



LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN *FORBES NEWS* HEADLINES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the presence and function of lexical ambiguity in *Forbes News* headlines. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase has more than one possible meaning, often leading to multiple interpretations. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research examines a selection of headlines from *forbes.com* to identify ambiguous lexical items and analyze their contextual usage. The study highlights how lexical ambiguity serves both stylistic and rhetorical purposes in news headlines, such as attracting readers' attention, creating curiosity, and enhancing interpretative depth. Findings reveal that ambiguous words are frequently employed to compress complex information into concise formats, a necessity in headline writing. However, such ambiguity may also lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding, particularly among readers unfamiliar with the broader context. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of lexical ambiguity for effective communication in journalism and media literacy.

Keywords: lexical ambiguity, semantics, news headline, Forbes, media language

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is inherently complex and multifaceted, often characterized by the presence of ambiguity, which challenges our understanding and interpretation of meaning. Among the various forms of linguistic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity is one of the most prevalent and intriguing phenomena. Ambiguity is a phenomenon which depends on individual interpretation. It is often found in our lives and many people are confused in understanding the true meaning. Leech (1981) states that an expression becomes ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be determined. Many words in language carry multiple meanings. A single word form may be associated with more than one distinct concept. Lexical ambiguity arises when a single lexical item, typically a word, has multiple possible meanings (Kroeger, 2018). For instance, the term "bark" might denote the sound a dog makes or the exterior layer of a tree. This type of ambiguity is commonly known as lexical ambiguity. When context is insufficient to determine the meaning of a single word with more than one lexical meaning based on dictionary, there is lexical ambiguity (Andini et al., 2021). Nonetheless, both terms are frequently used interchangeably.

In recent years, lexical ambiguity has gained attention beyond theoretical linguistics. A deeper understanding of lexical ambiguity not only contributes to linguistic theory but also to practical applications in technology and communication. The theoretical framework used for this study is based on semantics, which is the scientific study of meaning that is being expressed by language. Kreidler (1998:3) states that semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how language organizes and expresses its meaning. Semantics is very important to study because it can solve problems related to



meaning so that listeners can understand information well. The meaning in an utterance or word can be literal or expanded (Ramadani, 2015; Sari, 2019).

The study of lexical ambiguity has long been of interest to linguists because it reveals how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in communication. According to Cruse (2000), lexical ambiguity can be categorized primarily into homonymy and polysemy. Homonyms are words that share the same form but have unrelated meanings, whereas polysemous words have related but distinct senses. Meanwhile, this study focuses on lexical or word ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is a phenomenon which a word has multiple meanings. Moreover, context plays a pivotal role in resolving ambiguity. As Lyons (1995) notes, the surrounding linguistic and extralinguistic environment often provides cues that help listeners and readers disambiguate potential meanings. This ability to infer the intended meaning based on context is a key aspect of human linguistic competence (Puspitasari & Beratha, 2019). However, lexical ambiguity can still lead to misinterpretation, humor, or even manipulation, especially when context is insufficient or intentionally misleading.

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge the semantics relationship in order to prevent misinterpretations and miscommunications between the writer and the reader while also reveal the meaning behind the research object. In order to do this, the author narrows the scope by examining *Forbes News* Headlines whose meanings are deduced by lexical ambiguity. This paper aims to analyze lexical ambiguity from both theoretical and applied perspectives. It will explore its meaning and implications, emphasizing how ambiguity affects meaning and communication. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and its significance in various linguistic contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lexical ambiguity is a fundamental topic in the field of semantics, as it directly concerns the relationship between linguistic forms and their meanings. Semantics, the study of meaning in language, investigates how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning, and lexical ambiguity challenges the straightforward mapping between a word and a single, univocal meaning. According to Saeed (2016), lexical ambiguity occurs when a single lexical item is associated with two or more distinct meanings, which may cause interpretative difficulties in communication. This phenomenon is inherent to natural languages and manifests in various forms such as homonymy and polysemy, both of which have been extensively studied within semantic theory.

