SOME ASPECTS OF AMBIGUITY BETWEEN KURDISH AND ENGLISH: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The possibilities of misunderstanding in language use often arise from differences at different language levels. Ambiguity is one of the semantic aspects that causes many communication and comprehension problems. People often need clarification on each other because of unclear written or spoken expressions. In this sense, ambiguity refers to an unclear meaning expressed by any form of communication. So, where there is a word, sign, term, symbol, phrase or sentence which can be interpreted in more than one meaning, this is called ambiguity and is found in every language. Therefore, it is considered one of the most problematic phenomena in languages. This paper examines some aspects of this phenomenon in the Kurdish and English languages and underlines the main differencesin news articlesThis study adopts a qualitative approach with a focus on semantics. The data collection process involved purposive sampling from well-known Kurdish and English websites. A total of one hundred headlines were gathered for each language, and a comparative analysis was conducted. The findings revealed that in Kurdish headlines, approximately 83% of the ambiguity stemmed from the use of personal pronouns, while 17% was attributed to the inclusion of indefinite articles. On the other hand, in English headlines, around 80% of the ambiguity occurred at the lexical level, while 20% occurred at the syntactic level. The results can assist the Kurdish EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in mastering the English language.(Please include the Methodology in your abstract).

Subject Area: Linguistics

Keywords: Ambiguity, Kurdish Language, English Language, Differences

1   Introduction

Language is the critical mode of communication. Surprisingly, this communication is built on joining the sound tighter to form words and arrange the constructed words to formulate sentences. Sometimes miscommunication occurs due to the absence of context or speakers` failure to deliver the right message. In most cases, miscommunication or misunderstanding is rooted in the meaning, which alternatively causes ambiguity. Different branches of linguistic studies recognize the term ambiguity.

Chomsky argues that ambiguity is a genuine feature of the language, and it is impossible for us not to misunderstand one another (Piantadosi et al., 2012). Moreover, According to Zipf(2006), ambiguity arises due to a tradeoff between speaker and hearer pressures. In other words, ambiguity occurs due to the minimum efforts by the speakers. Zipf (2016) believes that if listeners provide a sincere effort to understand the speakers, there will be no room for ambiguity.

The term ambiguity refers to any linguistic form that can map to more than one possible meaning. For instance, the word "run" is ambiguous because it can refer to various things, including a pantyhose run, a baseball run, a jog, a string of consecutive events, etc. In addition, When someone writes or speaks, their meaning often diverges from their intended meaning, caused mainly by phonological segments of words, linguistic aspects of words, syntactic structures of words, and contextual functions of the word. In addition to hindering communication and comprehension, these aspects sometimes impede translation.

It is essential to distinguish ambiguity from vagueness. Expressions are generally vague if the regions they refer to have poorly defined boundaries. Most natural language expressions have vague denotations. Their meanings could be more transparent around the edges. Linguists and philosophers of language, however, persist in refusing to accept that it is rare to be able to develop sufficient and necessary conditions for membership in the denotation of a natural language expression. There are exceptions, such as technical terms in science or mathematics, which are defined precisely for a particular use. A lozenge cannot be considered eating unless a specific context is present and the question is raised. It is likewise context-dependent whether a check-cashing store or an investment club should be considered banks. There is a difference between these questions and the ambiguity of the words. It is common for linguistic expressions to have fuzzy denotations, making them vague. However, ambiguity requires more than one denotation (Wasow et al. , 2005).

This paper will compare some aspects of ambiguity between English and Kurdish. We examine three critical aspects of ambiguity which are phonological, lexical, and syntactic. We will also spotlight the similarities and differences between the two languages.

2   Literature Review

The best way to describe ambiguity is to provide an explicit definition of the term "ambiguity." Saones (2005) states that ambiguity refers to "waiving of opinion, hesitation, doubt, or uncertainty, doubtful, questionable, indefinite, opaque, not clearly defined something understandable from two or more perspectives, and accepting more than one interpretation or explanation. " (Ahmadi, n.d.). The concept of ambiguity has also been discussed extensively by William Empson (1930). According to his book, Seven Types of Ambiguity, ambiguity exists when there are two or more meanings to the same expression in a literary text. He defines ambiguity as any consequence of language which adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose (Everest, 2021). Essentially, it means a word or sentence with more than one meaning. Confusion and doubt arise when encountering ambiguous words or expressions due to a lack of understanding and background in the language.

In other words, the rate at which someone understands a word or expression depends on their knowledge of that word or expression. A word's meaning can be disputed depending on knowledge, context, association, and background. Boulton (1990) asserts that saying what we mean is more challenging than it sounds. Various factors contribute to ambiguity in language. Language-related cultural knowledge and personal experience help bypass ambiguities in the language. As a result, a lack of knowledge and background regarding English levels creates ambiguity. In most words, in English, this is true. Words may evoke different associations from what comes to mind. Depending on the context, a word may differ from its literal meaning (Price, 2010).

