

AN ANALYSIS OF AMPHIBOLOGY AND SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY IN TIV

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Abstract

There are a number of grammatical or syntactic structures in sentences that are ambiguous in Tiv that make the interpretation of such sentences difficult to the listeners or readers. These grammatical or syntactic structures are a model of language discovery distribution of words that are both semantically and syntactically coherent; but the distributions sometimes create more problems semantically for they give room for dual interpretations. The result of this is that it affects effective communication since the meaning is not clearly brought out at a glance, thereby resulting into semantic complexity. This study therefore, examines syntactic ambiguity in particular and amphibology in Tiv and how they impede communication in the language. The causes of such semantic complexities and the strategies to be adopted to overcome those problems are also examined. Data for this study were gathered from Tiv speaking area of Benue state through conversation with the native speakers of the language and through participant observations. The findings of the study reveal that syntactic ambiguity and amphibology can be eliminated if there is a clear structural relationship between the various syntactic units in the grammatical structure of a phrase, or sentence and the phrases selected in our conversations are used denotatively rather than connotative in the sentence structures to avoid confusion to readers and listeners.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Syntactic ambiguity, Amphibology and Tiv.

Introduction

There are instances in Tiv language where sentences are interpreted in two or more different ways due to the ambiguity in the grammatical or syntactic structure of the sentence or, phrase. This ambiguity is occasioned by the structural relations among the syntactic constituents, and so creates room for two or more interpretations in context. This usually affects communication because in a situation where the language user does not know the possible interpretations of a given sentence due to its syntactic or grammatical structure, his understanding may be hampered and consequently, communication is hindered and the purpose of language is defeated. It is in view of this that amphibology and syntactic ambiguity in Tiv are examined here to identify their roles in hampering the understanding of the language and how these problems can be overcome in Tiv.

Data for this study were sourced from the Tiv speaking area of Benue state. The techniques for sourcing the data included interviews, participant observation and metalinguistic conversations. We had discussions with some native speakers who were randomly sampled from the Tiv speaking area and ten of them participated

in this study. The researchers also observed the speech of competent native speakers in natural conversational settings. The socio-biographical data such as age, occupation and education were taken into consideration. Questions were asked on the causes of amphibology and syntactic ambiguity, their possible interpretations and disambiguation in Tiv language. Several expressions in Tiv that have amphibology and syntactic ambiguities were identified, discussed and analyzed by the researchers, bringing out their several interpretations, and how to disambiguate them.

Ethnographic Information on Tiv

The word Tiv refers both to the ethnic and linguistic group as well as the language spoken by the ethnic group. According to Ngutswen (2013:2), the word Tiv has a Bantu origin meaning 'a beloved child'. Akase (2017:16) on the other hand claims that the word Tiv is derived from 'Tive' meaning 'their name'. This means that, it is a name for the Tiv race.

Tiv language is classified as a Southern Bantoid language of the Benue – Congo family which is a subgroup of the Niger – Congo phylum. The language is dominantly spoken in Benue state and

other parts of Nigeria such as Nasarawa and Taraba States. The Tiv number about five (5) million based on Nigeria's 2006 census population data (Ibrahim, 2012).

Explorations in the Study of Amphibology and Syntactic Ambiguity

Amphibology

Amphibology is a situation where a sentence may be interpreted in more than one way due to its grammatical ordering in the structure. It is similar to syntactic ambiguity for both of them have dual or multiple interpretations. Amphibology arises when the grammatical relations of the constituents in the phrase or sentence give room for more than one interpretation.

Reidel (1992) explains amphibology as a phrase or sentence that is grammatically ambiguous. It is an ambiguous grammatical structure in a sentence or within a very short discourse such as two sentences. It is susceptible to two interpretations, and hence of uncertain meaning. It may occur by accident and it could be used for deliberate effect.

Amphibology and syntactic ambiguity generally result from the arrangement in grammar; that is, the linear relationship among the constituents that enable for the interpretation and comprehension of the intended meaning. When such situations occur in the grammar, the participant is faced with the choice of interpretation since the arrangement offers more than one option for interpretation.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is one of the concepts in the study of meaning (semantics) in particular and linguistics in general. It is an expression that can be given more than one interpretation in language. An expression is said to be ambiguous if it is assigned more than one meaning by the grammar of the language, due to the linear relationship among the constituents in that sentence's structure.

