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LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY: AN OVERVIEW

Student: González Expósito, Sheila

Tutor: Dr. Juan Ráez Padilla

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LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY: AN OVERVIEW

Abstract

The present document explores the linguistic phenomenon of ambiguity, highlighting its importance in language learning and meaning processing and the necessity of considering context in order to comprehend ambiguous messages appropriately. It is basically a theoretical study of linguistic ambiguity which tries to make a concise analysis of its types and the most remarkable works and scholars that have focused on this topic. In an attempt to prove how interesting as well as deceiving ambiguous words and sentences can be, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been analysed by means of the identification and explanation of some of the double senses found in the play. In addition, a comment on how foreign language students approach ambiguous words in English is included together with the proposal of an experiment that could be implemented in the future in order to see whether Spanish learners of English with a B1 certificate can identify ambiguous words and sentences and how they resolve ambiguity in written language.

Keywords: linguistic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, homonymy, polysemy, meanings, literature, learners, context, language disambiguation, Oscar Wilde.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language involves dealing with all the skills it presents: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the case of reading, literary texts are one of the most popular tools for students to practise and learn the language. This task involves the selection of books appropriate to the level of the students in order for them to develop adequate reading skills and comprehension and, as a result, increase their knowledge of the language.

There is a phenomenon in language that sometimes makes it hard for learners to understand messages due to the different possible interpretations of words and sentences and/or the intention of the speaker/writer. That phenomenon is the so-called *linguistic ambiguity*. At certain levels, especially low ones, learners are able to understand and

express basic and everyday situations but do not explore the wide possibilities of meanings that words present, considering thus just the most common definitions of the words or the ones they have been more in contact with. That is the reason why some intended meanings are lost and so the full comprehension of the work is not achieved, preventing readers from appreciating any attempt of humour or sarcasm intended by the author.

The above situation describes what happens, for example, with polysemous words such as *plain*. Not only is ambiguity present in lexis but it is also created at the structure level. Sometimes sentences are built in a way that makes them being interpreted in more than one way, creating thus structural ambiguity. Apart from that, phonology also leads to confusion, making an interesting choice when dealing with wordplay due to the existence of homophones.

These aspects will be examined in what follows paying especial attention to the different publications on language ambiguity and the figure of Oscar Wilde and his witty creative skills. It is necessary to explore the term ambiguity, how it works and the different types that can be encountered. Within the wide array of publications on the issue, more attention will be paid to those focused on literary works and second language learning. This information will establish the foundations for the design of a potential investigation on the role of ambiguity in EFL.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Ambiguity and its types. Explanation and examples.

Ambiguity is an interesting phenomenon of human language which plays an important part in everyday communication. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (4th ed.), ambiguity means “openness to different interpretations; or an instance in which some use of language may be understood in diverse ways” (2015). It is sometimes known as *plurisignation*, *multiple meaning* or *double entendre* when the message conveys sexual connotations, in the case of the latter.

In this sense, a word, phrase or sentence is ambiguous when it can be understood in several possible ways. There are two main types of ambiguity: *lexical* and *grammatical* (also called *structural* or *syntactic* –terms which will be used interchangeably throughout this essay. The first type is by far the most common and it occurs when a particular word has two or more meanings. An example of this is the word *lie*. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, as a noun it denotes “a statement made by somebody knowing it is not true” and as a verb, it means “to be or put yourself in a flat or horizontal position so that you are not standing or sitting” (2010), among other things. Grammatical ambiguity, on the other hand, is rooted in syntax and it happens when a sentence can be interpreted in more than one way. That is, the meaning of the sentence lies in the relationships between their words and clauses. Thus, the sentence “The police took down the man with a gun” means either that the police used a gun to take the man down, or that the man was holding a gun. Some authors, moreover, include two other categories: *phonological ambiguity* (Frost et al., 1990), and *pragmatic ambiguity* (Horn, 1985).

2.1.1. Lexical ambiguity

This type of plurisignation is caused by the fact that two or more meanings occur within a single word and it is mostly the result of *homonymy* and *polysemy*.

The former refers to the relationship between words which are grammatically equivalent and have identical spelling and/or pronunciation but have different meanings. Within this group we can distinguish three types, namely *true homonyms*, *homophones* and *homographs*, all three explained below. In order to facilitate understanding, examples of ambiguous words are included together with their definitions, which have been retrieved from the *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* (8th edition).

The first type refers to words that are both spelled and pronounced alike –*bow* /baʊ/, “to move your head or the top half of your body forwards and downwards as a sign of respect or to say hello or goodbye”, and *bow* /baʊ/, “the front part of a boat or ship”. In the case of *homophones*, they are words which are written differently but share the same pronunciation –such as *sail* /seɪl/, “to travel on water using sails or an engine”, and *sale* /seɪl/, “an act or the process of selling something”. Lastly, the term *homographs* is used to refer to words that are written the same but pronounced in a

different way –for instance, *lead* /li:d/, “to go in a particular direction or to a particular place”, and *lead* /led/, a chemical element.

Regarding polysemy, it occurs when a single word has multiple meanings. For some scholars polysemy and ambiguity are two separate things (Tuggy, 1993) while others consider the former a phenomenon contained within ambiguity (Cann, 1993). The reality is that their relation is not perfectly clear cut, but given that polysemous words can actually be ambiguous, they will be included within lexical ambiguity for the purpose of this study.

Polysemy occurs with words such as *lip*, which means both “either of the two soft edges at the opening to the mouth” and “the edge of a container or a hollow place in the ground” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2010). Another example could be the noun *front*, which according to the *OALD* can denote “the position that is in the direction that sb/sth is facing”, “an area where fighting takes place during a war”, and “the line where a mass of cold air meets a mass of warm air” (2010), among other meanings. As a consequence, in a sentence like “Please, come to the front”, without further context, it is not possible to get an accurate meaning of the word itself.

The controversy lies in how to determine whether two words are homonyms or whether different meanings correspond to the same lexical item. Sometimes it depends on the users’ criteria; there are words which have related meanings that overlap, which would lead us to treat them as a case of polysemy, while other words do not share anything in common, which would make us consider them homonyms (Dash, 2010). However, users’ intuition is not always certain. According to authors like Palmer, the key aspect is that of origin. Presumably, polysemes have related meanings and origins while homonyms do not. But how possibly could a simple reader/listener be aware of this? The most effective way is by using a dictionary. The different meanings of polysemous words would appear within the same entry, while homonymous words are listed separately in dictionaries, making thus clear that they are different unrelated words (Palmer: 1976).

Lexical ambiguity and ambiguity in general is easily solved when context is taken into account. However, some linguistic contexts do not provide sufficient information to disambiguate meaning. The use of multi-defined words requires the writer or speaker to clarify the context in which they appear, and sometimes elaborate

on their specific intended meaning. More problematic are those words whose senses express closely related concepts. Consider the word *fantastic* in the following sentence: “That is a fantastic tale!” –meaning either excellent; “strange and showing a lot of imagination” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2010) or even used as a synonym of absurd. Another example is the lexeme *run* in “*Running* marathons can be fun”, where running can be interpreted as “taking part in the marathon” but also as “being in charge of its organisation”.

