

# Ambiguity and its role in *Vyañjanā*

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The utilization of ambiguity in various domains of artistic expression, whether it be in the form of literary, auditory, or visual creations, has been a prevailing phenomenon that has been extensively studied. Nevertheless, it is of considerable significance to appreciate how ambiguity is employed in everyday linguistic exchanges, and more specifically with regard to how it plays its role in the functioning of *vyañjanā vṛtti*.

Empson's (1949) seminal work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, delineates the distinct categories of ambiguity encountered in poetry, given that the work principally concerns literary criticism. Conversely, subsequent works in the field of linguistics and related disciplines have scrutinized ambiguity from alternative angles. Chomsky's analysis (Chomsky 1965) implicitly identifies three levels of ambiguity, namely lexical, surface structure, and deep structure. Furthermore, psycholinguistic research has delved into multiple categories of ambiguity, as opposed to singular ones, as evidenced by studies conducted by Mackay (1966) and Mackay and Bever (1967).

Domains such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) predominantly address ambiguity at the levels of lexis, syntax, and semantics, despite the presence of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic methodologies as investigated in Franz (1996:19-23). In this field, exceedingly particularized statistical models have been examined, as outlined in Franz (1996), although such models only marginally capture the full spectrum of conceivable ambiguities found in natural language. Various literary works on ambiguity (see Simpson 1989) explore theoretical and empirical investigations pertaining to lexical, syntactic, and semantic ambiguities. The classical examples such as

“The men decided to wait by the bank”, or

“Visiting relatives can be a nuisance”.

have been much analysed and it has been recognized that the likelihood of encountering such sentences in everyday language use is relatively low. The existence of polysemy in language further contributes to ambiguity, as exemplified by the use of the word "room" in the subsequent sentences:

1. We rose when the queen entered the room.
2. The room burst into flames.
3. The room burst into applause.
4. His argument left no room for discussion. (Simpson 1989:15)

Simpson terms pragmatic ambiguity for the case of

“He is skating on thin ice”,

where figurative interpretation is accessed when the literal is deemed unsuitable

(1989:17).

The effectiveness of ambiguity in language use can largely be attributed to *vyañjanā vṛtti*, as it enables speakers to convey a range of implications and connotations through linguistic expressions that have multiple interpretations. Such expressions allow for a degree of flexibility in communication, and can be utilized to achieve a variety of communicative goals. For example, a speaker may intentionally use ambiguous language in order to elicit a particular response from their interlocutor, or to convey multiple meanings simultaneously.

While ambiguity can sometimes lead to confusion or misinterpretation, when used skillfully, it can be a powerful tool for effective communication. By exploiting ambiguity through the suggestive power of language, speakers can convey a wealth of information and meaning that goes beyond the literal content of their words. I argue that the study of linguistic ambiguity *vis-à-vis vyañjanā vṛtti* offers valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of language use, and highlights the importance of considering the broader communicative context in interpreting meaning.

Elsewhere (Meera 2017 and Meera 2016) it is demonstrated that *anyokti*-s are a big part of various types of linguistic expressions, be it proverbs, *nyāya*-s or tropes. From the discussion on how *anyokti*-s get applied and understood in the current (macro) context one of the major takeaways is that the links between the micro-context of the *anyokti* and the macro-context of the current scenario will have to be “built” by the hearer (Meera 2016).

Though there can be gaps in communication in such exchanges, with *vivakṣā* being problematic, assuming that the speaker and the audience share a certain level of common knowledge and contextual understanding (analogous to the concept of "*sahṛdayatva*" in poetry), it becomes evident that the audience is required to construct links and make inferences in the case of *anyokti*-s leading to a greater likelihood of ambiguity. When a speaker does not explicitly state something with redundancy, there is inevitably a degree of ambiguity present due to factors such as unclear contextual frames, homonymy, and polysemy. In contrast to direct and explicit speech, in which the audience's task of meaning-making is relatively simple, the use of *anyokti* adds a level of complexity that requires the audience to engage in more active interpretation. This often results in a range of possible meanings and a combinatorial explosion of possibilities. The process of pruning these potential meanings is both fascinating and challenging for the human mind. However, this is not the main focus of the current thesis.

