

LESSON TWELVE

VAGUITY AND AMBIGUITY

Most often, we make or produce certain sentences – statements, questions or commands and realize that these sentences do not have any meanings or have meanings, but the meanings are more than one.

VAGUITY/VAGUENESS

Sometimes when we make or produce certain sentences, we realize that these sentences do not have meanings at all. When a sentence/construction or structure has no meaning, we say that construction is vague. We say that construction is semantically empty – It has no meaning.

For e.g., if we say.

Colourless green ideas sleep furiously

This is a complete vague construction.

Considering the relationship between the words, we realize that for instance; **Colourless – green**: something cannot be colourless and be green at the same time;

Colourless / green – ideas – ideas do not have colour so ideas cannot be green

Ideas – sleep – can ideas sleep?

Sleep furiously: we sleep for rest. How then can an entity sleep furiously? How will it look like?

The words in the construction have meanings in themselves, but when they were put together, they made no meaning. We are not looking at the words; but the relationship between the words. As such, we say that vaguity has usually a syntactic emphasis. (looking at the relationship between the words).

TYPES OF VAGUITY

Referential Vaguity

In referential vaguity, we make reference to a certain entity but realize that the entity we are pointing to or referring to is non-existent.

For e.g.

Ama saw it

What did Ama see?

We realize that we can't even identify what Ama saw.

We say this sentence is **referentially** vague.

Also, if we say

They are asleep.

One may ask; who are "**they**"? '**They**' is not referring to any group of people.

Another e.g.

The girl came here

Which girl who are we talking about?

Because we cannot point to any entity as those we are referring to; we say that the presence of the words have rendered the sentences are **referentially** vague.

SOURCES OF REFERENTIAL VAGUITY

- ✚ Referential vaguity can result because of the presence of ***pronouns***.

For e.g.

They ran away
Ama threw ***it*** away

- ✚ It can also result from the presence of the definite article:

For e.g.

The boy is rude.
The girl
The school
e.t.c.

Which entities are we referring to?

- ✚ Referential vaguity can result from the **presence of substitution items**.

For e.g. in the sentences:

They ***did*** it.
Ekuwa loves the ***soft/ ones***

Have we identified what **action** they undertook or what **soft ones** is referring to?

- ✚ The presence of **comparative/superlative adjectives** can result in vagueness of a sentence.

For e.g.:

Ata is *taller* / tall.

Esi is *slower* / slow

John is *wiser* /wise

Who are we comparing the entities with? We say that the meanings of the adjectives have not been specified.

Syntactic Vaguity

In this type of vaguity, the meanings of the words that make up a structure do not agree in that structure.

For e.g.

Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

Here, we realize that the words in the structure do not agree in anyway.

Syntactic vaguity is usually associated with anomalous sentences:

For e.g.:

My bucket is sick.

The sentence is vague. It is also anomalous. No meaning can be made from such a statement.

AMBIGUITY

We meet some constructions and realize that these constructions have more than one meaning.

For e.g.:

We are going to the court

‘**Court**’ here may mean:

- **Place for settlement of cases.**
- **Space for playing games (tennis, volleyball court)**
- **Any open space in the house.**
- **The official residence of a sovereign.**

These different meanings of the word **court** make the sentence ambiguous. –it has more than one meaning.

TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Lexical Ambiguity

Some words have different meaning in themselves. When these words are made to join other words in a structure, they cause the structure to become lexically ambiguous.

For e.g.

I am going for the pen

He asked me to give him the key.

SOURCES OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

✚ **Homonymy** (Homophony & Homograph).

For e.g.:

They have found the bore

Bore – an interesting and tiring person.

For e.g.

She is a pig

- Pig as **an animal**
- Or as a human being who will **eat anything that comes his way**
- As a **dirty person**.

Bore – the measurement across a gun, pipe. Phrasal Verbs can also be homonymous

For e.g.

put off

becomes ambiguous if used without a context to specify the meaning.

✚ **Confusion between Idiomatic & Non Idiomatic Use**

The meanings of idioms are obtained from the structure as a whole & not from the individual words that make the expressions. We thus treat the idiom as one lexical unit. Sometimes, it does not become clear whether to give meaning to the expression as a single unit or as an ordinary combination of lexical units.

For e.g.

He kicked the bucket

- died or
- hit his foot against the bucket?

Confusion of Juncture

Juncture is a psychological perception of boundary between words.

When one becomes confused as to where to place the juncture, it results in an ambiguous structure.

a + flame; aflame

nitrate; nite+rate

a+maze; amaze,

e.t.c.

Confusion of Lexical Classification

We meet words and we become confused as to whether we have to describe that structure as a **single word, an adjective and a noun or a verb + adverb** compound. When such words occur in structures, they create ambiguity.

For e.g.

Bluebird, blue + bird

Donewell, done + well

Bestworld, best + world

Godsway, God's + way

multiple connotative meaning

If a word has multiple connotations, its use results in ambiguous structures.

For e.g.

Ama is a snake

Does snake mean

- deceitful
- clever
- poisonous?

Other words with such multiple connotations are teacher, Solomon, e.t.c.

Polysemy

Lexical ambiguity can result from the presence of **polysemes**.

For e.g.

She is a small girl

Small as **small in size**,

Small as **immature**

Small as **unimportant**

Small as **unpopular?**

The presence of such a word and other such as big, clean, pen, key, can create ambiguous sentences.

Confusion Between Connotation and Denotation

Sometimes, we become confused as to the meaning of a practical word. We meet words in structures and become confused as whether to consider the denotative meaning or the connotative meaning. This is usual with nouns.

For e.g.

Confusion of Number

Some nouns have the same form for the singular as well as the plural. These nouns, except where the context specifies, exhibit ambiguity, for it is not clear whether one intends to use the singular or the plural form.

For e.g.

I saw my sheep coming home.

Are we referring to a single **sheep** or a **number of sheep**?

The university bought new equipment.

There is a luggage at the station.

Confusion of Mood

It may not be easy all the time to say whether the sentence:

I am going to Accra.

Should be interpreted as an event in the present – whether the person has already started the journey and is on the way; or as exhibiting the future mood, that is if he will go to Accra but has not started yet. Often, it is the

use of time adverbials which forestalls this confusion. We would, thus be able to interpret the sentence below as in the future:

I am going to Accra tomorrow.

Then we know that it is in the future.

There is also the confusion of the interpretation of ‘**going to**’ – whether it should be interpreted to have a spatial or temporal significance i.e. whether it refers to the covering of distance or to the passage of time, as in the French ‘je vais manger. – ‘I am going to eat’. Does it mean

I am going to a place with the intention of eating,

Or I am certain that in the near future I will eat?