Lexical ambiguity is very common in advertisements and newspapers headline. Among other techniques, advertisers tend to use lexical ambiguity in their campaigns in order to persuade potential buyers, an effective technique based on the several possible meanings that a word can adopt (Díez Arroyo, 1995). In the following slogan ambiguity is created by the word *browning*, which can be interpreted in two different manners: “As lunch approached it wasn’t just me that was browning nicely...” (Marie Claire, in Díez Arroyo, 1995). On the one hand and linked to the term *lunch*, *browning* could be understood as cooking (making food brown from heat). On the other, the object pronoun *me* activates the meaning of getting a tan.

2.1.2. Structural ambiguity

According to Crystal’s *A Dictionary of Linguistic and Phonetics*, this type of ambiguity refers to “a construction with more than one grammatical interpretation in terms of constituent analysis; also called grammatical ambiguity” (Crystal, 2008: 458). A widely used example, also included in this entry, is *old men and women*, where *old* can modify the first noun (i.e. only men are old) or both (i.e. men and women are old).

The meaning of any sentence is determined by the meanings of its words (or morphemes) and their syntactical arrangement. Hence, although all the words of a sentence are clear in its individual meaning, there may be different underlying syntactic structures (syntactic trees) which can yield to more than one interpretation. That is the case of “Call me a cab”, where the producer is either asking for a cab service or to be called a cab himself/herself.

This type of ambiguity is very common in compressed messages like advertisement slogans or newspaper headlines, where the elimination of nonessential words can distort the meaning. The term nonessential is referred to the so-called

function words, those which express a grammatical or structural relationship with other words in a sentence (content words). In contrast to content words, function words have little or almost meaningless content but it does not mean they are useless. In fact sometimes, their omission may involve an obstacle in the message's comprehension. This group of words includes articles, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, modals, interjections and quantifiers (Fries, in Rus, 1956).

Let us consider the following newspaper heading: "Squad helps dog bite victim" (Bucaria, 2004: 16). The structural ambiguity is made possible by the fact that *bite* can be interpreted as both a noun and a verb. If considered a noun it is modified by the previous noun *dog* meaning that the squad helped someone who was bitten by a dog. On the other hand, the lack of function words makes it possible for *bite* to act as a verb and so the squad helps a dog to bite the victim.

In English syntax there are many grammatical situations that can be considered ambiguous which results in different subtypes of structural ambiguity. In order to narrow the scope, David Crystal subdivision will be considered here. He distinguished between two mayor groups: phase-structure ambiguity and transformational ambiguity. This division matches the types of grammar included by Noam Chomsky in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957). In accordance with these notions, *phrase-structure ambiguity* occurs when "alternative constituent structures can be assigned to a construction" (Crystal, 2008: 22-23), as in the case of the previously mentioned *old men and women*. On the other hand, *transformational ambiguity* derives from "two or more distinct underlying structures" (Lyons, 1977: 403). The commonly mentioned example "*visiting relatives* can be boring" is a clear case of transformational ambiguity since *visiting* can function as both the action of paying a visit to someone or as an adjective part of the noun phrase (NP) which modifies its nucleus, *relatives*.

Another relevant and related notion in this context is that of *garden path sentence*. Sometimes structural ambiguity is just momentary and immediately resolved once we have finished reading/listening to a sentence. The name of this type of ambiguity comes from the expression "to be led down/up the garden path" (Crystal, 2008: 205), meaning to be misled, deceived. It happens when we read and understand one word at a time, when the sentence requires to be read until the end to be comprehensible. An example of this can be "Fat people eat accumulates" (Pinker, 2003:

211). If the meanings are understood word by word then *fat* is considered to be part of the NP and not as part of an elliptical relative clause (“The fat that people eat accumulates”) and *eat* as the main verb of the sentence preceding a direct object, which is not the case.

Among the dozens of grammatical structures that can cause ambiguity, the most frequent ones are listed below, cited by Stageberg (1968) in “Structural Ambiguity for English Teachers”:

1. “-ing” verb + noun: *Flying planes* are dangerous
2. Separable verb, or verb + prepositional phrase: He stood *drinking in* the moonlight.
3. Verb or adjective: Social legislation is the way to better *living*.
4. Function noun or determiner: We observed *another* sail.
5. Adverb of place or of direction: The children ran *outside*.
6. “Then” – adverb of time or of result: I’m not going home *then*.
7. “Simply” – adverb or qualifier: The building was *simply* demolished.
8. Noun + noun head: *student hero*.
9. Adjective + noun + noun head: *new patient counsellor*.
10. Predeterminer + noun + noun head: *double job pay*.
11. Noun head + prepositional phrase + participial phrase: *A Bavarian of good family already disillusioned with Nazism*.
12. Noun head + participial phrase + prepositional phrase: *The children watching the fireworks in the back yard* were elated.
13. Noun verb + prepositional phrase + appositive: *The married daughter of Brigid O’Toole, a slovenly woman*, had untidy housekeeping habits.
14. Noun head + infinitive phrase + prepositional phrase: *attempt to break strike by Negroes*. (Stageberg, 1968: 30-33)

Sometimes ambiguity results from a combination of both lexical and structural ambiguities, giving rise to the so-called *lexical category ambiguities* (McDonald, 1993). This occurs when a word can function as different lexical categories, adopting thus different meanings. That is the case of *straight* (“This is a *straight* flight to Moscow” [adj.] and “He went *straight* home” [adv.]); *attack* (“I’d never experienced an anxiety *attack* before” [n.] and “Some people *attack* verbally when they are nervous” [v]). This type of ambiguity can be momentary but once the context is considered, the comprehension problems are usually solved. There are instances, however, in which the use of these words leads to confusion. Consider, for example, the word *drink* in the

following construction: “Steve saw her *drink*”, where *drink* can fulfil two different lexical categories: the category of noun –‘a liquid for drinking’– and the category of verb –‘to take liquid into your mouth and swallow it’. As a result, the syntactic structure is also altered and so the message can be understood in two different ways. The former situation would imply that Steve saw the drink that belonged to her and so *drink* is the direct object of *her*, whereas the other situation means that Steve saw her when she drunk something, where *drink* becomes the complement of the object *her*.

2.1.3. Phonological ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity is one of the least documented types of linguistic ambiguity. It could be considered as one subtype within lexical ambiguity given its similarity with homophones. However, this type of ambiguity can also happen in spoken language when joining words. According to Shultz and Pilon it is not just a question of words, but this type of ambiguity occurs when “a given phonological sequence can be interpreted in more than one way” (1973). An example of this kind of ambiguity can be the noun *ice-cream* and the sentence *I scream*, which can cause confusion or used to create humour.