If we were to examine the use of *anyokti*, such as a proverb, a *nyāya*, or a trope, in a casual conversation, we would encounter a considerable level of ambiguity. This is due to the challenge of identifying the exact correlations between the micro-context and the macro-context, which entails grasping the underlying principles involved. This ambiguity factor is further compounded by the multiple implications that the *anyokti* can generate in its micro-context, as well as in its applied notion to the macro-context.

As explained in Meera (2016), *anyokti*-s offer a highly effective means of communication in certain scenarios due to their increased ambiguity factor. The utilization of ambiguity results in a high ratio of Expressiveness to Expression, where maximum

expressiveness is achieved with minimal expression. Although exploiting ambiguity may seem to offer substantial benefits, such as influencing the audience, plausible deniability, and selectively conveying ideas, it is important to recognize the need for careful selection of words to avoid any unintended implications. Ambiguity is often used to great effect by politicians, lawyers, astrologers, and orators, who may even be said to thrive on it. The classification of ambiguity has been further expanded to a six-fold one below:

**A. Lexical (which takes into account homonymy and polysemy)**

“She brought the glasses.”

Here glasses can mean spectacles or drinking glasses.

**B. Syntactic**

“I saw her duck”,

The meaning depends on the syntactic parsing of the word “duck” here – if it is a noun, this would mean “I saw her bird”; if it is a verb it means “I saw her lower her head to avoid something”.

**C. Structural**

a. **Word-level** : “She is an English teacher”

Does that mean she teaches English or that she is from England...or both?

b. **Phrasal level**: “Porcelain egg container”

Does this refer to an egg container that is made of porcelain, or a container that holds a porcelain egg?

c. **Sentential level**: “John saw Mary outside”

Does this mean ‘Mary was outside and John saw her’ implying John need not have been outside? Or that ‘John was outside and he saw Mary there’ implying both were outside?

**D. Referential**

“John loves his wife. Everyone loves his wife.”

Does the second ‘his’ refer to John or to ‘everyone’? This is a typical problem with usage of pronouns.

**E. Scope**

“3 students wrote 4 articles.”

Does this mean ‘3 students together contributed to write 4 articles’ or that ‘3 students each wrote 4 articles’?

This is a problem that is typically encountered when quantifiers are used.

**F. Pragmatic**

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Does this involve a threat? Or is it a promise? Or is it even a mock threat or even a

mere closing line to close the conversation?

