambiguity) is not fulfilled. This fact is not an easy issue to solve because it implies providing more information and newspapers headlines must be short. That is why, Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort is present in this case as newspaper headlines too, aiming at being brief and short due to their nature. Therefore, they would stand as an example of how following Zipf’s Principle may give rise to linguistic ambiguity.

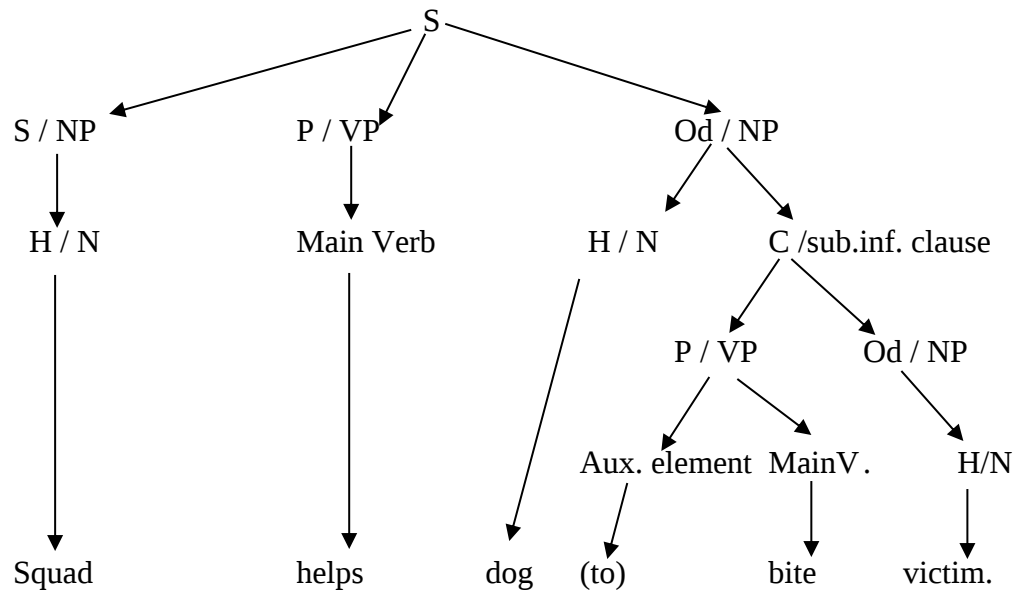
On the other hand, syntactic or structural ambiguity can also be perceived in the case of newspaper headlines. For example,

(14) “Squad helps dog bite victim” (Charina, 2017: 128).

(15) “Research fans hope for spinal injuries” (Bucaria, 2004: 292).

As syntactic ambiguity is distinguished because it happens due to the meanings which, according to different syntactic structures, a sentence can portray, both (14) and (15) must fall under that principle. In example (14), the sentence can mean either than a squad helps a victim of a dog bite or that the squad helped the dog to bite a victim. These meanings happen due to the following syntactic analyses:

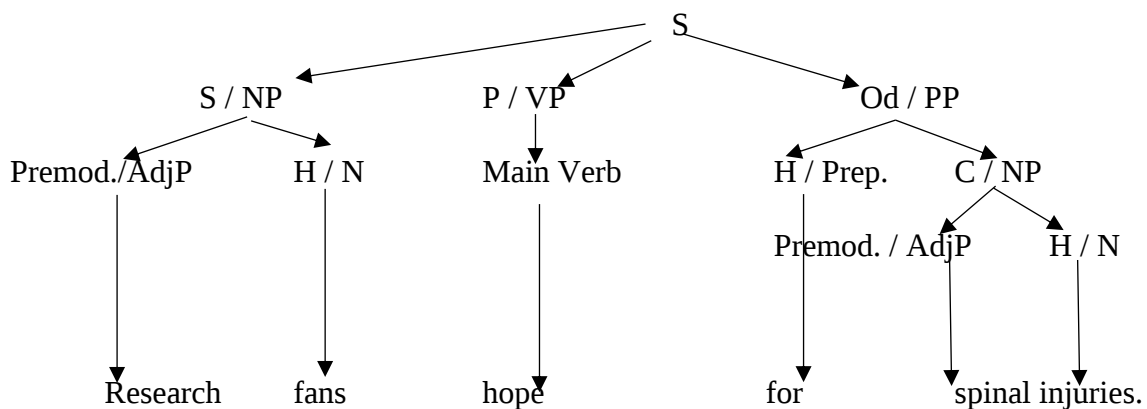
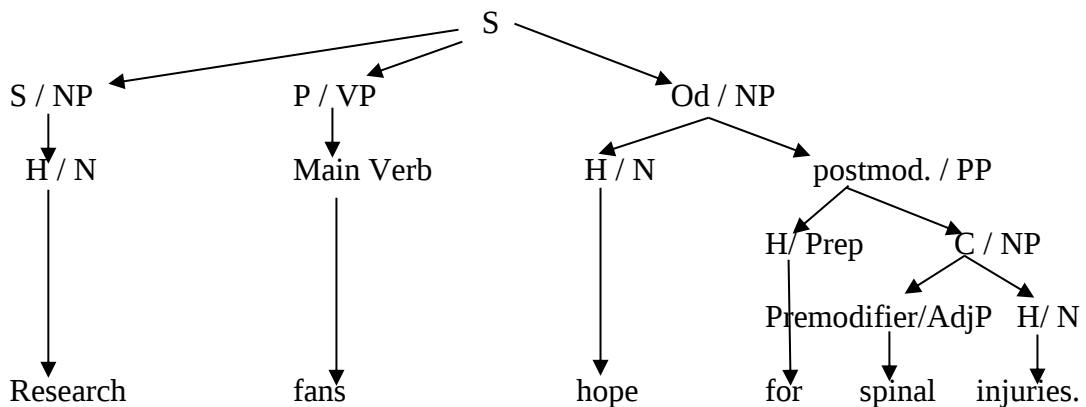




