REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY – A SOURCE OF VARIOUS MEANING EFFECTS

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Abstract
Referential ambiguity concerns the relationship between objects and their expression. At the lexical level, it reveals itself through polysemy and homonymy. The change of referents by determining them in the same discourse may lead to comic or/and ironic effects. Referential ambiguity is present in both oral and written language, in literary texts, in advertisements etc., thus creating meaning effects.

Key words: *polysemy, homonymy, referential, expression, meaning*

Résumé
L'ambiguïté référentielle concerne la relation entre les objets et leur expression. Au niveau lexical, elle se manifeste par la polysémie et l'homonymie. Le changement des référents par l'actualisation dans le même discours peut créer des effets comiques ou/et ironiques. L'ambigüité référentielle est présente dans la langue écrite et orale, dans les textes littéraires, dans les réclames publicitaires, etc., en créant des effets de sens.

Mots-clés: *polysémie, homonymie, référentiel, expression, sens*

The issue of ambiguity has been debated by linguists over the last decades. Various authors have studied this phenomenon according to the role that it played in their theories. Thus, entire chapters are devoted to ambiguity in the works of O. Ducrot, J. Moeschler, A. Reboul etc. When we identify an event, a certain relationship is established between it and the referential expression. *Referential ambiguity* concerns this type of relationship.

In general, in the literature there are two types of ambiguity: *syntactic* and *lexical*. In the case of the two types of ambiguity, one can read as follows: "a syntactically ambiguous term is also semantically ambiguous, but not vice versa."[1] An example widely commented in the literature (1) *Bătrânul duce o poartă/* 'The old man is carrying a gate' or 'The old duke takes her' perfectly illustrates what has been mentioned above. This example highlights two nominal expressions with different roles: *bătrânul duce* 'the old duke'/subject/agent/ *poartă* 'takes' /predicate/ *o* 'her'/direct object/beneficiary and *bătrânul* 'the old man'/subject /*duce* 'is carrying'/ predicate */o poartă* 'a gate' /direct object/beneficiary. So the correct interpretation, which the speaker wished to communicate, is performed at the contextual level and is pragmatic.

E. Coşeriu[2] mentions the existence of two strata of verbal language: one which signifies in the language and one which designates, has a meaning in the discourse. V.

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[1] Munteanu, 2006, p. 127.
[2] Coşeriu, 1996, p. 57.

Păcuraru considers that "The context is in fact the framework that enables the activity of interpreting discourse, in order to receive the message contained in the discourse."[3] In this context, the author presents conclusive assumptions. The fact is that meaning is constructed within discourse, not beyond it, hence the value that the linguistic sign has in the semiotic code and its semantic value in the discourse. There is also reference to the connection between the semantic value of the lexical sign and the context, the speech act. So the importance of the text in the disambiguation of an ambiguous lexical sign is obvious, and "for the comprehension of the message that the given utterance contains, the speaker will first have to disambiguate the meaning of the sign /.../, for each of its two occurrences, operating for this purpose a real selection of the meaning traits constituting the meaning/ meanings of this lexical sign as a unit of the functional language system, focused in relation to the concrete context of enunciation and revealing those which are highlighted in the given context"[4].

Ambiguity pertains to a broad linguistic sphere. There is lexical ambiguity which refers to the phenomena of homonymy and polysemy, morphological ambiguity - the homonymy of certain morphological forms, syntactic ambiguity, when a subordinate clause shows different nuances.

The act of generating ambiguities that produce different effects of meaning is due to the existence of homonymic forms and polysemy. We need to make a comment on the issue of delimitation of the two linguistic phenomena which encounters many difficulties. Things are not so simple as they seem, given that both phenomena are based on the truth that the same form can have two or more meanings and polysemy is a source of occurrence of homonyms. The criterion that determines the distinction between homonymy and polysemy is based on the fact that the structure of a polysemous word contains a meaning that attracts all the others on the basis of the similarity of traits that it sums up, while with homonyms the common seme is absent.