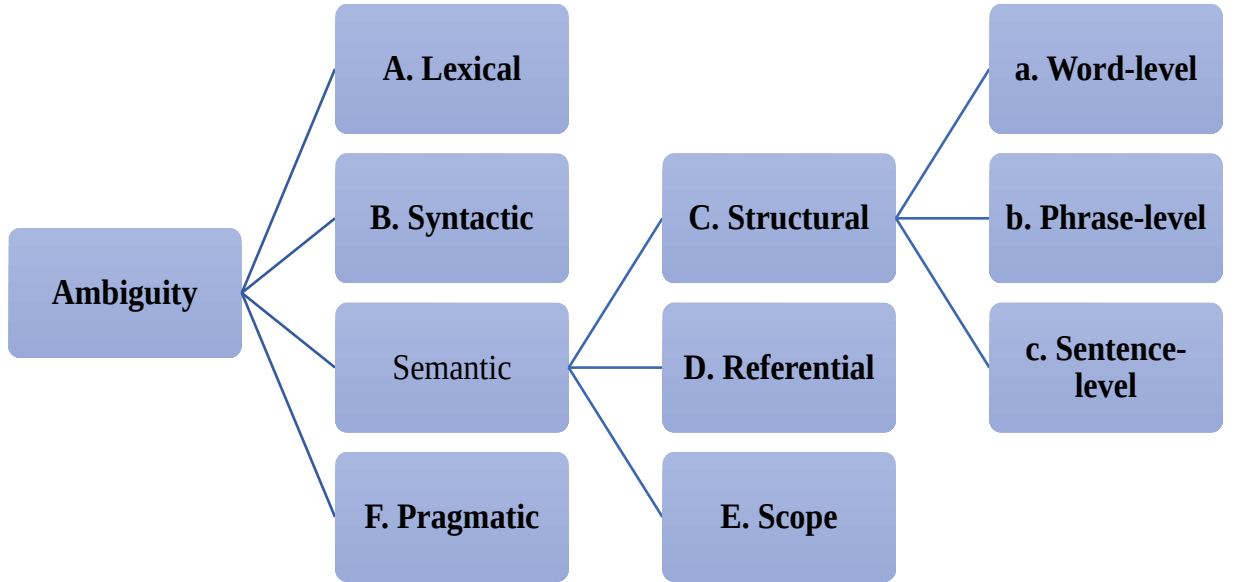


Fig. 1. Types of Ambiguity – Classification 1

Kannan's (1989) (humorous yet scholarly) work delves into the multifaceted nature of ambiguity and how it leads to the emergence of unintended or twisted meanings, also known as *apārtha*-s. The author provides a comprehensive list of tools or linguistic factors that contribute to ambiguity in communication, which can be classified under four of the five categories mentioned earlier in this discussion. They are:

**A. Polysemy and homonymy :**

*tvāṁ varṇayāmi*

is an example in Sanskrit. *Varṇayāmi* can mean “I will describe” or “I will colour”. If one were to deliberately use a word in a manner that goes against its expected meaning, the resulting ambiguity can be used for humorous effect.

In Sanskrit literature, there are numerous verses that employ this concept of homonymy or polysemy to create ambiguity. Although such verses are typically appreciated for their poetic value, they also highlight the potential for ambiguity in everyday language usage.

**B. Idiomaticity:**

“Aeroplanes are coming in trains.”

This is an instance of idiomatic usage whereby the meaning of the phrase is not derived from the literal meaning of its individual words, but rather from the established usage

within the language community. In the present case, the phrase can be interpreted as either the sequential launching of multiple airplanes, or the transportation of unassembled or assembled airplanes by trains.

### **C. Extended sense or *lakṣaṇā***

In the usual understanding of language, polysemy arises when a word takes on multiple meanings due to metaphorical extensions. However, ambiguity can arise when it is challenging to discern whether a particular usage represents a primary meaning or a metaphorical one.

“The astronomer is married to the star.”

In the absence of contextual cues, the nature of a given utterance can be difficult to ascertain, specifically whether it represents a purely metaphorical use of language or whether certain aspects of it may be interpreted more literally. For instance, the word "star" may refer to a movie star, in which case the reference to "marriage" may be taken literally, rather than as a metaphor. The inherent ambiguity of language can thus make it challenging to determine the precise meaning of a given expression without additional information to provide necessary context.

### **D. *Sandhābhāṣā***

In many Indian *śāstra*-s, a form of coded language is employed to safeguard certain concepts or ideas (often appearing in Tantra *śāstra* texts). The verses utilizing such coded language typically employ words from common vocabulary, which consequently creates ambiguity. The aim of such obfuscation is to render the content accessible to a select audience. In real-life scenarios, the use of coded language also finds prevalence, particularly when communicating sensitive or confidential information to a targeted audience.

### **E. Due to the same final form of the word**

The potential for ambiguity arises when a word can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the context and its inflectional and morphological features. For example, the sentence "I read the book" can be interpreted in the past tense or present tense, with disambiguation relying on contextual clues. This phenomenon, known as homography, is distinct from homophony, which is typically seen in Indian languages that use phonetic scripts and involves both homographic and homophonic expressions.

### **F. *Sandhi* - Word splitting**

In Indian languages, particularly Sanskrit, the rules for combining sounds euphonicly can often lead to multiple possibilities when the sandhi (the combination of sounds at the juncture of two words) is split. This is a common occurrence in these languages

and can result in homophony and homography of expressions, adding to the complexity of interpretation. *vacaste'grāhyam* = *vacas te grāhyam* (Tr: your words are fit to be received) / *vacas te agrāhyam* (Tr: your words are not fit to be received).