Then, the difference lies on the structure of the constituents *dog bite victim*. In the case of the first analysis, the meaning is that the squad actually helped the victim of the dog bite. Opposite, the second analysis implies that the squad helped the dog to bite a victim.

In case (15), the sentence can be analysed in the following ways:

Research fans hope for spinal injuries



As two possible analyses of the same utterance are possible, two possible meanings are portrayed, the ambiguity lying on the word *fans*, which can be interpreted as the third person singular of the verb *to fan* (i.e. to increase) or as a noun (i.e. supporters of something). In this regard, lexical ambiguities would be linked to syntactic ambiguities –the syntactic analyses being affected by the meanings of the words. Therefore, the first analysis would imply that research has increased the hope for spinal injuries whereas the second analysis suggests that the supporters of research are hoping for spinal injuries, this last being the interpretation in which humour lies.

Finally, not many instances of pragmatic ambiguity have been found in the case of newspaper headlines. The reason for this may be that headlines are short and brief, with little context surrounding its constituents. Nonetheless, the following headline could exemplify a case of pragmatic ambiguity in newspaper headlines, as the humorous and ambiguous sense of this sentence is that it can be interpreted as a command: –“include your children when you bake cookies”– or as a suggestion –“you should include your children in the cookies that you bake” (Charina, 2017: 128). Hence, this is an example of what Austin (1960) and Searle (1969, 1979) named as Indirect Speech Act.

(16) “Include your children when baking cookies” (Spalink, 2000: 189).

3.2.2. *The case of advertisement slogans*

Slogans are phrases or mottos appearing in advertisements and therefore employed to promote products or services. In order to claim the fleeting attention of the consumers, slogans should innovate, they should be creative. This creative use of the language gives rise to the conative function of the language, which is considered to tend “towards the personal, the specific, the ambiguous and the indeterminate” (1992: 99), as Cook explains. This fact can trigger the appearance of linguistic ambiguities as a resource for humour, because “the ambiguities employed in advertising are usually pleasantly humorous, with one reading also typically suggesting the product and its virtues” (Díez Arroyo, 1995: 189).

Advertisement slogans can be either written or spoken; therefore, phonological ambiguities will play a major role when slogans have spoken potential. For instance, the following slogans are phonologically ambiguous through homophony:

(17) “We have courses to make grown man young and a young man the groan” (Yang, 2014: 331).

(18) “Even more stylish. Even more smiles per gallon. (Volvo DRIVe) [GQ, Men’s Health]” (Díaz Pérez, 2012: 23).

(19) “125 grammes. Tonnes of tradition” (Díaz Pérez, 2012: 28).

As being phonologically ambiguous implies that two or more words sound more or less the same, the previous examples should follow that general idea. On this point, example (17) includes homophony in the word *groan* sharing the same pronunciation as *grown* (i.e. /grəʊn/). Then, if the second *groan* is considered, the interpretations for this advertisement slogans would be that the enterprise has courses to make young men seem older, or that there are courses to make young men be in pain or unhappy. The second interpretation creates humour as the enterprise wants to sell their goods, not to make people believe they actually have courses to make young people feel unhappy.

(19)’s ambiguous element is *tonnes*, which sounds phonetically the same as *tons*, with a *tonne* being a measuring weight which corresponds to 1,000 kilograms, and *tons* being an informal expression used to refer to a great quantity of something. Then, as 125 grammes is not equal to one tonne, the sentence would be interpreted as a great amount of tradition, for the enterprise maybe. This time, the humour lies on the non-correspondence between 125 grammes and one tonne.