Maybe it is more appropriate to include the case of homophones in this section, since ambiguity is created due to pronunciation and not spelling. That means that ambiguity resulting from homophones would only work in oral language and not in writing, unless the message is read aloud. That is to say, no ambiguity would be created when encountering the words *taught/tort* in a written text, since they are clearly distinct in spelling, but when they appear in spoken language, they are pronounced alike (/tɔ:t/).

2.1.4. Pragmatic ambiguity

Pragmatics is the term applied to the “study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication” (Crystal, 2008). When speakers produce an utterance it is necessary to consider the social context in order to grasp the meaning, and not limit it to the semantic and grammatical relations. In this context, we talk about speech acts or any of the acts that may be performed by a speaker in making an utterance such as apologising, complaining, greeting or requesting.

Consider the sentence “Can you pass me the salt?” The message is clear in semantic terms and so is the grammatical connection among its elements. However, it could be understood in two different ways. Literally speaking, it refers to the physical ability of handing an object but, pragmatically, and taking into account the different uses of “can”, it is a request made to someone and can be synonymous with “Pass me the salt, please”.

2.1.5. Linguistic ambiguity vs. vagueness

When talking about linguistic ambiguity the term vagueness usually comes to the fore and sometimes both are used interchangeably. However, there exist some nuances that need to be commented upon. Ambiguity is not commonly seen as a problem in language. In fact, it is permitted for a word or message to be understood in several ways. Vagueness, on the other hand, is a negative effect caused by the lack of clarity and so it is something not desired. The receiver fails to entirely understand the producer’s message because the words used seem abstract and lack detail. There are many vague expressions in the English language, among them those related to quantities such as *many* (how much is it denoting? 50? 5000? 5 million?), *a few*, and *a great deal*. As can be seen, these examples would not be confused with a case of ambiguity since they do not carry distinct meanings but rather are imprecise. That is to say, ambiguity corresponds to separate, sometimes connected, meanings while vagueness implies unity of signification.

2.2. Elements of ambiguity: pun, irony and innuendo.

Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Awad Ibrahim mentions in his article “Ambiguity In Poetry: Definition, Function And Elements” the three main elements of ambiguity in poetic composition, which can be applied as well to other contexts. These elements are irony, pun and innuendo.

In the first place, a **pun** is “an expression that achieves emphasis or humour by contriving an ambiguity, two distinct meanings being suggested either by the same word or by two similar-sounding words”, according to the definition included in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Two kinds of puns can be distinguished; namely, homographic and homophonic. The former refers to those words that are spelled the

same (homographs) but pronounced differently. Douglas Adams' line shows an example of this type, although a homophonic pun is included as well: "You can tune a guitar, but you can't tuna fish. Unless of course, you play *bass*" (Wikipedia, n.d.), where *bass* corresponds to two different pronunciations and meanings: /beɪs/ as referred to a musical instrument and /bəʊs/ meaning a kind of fish.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* the following passage can be found: "A trade, sir, that, I hope, I may use with a safe conscience, which is, indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles". This is an example of homophonic pun, that is, two words that are spelled in a different way are pronounced the same. There is no misunderstanding in the interpretation of the word *sole* as the bottom part of a shoe in its written form, but when read aloud it also evokes the term *soul* since both are pronounced as /səʊl/.

As far as irony is concerned, *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as "the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean, often as a joke and with a tone of voice that shows this" (2010). As it is included in this definition, in order for irony to be appreciated, it is important how a text is read since using the wrong tone would make the irony be lost and so the desired effect would not be achieved.

Irony may be divided into three categories; namely verbal, dramatic and situational, but for the purpose at hand, only verbal irony will be considered here. Multiple examples of ironic language can be found in literary compositions. The following passage corresponds to Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, where Fortunato and Montesor make a toast to the buried:

"I drink", he said, "to the buried that repose around us."

"And I to your *long* life." (Poe, 1984: 75)

The irony here lays in the fact that Montesor is aware of Fortunato's destiny, who will die soon while Fortunato unknowingly toast to his own death.

Lastly, there is the case of innuendo. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* an innuendo is "an indirect remark about somebody or something, usually suggesting something bad or rude." In turn, *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "a remark or remarks that suggest something sexual or something unpleasant but do not refer to it directly." Innuendos can be used in daily language as a way of sending an

obscene message hidden behind polite and innocent words. To mention but an example, the following passage can be found in Hitchcock's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*: "I wouldn't mind having a free meal in there". The sentence is uttered by a policeman after seen a couple kissing, which makes clear references to sex (Novak, 1986).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term ambiguity dates back to the Middle Ages (from Old French *ambiguite* or Latin *ambiguitas*, from *ambiguus* 'doubtful') and can be ambiguous itself. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it refers to 1) a word or statement that can be understood in more than one way and 2) the state of being difficult to understand or explain because of involving many different aspects. Traditionally, ambiguity has been of great interest for philosophers, lexicographers, linguists, critics, translators, authors, poets, and just about everyone who considers the interpretations of linguistic signs.

Numerous papers on this aspect have been elaborated and published. They tackle ambiguity from different perspectives: its effect in communication, its presence in literary works, its implications in language learning and education, etc. Many of them explore the topic from the point of view of poetry. In this context, ambiguity is seen as intrinsic to poetic composition since, as William K. Wimsatt and Brooks acknowledged, "the norm for poetry has always included what they call multiple implication" (Wimsatt and Brooks, 1957, in E. Cook, 2008-2009:232).

Ambiguity is notably present in literature, especially in poetry, used as a device that allows authors to hide or give multiple meanings to words in order to make their poems open to the readers' interpretations. As Jakobson put it, ambiguity is a common device of poetry, "an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry [...] The supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous" (Jakobson, 1960).

A remarkable and influential work focused on ambiguity is William Empson's well-known book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, filled with examples drawn from poems where the critic defended it as a source of poetic richness rather than a lack of precision. It is a complex book which deeply examines this phenomenon and can be considered mainly as an analysis of poetical ambiguity which explores the conflicts within the

author. According to Empson, a term is ambiguous when “there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading” (1930). According to the literary critic, the term ambiguity can be branched off as follows:

1. The first type of ambiguity corresponds to metaphor, by the identification and comparison of two elements.
2. Second-type ambiguities are to be found when two or more meanings are resolved into one.
3. The third type describes those meanings that are apparently different but are connected through context, as in the case of puns.
4. The fourth type occurs when alternative meanings combine to make clear the author’s state of mind.
5. The fifth type is described as some sort of confusion created by the author’s indecision in the process of writing.
6. Sixth-type ambiguity results when the message is not clearly communicated, it might be contradictory or irrelevant, and the reader has to decide how to interpret it.
7. The seventh type results from the combination of two opposite meanings, consequence of the author’s mind division. This is, according to Empson, the most ambiguous type of all.

