

ENRICHING THE DISCOURSE WITH CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS TO AVOID AMBIGUITY CAUSED BY THE USE OF AMBIGUOUS WORDS IN COMMUNICATION AMONG ALBANIAN STUDENTS OF ENGLISH (ESL)

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Abstract: Ambiguity or vagueness, the state in which our discourse consists of words that are ambiguous or unclear regarding the meaning they convey, is a serious issue encountered while communicating in English. Albanian students of English as a second language are no exception to this problem. This article aims to highlight the problem of ambiguity that results from the use of the ambiguous words in communication, as well as to reflect on the effective ways for avoiding misunderstandings that might occur in our discourse and communication as a result of their use especially among Albanian students of English as second language. Lexical ambiguity is a common and widespread phenomenon in English. If we refer to the studies carried out in this linguistic aspect, it results that in English, over 80% of common words have more than one entry in the dictionary (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2002), as well as a considerable number of words have several different definitions. In such situation, when a listener (or reader) encounters ambiguous or multiple meaning words, it is the context in which that word is used that clarifies the intended meaning of the speaker. It is hypothesized that context resolves the ambiguity which is emerged as a consequence of words that bear more than one meaning. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of the research related to it. Does the context help clarify the meaning of the ambiguous word? Is the discourse, which consists of ambiguous words, clarified if it is enriched with contextual elements? These are some research questions that this study aims to answer using descriptive, analytical and comparative methods. Through descriptive methods, the study brings and analyses the theories that have already been conducted in this field. By means of analytical and comparative methods, the study draws different examples of sentences that carry ambiguous meaning as a result of ambiguous words, along with the same sentences enriched with contextual elements that avoid ambiguity. This way, it is proved and clarified how the ambiguity in the given discourse is resolved by the help of appropriate contextual elements. Based on the theoretical research and practical examples, the ambiguity that these ambiguous words carry in discourse, is evident and the comparison with the statement enriched with contextual elements illustrates how ambiguity, misunderstandings and misinterpretations in communication can be avoided by using the appropriate context. In conclusion, context is the framework that shapes thought and minimizes the wide range of possible interpretations (Crystal, 2008 p.22). Providing the discourse with the appropriate contextual elements plays a crucial role in resolving lexical ambiguities that come from ambiguous words which is in turn an essential component of skilled language comprehension. It should be given the due importance to the context by both actors (speaker and listener) in order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the speakers intended discourse.

Keywords: ambiguous words, context, ambiguity, meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language and communicating in that language involves, among other things, mastering the vocabulary of that language, learning the forms and meanings of words, and the various ways in which these forms and meanings are related to form sentence and further discourse (Perfetti & Hart, 2002; Rice and Tokowicz, 2019). An important factor in the process of understanding a sentence is determining the most appropriate meaning of its lexical units. It is a fact that lexical elements have only one grammatical function, but if we refer to the meaning they bare, words often refer to more than one meaning. Most of the lexical units in English have different meanings and not infrequently in discourse we encounter the presence of ambiguous words which convey or refer to several different meanings which increase the perceptual complexity of the discourse. Lexical ambiguity is considered an important issue both in the field of education, training (Zukswert et al., 2019), as well as in public communication (Cutts, 2015), and it has also been identified as a problem in many professional fields.

Various previous studies show that most words in English are semantically ambiguous, which means that they carry two or more meanings and therefore they convey different meanings in different contexts, even the meanings of words which are not ambiguous. are context dependent (Rodd et al., 2004). In English, approximately 7% of word forms are homonymous e.g.: mouse-mi, mouse-as a piece of computer equipment i.e. they have multiple, unrelated meanings e.g. "bark-bark" vs "bark being"), and 84% of word forms are polysemantic, i.e., they have multiple related meanings. (Rodd et al., 2004). But even non-ambiguous words, i.e. words that bare a clear meaning, in

certain situations, evoke subtle different interpretations depending on the context of use, i.e. their meanings vary and are context-dependent (Yee and Thompson-Schill, 2016; Li and Joanisse, 2021).

But what do we mean by ambiguity or vagueness? According to the Macmillan Dictionary, ambiguity can be defined as "something that is unclear because it has more than one possible meaning", or even as "a confusing mixture of meanings or ideas that makes something difficult to understand" (Ambiguity, Macmillan 2009). But if we take a look at the dictionary, we would find that these connections are not always one-to-one, but in fact, a large number of words have such semantic maps where a word is connected to more than one meaning, e.g. "Bat" can mean baseball bat or bat-the animal; (Eddington and Tokowicz (2015). It is precisely this semantic ambiguity that increases the degree of difficulty of vocabulary learning and communication by ESL students, and can interfere with vocabulary learning and comprehension of the basic block of that language (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

