Chapter 3 (first part of 3)

AMBIGUITY!

One of two sources of major confusion in people’s thinking!
“I know a little Italian.”

Does this mean…

- “I know a small Italian person”?
  
  Or
  
- “I understand a little of the Italian language”?  

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“I know a little Italian.”

- It means BOTH!
- It is AMBIGUOUS!
“We can’t lose in Iraq.”

Does this mean…

■ “It is not possible for us to lose in Iraq”?

Or

■ “We cannot afford to lose in Iraq”?

It’s ambiguous!
“I like eating a lot!”

Ho ho ho

■ “Eating is something I like a lot”? 
  Or
  ■ “Eating a lot is something I like”?

It’s ambiguous!
“Cheney’s shooting was terrible.”

Does this mean…

- “Cheney was a terrible shot”?
- “It was terrible Cheney was shot”?
- “Cheney’s shooting of something was terrible”?
“The author of Hamlet might have been a woman.”

Does anyone see two possible meanings?

1. “Hamlet might have been authored by a woman, not by Shakespeare.”
2. “Shakespeare might have been a woman.”
Definition: An ambiguous statement has more than one meaning, and it isn’t clear which meaning is intended.
Pretty elementary?

Hang on!
It gets complicated.
Divide into two groups:

- Linda likes candy more than Howard.
- Women can fish.
- Charlie rents his apartment.
- People who lie frequently get into a lot of trouble.
Hint:

- Linda likes candy more than Howard.
- Women can fish.
- Charlie rents his apartment.
- People who lie frequently get into a lot of trouble.
“Linda likes candy more than Howard.”

- Does Linda like candy more than Howard likes candy?

Or

- Does Linda like candy more than she likes Howard?
The problem is SYNTAX.

Huh?

- Syntax is GRAMMAR.

“Linda likes candy more than Howard.”

It’s unclear what “more than” refers to.

- Is it Howard?

- Or is it how much Howard likes candy?
“People who lie frequently get into a lot of trouble.”

- Another syntax (grammar) problem. We don’t know whether “frequently” goes with what comes before it, or with what comes after it.

- Does it mean “frequent liars get into trouble” or “liars frequently get into trouble”? 

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Which of these has a syntax ambiguity?

A. My grandmother heard the salesman with a hearing aid.

B. My grandmother heard the salesman who had a hearing aid.
And which of these has a syntax ambiguity?

A. Thinking clearly involves hard work.

B. Clearly, thinking involves hard work.
What’s the problem here?

- Jordan could write more profound essays.

You don’t know what “more” goes with.
Great!

- Everyone make up one example of a syntax ambiguity!

Best example goes home after class.
“Charles drew his gun.”

This, too, is ambiguous.

Syntax problems????? Nyet!

The problem is: “drew” has two meanings.
When a statement contains an expression that has more than one meaning, like “drew,” then what you have is:

A SEMANTIC ambiguity.
“Women can fish.”

“Can” has two meanings:
1. “Are able to”
2. “Put inside cans”

So the sentence has a SEMANTIC ambiguity.
“Charlie rents his apartment.”

“Rents” has two meanings:
1. “Rents to”
2. “Rents from”

So the sentence has a SEMANTIC ambiguity.
X-cellent!

- Now make up one example of a semantic ambiguity!
“Someone’s in the bed next to me.”

- Syntax ambiguity or semantic ambiguity?

Syntax ambiguity.

- “Next to” might go with the bed or with me.
“We’ll see lots when you visit.”

- Syntax ambiguity or Semantic ambiguity??

**Semantic ambiguity.**

- “Lots” has two different meanings.
“In one of Shakespeare’s famous plays, Hamlet relieves himself in a long soliloquy.”—Richard Lederer

- Syntax ambiguity or Semantic ambiguity???
  
  Semantic ambiguity.
  
- “Relieves” has two different meanings.
“Angela stuffed her drawers with sox.”

- Syntax ambiguity or semantic ambiguity?

Semantic ambiguity.

- “Drawers” has two different meanings.
“They were both exposed to someone who was ill a week ago.”

- Syntax ambiguity or semantic ambiguity?

Syntax ambiguity.

- “A week ago” might refer to when the person was ill, or it might refer to when they were exposed
“Chelsea has Hillary’s nose.”

- Syntax ambiguity or semantic ambiguity?
- Semantic ambiguity.
- “Has” means both:
  a) Chelsea’s nose RESEMBLES Hillary’s, and
  b) Hillary’s nose (for some reason) is IN CHELSEA’S POSSESSION…
Stop right there!

We get it!
OK! So much for syntax ambiguity and for semantic ambiguity.

- One more important kind of ambiguity…
“Grouping ambiguity.”

Who drinks more beer? Fresno State students, or Chico students?
Uh…

Can we get a clue?…
Well, FSU has 10,000 more students than CSU.

- So, COLLECTIVELY, Fresno students drink more.

- But INDIVIDUALLY? Who knows?
GROUPING AMBIGUITY: When it is unclear if you are referring to a group of things collectively or individually
“Swedes eat millions of quarts of yogurt every year.”

- Does this refer to Swedes collectively?
- Yes. In real life it’s clear we are talking about Swedes collectively.
- So this is NOT ambiguous.
“Attorneys make less money than physicians.”

- Does this refer to attorneys and physicians individually or collectively?

- Can’t say. It has a grouping ambiguity.
“Seven people rode in that taxi.”

- Is this ambiguous?
- Yes: Can’t tell whether they rode together or one by one.
“Which causes more air pollution, lawn mowers or motorcycles?”

Which question do you ask first?
A. “How do you know that?” Or...
B. “Do you mean collectively or individually??????”
“Nancy Pelosi wants to give us the biggest tax increase in history!”

What is the first question?
A. “Bummer! Why does she wanna do that?”
B. “What makes you think that?”
C. “Do you mean collectively or individually?

It’s C. The increase in total tax revenues is different from the increase for the individual tax payer.
Some syntax problems are subtle:
“WOMAN GETS 9 YEARS FOR KILLING 11TH HUSBAND”
—Newspaper headline

- Has she killed 11 husbands? Or has she killed one husband—her 11th?
Review:

- Good reasoning depends on clear thinking.
- Ambiguity is one source of confusion.
- Three types of ambiguity:
  - Semantic
  - Syntax
  - Grouping
Give yourself a hand.

Now, let’s look at a couple of real life examples....