(Empson, 1930)

Critics such as John Gross (1984) hold the view that the book sheds a light upon the readers’ mind and helps them to understand texts better. However, others like Charles I. Glicksberg claim that *Ambiguity* is perhaps too dense and believe that Empson went too far on his examination and his proposal of different definitions. Some even think that Empson has invented himself some ambiguities without taking into account whether they make sense or not. He seems a bit stilted, and that is Glicksberg’s opinion on his “William Empson: Genius of Ambiguity”. In his article, Glicksberg makes such sarcastic and critical statements as this: “Empson, will take a Shakespearian sonnet, and by manipulation, reveal unsuspected facets of meaning.” He also criticises Empson’s insistence in analysing poetry under the rules of the scientific method and by using his method of free association, which results in the murder of “the emotional and imaginative values of a poem”, transforming for instance, a “Shakespearian sonnet into

a conundrum” (Glicksberg, 1950). Moreover, he continues, Empson is “guilty of a pedantic ingenuity that is tortuous and irritating...” He finishes the article as follows:

“For those who enjoy this sort of thing, the Empsonian strategy undoubtedly has its value. For those who are interested primarily in poetry and only secondarily in the virtuosity of the critic, Empson's work and that of his followers must be rejected as misleading, sometimes dangerously so.” (Glocksberg, 1950: 337)

Ambiguity in literature can be both deliberate and unintentional, the latter seen as a point of weakness in poetic compositions that leads to vagueness and confusion but is normally resolved by context. Just as it is a fantastic device for literature it is not so desirable in other contexts such as scientific or legal texts and the news, where clarity is required. There is a controversy to whether linguistic ambiguity is a positive phenomenon of language or not. Within the group of people who consider linguistic ambiguity a problem are translators, who must decide how to interpret the authors' words and try to transmit the effect intended by them in their original writings. The main difficulty, of course, arises when words are considered in isolation. If linked to the context they appear in they gain sense, although sometimes more than one translation is permitted and more than one meaning needs to be transmitted for the text to make sense.

Even though it may be seen as a problem to communication, many scholars hold the view that it actually makes languages more interesting and efficient and it makes an extremely powerful tool for many authors (Piantadosi et al., 2011; Simpson, 1988, in Rodd et al. 2000). The fact that the same word can be used for different purposes is considered an advantage. Moreover, they explain, contexts help receivers to disambiguate messages. Deliberate ambiguity can be intended for fun or to make the reader think, or even to disguise controversial ideals. That is, the writer is sending a message in a non-explicit way. This type is also a typical and useful element in politicians' speeches and allows them to free themselves of any obligation and promises as the following quote clearly demonstrates: “through the use of ambiguity and question dodging, let a politician say not a single word about his principles or his creed, let him say nothing, promise nothing” (Hurford and Brendon, 1983, in Awwad, 2017).

There are numerous articles, some of which are mentioned below, about the presence of ambiguity in language systems. This ambiguity does not just occur at word

and sentence level, but also with morphemes. Let us consider, for example, the English morpheme *-er*, which can be added to words in order to denote profession (butcher) or inhabitant (Icelander), or *-s* used to form plurals (cats), the present simple third person (sits), to denote possession (Paul's), or meaning both *is* and *has* (Lisa's clever; Lisa's got lots of books).

Among the advocates of this linguistic phenomenon are Steven T. Piantadosi, Harry Tily and Edward Gibson who consider ambiguity as a necessary and beneficial aspect of communication systems (2011). Their work complemented previous research and demonstrated that ambiguity is not detrimental to human language and communication due to the comprehender's ability to disambiguate between possible meanings. In their study they proved that 1) context disambiguates meaning and 2) re-using words would minimise effort on the part of the producer. In their study they remark that the producer's effort is minimised but, obviously, the receiver's effort is greater. For that reason, a total ambiguous language would not be viable since it would create much confusion.

One of the arguments that support the benefits of ambiguous words in language is that multi-purpose words reduce the load of lexis our memory has to remember (Wasow et al., 2005, in Piantadosi et al., 2011). Piantadosi et al. state that learning new meanings for an already known-word is easier than learning a completely new word since the effort of memorization is lower, even more when dealing with short terms. That is the case of pronouns, which help us to avoid redundancy in a concise way. Pronouns are considered ambiguous in that they could refer to many things at once. By comparing certain properties of words to their numbers of meanings, the researchers confirmed their suspicion that shorter, more frequent words, as well as those that conform to the language's typical sound patterns, are most likely to be ambiguous.

These arguments are highly relevant, especially when taking into consideration that the purpose of languages is to communicate information and in order for this task to be efficient the simplest the better. Language then, needs to be specific and concise. Apart from this, it is necessary to bear in mind that linguistic ambiguity also serves an interesting communicative function, that of expressing several meanings in order to deceit or create humour. Hence, speakers/writers sometimes use ambiguous words deliberately.

Once linguistic ambiguity has been considered an intrinsic and accepted phenomenon of language, it is necessary to explain how our brains process semantically-ambiguous word. That is the core issue in Eddington and Tokowicz research, which is focused on how humans process both polysemous words and homonyms, in their differences and the aspects they share. In their paper they use two different terms to refer to the different significations both types of words adopt. Thus, they employ the word *senses* to refer to the multiple instantiations of polysemous words and *meanings* for the multiple acceptations of homonyms (Eddington and Tokowicz, 2014). They cover aspects such as semantic ambiguity and behavioural studies, focusing mainly on studies which deal with the comparison of homonyms and polysemes in lexical activation and processing. They include several experiments that proved that there is an advantage of polysemous words over both homonyms and unambiguous words, since the first type is responded more quickly than the others (Rodd et al., 2002, in Eddington and Tokowicz, 2014). Not only is the disadvantage of homonyms noted when compared to polysemy, but also in relation to unambiguous words being lexical decisions slower (Beretta, Fiorentino, & Poeppel, 2005; Roddet al., 2002, in Eddington and Tokowic, 2014).

Eddington and Tokowicz mention an interesting distinction between polysemous words based on the source of ambiguity; namely *metonymous polysemy* –considered regular polysemy– and *metaphorical polysemy* –irregular polysemy– (2014). The first term is used to designate words whose interpretations of senses are literal and connected in meaning through one of various types of relationships, such as countable/uncountable or container/content. That is the case of “plate” which can be referred to as both, a dish where food is served in (e.g.: a blue “plate”) or as the amount of food you can put on it (e.g.: a “plate of pasta). On the other hand, metaphorical polysemy occurs when one sense has a more literal interpretation while the other is more figurative. Several studies demonstrate that the first type is processed faster than the second (e.g., Frisson & Pickering, 2001; Klepousniotou, 2002; Klepousniotou et al., 2008, 2012, in Eddington and Tokowicz, 2014).