*modakaistāḍaya* = *modakaiḥ tāḍaya* (Tr: Hit me with sweetmeats) / *mā udakaiḥ tāḍaya* (Tr: Do not hit me with water).

*ayamātmātattvamasi śvetaketo* : *ayamātmā tattvamasi* (Tr: That is the self. That are Thou) / *ayamātmā atattvamasi* (Tr: That is the self. **Not** That are Thou)

## G. Juncture

(a) The challenge of juncture pertains to the identification of word boundaries, which is the process of breaking down a string of phonemes into coherent units of meaning. This process can result in multiple possible ways of dividing the same set of phonemes, and such variability can be intentionally manipulated in language usage. **Word-word:** great issues v/s grey tissues.

(b) **Word-sentence:** ice cream v/s I scream.

(c) **Sentence-sentence:** The sun's rays meet v/s The sons raise meat.

Crafting puns at the sentence level is a complex task in English, but it is more commonly employed in Sanskrit.

(d) **Samāsa**

Compounding of words in Indian languages often results in the dropping of case-endings, which are often the disambiguators. This leads to ambiguity in the dissolution of the compounded word, which can be deliberate in some cases.

For example, the compound word *viṣṇu-vāhana* can be translated as "the vehicle (*vāhana*) of Viṣṇu," (viz. Garuḍa) while *mūṣaka-vāhana* can be translated as "one whose vehicle is a mouse," referring to Gaṇeśa (and not as "the vehicle (*vāhana*) of mouse (*mūṣaka*)".

Similarly, the word *pītāmbara* can mean "yellow robes" or "the person who is wearing yellow robes," (referring to Viṣṇu). Ambiguity can also arise in answering questions, such as the answer "I am *anāstika*" to the question "are you a *nāstika*?" which can mean either "a-nāstika" (= "not *nāstika*" = *āstika*) or "*an-āstika*" (= "not *āstika*" = *nāstika*) This technique of deliberate ambiguity is frequently utilized in poetry.

(e) **Ordering and anvaya**

Unlike Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) and Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) languages, which

typically have strict word order rules, Free Word Order (FWO) languages such as Sanskrit have more flexibility in how they arrange sentence elements. However, this freedom in word order is not unlimited, as there are certain constraints on how gerund phrases are arranged. When a sentence is divided into phrases, the order of these phrases must be observed. For example:

*bālahḥ dugdham pītvā, pāṭham paṭhitvā sālām gacchati.*

One cannot very well change the order of the words and say

\*“*dugdham paṭhitvā, pāṭham pītvā sālām bālahḥ gacchati*”.

There is semantic disambiguation in the above case, whereas, in the following sample, it continues to be ambiguous.

“*Rāmam daśaratham viddhi*” – does this mean Rāma is to be thought of as *Daśaratha* or vice versa?

When taken in isolation, there can be ambiguous statements such as,

“Time flies” (whether one is to time(verb) the flies (subject) or that time(subject) flies (verb)) or

“Flying aeroplanes can be dangerous.” or

“Visiting relatives can sometimes be a nuisance.” or

“A lady carrying a monkey and a large elephant entered the circus tent.”

Let us consider where ambiguity here is:

(1) How a particular word is tagged for part-of-speech, viz. if it is an adjective or a verb. (E.g. Is “flying” an adjective or a verb; is “visiting” an adjective or a verb)

(2) The process of determining how a specific keyword or phrase should be grouped or enclosed within a larger structure, such as a sentence or document, is referred to as bracketing. This involves identifying the syntactic and semantic relationships between the words or phrases and their surrounding context in order to properly interpret the meaning of the text. How then should the keyword under consideration should be bracketed( “dangerous (flying aeroplanes)” or “dangerous (flying (aeroplanes))”; “nuisance(visiting relatives)” or “nuisance(visiting (relatives))” ; “enter((lady carrying a monkey) AND (elephant))” or enter ( lady carrying (monkey AND elephant))” ).