One of the earliest semantic explorations into lexical ambiguity can be traced back to Lyons (1995), who clearly distinguished between homonymy and polysemy, terms crucial for understanding lexical ambiguity. Homonymy refers to cases where two words share the same phonological or orthographic form but are historically unrelated and have completely different meanings (e.g., “bank” as a financial institution and “bank” as the side of a river).



Polysemy, however, describes situations where a single word has multiple related meanings that have evolved from a common origin (e.g., “mouth” as the opening of a human face and the opening of a river). Lyons emphasized that semantic theories must account for these distinctions because the cognitive processes involved in interpreting homonyms and polysemes differ substantially. While homonyms typically represent separate lexical entries, polysemous words share a core meaning extended through metaphor or metonymy.

Semantic theories have continued to refine the understanding of lexical ambiguity, particularly focusing on the representation of multiple meanings in the mental lexicon. Cruse (2000) posited that lexical items can have multiple sense components stored as related or unrelated entries. The challenge lies in modeling these relationships effectively. For example, polysemous meanings often exhibit a network-like organization where core meanings serve as prototypes or central nodes from which extensions radiate. Within semantics, formal approaches have also tackled lexical ambiguity by attempting to model the truth conditions and logical relations among multiple senses of a word. Montague semantics, for example, represents meanings in terms of intentional logic and possible worlds, which allows for precise handling of ambiguous expressions by contextualizing their interpretations. Kamp and Partee’s (1995) work on dynamic semantics and discourse representation theory further integrates context into meaning representation, emphasizing that lexical ambiguity can only be resolved through interaction with the surrounding discourse context. The dynamic nature of meaning thus accounts for how the interpretation of ambiguous words shifts depending on prior and subsequent utterances.

The role of context in resolving lexical ambiguity is central to semantic-pragmatic interface theories. While semantics traditionally deals with literal or conventional meaning, pragmatics studies how context influences interpretation. Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) Relevance Theory is particularly influential in this regard, proposing that listeners use contextual information to infer the most relevant meaning among competing interpretations. This approach argues that lexical ambiguity is not an obstacle but rather a resource for efficient communication, where speakers economize language by relying on shared knowledge to disambiguate meaning in real time. Thus, the semantic representation of ambiguous words is underspecified until pragmatics supplies the necessary information for disambiguation.

Empirical research in semantics has demonstrated that ambiguity affects language processing and comprehension significantly. Eye-tracking studies (e.g., Duffy, Morris, & Rayner, 1988) show that readers experience longer fixation times on ambiguous words, especially when context does not immediately clarify meaning. Such findings suggest that the semantic system initially activates multiple candidate meanings, which compete until contextual constraints guide selection. This processing model supports semantic theories that propose simultaneous activation of senses, challenging earlier models that posited immediate context-driven interpretation. Additionally, psycholinguistic experiments reveal that the



dominance of a particular sense (frequency of usage) influences interpretation speed, with dominant meanings accessed faster than subordinate ones (Simpson, 1981).

Semantics has further explored how lexical ambiguity interacts with syntax and compositionality. The principle of compositionality states that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and the rules used to combine them. However, lexical ambiguity challenges this principle because a single lexical item can contribute multiple meanings, creating ambiguity at the phrasal or sentential level. Pustejovsky's (1995) Generative Lexicon Theory offers a solution by introducing structured lexical entries with qualia roles that specify different aspects of meaning, allowing for dynamic interpretation depending on context and syntactic structure. This approach models how polysemous words can generate multiple interpretations while maintaining compositionality.