After making an overview of several studies and experiments they conclude that ambiguous words are processed differently than unambiguous words and at the same time it is evident that different types of ambiguous words are processed in different ways. In general, polysemes are easier to process than homonyms and, within the first,

metonyms show an advantage over metaphorical polysemes. The explanation for this has to be found in how our brain stores lexis. More semantically related concepts are linked more closely than those less related and so the senses of polysemes would activate each other in the semantic network while the meanings of homonyms are less likely to activate because they are less connected. Biased context also plays an important role in this activation, mostly when the context biases the dominant sense or meaning (Eddington and Tokowicz, 2014).

Throughout the present essay, context has been mentioned as an essential element for disambiguation, but nonetheless there are several theories which maintain that context it is not sufficient enough to clarify meaning. Degani and Tokowicz include in their article "Semantic ambiguity within and across languages: An integrative review" a series of models that address this issue; namely, *context-dependent models*, *exhaustive-access models*, *ordered-access model*, and *recorded-access model*. The first type makes reference to those words in which context predetermines signification so that only one meaning is activated, whereas the second type of models postulate that all meanings are initially accessed and it is not until later that context helps to narrow down the meanings. In the same way, the ordered-access model assumes that the different meanings of a word are initially activated, normally the more frequent ones. For example, when the word *bed* makes reference to the bottom of a river, the first sense of the word (a piece of furniture for sleeping on) is already activated in our brains because it is the most familiar sense. Finally, the recorded-access model is more interactive and takes into account both context and frequency in the initial access to meaning (Schvaneveldt, Meyer, & Becker, 1976; Onifer & Swinney, 1981; Hogaboam & Perfetti, 1975; Duffy, Morris, & Rayner, 1988, in Degani and Tokowicz, 2010).

Although some models suggest the idea that the activation of prime meanings and senses always occurs, even when the less frequent sense is biased by context, some scholars disagree on this point. Eddington and Tokowicz include in their article Klepousniotou et al.'s findings which reveal that dominance has a minimal or even null effect in polysemous words (2012). This reduced effect is especially true in the case of more related senses, what leads the researchers to assert that dominance becomes more prominent with less semantically similar polysemes and with homonyms as well.

Finally, a paramount aspect for the purpose at hand is the role of ambiguity in reading, more specifically for foreign language learners. Sometimes a word with different senses and meanings maps different words within another language. For example, the English lexical form *kid*, which has several meanings, adopts different forms in Spanish: 1) *niño/a* as synonym of child; 2) *cabrito/cabrita* as meaning young goat; 3) *menor* when it is a synonym of younger; and 4) *bromear* when meaning to joke. It can also occur that a single English word has multiple translations which correspond to the same meaning. For instance, the word *building* as a noun can be translated into Spanish as *edificio*, *construcción* and *inmueble*, all three meaning the same. It seems almost inevitable that at low levels FL learners translate the target language in their minds in order to understand the message of texts. In this context, and taking into account the previous information, L1 can interfere in the comprehension of the text. When a word has several meanings, it is rarely the case that one translation also happens to capture these same meanings. Then, an English word with several meanings or senses normally corresponds to distinct words in Spanish. This implies that when learners are reading they have to decide which is the correct word or sense for a specific term, depending on the context and the purpose of the message.

4. CHALLENGES OF AMBIGUITY WHEN LEARNING A LANGUAGE

Teaching ambiguity in the EFL classroom is vital for our students to get a broader perspective of the language. Being aware of the different meanings and contexts in which a word can appear improves comprehension, making the reading task (and comprehension in general) more interesting. This issue is relatively easier for native speakers but FL learners can find it struggling and get frustrated when trying to work out the meaning of a text.

In the case of native users of English several studies have been carried out on the aspect of teaching linguistic ambiguity. Nicola Yuill, for instance, conducted a series of experiments in which children had to discuss and resolve ambiguities in joking riddles. The purpose of her investigation was to explain the role language ambiguity played in the development of reading skills in 7 to 9-year-old-children, demonstrating that comprehension of ambiguous words improves significantly after training (Yuill, 2009).

As far as ambiguity in second language learning is concerned, Szerencsi states that linguistic ambiguity can contribute to developing learners' language proficiency. The disambiguation process for foreign language learners requires a higher level of language control and it involves "ignoring initial reading of sentence and subsequent analysis" (Szerencsi, 2010). That is to say, language learners need to spend more time working on a text which contains ambiguous terms in order to grasp its full meaning. For that reason, it is necessary to include examples of ambiguous language in the classroom in order for learners to become better users of the foreign language. Szerencsi recommends drawing these examples from actual literary works rather than relying on examples from grammar books and so combining the teaching of literature and language.

As has been proved in the previous sections, the English language, as many others, is full of ambiguous words. When students encounter a term they normally stick to the most common meaning, although sometimes they realize they cannot work the meaning out in some context. Most students get surprised when they find, for example, the word *like* used not as a verb but as a preposition, adverb or adjective. This is one of the first words students learn and use to talk about personal experiences and, maybe due to the fact that they have its verbal meaning so internalised, they fail to comprehend its meanings in sentences such as "Mark talks like his dad does", "He has visited like 50 countries" or "She responded in like manner".

Understanding that words and sentences can have more than one meaning improves comprehension by allowing readers to think flexibly about what the appropriate meaning may be. Exposing learners to different pieces of reading trains them in recognizing lexical ambiguity more easily and improves their knowledge of the foreign language, English in this case. This means that, on some occasions, learners will have to re-read a passage and contemplate the different interpretations that could be given to a certain text in order to take decisions and disambiguate its meaning.

One of the paramount aspects of reading comprehension is the identification and understanding of words as they are encountered, and to interpret them in accordance to the context of appearance. This is a relevant aspect especially when dealing with ambiguous language. As has been mentioned above before although most structures appear in a biased context, that is not always the case and sometimes readers need to

consider alternative meanings. Sometimes this ambiguity is temporary and it is resolved when reading the whole passage, but when learners try to work out the meaning word by word they can easily get confused.

The way texts are processed depends of course on the reading skills of the learners. At low levels there is a notable influence of the native language, which plays an important part in the way learners understand texts since they tend to translate them into their native language for a better comprehension. That is to say, there is normally cross-language transfer. At higher levels, learners have a more proficient use of the FL and as a consequence they will probably find it easier to disambiguate meaning.

Although ambiguous language can make some texts richer due to the different implications of words, learners may consider it a problematic issue since it hinders their interpretation of texts. Anyhow, what is certain is that linguistic ambiguity can create controversial or humorous situations which make language systems even more fascinating.

5. AMBIGUITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

As has been stated above, linguistic ambiguity is a prominent element in literature and plays a crucial role in the works of many authors such as William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde. The latter is considered as one of the most important writers of the Victorian period and is well-known for his witty comedies of manners, among which *The Importance of Being Earnest* is included. Although on the surface it just seems to be a funny play which deals with trivial themes, what Wilde intended was to show how shallow and hypocritical the members of Victorian upper classes were. The play is a satire of Victorian society; its customs, its views on love and marriage, the importance of keeping up appearances, etc. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* lots of words with a double sense that contribute to the ironic and humorous style of Wilde's work can be found.