Thus, the meanings of a polysemous word are more or less related, unlike the meanings of homonyms which are not connected. Between the meanings of a polysemous word there is a relationship: hence the name of polysemantism. Take for example the word *gură* that we will use in sentences with different meanings and sending to different referents:

(2) *El îşi ţine limba în gură.*/ 'He keeps his tongue in his mouth'.

(3) *Gura sacului este largă.*/ 'The opening of the bag is large.'

(4) *Are o gura cât o şura.*/ 'He has a big mouth.' (literally, 'as big as a barn')

In (2), the word *gură* is used with its common, literal meaning and sends to a referent designating a part of the whole, it is about the mouth - organ. In (3) and (4) it is used with secondary meanings and therefore it has several referents. Starting from the basic meaning, we know that the mouth is oval, round. Can one not assign this feature to other meanings? In (3) *gură* has as a referent the opening of a bag, and in (4) the referent appears as a talkative person. So is the word *masă* whose literal meaning is that of furniture item with 3 or 4 legs.

Here are a few sentences that send to other referents:

(5) *Iau masa în oraş.*/ 'I'm having lunch in town.'

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[3] Păcuraru, *Construcţia de sens vs ambiguitatea semantică a semnului lexical,* in „Limba română", Nr. 11, Anul XV, 2005, p. 38.

[4] Păcuraru, *art. cit.*, p. 41.

(6) *Bolnavul este pe masa de operaţie.*/ 'The patient is on the operating table.'

(7) *Ce masă a fost la petrecerea asta!*/ 'What a meal we had at this party!'

(8) *Treceţi la masă.*/ 'Go to the table!'

All these meanings are derived from the literal sense. In (5) the referent is lunch; in (6) - a specialized table in a hospital; in (7) - dishes served; in (8) – the actual table (used either to eat or to discuss something).

So, homonyms are different words, with different meanings and identical form, and a polysemous word is one word with several meanings.

Coming back to ambiguity and the change of referents by determining them in the same discourse, we might see that they generate a game which produces different effects: ironic, comic etc. Thus, M. Munteanu considers[5] that "the possibility of placing the same word in different semantic isotopies and multiple readings that the intentionally ambiguous text generates, represents a mark of poeticity in the case of literary discourse". To illustrate this, we will present a series of examples that illustrate referential ambiguity:

(9) – *Nu ai luat **bacul**? Mai ai o şansă să-l iei. Mâine la ora 8. De la podul înalt.*/ 'Haven't you taken the ferryboat?(or 'Haven't you passed the graduation exam?') You have one chance to get it. Tomorrow at 8. From the high bridge.'

In (9) it is about the explicit and implicit occurrence of the homonyms *bac* / 'ferryboat' *"a flat-bottomed boat used to cross rivers or lakes from one bank to another or for ancillary services of the ship"* and *bac***,** abbreviation from baccalaureate *"high school graduation exam".* The last reply reveals the resolution of that ambiguity and sends to the referent considered by the speaker.

The word *bancă* may also lead to such ambiguities at the meaning level. The homonymic core is based on the meanings of the word *bancă* 'bank' - "a financial institution whose main business is to attract deposits and to lend money in order to grant loans and make investments" and *bancă* 'bench' - "long, narrow seat for two or more persons". The referent of the word can be contextually determined:

(10)– *Te aştept lângă **banca** la care ne-am despărţit săptămâna trecută.*/ 'I am waiting near the bank where we left last week.'

– *Care bancă? Banca Naţională?*/ 'Which bank? The National Bank?'

– *Nu, cea din parcul de lângă casa ta.*/ 'No, the one in the park near your house'.

Examples of contexts with obvious ambiguity may be generated by other words as well: *regină, liliac, masă, lamă, râs, roabă, cursă, mină, post, bandă, carieră, ghid.*

(11) – *Îţi aduc un liliac.*/ 'I'll bring you a bat.' (or 'I'll bring you a lilac.')