Fromkin and Rodman (1993) explain ambiguity as a term used to describe a word, phrase or sentence with multiple meanings. They emphasize that ambiguity refers to two or more meanings traced to one source. This explains the fact that two meanings could be expressed by one word or sentence. They have identified two types of ambiguity: lexical and grammatical or structural

ambiguity. Kempson (1999) argues that ambiguity is the state of having two possible interpretations. Yule (2010) explains ambiguity to mean the quality of being able to be interpreted in more than one way. Ambiguity therefore, intrudes into communication by introducing multiple interpretations leading to semantic complexity and misinterpretation.

The descriptions of ambiguity above have revealed the fact that ambiguity is associated with a lexical item, sentence, or phrase with multiple interpretations. Consequently, it is seen as obstacle to language communication, since a word or sentence could mean several things. Successful communication occurs only when the reader correctly interprets the symbols used by the writer of which ambiguous words or sentences pose obstacles to this process, thereby frustrating communication. Leech (1981) also emphasizes that, ambiguity at whatever level is an obstacle to communication. Meaning is essential to the study of communication and as communication becomes a more critical factor in social organization, the need to understand it becomes more pressing. This is because ambiguity disrupts communication of the intended meaning. Pushpinder and Jindal (2010) hold similar view that meaning is threatened in the domain of language by the presence of ambiguity. They point out that rarely does language convey to the hearer the meaning the speaker intends if it is ambiguous. This has therefore, attracted the attention of this work or study with emphasis on amphibology and syntactic or grammatical ambiguity in Tiv.

Syntactic Ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity or grammatical ambiguity comes about due to the ordering of a constituent in relation to other constituents in the phrase, or sentence. It is a structural or grammatical ambiguity of a whole sentence that occurs in a sub-part of a sentence. Structural ambiguity arises from the grammatical analysis of a sentence. It arises not from the range of single words but from the relationship between the words and clauses of a sentence, and the sentence structure underlying the word order. In other words, a sentence is syntactically ambiguous when a reader or listener can reasonably interpret one sentence as having more than one possible

structure.

Dallin (2010) points out that structural ambiguity may be created by design when one understands the kinds of syntactic structures that will lead to ambiguity. However, for the respective interpretations to work, they must be compatible with semantic and pragmatic contextual factors. MacDonald, Mayellen, Neal and Mark (2016) explain that syntactic ambiguity is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single sentence or sequence of words as opposed to the lexical ambiguity, which is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word. The intended meaning of a syntactically ambiguous sentence may be determined by the context of its use. Richard (2010) adds that when dealing with syntactic ambiguity, it is helpful to use your context clues to uncover the true meaning of the sentence.

Basically, syntactic ambiguity demonstrates confusion in the meaning of a sentence. If there is more than one possible meaning of a sentence, then the sentence is syntactically ambiguous. Fromkin and Rodman (1993) argue that two or more meanings may not be as a result of lexical ambiguity but two or more structures underlying the same string of words. This is ambiguity as a result of different structures, permitted by the rules of syntax rather than an ambiguous word. Structural ambiguity therefore, entails sentences which are syntactically ambiguous and are not dependent on any word; rather it is their grammatical structure which causes the ambiguity. This type of ambiguity can also be explained in terms of deep and surface structures. When a sentence is structurally ambiguous, it has two underlying interpretations which would be represented in the deep structure; that is, one surface structure can express those two deep structures (Yule, 2007).

Causes of Syntactic Ambiguity and Semantic Complexities

Syntactic ambiguity and amphibology intrude into communication by presenting multiple interpretations, thereby, leading to semantic complexity and misinterpretation in the study of language. A number of causes responsible for this are identified and discussed below:

The use of double or multiple referent

pronouns

This comes into play when a speaker uses pronoun that can go with two or more nouns mentioned in an expression. This clearly shows that such a pronoun has double or multiple nominal referents and it causes semantic multiplicity or complexity. For example:

Aker told Jeyol that he is given the job

The ambiguity here is caused by the use of double or multiple referent pronouns.

The use of ambiguous expressions

The use of ambiguous lexemes occurs when communicators use expressions that are inherently ambiguous which are capable of conveying hidden meanings, in addition to the superficial meanings, and this is fundamental to semantic complexity, for example:

I want to see my old friends

This expression is ambiguous since old friends can mean friends that have been known for a long time. It could also mean friends who are no longer young.

Omission of vital punctuations

This is another cause of structural ambiguity. Accurate use of punctuation marks makes it easier to understand the speaker or writers intended meaning. The omission of vital punctuation will subject the expression to multiple semantic interpretations. For example:

*If you need a good car at the end of the month
bring your money*

This example has dual semantic interpretations because it is not properly punctuated to indicate the intended meaning. The expression could mean that the money should be brought at the end of the month, if the good car is needed. It could also mean that the money should be brought if the car is needed at the end of the month.

