

AMBIGUITY

While vague claims are unclear because they lack detail or precision, *ambiguous* claims are unclear because they are subject to multiple interpretations.

Semantic Ambiguity:

Claims suffer from semantic ambiguity when they contain a word (or words) with multiple meanings.

Ex: “I don’t like it when my father smokes.”

The word “smokes” has more than one meaning, and the significance of the sentence changes dramatically depending on which meaning is intended.

How can we remove the semantic ambiguity from this sentence?

Syntactic Ambiguity:

Claims suffer from syntactic ambiguity when multiple possible meanings result from grammar or sentence structure.

Ex: “Joe experienced severe shortness of breath and chest pain at home while having sex, which became more unpleasant at the emergency room.”

What became worse at the emergency room—the chest pain and shortness of breath, or the sex? This sentence’s structure leaves room for either interpretation.

How can we remove the syntactic ambiguity from this sentence?

What kind of ambiguity affects each of the following?

There have been several nights when I did not know the name of the person in the bed next to me.

I could really go for a little Mexican right now.

You look more like your brother than your father.

I want Al Gore to be the next president of the United States in the worst way.

“Can you make me a sandwich?”

“Abracadabra! You’re a sandwich!”

I’m not a big pancake man myself.

Grouping Ambiguity:

-A sub-category of semantic ambiguity

-Refers to words that describe sets of indeterminate scope

“Baseball players make more money than football players.”

In this sentence, we don't know whether “baseball players” refers to the *collective* set (all baseball players taken together) or to some smaller subset of baseball players. A similar ambiguity is in place here for “football players.”

Identify the Amiguity

For each of the following sentences, list as many possible interpretations as you can:

1. Put the book on the table by the window in the bedroom.
2. I was told to stop drinking at midnight.
3. “New Chief Vows to Avoid Drastic Changes While Reviewing Much-Criticized Reforms”
4. “I wrote a poem once about a great encounter I had with a dear early in the morning that was very moving.” (John Kerry *New York Times* March 7th 2004)
5. For sale—ten puppies from an Australian terrier and a Boston terrier.
6. Visiting relatives can be boring.
7. Teachers work harder than doctors.

Can you clarify these?

“New York’s first commercial human sperm-bank opened Friday with semen samples from 18 men frozen in a stainless steel tank.”

Hint: this sentence suffers from syntactic ambiguity

“College professors make millions of dollars a year.”

Hint: this sentence suffers from grouping ambiguity

“The Raider tackle threw a block at the Giants
linebacker.”

Hint: this sentence suffers from semantic ambiguity.

IN GROUPS:

Develop 2 examples of semantically ambiguous claims.

Develop 2 examples of syntactically ambiguous claims.

Develop 2 examples of claims containing grouping ambiguities.

Definitions

Problems resulting from ambiguity and vagueness can often be fixed by introducing definitions.

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS:

1. Definition by example
 - Appealing to one or more examples of something to which the defined term applies.
 - “By ‘candy bar’, I mean things like Snickers and Baby Ruth.”
2. Definition by synonym
 - Giving another word or phrase that is equivalent in meaning.
 - “When I call you ‘obnoxious’, I mean you’re annoying.”
3. Definition by analysis (analytical definition)
 - Specifying two aspects of the defined term:
 - a. The *broad* category to which the term applies
 - b. The *distinctive* features of things to which the term applies
 - EX: “A bachelor is a man who is not married.”

We might want to use any one of these definition types in order to clarify what we mean. For example, we might come up with different definitions for “doctor”.

Definition by example:

Definition by synonym:

Definition by analysis:

Rhetorical Definitions

We sometimes give definitions that are “loaded” in such a way as to convey a particular attitude toward the term defined.

“A conservative is a hide-bound, narrow-minded hypocrite who thinks the point to life is to make money and rip off poor people.”

Strictly speaking, this is a definition (whether it’s *correct* or not is another matter).

When we give definitions to clarify our meaning, it’s best to employ neutral language wherever possible.

Which item in each of the following sets of claims has the most negative emotive force?

1. Mr. Gardner
 - a. is a social drinker.
 - b. is alcohol-dependent.
 - c. is a heavy imbiber.
 - d. enjoys tippling.
 - e. is a drunk.

2. Shirley always had trouble finding clothes that fit because she was
 - a. so petite.
 - b. quite small.
 - c. a runt.
 - d. diminutive.
 - e. tiny.

3.
 - a. He had done some unfortunate deeds in his day.
 - b. He had on occasion gone astray.
 - c. He had become morally bankrupt.
 - d. He had the moral sensibility of a reptile.

4.
 - a. She occasionally lapsed in her duty toward others.
 - b. She didn't care how her actions would negatively affect others.
 - c. She seized opportunities to cause misfortune for others.
 - d. She was vicious toward others.