Moreover, (18) is an example of a phonologically ambiguous utterance through homophony (paronymy), present in the words *smiles* and *miles*, which do not sound strictly the same and denote different meanings. Nonetheless, the ambiguous and humorous effect lies there, as both *smiles* and *miles* fix in the structure of the slogan. As Díaz Pérez explains, the miles interpretation implies “that more distance will be travelled with the same amount of petrol and, on the other hand, the smiles interpretation indicates that driving the Volvo car is an amusing and pleasurable experience” (2012: 23).

To continue, slogans can also be lexically ambiguous –with any of their constituents denoting more than one meaning–, for instance:

(20) “Adjustamatic Beds: For the rest of your life” (Korčák, 2012: 26).

(21) “Take your mother-in-law out back and shoot her” (Kadlub, 2017: 48).

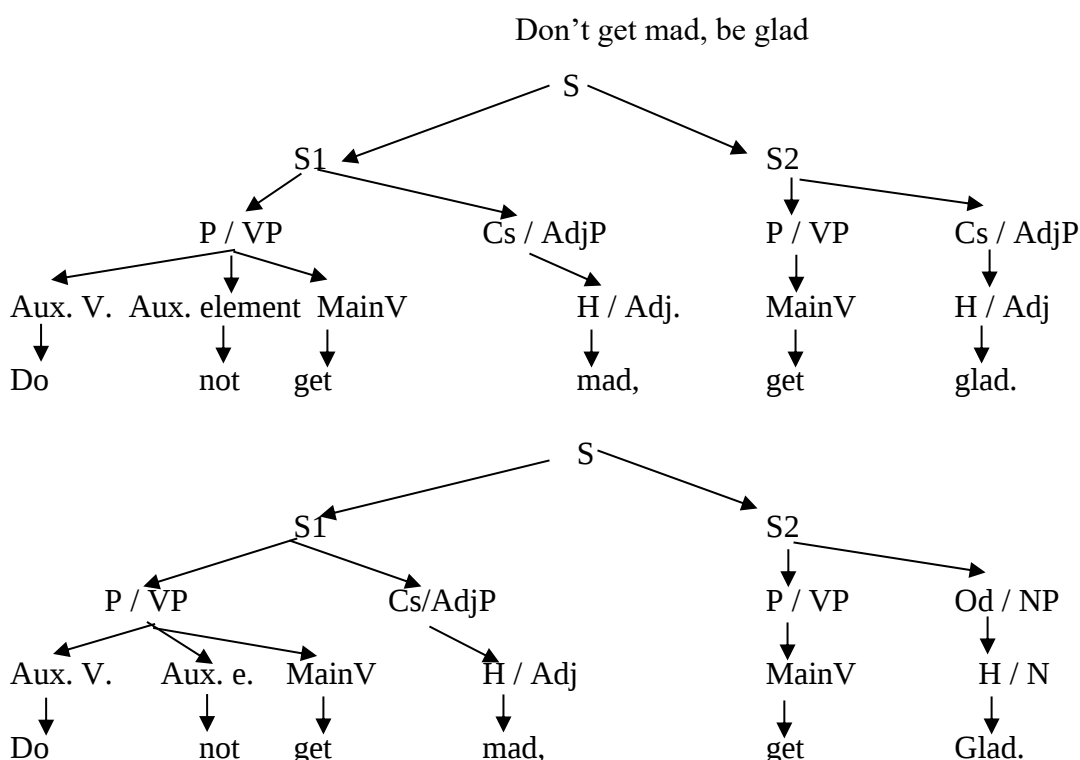
Both examples are lexically ambiguous through polysemy. In the first case (20), *rest* is the ambiguous word, which can mean either “the remaining part of something that remains” [in this case, your life] or “period of relaxing, sleeping or doing nothing after a period of activity” (Hornby, 2015: 1319-1320). The utterance’s meaning will vary depending on which entry we associate with *rest* in this sentence, which can suggest that the beds will last for the part of your life that remains or that you will have the best relaxing time in that bed, enhancing the products’ virtues –as Marisa Díez Arroyo (1995: 189) explained.

In the second case (21), the lexical ambiguity is found in the verb *to shoot*, which can signify “to fire a gun or other weapon; to fire sth from a weapon” or “to make a film / movie or photograph of sth” (Hornby, 2015: 1432). If the first meaning of *shoot* is chosen, the utterance’s meaning would be to “take your mother-in-law out back and fire at her with a gun”. Opposite, if the second meaning is preferred, the sentence would imply to take pictures of your mother-in-law. The humorous meaning lies on the interpretation of presupposing that the audience has got a mother-in-law and would fire at her with a gun, instead of interpreting the main aim of the advertisement slogan, which is selling cameras to take –shoot– pictures, not people.