The use of non-restrictive adjectives

This is peculiar to the pre-modifying adjectives that usually have unique reference and therefore, cannot be further limited or restricted by such pre-modifying adjectives. The result of this is that double or multiple semantic interpretations can be possible due to the fact that such pre-modifying non-restrictive adjectives are not usually marked either by punctuation or intonation in written or verbal communication as seen below:

Children who listen to their parents always obey the commands

The multiple interpretations here include: all children always obey the commands. It could also mean that only children who listen to their parents (not all children) obey the commands. The use of non-restrictive adjectives is therefore, responsible for the structural ambiguity here.

The above factors have shown that structural or syntactic ambiguity impedes effective communication for it decodes more than one message and this leads to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. From this, we can see that structural ambiguity and amphibology can negatively affect the response to the message communicated and received. This will be the case where the receiver takes for granted one of the meanings of the ambiguous expressions communicated to him or her. The consequence of this is that it will affect his or her reaction or response to the communicated message and the feedback will not be as expected.

Disambiguation of Structural Ambiguities

Disambiguation is a process and result of clarifying structural ambiguity of linguistic expression by the linguistic or extra linguistic context. This process of resolving syntactic ambiguity is also known as syntactic disambiguation. Theda-Obiora (2012) emphasis that disambiguation through extra linguistic context depends on the particular situation or prior knowledge, attitudes and expectations of the speakers or listeners. This has to do with the

mental process of existing discourse. This is why Akmaijian, Richard, Ann and Robert (2006) say that in order to determine the meaning of expression; the hearer must be able to mentally process sentences that reflect complex structural properties of human languages. Since many expressions are linguistically ambiguous, the hearer must determine which of the possible meaning of an expression convey the intended meaning or message of the speaker.

Content analysis helps in resolving structural ambiguity created by sentence structure. Context is the linguistic environment in which the physical or extra linguistic factors provide specific meaning of a structure. This is based on the communicative competence of a native speaker to deduce various kinds of meanings from sentences, or related physical influence of extra linguistic features in meaning interpretation. Context therefore, plays key role in determining meaning for it determines which interpretations is possible. This means that the greater part of the ambiguous sentences used in conversation are worked out by referring to the context of speech acts. Context helps to limit the range of possible interpretations.

Ohiga (2016) identifies prosodic features such as stress, tone, intonation and pause in resolving ambiguities or disambiguation in speech communication. This is because when such prosodic features or elements are properly used will easily make the intended meaning known.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this work are presented and analyzed to reveal instances of amphibology and syntactic ambiguity in Tiv as follows:

1.

Ìkyéghnékúmàì-yàn
Chicken this ready it eat
'This chicken is ready to eat'

The expression in the above example has two distinct meanings which arise from two different grammatical ways of combining the words in the sentence. The semantic interpretations of the sentence include the following:

- i.** The chicken is ready to be fed (so feed it)
- ii.** The chicken is ready to be fed to someone (so serve it)

This however, depends on the thematic assignment. This is because the chicken is assigned agent on one reading and patient on another. This is a syntactic phenomenon assuming principles that align thematic role and syntactic position.

The above ambiguity can be eliminated by reconstructing the sentence with a single meaning or interpretation as follow:

2.

Ìkyéghné kúmà-ì yàn, nâi kwàgh-yán
Chicken this ready it eat give it thing- eat
'This chicken is ready to eat, give it food'

From this example, the ambiguity is completely eliminated.

3.

Ákómbógbàí-wànsháávè
N- Ákómbófall SG-cripple on PL-hands
'Ákómbó is crippled on the hands'

This sentence has multiple interpretations and meanings as seen below:

- i. Ákómbócatch *Íwàn* on the hands
- ii. Ákómbó carved *Íwàn* using hands
- iii. Ákómbó has fallen on *Íwàn*'s hands
- iv. Ákómbó is crippled on the hands

Any of the above interpretations is acceptable. Ambiguity here is occasioned by the semantic nature of the verb *gba*, which can be interpreted in more than one meaning sense to mean 'catch', 'carve', 'fall' and 'become'. However, the ambiguity here can be eliminated by restructuring the sentence as follow:

4.

Ákómbókáór- í-wán
N-ÁkómbóFOC-it SG-human SG-cripple
'Ákómbó is a cripple'

The meaning of the above sentence is straightforward and cannot be misinterpreted.

5.