#### (f) **Adhyāhāra (mode of interpretation)**

In the examples of

“The fat manager’s wife is intelligent.” and

“Seats are reserved for old men and women.”,

In the above samples, we see the ambiguity that is introduced due to the variety of interpretations that are possible: who is fat? the manager or his wife? – in the first sentence;

and is the reservation for only old women or not? – in the second.

It is explicitly mentioned in the case of a *dvandva* compound, that the qualifier is applicable to all the qualified entities. There can be ambiguity in the case of a pragmatic case of substitution affected.

**(g) Pronoun/Anaphora**

The sentence "Everyone loves his wife" in isolation is not ambiguous, but when preceded by "John loves his wife", how does one understand that? This is an example of referential ambiguity where the pronoun "his" can refer to either "John" or "everyone". The lack of a clear referent for the pronoun makes the sentence ambiguous and requires context for disambiguation.

**(h) Anyokti**

*Anyokti* refers to a statement that implies a comparison or analogy without explicitly stating the things being compared or the properties being compared. The audience is expected to draw the comparison or analogy based on their own knowledge and understanding. This can lead to ambiguity if the exact parallel is not clearly understood by the audience.

**(i) Levels of discourse**

There can be different levels of discourse such as using a word to mean a particular thing or using it to refer to the word itself. This type of jumping levels of discourse – of referring to the word and not its referent – can bring in ambiguity. For instance, a debate ensued where one participant tried to disparage the other by sniping at him

“*ākāro hrasvaḥ*”

(“your stature (*ākāra*) is short”). The opponent jumped levels by retorting back

“*ākāro dīrghaḥ*”

(“the sound *ā* (*ā-kāra*) is long”).

Undoubtedly, the aforementioned phenomenon constitutes yet another linguistic tool that has been adeptly utilized by practitioners of Sanskrit. Whereas the former participant articulates at the level of everyday conversation, the latter operates at a higher, meta-linguistic level.

Furthermore, there exist certain linguistic features that are characteristic solely of spoken or written language, respectively, which serve to clarify meaning or engender ambiguity when transitioning between the two. Several exemplars are explicated below:

**(j) Intonation**

This phenomenon is particularly applicable to spoken language, as intonation patterns can be used to distinguish between plain speech and sarcasm. An example of this is the



phrase "Einstein incarnate". However, in written language, context can also provide some clues as to the intended meaning.

(k) **Elements of phonology (stress, pitch, pause)**

The emphasis of word(s) in speech, indicated by a variation in stress, pitch, and/or pause, convey additional information that alters our understanding of the intended meaning.

**He** stole the pencil. v/s

He **stole** the pencil. v/s

He stole **the** pencil. v/s

He stole the **pencil**.

This technique has been effectively employed in literature, e.g., by Agatha Christie in her novel *A Murder is Announced*..:

“**She** wasn’t there!” v/s

“She wasn’t **there!**”

(l) **Elements of orthography (spelling, punctuation)**

Consider the example of the Judge stating for the record,

“Hang him, not leave him.”

and the court stenographer taking it down as

“Hang him not, leave him.”

The prisoner who was to be hanged, was set free because of a misplaced comma!