Furthermore, advertisement slogans are not absent of syntactic ambiguities, although not many instances of this type have been found. The following slogan about garbage bags from the Glad company is worth mentioning:

(22) “Don’t get mad, get glad” (Kadlub, 2017: 47).

The word *glad* is the constituent which creates the syntactic ambiguity in this advertisement slogan, as it can be analyzed as an adjective following the linking verb *get*, or as a noun (direct object) following a transitive verb, as follows:



According to these syntactic analyses, there will be two possible meanings of the utterance; the first one being that you should not feel angry but pleased about buying their garbage bags; meanwhile, the second interpretation would be that you should not feel stupid and, in order not to feel that way, you should buy their products or goods. Then, the humorous

effect is found in the first interpretation, and this helps to create a link between their products – Glad company’s products– and the state of feeling glad (emphasizing the state of joy that the products being to their consumers –therefore, emphasizing the products’ virtues).

Finally, pragmatic ambiguity is the last type to be considered in relation to advertisement slogans. For that, the following slogans will be taken into account:

(23) “Pioneer: Everything you hear is true” (Korčák, 2012: 25).

(24) “When she washes the dishes, he should wash the dishes with her. When she mops up the floor, he should mop up the floor with her” (Kadlub, 2017: 47-48).

These two instances have something in common; their syntactic analyses and meaning of the words are the same in the two possible interpretations. However, what changes is what they refer to by their meanings.

What (23) refers to is not really clear. In fact, what the company implies is that with its products, the sound will be as clear as possible; almost as if the sound was real. However, this slogan could mean that everything you hear from people talking about the products they sell will be true. This second interpretation could have positive or negative effects as people may speak positively about the company’s products or not; however, more often than not, this expression is said when consumers have good opinions to give about the products. Besides, example (24) encourages newlyweds to spend together as much time as possible, either washing the dishes, mopping up the floor, etc. Nevertheless, the utterance could also imply that husbands should employ their wives as an instrument for doing the washing, mopping the floor, etc. –and here is where the humorous effect lies, even though not everyone will laugh at this instance of pragmatic ambiguity.

3.2.3. *The case of jokes*

Jokes are based on puns in order to create humour. In other words, without that play of words the joke would not exist because of the lack of humour. In this regard, Chiaro explains that jokes can play with the language by including elements which are linguistically ambiguous, for instance, features such as “sounds, words, parts of words and even syntactic structures can all become two-faced” (1992: 43). Thus, phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic ambiguities as a resource for humour in jokes will be analyzed.

On the one hand, the following instances are examples of phonologically ambiguous utterances through homophony:

(25) “‘Waiter!’
‘Yes, sir-’

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s bean soup, sir.’

‘No matter what it’s been. What is it now?’” (Semiz, 2014: 11)

(26) “I keep reading ‘The Lord of the Rings’ over and over. I guess it’s just force of the hobbit” (Seewoester, 2009: 7)

(27) “Woman: ‘What is the brightest idea in the world?’

Man: ‘Your eye, dear’.” (Giorgadze, 2014: 274)

(28) “Why didn’t the skeleton go to the party?

Because he had no body to go with.” (Sánchez Roura, 1995: 226)

In (25) the humour lies on the words *bean* and *been*, and here is where phonological ambiguity is found. The client asks for the name of the dish which has been offered by the waiter, and he replies that it is “bean soup”. However, the client understands that it was soup, and he wants to know what it is now, no matter what that dish was in the past. The fact is that the name of the dish is “bean soup”, and as the words *bean* and *been* are both pronounced as /bi:n/, the client understands a different thing from what the waiter really replies to him.

More or less the same process is found in instance (26), in which the humorous and ambiguous use of the language lies on the word *hobbit*, nearly being a homophone for *habit* (/ˈhæbɪt/), especially in General American English. On the one hand, *The Hobbit* was J. R. R. Tolkien’s precedent work to *The Lord of The Rings* and it may be the fact that the speaker enjoyed reading *The Hobbit* what forces him or her to read over and over again *The Lord of the Rings*. On the other hand, it makes sense to understand this utterance as “the force of the habit” as it is a routine to keep reading over and over again the novel. Therefore, both interpretations would be accurate in spoken English due to the fact that *hobbit* and *habit* are near homophones. Nevertheless, when it comes to written English, the joke is lost because *hobbit* and *habit* do not share their spellings and phonological ambiguity disappears.