Another important semantic perspective on lexical ambiguity concerns semantic fields and domains. Words are often understood as members of semantic fields—sets of related words sharing conceptual domains. Ambiguous words can belong to multiple fields simultaneously, causing cross-domain ambiguity. Geeraerts (1993) emphasizes that analyzing semantic fields can reveal how different senses of a word relate and interact, shedding light on mechanisms of meaning extension and disambiguation. This perspective integrates well with prototype theory and cognitive semantics, offering a holistic view of lexical meaning as fluid and contextually modulated. In addition, semantics addresses the social and cultural dimensions of lexical ambiguity. Words may carry different connotations or meanings in different speech communities, leading to cross-cultural ambiguity. Wierzbicka (1992) argues that semantic universals and cultural scripts shape how ambiguity is encoded and resolved. Sociolinguistic semantics thus examines how social identity, cultural norms, and discourse practices influence the interpretation of ambiguous words, adding another layer of complexity to semantic analysis.

III. METHOD

In this study, the descriptive qualitative research was conducted. This method is centered on collecting and analyzing unstructured and descriptive data. This method entails providing definitions for linguistic ambiguity found in the *Forbes News Headlines* data from *forbes.com*. The descriptive analysis method offers a systematic explanation of anything by classifying, assessing, and clarifying the collected data utilizing theories. The main goal is to comprehend a phenomenon. Finding instances of ambiguity in Forbes news headlines was the aim of this investigation. To collect data, the author used note-taking and non-participant observation methods. Sudaryanto (1993) states that the note-taking technique entails making notes on the complete data set and subsequently categorizing it. An observational technique that involves the writer observing the data process instead of taking part in it is known as non-participant observation.



IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section aims to explore the lexical ambiguity obtained after selecting news articles from headline news from Forbes. As headlines are written to gain attention from the masses, they are often written in words that can be interpreted with different meanings. This characteristic makes lexical ambiguity an interesting discussion in the realm of news. The discussion will then focus on how ambiguous objects in *Forbes News* headlines can lead to multiple interpretations, affecting readers' perceptions in understanding the news. To illustrate this phenomenon, some data from Forbes headlines will be discussed in detail about how lexical ambiguity works and what interpretations can be obtained.

“Striking A Balance: Nurturing Personal Connections in Professional Settings”

This headline's use of "striking" has two main meanings. "Striking" is first seen as "achieving" a balance. From this perspective, the headline implies a deliberate and careful process of balancing professional obligations and personal relationships. The focus here is on harmony, which implies that with effort and planning, it is possible to attain an ideal middle ground between two possibly opposing domains. The second reading views "striking" as meaning "hitting" a balance, which has a more urgent, almost forceful, connotation. "Hitting a balance" differs from "achieving" in that it can be understood as either sudden or decisive equilibrium reached, perhaps in response to conflict or pressure. Unlike "achieving," which suggests a slow and intentional effort, "hitting a balance" can be interpreted as it might suggest an effect as though the balance is not gently created but rather violently encountered or imposed. Implying that finding balance in such environments could involve quick choices or strong boundaries instead of gentle negotiation, this reading adds a somewhat more dynamic or even forceful tone to the title. The headline's message is subtly influenced by the ambiguity between these two meanings, showing how a single lexical choice can affect readers' perceptions.

“Indonesian Tycoon, Partners Sell Stake in Gummy Candy Maker to Affinity For \$1.1 Billion”

There are two main opinions on how commas are used in this statement. The first opinion, "Indonesian Tycoon" and "Partners" are two different entities, an Indonesian tycoon and his partners. In this case, "Partners" refers to other people or entities that work with the tycoon. The second opinion, "Indonesian Tycoon Company" refers to a group consisting of a group of Indonesian tycoons who are partners with each other. In this case, Indonesian tycoon, partners mean a group of Indonesian tycoons who have a partnership relationship with each other.

“Trump's Russia Envoy Downplays Concerns About Putin: 'I Take Him at His Word'”

The news is about Steve Witkoff conducting direct diplomacy with Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the meeting, Putin made a statement to make peaceful actions and a ceasefire in Ukraine on the condition that Ukraine should not join NATO, Ukraine must surrender four of its territories to Russia, and also asked to reduce its military strength. Now here Witkoff says "i take him at his word" which means he believes in Putin's efforts towards



peace and ceasefire efforts towards Ukraine. This caused concern from some parties because Putin's efforts were actually detrimental to other parties.