The play is full of ambiguous terms from beginning to end. The most notable example is found in the title. The entire play revolves around the term **earnest** and its homophony with the proper name **Ernest**. When we look up the former word in a dictionary we find definitions such as these: 1) adj. Serious in intention, purpose, or

effort; sincerely zealous. 2) adj. Showing depth and sincerity of feeling. 3) adj. seriously important; demanding or receiving serious attention. 4) n. full seriousness, as of intention or purpose. (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.) So earnestness implies seriousness and sincerity and those are the features that the characters of the play attribute to the name *Ernest*. Both Gwendolen and Cecily show a great interest, even obsession, in that proper name, as if the similarities in pronunciation between the two terms had a real influence on the attributes of people. But the girls are not the only ones who support this view, Algernon also says: “You look as if your name was *Ernest*. You are the most *earnest* looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn’t *Ernest*” (Wilde, 1998: 257). The question is: how can a person possibly look like a proper name? Victorian high society gave so much importance to appearances that a simple name may be essential to decide whether a person is worthy or not.

The importance of the name leads Gwendolen to admit that the first time her cousin Algernon mentioned to her that he had a friend called *Ernest* she knew that she was destined to love him. So much so that when Mr. Worthing asks her whether she would love him even if his name was not *Ernest* but Jack, she replies:

“Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack [...] I have known several Jacks, and they all [...] were more than usually plain. Besides, Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. [...] The only really safe name is *Ernest*.” (Wilde 1998: 263)

Cecily’s inclination about the name *Ernest* is very similar to Gwendolen’s. According to her, “it had always been a girlish dream of [hers] to love someone whose name was *Ernest*. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence” (Wilde, 1998: 284). In fact, her obsession with that name goes beyond that. Cecily has fallen in love with his uncle’s supposed brother and has invented her romance with Ernest and elaborated it. Indeed, when Algernon proposes marriage to her she answers: “Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months” (Wilde, 1988: 283).

Both Gwendolen and Cecily are in love with that name, based on an assumption that boys named Ernest will be as honest as the name suggests, and what is more, they do not really care whether the man actually possesses those qualities. Neither Jack nor Algernon are earnest. Both characters could be rather described as irresponsible and

insincere, what does not seem to be a problem for both women in the end. After finding out that Algy and Jack have been lying to them all the time, the girls forgive them without further ado.

Another example of homonymy is the word **account**. When Jack and Algernon are talking about Gwendolen, the latter says: “It isn’t. It is a great truth. It *accounts* for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don’t give my consent” (Wilde, 1998: 255). The word *accounts* functions as a verb here —*account for* means “to explain”— but it is homonymous with the term *accounts*, meaning “financial statement”.

Towards the end of the first act, an example of innuendo can be found; the word **stirred**, which can adopt two different senses in the context it appears. On the one hand, it can be used as the past participle of the verb *stir*, which means “to affect strongly” (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.). On the other, it is also a synonym of the adjective *horny*. After finding out that Jack was abandoned at Victoria Station, Gwendolen says: “The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally *stirred* the deeper fibres of my nature” (Wilde, 1988: 270); meaning that it moved her to pity but also that it makes her feel sexually excited.

As far as polysemy is concerned, there are lots of words which have more than one meaning in the play. The following examples can be grouped together according to the semantic field they belong to.

The first group is related to money and social status, which is one of the main themes of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the very beginning there appears a word that will be mentioned on several occasions throughout the play and which is very significant; the noun **cucumber**. Cucumber sandwiches are linked to Lady Bracknell, since they are expressly prepared for her. Thus, Wilde establishes a connection between the daintiness of the sandwich and the upper class. In fact, the word cucumber is synonymous with the term *currency*, in reference to paper money (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.). Therefore, the link between the vegetable and the nobility becomes even stronger due to money’s reference.

Another example is the word *fruit*, used when talking about love and marriage. In this case, the term is uttered by Miss Prism, who is talking to Dr. Chasuble about married men:

“MISS PRISM: No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE: And often, I’ve been told, not even to her.

MISS PRISM: That depends on the intellectual sympathies of the woman. Maturity can always be depended on. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green. (Dr. Chasuble starts.) I spoke horticulturally. My metaphor was drawn from *fruits*. But where is Cecily?” (Wilde 1998: 277)

A possible meaning of the term in this passage, and probably the first one that readers think of when reading the fragment, is that of “the part of a plant that consists of one or more seeds and flesh, can be eaten as food and usually tastes sweet” (fruit, 2010). But, in addition, the term is synonym with *revenue*.

Wilde also plays with concepts which denote the presence or lack of intelligence. In the first act Algernon states: “I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so *shallow* of them” (Wilde, 1988: 260). The first remarkable aspect is that he is treating meals as something of vital importance. In doing so, he may be right but it seems that the author considers he is going a bit far and makes fun of Algernon. This overreaction is highlighted with the use of the word *shallow*, which does not only mean “having little depth” (Collins.com, n.d.); but also *unintelligent* and *ignorant*.

Another good example of linguistic ambiguity within this group is *short-sighted*, a term usually used to describe people unable to see far; myopic. In one of his conversations with Cecily, Algernon states: “Then Miss Prism is a *short-sighted* old lady” (Wilde, 1988: 286). This comment can be perfectly misunderstood since the adjective also means “foolish”. Instead of using this more direct and impolite word, Algernon chooses the term *short-sighted* to remark that if Miss Prism is not able to see Cecily as a “pink rose”, she must be near-sighted or rather a bit stupid.

One of the most memorable characters in the play is Lady Bracknell, a symbol of Victorian earnestness who is depicted as a commanding and domineering woman, what is reflected in most of her comments. As the play progresses, it can be noticed that

she is the one who “wears the trousers” without taking into account her husband’s opinion. At the beginning of the third act she explains:

“Her unhappy father is [...] under the impression that she is attending a lecture [...] on the Influence of a permanent income on Thought. I do not propose to *undeceive* him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question.” (Wilde, 1998: 297)

Apparently, Lady Bracknell means that she does not want her husband to know that Gwendolen is visiting Mr. Worthing not to disappoint him. However, in view of her personality, *undeceive* could also mean “to inform” by not telling the man his daughter is deceiving him, she does not find it necessary to tell her husband the truth.

Since love and marriage are a primary part in the play, linguistic ambiguity also arises among concepts related to this topic. An interesting term in this context is the word *parting*, found in act II:

“CECILY: Then have we got to part?

ALGERNON: I am afraid so. It’s a very painful *parting*.” (Wilde, 1988: 282)

These lines could be understood in two different ways. Since Algernon has previously mentioned that Jack was going to send him away to London, Cecily’s question would mean: Do we have to separate now? And so Algernon’s use of *parting* would stand for *goodbye*, *farewell*. On the other hand, and due to polysemy, the word *parting* would also denote *breakup* and then, what they mean is that they are forced to put an end to their relationship.