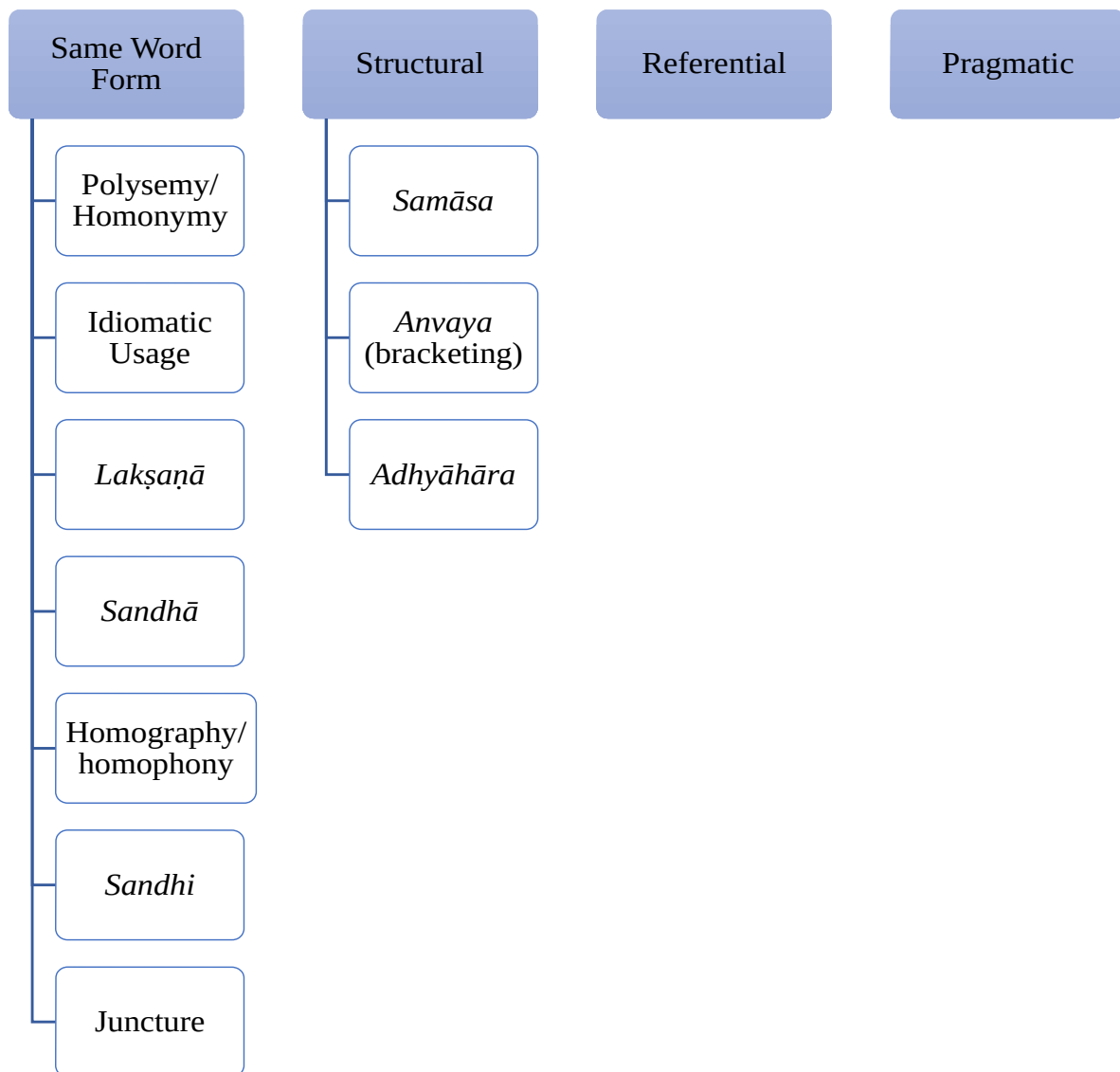


Fig. 2. Types of Ambiguity – Another classification

Ambiguity is sometimes simply divided into two (as, for example, in law) (Agarwal 1983:15) as:

(a) Patent Ambiguity where the ambiguity is apparent on the face of the instrument (i.e. any document), whereas

(b) Latent Ambiguity is one which is not apparent on the face of the instrument.

It is the latter type which is often made use of by lawyers, politicians and astrologers. Also, it is to be noted that ambiguity is not to be confused with unintelligibility.

## Conclusion

The preceding sections have delineated two types of categorizations of linguistic ambiguity, taking into consideration diverse prospective facets. These classifications serve to underscore how manifold meanings can be derived from the same enunciation - which is

precisely what is expected of the *vyañjanā vṛtti*. Certain disambiguating factors (under certain circumstances) do make the effects of *vyañjanā* more focussed. However, in several instances, the ambiguity may persist, especially in cases where there is indeterminacy of meaning engendered by the device employed, and no further indicators that may contribute to the disambiguation. The various examples explored herein make it patently clear that *vyañjanā vṛtti* thrives in domains where ambiguity is employed strategically.

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