Besides, what happens in (27) is that *idea* could be understood as *eye*, *dear* due to a confusion between the boundaries of the words *eye* and *dear* and the fact that these two words together are homophones of the word *idea*, being pronounced as /aɪˈdɪə/. Hence, phonological ambiguity arises in instance (27) due to the sum of homophony and the confusion between the boundaries of the words *eye* and *dear*.

Finally, the humorous sense of instance (28) is due to the different interpretations of *no body* in spoken English. If these two words are considered separately, the joke would mean that the skeleton did not go to the party because it did not have a body to go with, it was just bones; however, if “no body” is understood as two words being linked (i.e. as “nobody”), the utterance

would mean that the skeleton did not go to the party because it had no company to go with. Therefore, both interpretations are possible due to phonological reasons. This is another case of the confusion between the boundaries of two words plus homophony.

To continue, the following conversations exemplify how lexical ambiguity can create humour when dealing with jokes:

(29) “The following conversation took place between a visiting American and an Eton schoolmaster:

‘Do you allow your boys to smoke?’ the American asked.

‘I’m afraid not,’ was the reply

‘Can they drink?’

‘God gracious, no.’

‘What about dates?’

‘Oh, that’s quite all right,’ said the master, ‘as long as they don’t eat too many’.”

(Shourie, 2001: 244)

(30) “In the dinner of a southbound train, a honeymoon couple noticed two nuns at another table. When neither could identify the religious habit, the husband volunteered to settle the question.

‘Pardon me, Sisters,’ he said, pausing politely before the nuns’ table, ‘but would you mind telling me your Order?’

One of the nuns smiled at him. ‘Not at all,’ she said cheerfully. ‘Lamb chops –and they’re delicious!’” (Hoke, 1965: 194, as cited in Lew, 1996: 25)

(31) ““River Ravi flows in what state?’

- ‘Liquid’” (Charina, 2017: 121)

(32) ““Did you take a bath?’

- ‘No, only towels, is there one missing?’” (Giorgadze, 2014: 274)

What happens in case (29) is that a visiting American schoolmaster is asking an Eton schoolmaster about the students’ habits, whether they allow the students to smoke, drink, etc. The humour of this joke lies on the fact that the teacher asks what happens with *dates*, and here two possible interpretations are possible, as the word is lexically ambiguous through polysemy. The question could be understood as whether the Eton schoolmaster allows the students to meet people of opposite sexes or whether she allows the students to eat dates. Obviously, the American schoolmaster wants to know if the Eton schoolmaster allows students to meet people from opposite sexes, and as she answers following the interpretation of *dates* as a type of food, the humour is found in the answer “as long as they do not eat too many (dates)”.

The same happens in sample (30), in which a honeymoon couple wants to know the order of two nuns who are in the same restaurant as them, the term *order* being lexically ambiguous. What the husband wants to know is which community of nuns they belong to, and as they answer considering *order* as the type of food they had ordered, humour arises.