Towards the end of the play, soon after Jack finds out that he is Algernon’s elder brother, he asks his now aunt Augusta whether he has being christened or not and this is what Lady Bracknell answers: “Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and *doting* parents” (Wilde, 1988: 306). Here ambiguity is caused by the use of the word *doting*, which could be interpreted as “excessively fond of somebody” as well as “senile”, “weak-minded” (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.).

Another interesting semantic field in which words’ double sense is relevant is that related to idealism and falseness. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* reality is usually altered and so is the language the characters use. The best examples of this are

the words *romance* and *unromantic*. The former is a noun commonly used as a synonym for *love affair*. In addition, the word *romance* originally refers to “a novel or other prose narrative depicting heroic or marvellous deeds, pageantry, romantic exploits, etc., usually in a historical or imaginary setting” (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.). That is to say, *romance* is also synonymous with *fiction*, *story* and *figment*. Then, the term *unromantic* implies a lack of romance, meaning therefore, *realistic* and *practical*. A fragment that clearly shows how ambiguity works with these terms can be found at the beginning of the first act:

“JACK: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON: I thought you had come up for pleasure? ... I call that business.

JACK: How utterly *unromantic* you are!

ALGERNON: I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic in a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of *romance* is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.” (Wilde, 1998: 255)

In this fragment, Wilde plays with the idea of romanticism. Love appears as a trivial matter and Algernon sees it as something separated from engagement. For him, love is just a passing fancy and the idea of proposing terrifies him. The word *romance* could be understood here as *fiction*, something which is not real or true.

The last group of words that will be mentioned here is related to those terms that have a sexual connotation. There is not actual sex in the play but sometimes the characters use language in a rather suggestive sense. Right after meeting, Cecily and Algernon have the following conversation:

“ALGERNON: [...] That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that our mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily.

CECILY: It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try.

ALGERNON: I will. I feel better already.

CECILY: You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON: That is because I am *hungry*.” (Wilde, 1998: 276)

Here Algernon plays with the word **hungry**, meaning either he wants to eat something or that he is feeling desirous, hot.

Another outstanding passage of the play is included below:

“JACK: It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew [...] I suspect him on being untruthful.

LADY BRACKNELL: [...] Impossible! He is an Oxonian.

JACK: I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. [...] he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently [...] devoured every *muffin*.” (Wilde, 1998: 300)

Jack mentions the word **muffin** which, apart from a type of cake, is also the slang word used to refer to “a young girl, especially one’s girlfriend” (*Dictionary.com*, n.d.) and a synonym of *vagina* (*Urbandictionary.com*, n.d.).

A recurrent term in the play, used mainly when talking about the imaginary sick brother of Jack, is the adjective **wicked**. Cecily states: “I have never met any really *wicked* person before” (Wilde, 1998: 274) and “I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be *wicked* and being really good all the time” (Wilde, 1998: 275). It essentially means “evil or morally bad in principle or practice”; “sinful” (wicked, 2010); but it is also synonymous with the adjective *naughty* and hence, its sexual connotations.

Grammatical ambiguity is also present in this work. Wilde uses terms such as **that** and **their** with an ambiguous sense. Both belong to the group of deictic words and for that reason their meanings depend on contextual information; it is necessary to know the utterance in which they are contained, who gives it, when, where and of whom it is said. This can be clearly appreciated in the following dialogue between Lady Bracknell and Jack:

“LADY BRACKNELL: Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character. What number in Belgrave Square?

JACK: 149.

LADY BRACKNELL: [Shaking her head.] the unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, *that* could be easily altered.

JACK: Do you mean the fashion, or the side?" (Wilde, 1988: 266)

Jack himself asks Lady Bracknell to clarify what she means by *that*. During their interview the old lady is very interested in Jack's income; she needs to know whether or not he is a good suitor for her daughter. Thus, it is important that Jack has enough wealth to afford both a country and town house. Moreover, in order to pass Lady Bracknell's test, Jack must live in a fashionable area in the city. Lady Bracknell assumes that Jack will gladly either relocate his house to the fashionable side or change his style to reflect the current fashionable trends.

Later on, after Lady Bracknell and Mr. Worthing's conversation is over, Jack talks to Algernon and says:

JACK: [...] "You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?"

ALGERNON: "All women become like their mothers. That is *their* tragedy. No man does. That's his." (Wilde, 1998: 268)

The possessive adjective *their* may be referred to both "all women" and "their mothers", so is this fact a tragedy for the mothers, or for their daughters?

In order to finish this section a comment on the characters' names will be included. This is an interesting aspect since some of the names can be interpreted as wordplays. Apart from *Ernest*, previously mentioned, there are other characters with evocative names:

Miss Prism. *Prism* is defined in the dictionary as "a transparent glass or plastic object, often with ends in the shape of a triangle, which separates light that passes through it into the colours of the rainbow" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2010). Wilde could have chosen it to refer to the woman's transparency and sincerity. However, at the end of the play we find out that she is nothing like that. In addition, *prism* sounds very much, although not completely, like prison; what may refer to her negligence (her abandonment of baby Ernest).

Chasuble. The word selected by Wilde to name the reverend is very symbolic and appropriate since a *chasuble* is, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, “a piece of clothing with no sleeves, worn by a priest over his/her other clothes” (chasuble, 2010).

Jack Worthing. Apart from being a town in West Saxon, *Worthing* reminds to the adjective *worthy* —1) “having the qualities that deserve somebody/something”; 2) “having qualities that deserve your respect, attention or admiration” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2010). It seems ironic since Jack/Ernest is not worthy of Gwendolen's hand, according to Lady Bracknell.

Miss Fairtax. Two words can be distinguished in Gwendolen's surname: *fair* and *tax*. It could be thought that Wilde put them together intentionally in order to make a pun. If we look up the word *fair*, one of the definitions we find is this: “quite large in number, size or amount” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2010). In the case of *tax*, it refers to the money people have to pay to the government so that it can pay for public services. People pay taxes according to their income and business, according to their profits. *Tax* is also often paid on goods and services. Therefore, *Fairtax* could suggest that the appropriate man to marry Gwendolen would need to be the owner of a considerable amount of money.

The pervious analysis demonstrates that ambiguity is a key aspect in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Without Wilde's use of linguistic ambiguity many of the humorous situations would not exist and the play would have lost its essence. The play depicts the typical characters and behaviour of the Victorian bourgeois class, which have been normally described as formal and civilized. That is the impression the characters try to project, although the reader eventually realises that nothing is what it seems. In the same way that characters hide their own self (e.g.: Jack Worthing/Earnest), words are not what they seem to be. Wilde satirises society's behaviour, interests, thoughts and their effort to keep up appearances, thus neglecting important values such as sincerity and transparency, morality and respect, by means of an clever and witty use of words.