But on another occasion Witkoff also said that he did not fully believe Putin's statement. This is what creates ambiguity about the news, whether Witkoff really believes in Putin's actions, or is it just a diplomatic strategy. Because in the world of politics, statements like "I take him at his word" spoken by Witkoff could be a diplomatic strategy to maintain the reputation of himself or other parties. In fact, he could also remain wary and not fully believe Putin's words. So, the ambiguous things highlighted in this news are that firstly, Witkoff's statement, "I take him at his word". This raises the question of whether he really believes him or whether it is just a diplomatic strategy. Secondly, Putin's statements and actions that said he would make peace and ceasefire with Ukraine, but in fact the conditions he gave were detrimental to Ukraine.

"Tesla Shares Rally after CEO Elon Musk Says to 'Hang On' to Sliding Stock"

From the headline, there are two words that are ambiguous so that readers can interpret in two or more meanings so that it can cause misunderstanding of the meaning of the news itself. The first is 'Hang On' where this word can have two different meanings. The first is the literal meaning and the second is the idiomatic or emotional meaning. The literal meaning of the word 'hang on' is to physically hold on to something so that it doesn't fall on something else. In the context of stocks, this can be interpreted as 'don't sell, hold on' which means a prohibition to sell the stock.

Meanwhile, the idiomatic or emotional meaning can mean 'to hold on' or 'to be patient,' which indicates that this difficult situation will definitely pass. This can have a motivational or encouraging effect on panicked investors. From these two meanings, it can be interpreted that Elon Musk optimistically asked all his employees not to panic and not to be afraid excessively and said that the stock price will definitely be fine. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted pessimistically or sarcastically that things are already bad, and the only thing that can be done is to 'hang on' or 'hold on' as the situation worsens. The second is the ambiguity in 'Sliding Stock' has a literal meaning which means sliding, but because there is an additional word, it can have another meaning. Neutral meaning means that the decline in stock prices that occurs can get better again. Negative or worrying meaning means that the decline can occur continuously without getting better again or slipping down. From the two meanings, it can be interpreted that the decline in stock prices discussed can recover without excessive worry but on the other hand it can be a dangerous threat, namely a decline in prices without improvement.

"How to Convince Your Parents They Should Take COVID-19 Seriously"

The news is a guide for young people to convince their parents to take the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. In order to prevent major illness from this virus, the news writer wishes to help the younger generation remind and safeguard their parents who may be sceptics or ignorant. In the headline, the phrase "take COVID-19 seriously" is not very specific that contains an uncertain meaning. The word "take" could convey various meanings



to various individuals, and thus may cause readers to misunderstand it. "Take" can literally mean "to take" or "to hit" in its original meaning. This can be misinterpreted as if parents are being asked to take the virus or be exposed to COVID-19. The second meaning, "take" figuratively means to "take" seriously or "treat" with seriousness. This meaning is what is meant and fits the overall context of the title and content of the news.

V. CONCLUSION

News titles containing lexical ambiguity, especially in *Forbes* mass media, have an important role in shaping the reader's perspective as well as the reader's interpretation of the information they present. Based on the chosen news title, it can be seen that one word or phrase can have various meanings so that it can cause different emotional and cognitive reactions. Like the phrase in "striking a balance", the use of punctuation in "Indonesian Tycoon, Partners", to diplomatic statements such as "I take him at his word", it can be concluded that the title is often written interestingly and also briefly. However, from there it can trigger different interpretations depending on the context, expectations and background of the reader.

On the other hand, news titles such as "Hang On To Sliding Stock" and "Take COVID-19 Seriously" also show how expressions of phrases or idiomatic can trigger confusion if not given a clearer context where this can be interpreted as motivation, satire and even concern. In the end, lexical ambiguity is a double-edged sword in the world of journalism and media. The first side can attract the attention of readers to stimulate their understanding but on the other hand it can also cause misunderstandings of interpretations that are far different from the intended meaning. Therefore, readers must think critically again in interpreting the news title so that deviations in meaning can be minimized.

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