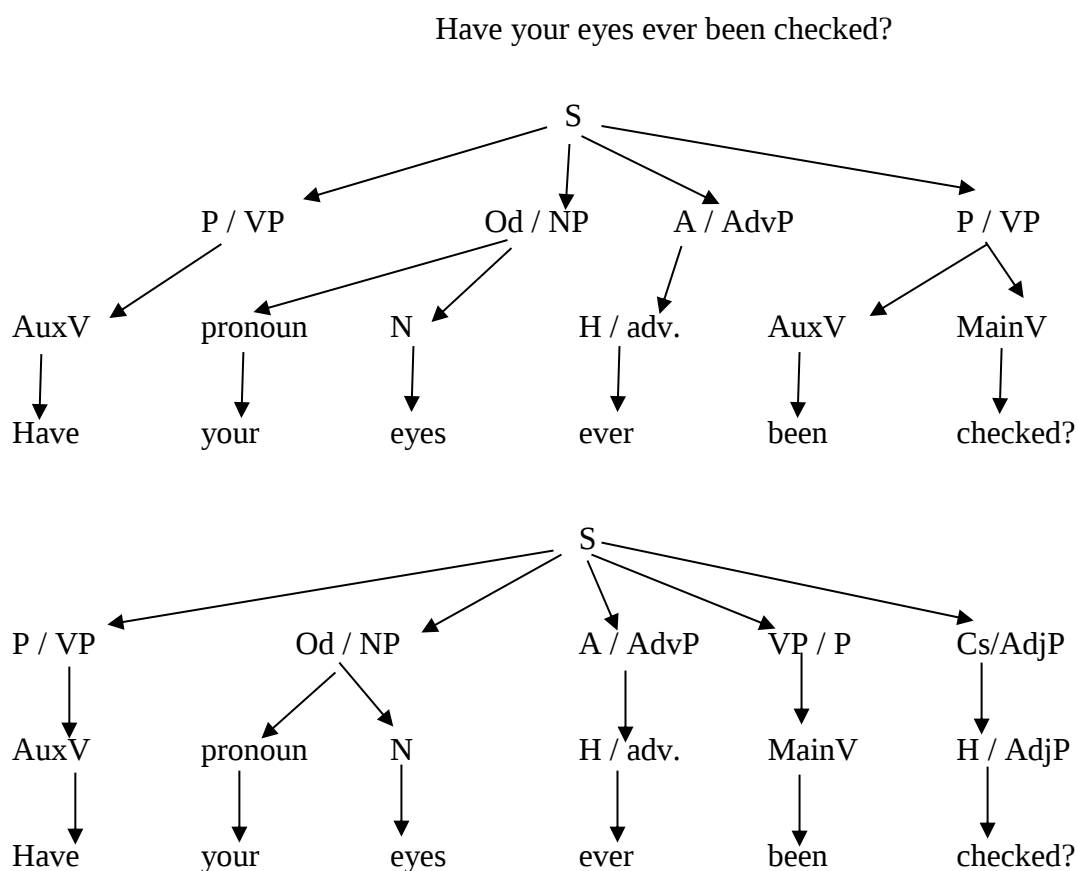
Besides, the ambiguous word found in instance (31) is the word *state*, with the utterance being understood as the physical condition of the River Ravi or as the nation in which it is found. Certainly, the question “River Ravi flows in what state?” refers to the second meaning of the word, with the speaker wanting to know where that river is found. Then, the response he is given creates the humour within the joke, as the answer “liquid” does not really fix the speaker’s desire. Besides, this exemplifies that almost all jokes flout Grice’s Maxim of Relation (Tang, 2016: 52), as the answer is not relevant to what the first speaker wanted to know. This helps to increase the humorous effect, which results in ambiguity. Therefore, the Maxims of Manner and Relation are linked –flouting the Maxim of Relation may trigger the creation ambiguous utterances; consequently, flouting the Maxim of Manner.

Example (32) deserves study because it is ambiguous due to the meanings of two words –*bath* and *take*. According to the interpretations given to those words, the utterance’s meaning will vary; therefore, the speaker could be wondering whether his or her listener had robbed a bath –the physical object– from somewhere, that being the reason why there is one bath which is lacking, or the speaker could be wondering whether his or her addressee had already had a shower, in which case *bath* would work as a verb. As has been mentioned, this utterance is lexically ambiguous because both *take* and *bath* can have different meanings. On the one hand, *take* can mean “to carry or move sth from one place to another” –in which case, it would imply that somebody has removed a bath from where it was originally placed– or it can be “used with nouns to say that sb is doing sth, performing an action, etc.” (Hornby, 2015: 1594, 1595) – meaning that somebody was washed, that is to say, somebody performed the action of bathing. On the other hand, *bath* can be employed as a noun to denote “a large, long container that you put water in and then get into to wash your whole body” or, as a verb, meaning “to give a bath to sb” (Hornby, 2015: 114), which would reinforce the meanings of *take*. Therefore, it is the combination of both concepts which creates ambiguity and humour. Besides, the interpretation of robbing a bath deals with *take* as the sentence’s main verb and with *bath* as its direct object, whereas the interpretation of taking a shower as bathing oneself deals with the terms to *take a bath* as a verbal locution –carrying out the action of washing.

Moreover, the use of language in jokes is not absent of syntactic ambiguity, as can be seen in:

- (33) “‘Have your eyes ever been checked?’
 - ‘No, they’ve always been blue’” (Sánchez Roura, 1995: 219)
- (34) “‘I rushed out and killed a huge lion in my pajamas.’
 - ‘How did the lion get in your pajamas?’” (Seewoester, 2009: 9)

In these instances, two possible meanings are possible due to the syntactic analyses of the sentences’ constituents. Therefore, dialogue (33) is syntactically ambiguous in the first speaker’s utterance because *checked* could work as an adjective or as the main verb of the question.

