**Linguistic phenomena**

Phenomena in ordinary language sometimes make this task more difficult because they obscure speakers’and writers’ intended meanings and therefore make it difficult to tell which proposition their sentences are supposed to convey.

***Ambiguity***

A sentence is **ambiguous** in a given context when there is more than one possible way of interpreting it in that context .There are two types of ambiguity.

***Lexical ambiguity :***

This is a property of individual words and phrases that occurs when the word or phrase has more than one meaning. The set or group of things to which an expression applies is called its **extension.** (it helps to think

of an extension as all the things over which the word or phase extends or spreads itself).

Ambiguous words and phrases can bring their ambiguity into sentences, making those sentences capable of having more than one possible interpretation. The word ‘match’ is one such word. The sentence ‘He is looking for a match’ could be intended to mean any of the following propositions:

* He is looking for a small stick of wood with an inflammable tip.
* He is looking for another one the same [as this one]
* He is looking for [wants] a game of tennis (or some such)

Notice that it is not only nouns that can be lexically ambiguous. When interpreting sentences that are lexically ambiguous,we have to focus on the context in which they are written or said and the consequent probability of each of the possible interpretations being the correct one.

Instances of lexical ambiguity also occur when a word has alternative meanings that are much closer together. Such cases are much harder to interpret and we need to pay a lot of attention to the context in which the word is being used and to the probability of the speaker or writer intending one interpretation rather than the other.

Suppose someone argues, ‘Fewer women have the ability to do complex mathematics than men’. The speaker or writer might mean to say that men have a greater **natural** or **innate capacity** for complex mathematics than women; If that were the intended interpretation, the claim would be sexist if it unjustifiably assumed that gender is a biological condition for success in mathematics. On the other hand, the speaker or writer might have intended to claim that as a matter of actual fact, there are fewer women than men successfully working at complex mathematics. This is true, but it is much less likely to be intended or interpreted as sexist: the relevant statistics are easily obtainable, and indeed might be cited by opponents of sexism as evidence that social factors encourage men, but discourage women, from specialising in mathematics.

The ambiguity here is due to the use of the word ‘ability’. ‘Ability’ can refer to one’s natural potential to do something – a potential with which one is born or it can refer to an actual capacity immediately to do the thing, a capacity which one may have acquired partly or wholly by training or practice. Often, it is not clear which meaning the speaker or writer intends.

***Syntactic ambiguity***

This occurs when the arrangement of words in a sentence is such that the sentence could be understood in more than one way.

The government will announce that the electricity supply is to be cut off tomorrow.

The sentence leaves ambiguous the question of when the announcement will be made and when the electricity supply is to be cut off:

Tomorrow, the government will announce that the electricity supply is to be cut off. (The announcement will be made tomorrow.)

The government is going to announce that, tomorrow, the electricity supply will be cut off. (The announcement will be made now, the electricity will be cut off tomorrow.)

Syntactic ambiguities are sometimes more difficult than lexical ones to interpret on the basis of context. Also, the possible interpretations of a sentence may be closely related so that there may not appear to be a very wide difference in meaning. Often we assume that one interpretation is intended without giving any consideration to alternatives. But such differences can be very significant indeed. Suppose someone were to claim:

* We should not tolerate those homeless people living on our streets.

They might be saying that we should be intolerant of homeless people themselves. Or they might be saying that the people who do live on the streets should not be allowed to live on the street. On the other hand, the intended proposition might be that we should not tolerate the fact that there are homeless people living on our streets. That is to say, the view expressed might be critical of a society in which people are forced to live on the streets rather than critical of such people themselves.

***Vagueness***

Vagueness is a property of words and phrases. The vagueness of a word is really a feature of its meaning: The meaning of a word or expression is vague if it is indefinite or uncertain what is conveyed by the word.

Suppose your boss promises that you’re going to receive a ‘big pay rise’ this year. When you receive the pay increase you discover that the rise is only ten pence an hour. When you complain, your boss defends their promise by saying that the rise is bigger than last year’s and therefore big in comparison.

***Irony***

Speakers and writers sometimes express their claims using irony. This takes the form of language that, taken literally, would convey the opposite of what they wish to convey, or something otherwise very different from it. Consider the following instance:

It is pouring with rain, very windy and cold. Mr I. Ronic says,‘Mmm lovely weather today’.

Mr Ronic is probably being ironic, and intends to comment that the weather is lousy.

It is important to be aware of the possibility of irony. In order to ridicule a position they are opposed to, speakers and writers sometimes sarcastically pretend to espouse that position; but it isn’t always obvious that they are doing so.

***Implicitly relative sentences***

Consider the following examples:

* She earns an above average salary.
* He is of average intelligence.
* Great Aunt Edie is a fast runner.
* Taxes are high.

Sentences such as these represent another potential problem for the critical thinker striving to work out exactly what a speaker or writer intends to convey by their words. The sentences are **implicitly relative**. They make a comparison with some group of things, but that comparison is not explicitly mentioned. For instance, to understand what it is for someone to earn an ‘above average salary’, we need to know of what group the average to which it is compared is. Or consider the one about Aunt Edie? Does the speaker intend to convey that Great Aunt Edie is a fast runner such that she runs at world record pace or that she is a fast runner for a woman of her age? Or something in between, such as that she is faster than the average person? If such sentences are interpreted without the recognition of their implicit relativity, then there is the possibility that they will be interpreted

as making a comparison with a group other than that intended by the writer or speaker.

***Problems with quantifiers***

**Quantifiers** are words that tell us how many/much of something there are/is, or how often something happens. As you will see, not all quantifiers specify an exact quantity of the thing, rather they provide a rough guide. In the following examples the quantifiers are underlined (this is

not an exhaustive list of quantifiers):

* All men drive too fast.
* Nearly all the students passed the course.
* She likes hardly any of her fellow students
* Most women would choose to stay at home with their children if they could afford to.

There are four potential problems with quantifiers:

**1** Speakers and writers don’t always use quantifiers with sufficient precision,so that the proposition they intend to convey is unclear and open to misinterpretation and rhetorical abuse.

**2** Some quantifier words are themselves **vague**. Suppose, for instance,that someone claims

Some Members of Parliament support the decriminalisation of cannabis use.

What does ‘some’ mean here? It could mean that only a handful hold the view described. Without a more precise understanding of how many Members of Parliament are intended to be conveyed by ‘some’, it is difficult to know how to respond to the claim. Moreover, the claim is open to abuse from people who hold views on both sides of such a debate. Advocates of decriminalisation can use it in support of their cause; their opponents can use it to back up their anti-decriminalisation stance (the latter might say, ‘*Only* some members of parliament support. . .’).

**3** Often people simply *omit* quantifiers. For instance, someone might protest:

Lecturers don’t give students a chance to complain.

this might appear to convey the proposition that No lecturer (ever) gives a student a chance to complain.Yet it is likely that what the speaker really wants to say is something like:

Most of the lecturers I’ve encountered haven’t given students enough chance to complain.

Notice that once the appropriate quantifier is made explicit, the claim applies to a much smaller group of lecturers than one might have supposed when the quantifier remained implicit.

Consider another example:

Today’s students are dedicated to their studies.

If we interpret this as expressing this proposition:

All of today’s students are dedicated to their studies.

we are likely to want to challenge the claim as we will be able to cite exceptions to the generalisation. If, however, we interpret the claim as it is more likely to be intended, then the quantifier that we make explicit should be ‘most’ or ‘almost all’, thereby exposing the proposition really intended as:

Most of today’s students are dedicated to their studies.