It is believed that lexical ambiguity is the most familiar form of ambiguity (Walton 1996). As a linguistic phenomenon, it occurs when words convey more than one meaning as they are commonly defined and understood. Considerable ambiguity arises when a word with different meanings is used without clearly specifying the relevant context. For example, "bank" can mean the "bank" of a river (noun), " but also a "bank" as a financial institution (noun), (Turner 1987). According to scholars, lexical ambiguity is often reduced or mitigated by the context of the sentence. The term "context" is a widespread and comprehensive concept which is considered indispensable in understanding and interpreting the intended discourse. Scholars emphasize the tremendous influence of context on the meaning of ambiguous words because, according to them, when speakers express their ideas using ambiguous words, listeners must rely on context to understand the target discourse (Elman, 2009; Li and Joanisse, 2021). Thus, it is emphasized that the meaning of each word depends considerable on the relevant context (Duffy, S. A., Kambe, G., & Rayner, K. 2001). In order to understand the importance of "context", Hymes (1962) argues that context can reduce any possible misinterpretations of a text and select the most appropriate meaning depending on the background or context of the text. By making adequate use of the context, we can resolve the ambiguity, decipher the intended meaning of the ambiguous word in the discourse. (Fillmore 1977)

To overcome ambiguities, it is essential that the discourse is rich in contextual elements that clarify the speaker's intended meaning of the ambiguous word. (Duffy, S. A., Kambe, G., & Rayner, K. 2001). The context or contextual elements consist of the linguistic context and the physical context (Yule 1996: 128). Linguistic context refers to the words that precede or follow the utterance and contribute to clarifying the meaning of the utterance itself. (Widows, 1988:98). The linguistic context is explained in linguistic terms, without explaining why a change is occurring or what drives the change while the physical context consists of physical things and objects that surround the discourse. Ambiguity resolution studies have so far been focused mainly on the impact that these ambiguous words have on reading skills in ESL students (Palma et al., 2020); Meanwhile, research in this regard has explored the role of language experience in relation to the knowledge of homonyms and ambiguous words, but not with the processing of homonyms (Booton et al., 2022). Considering previous research in bilingualism, it seems that the resolution of ambiguity or homonymy is not addressed through intrinsic word features such as frequency of meanings, but by the contextual integration of longer contexts, such as sentences. (M. Kaltsa and D. Papadopoulou Ampersand 11 2023). Further studies explicitly reflect the role and influence of context for successful comprehension of ambiguous words in spoken language (Blott et al. 2022).

Actually, words, as argued above, can have multiple meaning or interpretations, e.g. Spring can mean spring or the spring season. The use of the right appropriate context avoids the confusion created by the ambiguous features of the word. Pickering and Frisson (2007) recommend using the term interpretation to refer to one of these cases. Using the word in the relevant context clarifies the meaning of the word. (Duffy, S. A., Kambe, G., & Rayner, K. 2001)

Let's consider these examples: "She was enjoying the spring". This is an ambiguous sentence, as the word spring is ambiguous as it carries multiple meanings referring to a source of water, or spring –the season. Enriching this sentence with the relevant context removes ambiguity and clarifies the speaker's intended meaning. Specifically, the sentence: "She was enjoying the fresh water of the spring."- is no longer ambiguous since the relevant context has clarified the meaning of the word "spring". Likewise, the sentence "She was enjoying the blossom of the spring." It actually carries a clear meaning as it has been enriched with the appropriate context that removes the ambiguity that the word spring carries and clarifies the speaker's intention.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate and study how misunderstandings as a result of the use of ambiguous words among Albanian students who are learning English as a second language (ESL) can be avoided by enriching the discourse with contextual elements. The study hypothesizes that the relevant context resolves the ambiguity arising from words which have more than one meaning. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of related research questions, such as: "Does context help clarify the meaning of ambiguous or ambiguous words?" "Does the

discourse that consists of ambiguous words becomes clearer if it is enriched with contextual elements?" The method used in this research is an integrated approach between quantitative and qualitative methods. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, according to Thomas (2003), constitute an integrated approach, which is highly recommended by researchers today, as it increases the degree of reliability (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

In order to collect quantitative data, it was compiled and handed out a questionnaire as a suitable measuring instrument for the implementation. Through the questionnaire, individual data were collected from the students of two Albanian public universities: University "F.S. Noli", Korçë and the University of Tirana. While in order to collect qualitative data, it was thought to conduct discussions in focus groups by means of some semi-structured interviews. Discussions explored and evidenced students' experiences of avoiding ambiguity in discourse through the appropriate use of context. A total of 100 students from the above two universities participated in the research. The sampling in this research was done with the random selection of students, using a stratified sampling method, consisting of 60 students from the University of Tirana and 40 students from the University "F.S. Noli" of Korça, in order to make possible a representation at different levels: both in terms of the ability and mastery of the English language, as well as from different academic fields of study. Survey participants range in age from 18 to 22 years old.

Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to investigate the influence of contextual elements on the avoidance of ambiguity caused by ambiguous words. The structured questionnaire was designed to assess students' perceptions of ambiguity in English communication and their appreciation of the use of context to avoid ambiguity as a result of the use of ambiguous words. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, including 14 multiple-choice Likert-scale questions, focusing on how students understand and interpret ambiguous words in and out of context as well as 1 open question, where they express their opinion on how they solve the ambiguities as a result of ambiguous words. Focus group discussions provide us with qualitative data about students' experiences to avoid the ambiguity created as a result of the use of ambiguous words in discourse. Discussions were held in 3 focus groups with students from the sample. Each focus group consisted of 5 students who discussed and answered semi-structured interview questions. Discussions explored students' experiences and strategies in resolving ambiguities created in discourse as a result of the use of ambiguous words.

The research procedure was carried out in two stages. During the first phase, questionnaire surveys were administered to students. Participants completed the structured questionnaire independently and individually. This phase aimed to collect basic data on students' perceptions of ambiguity and the use of contextual elements to avoid this ambiguity. During the second phase, focus group discussions were conducted. The discussions provided deeper insights into how students try to avoid ambiguity and the effectiveness of using contextual elements in clarifying the meaning of ambiguous words. Responses from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize student perceptions and attitudes. In the same way, the qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussions regarding the students' experiences regarding ambiguous words and the enrichment of discourse with contextual elements were also analyzed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire responses. Analysis of focus group discussions included analyzing responses, gathering data from students' experiences to understand how students avoid ambiguity, and provided students' perceptions of the effectiveness of contextual elements.

3. RESULTS

From the analysis of data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, it is evident that Albanian students, who learn English as a second language, confirm the fact that a considerable number of words have several meanings and, as a result, cause confusion to perceive the meaning intended by the speaker and it is precisely the relevant context that clarifies this ambiguity by helping the interlocutor to refer to the intended meaning. The data obtained from the questionnaires are reflected in table 1 below. Obviously illustrated on the table1, can be seen the number of students for each Likert scale response to the questions of the questionnaires, according to which it turns out that the context affects a lot or extremely in avoiding ambiguity and correctly perceiving the intended meaning of ambiguous words used in discourse. Also, by analyzing the answers received from the interviews conducted in focus groups, it was evident that students feel confused as a result of the use of ambiguous words, but this ambiguity is avoided if these words are always associated with the relevant context. Some students emphasize the fact that, without the right context, ambiguous words lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of discourse. Appropriate context gives to ambiguous words the meaning intended by the speaker. They expressed that there were not a few cases when they felt confused and unclear to decipher the intended meaning of ambiguous words when the speaker avoided including the relevant context in the discourse, leaving room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation. About 90% of the interviewed students emphasized the importance of the context to avoid

ambiguity, or misinterpretation in the discourse. The data organized in the table below clearly highlight the results gathered and analyzed from the questionnaire survey conducted.

Table: 1: The number of students for each Likert scale response for every questionnaire questions