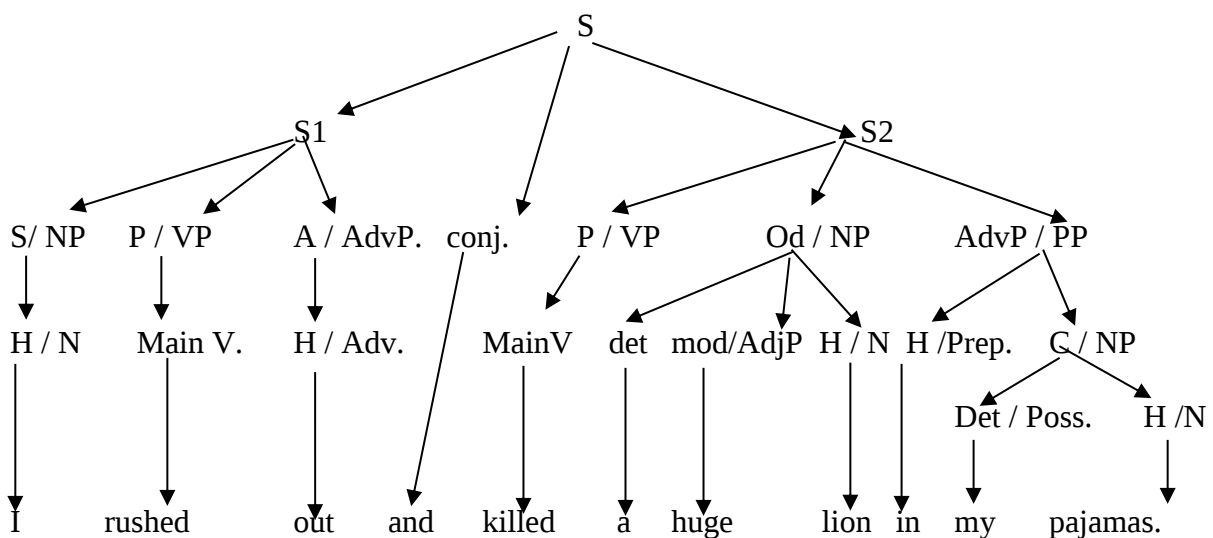
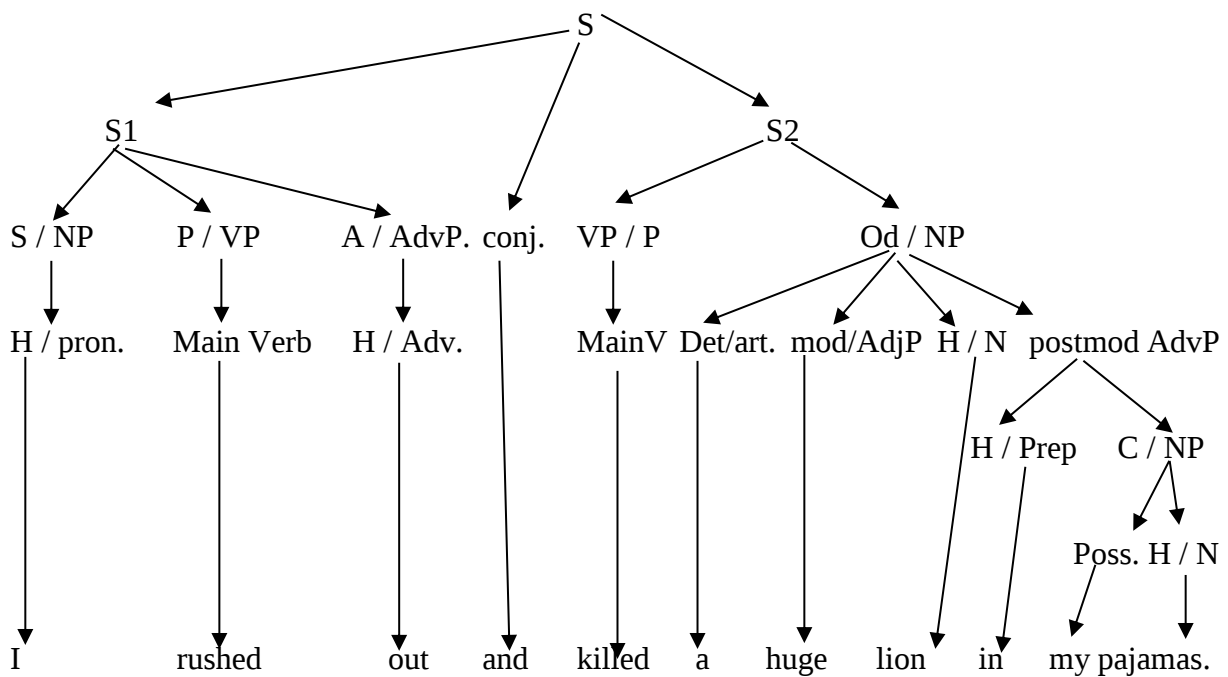


As these analyses show, the sentence could be understood as if the speaker was asking his or her addressee whether he or she had had his eyes checked, that is to say, whether he or she had gone to the oculist in order to know if she or he needs glasses or not –first syntactic analysis– or if the addressee’s eyes were of “a pattern of squares, usually of two colours” (Hornby, 2015: 251) –second syntactic analysis. Then, the fact that the standard meaning speakers have for the word *check* relates to the first meaning and that the second speaker replies that they have always been blue makes the humorous effect of the joke arise. Besides, as this sentence has different meanings depending on its syntactic –the analysis of its constituents–

and lexical –lying on the different meanings for the word *check* –it could be said to be both lexically and syntactically ambiguous.

