

AMBIGUITY IN MEDIA HEADLINES. WAYS AND MEANS OF RESOLVING AMBIGUITY

Marcela BULAC

CZU: 81'37:070.431

marcela.bulac1998@gmail.com

Această cercetare are la bază două concepte, precum ambiguitatea și titlul de știri cu scopul de a studia interdependența dintre ele, de a investiga aspectele care duc la fenomenul de ambiguitate și de a găsi metode de dezambiguizare a titlurilor de știri. Studiarea materialului teoretic a arătat că există patru aspecte care creează probleme în înțelegerea sensului unui titlu: ambiguitatea lexicală, ambiguitatea pragmatică, ambiguitatea structurală și titlurile ce conțin mai multe tipuri de ambiguități.

Astfel, în cadrul acestei cercetări am demonstrat faptul că un procent mare din titlurile de știri se bazează pe fenomenul ambiguității, acesta creând curiozitate, controversă și confuzie.

Ambiguity is a phenomenon often encountered in the sources of written form that surround us. Thus, throughout our research, we have discovered that many linguists have studied this phenomenon from different points of view. In this connection, according to F.R. Palmer in "Semantics: Second Edition", ambiguity could be defined as "the uncertainty of meaning, usually caused by word or phrases that convey more than one meaning" [1, p.71]. Another linguist, who studied this phenomenon is Nicholas Allot in his book "Key terms in Pragmatics". He mentions that a sequence of linguistic signs (written, spoken or signed) is ambiguous if and only if it is assigned more than one meaning by the grammar [2, p.20]. Ruth M. Kempson in her work "Semantic Theory" defines ambiguity as "the state of having two possible interpretations of an expression" that is an expression in general terms is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning [3, p.123].

Regarding the concept of news headline, "Scholastic Journalism" written by C. Dow Tate and Sherri A. Taylor, is the source which gives us the definitions and explanations for such concepts as news headline, writing rules, functions of headline, which outlines the topic of the news headline and sets out the true principles which represent its basis. According to them, headline-writing rules are continually changing among news websites, professional newspapers and magazines.

That is why many publications, sites, newspapers create the headlines according to their own policy, still following some general rules [4, p. 253]. In order to prove the theoretical aspects mentioned above, it is necessary to analyse some headlines that can show that ambiguity is a current aspect that characterizes the English language.

First of all, we want to specify that we chose to build our corpus of examples consisting of news headlines from sites like BBC and Yahoo considering that they are two of the most viewed websites by the world's population due the news they publish. The following examples of headlines will give us an exact perspective and will prove the phenomenon of ambiguity. The first type of ambiguity which was analysed in our research is the lexical one. Let's consider the following title published on www.bbc.com on 18.05.2020: *The woman nursing the babies of murdered mothers*. In this case the lexical ambiguity is created by the polysemy of the word "nurse". Thus the verb "to nurse" has three meanings: 1) to bed; 2) to give medical attention; 3) to breastfeed (a baby). Having only the headline of the news, we can say that all three meanings match the given context, but if we consult the entire article we understand that it refers to breastfeeding. Finally, this headline expresses the idea that the woman breast-fed the babies of murdered mothers. The second type of ambiguity analysed in our research is the pragmatic one. Let's consider the following title published on www.yahoo.com on 15.05.2020: *House to vote Friday on more virus aid, despite GOP skeptics*. In the context of this news headline, "House" and "GOP" are two terms that create pragmatic ambiguity. Having only a headline without context, we can determine neither the field nor the two terms. So we have to do research and to read the context in order to determine what the concept of "House" and the abbreviation "GOP" means. Reading the context, we understand that the concept of "House" refers to the House of Representatives, and "GOP" (Grand Old Party) is the abbreviation for the Republican Party. From this context, we understand that the Democratic Party, which forma a majority in the House of Representatives is fighting for a massive bill that aims to renew \$1,200 cash payments for individuals, and extend a \$600 weekly additional federal unemployment benefit, despite the Republican Party's wishes.

The third type of ambiguity is created at the level of structure and, according to the statistics made after compiling the corpus of examples for the diploma paper, it is the type of ambiguity used the least in news headlines. Let's consider the following title published on www.yahoo.com on 10.11.2019: *Parents of Teen Motorcyclist Killed By Envoy's Wife Say Trump Offered Them a Check*.

While reading this news headline, which has structural ambiguity, we understand that it has two underlying interpretations of meaning.

First one would be this interpretation [Parents Of Teen Motorcyclist] Killed By Envoy's Wife Say Trump Offered Them A Check, which suggests that parents of this teen were killed, and the second interpretation of the headline Parents of [Teen Motorcyclist Killed] By Envoy's Wife Say Trump Offered Them A Check, reports that the young man was killed. Reading the whole article, we understand that the second interpretation of the headline is the correct one, because the young man was killed by the envoy's wife. The last but not the least aspect which was analysed in our diploma paper is the aspect which is related to news headlines that contain more ambiguities.

Let's consider the following title published on www.yahoo.com on 28.04.2020: *Pentagon releases UFO videos for the record*.

Reading this news headline for the first time, we discover that the word that creates a pragmatic ambiguity is "Pentagon", because the first meaning that comes to mind refers to a shape with five sides and five angles. However, this "Pentagon" refers to the building in Washington where the US Defense Department is based. Specifically, we find the pragmatic character in the fact that in this context "Pentagon" refers to the authorities working in the US Defense department and who made public UFO videos. In the same headline, the abbreviation "UFO" creates a lexical ambiguity which can be deciphered as "unidentified flying object" and refers to any aerial phenomenon that cannot immediately be identified. At the end of compiling the entire corpus of examples, we noticed that out of 100 news headlines, 38 are headlines that contain pragmatic ambiguities, 30 represent multiple-ambiguity headlines, 28 contain lexical ambiguities, and only 4 contain ambiguities at the level of structure. In conclusion we can say that ambiguity in news headlines represents a

current topic, which is present especially in mass media, this being a method of catching the reader's attention. It represents a problem for those who do not know very well the English language and for those who do not know very well the social, political and cultural aspects of the English-speaking countries. In the same context, the most common ambiguities are lexical and pragmatic ones, which are largely created by polysemantic words, knowing that English is a polysemantic language, as over 70% of words have multiple entries. Moreover, abbreviations and unknown concepts represent a major source in creating ambiguities.

References:

1. PALMER, F.R. *Semantics*. Second Edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: UK, 1981. 232 p.
2. ALLOT, Nicholas. *Key terms in pragmatics*. Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., London: United Kingdom, 2010. 245 p.
3. KEMPSON, R. *Semantic Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1977. 232 p.
4. TATE, C. Dow and TAYLOR, Sherri A. *Scholastic Journalism*. Wiley, USA. 2014. 506 p.
5. www.bbc.com
6. www.yahoo.com

Recomandat
Rodica CARAGIA, lector univ.