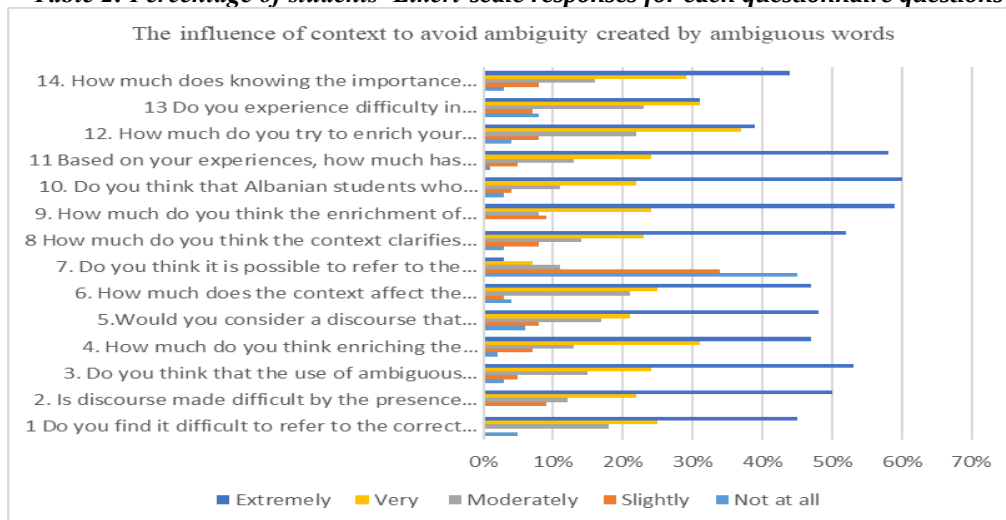
Questionnaire questions	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
1. Do you find it difficult to refer to the correct meaning when ambiguous words (with ambiguous or ambiguous meaning) are used in discourse?	5	7	18	25	45
2. Is discourse made difficult by the presence of ambiguous words?	7	9	12	22	50
3. Do you think that the use of ambiguous words with multiple meanings leads to misunderstandings or misinterpretations?	3	5	15	24	53
4. How much do you think enriching the discourse with contextual elements affects understanding?	2	7	13	31	47
5. Would you consider a discourse that consists of ambiguous words with multiple meanings lacking contextual elements to be ambiguous?	6	8	17	21	48
6. How much does the context affect the understanding of the discourse, which includes ambiguous or ambiguous words?	4	3	21	25	47
7. Do you think it is possible to refer to the correct meaning of the word ambiguous regardless of the presence of the context?	45	34	11	7	3
8. How much do you think the context clarifies and avoids misunderstandings arising from the use of ambiguous words?	3	8	14	23	52
9. How much do you think the enrichment of discourse with contextual elements affects to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations?	0	9	8	24	59
10. Do you think that Albanian students who speak English as a second language should be clarified about the role of context to avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings in discourse as a result of ambiguous words?	3	4	11	22	60
11. Based on your experiences, how much has avoiding misunderstandings and misinterpretations been the use of contention in discourse?	1	5	13	24	58
12. How much do you try to enrich your discourse with contextual elements to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations from the use of ambiguous words?	4	8	22	37	39
13. Do you experience difficulty in understanding speech if the interlocutor avoids the context when using ambiguous words?	8	7	23	31	31
14. How much does knowing the importance of context and its proper use in discourse affect to avoid misinterpretations resulting from the use of ambiguous words?	3	8	16	29	44

Source: Data from the responses of questionnaires of students

4. DISCUSSIONS

Based on previous studies, it was found that lexical ambiguity is ubiquitous. Researchers have proven that in English, over 80% of common words bare more than one entry in the dictionary (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2002), with a number of words having several different definitions. Ambiguity occurs when a term or a sentence is ambiguous in itself. For example, if the term is used outside the relevant context it carries two or more meanings and, therefore, brings ambiguity about the meaning intended by the speaker or its misinterpretation. It is precisely the relevant context that avoids ambiguity and gives the word its intended meaning. If we refer to the findings of the study, it is clear that the use of ambiguous words brings difficulties and ambiguity in communication. This difficulty or confusion can be avoided if the discourse is enriched with the right context.

Table 2: Percentage of students' Likert-scale responses for each questionnaire questions



Source: Data from the analyses student's response to the questionnaire questions

The analysis of questionnaires displayed on the table.2 and focus group interviews confirms the hypothesis raised during this research if the relevant context solves the ambiguity that appears as a result of words that have more than one meaning. Likewise, the findings obtained from this research argue the answer to the research question that the context clarifies the meaning of ambiguous words and the enrichment of discourse with contextual elements avoids misunderstandings and misinterpretations that may result from the use of ambiguous words. If we, as speakers of English as a second language, do not ignore but include the context in the discourse in the right way when there is the presence of ambiguous words, we will avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations of these words and of the discourse as a whole.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research is to highlight the problem of ambiguity resulting from the use of ambiguous words in communication, as well as to reflect on effective ways to avoid misunderstandings that may occur in discourse as a result of their use, especially among Albanian students who speak English as a second language. Based on previous studies in this field, but also during this research, it was evident that ambiguous words make communication and interpretation of ambiguous words difficult during a discourse that lack the context. Various studies have emphasized that context plays a key role in the understanding of ambiguous words (Duffy, S. A., Kambe, G., & Rayner, K. 2001). The research among Albanian students emphasized that enriching the discourse with contextual elements not only avoids the ambiguities and confusion that arise as a result of ambiguous words, but also makes the interlocutor refer to the intended meaning and avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations that can cause ambiguous words. As a result, the study reflects on the ambiguity created as a result of ambiguous words, ambiguity that can be avoided if the speaker always uses the context in the discourse when there are ambiguous words involved and this context is in line with the intended meaning. The hypothesis of the paper offered the possibility to treat the topic from a theoretical and empirical point of view, while the methodology enabled us to clarify the research questions posed. The compilation of the questions and the conduct of the questionnaire was made in function of the objectives and goals presented. Analyzing the answers to the questionnaires and interviews gave answers to the research questions posed during the conduct of this paper, confirming the raised hypothesis and emphasizing that the context avoids ambiguity and brings a clear understanding of the target discourse to the speakers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I dedicate a special appreciation, acknowledgement and gratitude for Prof. dr. Shpresa Delia, my tutor in my doctoral thesis, for the instructions, advice and guidance during the conduct of this research.

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