Besides, utterance (34) could be understood as if a huge lion was inside the speaker's pajamas or that the speaker killed a huge lion when wearing his pajamas. That is why the listener and second speaker wonder how the huge lion got into the pajamas, astonished, as the listener interpreted the first option.

I rushed out and killed a huge lion in my pajamas



The first analysis demonstrates how the sentence could be interpreted as the lion being inside the speaker's pajamas whereas the second interpretation explains that the speaker was wearing his / her pajamas.

Finally, pragmatic ambiguity can also be found within the language of jokes. For example:

(35) "Constantinople is a very long word, can you spell it?" (Chiaro, 1992: 75).

(36) "On the morning of her birthday, a woman told her husband, 'I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace. What do you think it means?'

'Maybe you'll find out tonight,' he said.

That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. She ripped off the wrapping paper and found a book titled *The Meaning of Dreams*." (Tang, 2016: 54)

(37) "A Scotsman takes all his money out of the bank once a year for a holiday; once it's had a holiday he puts it back again" (Chiaro, 1992: 40)

What happens in pragmatically ambiguous utterances is that different interpretations are possible but it is not due to the way the constituents can be analyzed nor due to phonological or lexical reasons, but it rather depends on the context. In this regard, (35) is pragmatically ambiguous because it is not clear if the speaker wants *it* or *Constantinople* to be spelt as it is a case of anaphoric reference –i.e. *it* and *Constantinople* share their referents, that is, they are co-referents; consequently, whether the speaker is referring to *it* or to *Constantinople* is not clear enough.

Furthermore, what happens in (36) is that a woman said to her husband that she had dreamt he gave her a diamond necklace and asks him what that meant. The humorous side of the joke is that the husband gave her a book named *The Meaning of Dreams* so that his wife could know what her dream meant. What happens is that the wife asked in an indirect way her husband to give her a diamond as a present, not a book to know what that meant. The ambiguity is found in "I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace" because, even though it has the surface structure of a statement, in its deep structure it is a request, this being an example of an Indirect Speech Act.

Finally, (37) is similar to (35) in that it is not clear if it is the Scotsman who goes for a holiday, or it is the money he takes out of the bank what has a holiday, the fact being that there

are two possible meanings for this utterance as the source for enjoyment, even though common sense will disambiguate this sentence in favor of the interpretation that it is the Scotsman who goes out for a holiday, to which the fact that Scotsmen are said to be tight-fisted has to be added.

4. Conclusion

From the study of theories of linguists like Paul Grice, George Kingsley Zipf, J. L. Austin and J. Searle to the study of linguistic ambiguities within newspaper headlines, advertisement slogans and jokes, it has been demonstrated that this phenomenon can be exploited as a resource for humour. This effect is created by means of the second interpretation which is possible for certain utterances, due to their phonological, lexical, syntactic or pragmatic analyses.

As Sánchez Roura explains, “a great amount of British humour depends on playing with language in different ways, especially exploiting ambiguity at different levels” (1995: 209). Even though she analyses British comedy programmes from the point of view of the Spanish television, as she argues, this fact can be workable to the different areas which have been studied within this end-of-degree thesis.

Therefore, linguistic ambiguity seen as a means for the emergence of humour is a phenomenon which seems impossible to avoid in language. Nevertheless, being ambiguous would mean flouting Grice’s Maxim of Manner (1975) and following Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort (1949). Regarding J. L. Austin (1960) and J. Searle’s (1969, 1979) Speech-Act Theory, some ambiguous utterances may be classified as Indirect Speech Acts, but not all of them, if utterances happen to have performative deep structures which do not really coincide with their surface structure –i.e. a question working as a command.

However, language users should not forget that linguistic ambiguities can lead to misunderstandings, and therefore speakers should take care of the utterances they pronounce, being as clear as possible, since they must try to “speak informatively, truthfully, with relevance, clearly, and unequivocally” (Fredsted, 1998: 528-529), so following Grice’s Theory (1975).

Finally, according to Sánchez Roura, language users are able to solve linguistic ambiguities and “process the correct interpretation” thanks to “some sort of mechanism within our brain, helped by context, or by the language system itself, at each moment, without even giving much thought to the other possible one” (1995: 209-210), that is, what Krashen would call the *input* –the linguistic and non-linguistic context to which individuals are exposed– and the *intake* –the information which is processed.

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