Iorvihikpàngùmômkémbà-vé-pér-yô
N- also V-be one in PL- 3PL cross EMP
'Iorvihi is also among those that have crossed'

This expression could mean any of the following:

- i. Iorvihi has passed an examination or test
- ii. Iorvihi has crossed over a stream
- iii. Iorvihi has also come (to a place)

All the interpretations above are possibly correct and the ambiguity can be disambiguated by restructuring the sentence as follows:

6.

Iorvihikpàngùmômkémbàvépérmngérèmyô
N- alsois one in those they cross water EMP
'Iorvihi is also among those who have crossed the water'

There is no ambiguity from the above example since it has a single interpretation now.

7.

Ingyôr-yòúngùàòr-jìmeddò
Sister 2SG V-be with SG-human-back good
'Your sister has a good person behind her'

The above expression could mean any of the following:

- i. Your sister has good buttocks
- ii. Your sister has a good supporter

Any of the interpretations above could be acceptable depending on the context. The ambiguity can however be eliminated if the sentence is restructured as follows:

8.

Á-lú- èrìngyôr -yòúnguá òr-jímèù mféáyènnànyô, mànáwárgá

If.V-be-like sister -your be with SG-humanthat wisdom less pro-INDF and save not

‘If your sister has a person that has no wisdom behind her, she wouldn’t have been saved’

The sentence is therefore, disambiguated and is free from multiple interpretations that will hinder communication.

9.

Kwàghùázè-miyòl-yô, á- yèm shin-ìnyá

Something that PRST-worry me, body-EMPH pro-INDF go under ground

‘My worry is that he has gone down to the ground’

This example has multiple interpretations as seen below:

i. He has gone downstairs

ii. He is dead

The ambiguity here can be removed if the sentence is restructured as seen below:

10.

Kwàghù ázè- miyòl-yô, á yèmshin gù má

Something thatworry me, body-EMPHpro-INDFgo under soil

‘My worry is that he has gone to the red soil (grave)’

There is no ambiguity in the above sentence since it is reconstructed to resolve the ambiguity.

11.

Ángbìán- évávkárinỳàmlàsháàtsé

PL-brother-PL 1SG share meat that on alter

‘My brothers shared the meat while still on fire’

This example too is ambiguous and it has multiple interpretations which include the following:

i. They shared the meat while it was still on fire

ii. They shared the meat among the old homesteads.

Here too, the ambiguity can be eliminated if the sentence is reconstructed to take this form:

12.

Ángbìánévávkárinỳàmlàsháhanematsé

Brothers my share meat the for each old homestead

‘My brothers shared the meat according to homesteads’

The meaning is very clear from this sentence and there is no misinterpretation since ambiguity is eliminated.

13.

Shìèkápùrúghèrkáìváányô

Time is fly like itarrowEMPH

‘Time flies like an arrow’

This is another example of syntactic ambiguity and has the following interpretations:

i. The sentence literally means that time passes fast, as fast as an arrow travels. This means that you can measure the speed of an arrow; that is, time flies in the same manner that an arrow would or does.

ii. The sentence could also mean that you can measure the speed of flies with qualities resembling those of arrows; that is, you should time those flies that are like an arrow.

iii. It could also mean that time moves in a way an arrow does.

In addition, the sentence contains semantic ambiguity. This is because, the noun phrase ‘time flies’ could refer to all time flies or a particular flies and ‘an arrow’ to all arrows, a particular arrow or different arrows for different flies.

The ambiguity above could however be eliminated, if the sentence is restructured as follows:

14.

Shìèngùáyèmfèlè

Time be1SGmove fast
'Time moves fast'

There are no multiple interpretations for this example because the ambiguity is eliminated.

Conclusion

This work has discussed amphibology and syntactic ambiguity in Tiv, its causes and semantic complexities that arise and how the structural ambiguity can be disambiguated or eliminated in the language. It is observed that amphibology and syntactic ambiguity contribute to semantic complexities in Tiv and they affect communication unless context is introduced to address the different meanings attached to the sentence. To resolve ambiguity, there should be explicit use of sentences, and appropriate use of prosodic features especially for tonal languages as

is the case with Tiv, in order to avoid ambiguity. If this is done, effective communication and development of the language will be guaranteed. Moreover, the result of the study provides the readers the opportunity to improve their ability and understanding of ambiguous sentences and phrases in Tiv language. The research will contribute as the reference for the study of semantics and syntax in teaching and learning activity in general and Tiv language in particular. It will also be useful to those who are interested in structural ambiguity for their research.

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