6. AN ACTION RESEARCH PROPOSAL

What follows is a proposal of an action research focused on the recognition and disambiguation of meaning by Spanish learners' of English. The experiment could not be carried out but will be useful for future research and even necessary for teachers to include the teaching of ambiguity in the FL classroom.

6.1. Statement of the problem

When learning a second language, reading is one of the core skills that learners need to control. Texts provide a great source for learning but not all texts are easy to understand. When it comes to literary texts, many aspects need to be considered more than the literal meaning of the words since literature is full of elements such as imagery, symbolism, metaphors or connotations so, on some occasions, a close reading is required to fully understand a text. When they do not have sufficient knowledge of the language learners fail to grasp the humour, sarcasm or double meanings inherent in a text thus causing confusion in the readers' mind and leading them to misinterpret the writers' intentions. The purpose of this study is not to picture linguistic ambiguity as something negative, as an obstacle in the learning process, but rather to treat ambiguity as an intrinsic characteristic of language which students must recognise and resolve. The idea is simply to identify to what degree learners of English as a foreign language are aware of this phenomenon so that teachers can make decisions in their teaching process concerning this issue.

6.2. Aims of the study

The main objectives of this experiment proposal are:

1. To check whether English language learners are aware of the multiple meanings of some words and sentences.
2. To determine which type of ambiguity learners find more difficult.
3. To determine whether context helps learners to disambiguate meaning.
4. To see if learners rely on their L1 in order to understand ambiguous words.

6.3. Research questions

According to the aims presented above, these are the posed questions:

1. Can learners identify ambiguity without being told?
2. What type of ambiguity is more difficult to get?
3. Is ambiguity solved by context? Or, do learners need extra knowledge?
4. How do learners solve ambiguity? To what extent do Spanish learners of English rely on their L1 to understand source texts?

6.4. Hypothesis

Based on the research questions the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. Learners are not always aware of ambiguous words. They normally know the most common meanings.
2. Probably semantic ambiguity is more difficult to get.
3. Context normally helps in the disambiguation process, unless several meanings are possible to be applied.
4. Learners consider the context of appearance of the word and think of the Spanish term to understand it better.

6.5. Methodology

6.5.1. Research design

The present investigation is basically quantitative in nature, although there is a final part of qualitative character. The qualitative part will be represented with numbers and graphs and will show the percentage of students able to identify and resolve ambiguity in language compared to those who did not. The qualitative part will be focused on open-ended questions for participants to express their opinions and experiences. It is also an instance of primary research, and within it, statistical since it includes questionnaires.

6.5.2. Participants

The study will be addressed to Spanish students of English of different ages who have already acquired a B1 certificate in English. Aspects such as the years of learning, the exposure to reading, the time of dedication to the language or other foreign languages they have been learning will be taken into account to see whether it is relevant in the identification and processing of ambiguity. Gender or socioeconomic

background will not be taken into account as they are not considered relevant for the outcomes.

6.5.3. Instruments

Tests and questionnaires will be used. A test will be passed to participants to detect those sentences that contained double senses (Appendix 1). A second test will be aimed at counting the different meanings of words participants are aware of and are able to remember and produce sentences for each of the meanings of the words (Appendix 2). Finally, the third part contains an open-ended questionnaire in which learners need to express their opinions and experiences in relation to the previous tasks (Appendix 3).

6.5.4. Data collection

The tests and questionnaire will be passed on the same day to students of the Official Language School (Escuela Oficial de Idiomas) who have already obtained a B1 certificate in English. The two tests and the final questionnaire will be completed one at a time and participants will work individually in all three parts. Thirty minutes will be allocated for the first test, forty-five minutes for the second, and fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire.

6.5.6. Data analysis

An Excel Spreadsheet will be used to write down and keep record of all the results in the tests. The elements to value will be: correct answers, incorrect answers and blank responses, as well as the general performance of participants in the tasks.

6.6. Results and discussion

The mean, the mode and the standard deviation will be calculated for each of the items in the two tests in order to see which part of the tasks obtain better results, and so consider what aspects learners find easier or know better, and contrast them to those which obtained poorer results, and consequently pose a greater challenge for participants. Finally, the percentage of students who obtained better and worse results will be calculated to see whether ambiguity is an obstacle for learners at this level or not.

In the case of the qualitative part common answers will be taken into account. Answers in this part will be very useful for teachers when designing lesson plans.

7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present paper has been to undertake a review of the multiple publications which focus on linguistic ambiguity in order to emphasise its importance in language and other areas of application. The wide array of research and instances of ambiguity in language imply the need for users of the language to identify, understand and resolve this phenomenon in order to get an accurate comprehension of texts (either written or oral).

This issue is of special importance in second language learning and acquisition contexts, where learners need to pay close attention in order to avoid misunderstanding. As it has been mentioned, ambiguity in spoken language is easier to decipher since speakers are surrounded by the context in which discourse takes place. In the case of written texts, readers sometimes get misled in the process of reading and it is necessary for them to finish the full passage in order to make sense of the words. Taking all this into consideration, it seems essential to include the issue of linguistic ambiguity in teaching plans in order for learners to learn to recognise and resolve it.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1 – Recognition

❖ Some of the sentences below contain ambiguous words or phrases. Identify them and underline the ambiguous parts.

- Lexical ambiguity
 - a) The criminal did not finish his sentence.
 - b) I talked to my mum yesterday.
 - c) They are looking for a match.
 - d) He saw some wood strips.
 - e) They went hiking and slept on a tent.
 - f) The day was cool.
 - g) I'll clean the garden on Sunday.
 - h) Have you seen my lamp? I can't find it!
 - i) Josh is going to run the marathon.
 - j) She left when she finished her homework
- Structural ambiguity
 - a) I saw a dog with a telescope.
 - b) Look at the man with one eye.
 - c) My brother ate all the cake.
 - d) Sue gave a bath to her dog wearing a yellow shirt.
 - e) Did you see her dress?
 - f) Jess was studying maths all day.
 - g) They were visiting relatives.
 - h) The children are playing on the sofa.
 - i) My parents are planning to buy a house.
 - j) The duck is ready to eat.

APPENDIX 2 - Interpretation

❖ What possible interpretations do you know for the following words? Write as many as you can. Use both an English explanation and the Spanish translations and produce a sentence using each of the meanings.

- a) Bank
- b) Break
- c) Check
- d) Clip
- e) Close
- f) Cover
- g) Lift
- h) Light
- i) Play
- j) Table

APPENDIX 3 - Experience

❖ Answer the following questions:

- a) What strategies did you use to detect and solve linguistic ambiguity in the previous tasks? What tools could be useful for this task? (dictionaries, background information, etc.)
- b) Which type of ambiguity was more difficult to recognise and disambiguate: lexical or grammatical?
- c) Do you find linguistic ambiguity an obstacle in learning or an interesting phenomenon of language, or both?
- d) Did you need to use your native language to understand ambiguous words?