– *Frumos, cum ai reuşit sa-l prinzi?*/ 'Nice, how did you catch it?'

– Nu, e floare./ 'No, it's a flower.'

A polysemous core underlies the following examples:

(12) – *Ai fost la **Regina** Maria ?*/ 'Have you been to Queen Mary?'

– *Din păcate nu am avut posibilitatea să întâlnesc regina.*/ 'Unfortunately I haven't had the opportunity to meet the queen.'

– *Nu, **Regina** Maria e* cea mai mare reţea privată de sănătate din România, îmbină serviciile medicale de excepţie cu atenţia şi respectul faţă de fiecare pacient./

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[5] Munteanu, 2006, p. 129.

'No, Queen Mary is the largest private health network in Romania, it combines exceptional medical services with concern and respect for each patient.'

The referent is also contextually determined in the following examples:

(13)– Am luat deja masa./ 'I have already eaten.' (literally, 'I have already taken the table')

– Când ai reuşi? Ieri magazinul a fost închis./ 'How did you manage? Yesterday the shop was close.'

– Pe aceea nu am luat-o, am vrut să zic că am luat prânzul./ 'I didn't buy that table, I meant I had lunch."

(14) *Doamne, ajută patru* **lămâi** *ca să-mi fac mănăstire privată!*/ 'Lord, help four lemons to make my private monastery!'

In (14) the word *lămâi* does not indicate the fruit itself. It has another referent. It refers to a slot machine, where *four lemons* get you a prize. In the following examples the referent is also triggered by the context:

(15) *Vorbesc doi prieteni:*/ 'Two friends are talking:'

– *Aseară am făcut cunoştinţă cu o domnişoară. /* 'Last night I met a young lady.'

– *Şi i-ai luat* **telefonul** *măcar?*/ 'Did you take her phone?'

– *Bineînţeles, ia te uită ce Samsung şmecher avea…/* 'Of course, look what a cool Samsung she had...'

(16) *Doi alpinişti stau pe marginea unei prăpastii./* 'Two mountain climbers are sitting on the edge of a precipice.'

Zice unul:/ 'One says:'

– *Aici a picat* **ghidul** *nostru anul trecut!*/ 'This is where our guide fell last year!'

Celălalt, scandalizat:/ 'The other, outraged:'

– *Şi asta spui tu aşa de liniştit?*/ 'How can you be so quiet saying it?'

– *Păi ce, era deja destul de vechi şi avea şi câteva pagini rupte!*/ 'Why, it was already old and had some torn pages!'

In both examples the referent is contextually determined. Referential ambiguity is exploited by different genres: advertisements, literary genres. Thus, in an advertisement the referent is constructed by highlighting polysemy or homonymy, which provides the advertisement with the advantage of several readings:

(17) *Luna plină de reduceri.*/ 'The month of sales.'

We have the homonymic core *luna decembrie* 'the month of December', the month of gifts and sales and *luna* 'the moon', the celestial body in the advertisement of a shopping centre.

(18) Vine, vine primăvara Knorr dă miei în toată Ţara/ 'Spring is coming, Knorr gives lambs around the Country'

Câştigă zilnic zeci de premii de la Knorr/ 'Every day you can win dozens of prizes from Knorr'

The word miei in (18) does not send to the referent itself miel "a domestic animal". With spring comes the great holiday of Christianity - Easter and the lamb is the symbol of this holiday. In that advertisement the word miei sent to another referent. It is about the gifts that you can win in this period.

The above-mentioned examples and comments prove what Mihaela Munteanu[6] argues, i.e. that "referential ambiguity is an important element in the interpretation of a text, whenever there is some intentionality on the part of the interlocutor (speaker), it creates effects of meaning(s)".

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[6] Munteanu, 2006, p. 134.