Similarly, a word can have different meanings depending on its position in a sentence. A sense of ambiguity arises at this point, resulting in misunderstanding. Contextual information and cultural background should be provided to avoid certain ambiguities.

2.1   Types of Ambiguity in English
Grammatically, ambiguity in the English language has three kinds which are phonological, syntactical and lexical. Each of these will be studied in the upcoming sections.

2.1.1   Phonological Ambiguity

In English, certain sounds and phrases can be understood differently from what the speaker means. The question 'why choose?' could be posed to a listener, for example.' if the listener recognizes the speaker's question, the listener could provide the answer, or may assume the speaker is talking about 'white shoes'. As a result, these two clauses exhibit phonological ambiguity (van der Hulst, 2015)leading to misunderstanding. Here are a few examples to help make the point clear:

1.   a name   an aim
2.   I scream   ice cream

Here are some examples of phonological expressions causing ambiguity. An utterance of a name may be interpreted as an aim. A similar interpretation would be to read I scream as ice cream. A marginal break (a juncture) in spoken expressions can reveal ambiguity. a name, for instance, will have the junction before /n/, while an aim will have it after /N/". Similarly, in example (2), the juncture in ice cream occurs after /s/ while it occurs before /s/ in I-cream. A juncture in the connected speech is difficult to perceive because it occurs in minimal form. Therefore, sometimes it can be hard to determine whether a speaker is saying I scream, ice cream/a name, or an aim. The examples above indicate that connected speech often results in phonological ambiguity.

According to Milton Erickson (1959)phonological ambiguity occurs because the conscious mind constantly monitors what the speaker says. In contrast, the unconscious mind attempts to find soothing sounds, ultimately causing phonological ambiguities (Zeb & Hameed, 2020) in the below examples.

3.   One two   want to
4.   Know more   no more

In the examples above, consciousness plays a crucial role in understanding the words stated. If the listener`s consciousness seeks possession, the listener might understand "one-two" as " want to". Similarly, in the second example, if the listener`s psychological state is tired, the statement " know more" might be perceived as "no more.".

2.1.2   Lexical Ambiguity

It is common to find enormous and dense vocabularies with many lexical variations. These variations are what create ambiguity, a crucial semantic property. In semantic theory, the meaning of an expression is frequently associated with different language representations. It is common for words to express closely related concepts and represent subtle variations, especially when involved in homonymy and polysemy. According to Harmer (2001), vocabulary's most problematic aspect is meaning. It is clear that a table is a thing with legs for writing and eating on, but it is not the end of the story. Our understanding of a word is based on its meaning, and we use that word accordingly, following its meaning (Harmer, 2001).

It is common for homonymous words to cause ambiguity in many situations. Despite their similar spellings and pronunciations, these words differ in meaning. The homonymous words are subcategorized into complete and partial homonymy (Obeidat & Abu-Melhim, 2017). Most homonyms are spelt and pronounced similarly but have different meanings, such as bank, light, and table. Check out the examples below to see how each word leads to ambiguity.

5. John found his wallet near the bank.
6. Mary is wearing a light coat.
7. That table is not useful at all.

Using the word bank in the first sentence creates an ambiguity since it can refer to both (the building where one gets money) and (what borders a river). Hence, we need clarification about whether John has found his wallet near the building or the river. It also needs to be clarified what light means in the second example. Moreover, we are curious if Mary is wearing a coat that is light in color or light in weight. In the third example, the word table can be interpreted as either a piece of furniture or a list (written on paper). So, as is explained in the above examples, homonymous words often create a sense of ambiguity.

It is also possible for partially homonymous words to cause ambiguity. There is a particular case when there is a difference in meaning between two words. However, both have the exact spelling or pronunciation. in the example below, homographic words exist (words with different pronunciations but identical spelling). The word wind, for example, has different meanings depending on how it is pronounced: /wind/ and /waind/. Consider the following example:

8. Old men wind hardly

In this example, it can be pronounced as /wind/, meaning (the ability to breathe), or as /waind/, which means (twisting in a particular manner). b. When there are homophones (differently spelt words with the same pronunciation). For example, the words flower and flour are pronounced the same as /fl /. Consider the following example:

9. She put the flour into the water.

Since flour and flower are pronounced the same, there is confusion. Listeners may interpret this sentence as either flower or flour.

When a word has multiple meanings, that is called polysemy. It is explained by Harmer (2001) that the Cambridge International Dictionary of English lists three primary meanings of table aside from the large number of different phrases in which the word appears to have a subtly different meaning. In addition to eating off a table, someone can also table a motion at a conference and summarize information on a table. By closely examining the context, we can disambiguate these three distinct meanings of the polysemic word table. According to Harmer (2001), a word's meaning can be determined by its context(Harmer, 2001). Take the verb cry as an example and the auxiliary verb may. Consider the following examples:

10. The boy was crying.
11. The student may leave the class

There is an ambiguity in the verb cry in the first sentence. Two meanings are implied by it. Depending on the context, it could be either weeping or shouting. This sentence is unclear whether the boy was weeping or shouting. Auxiliary verbs cause ambiguity in the second sentence because they have two meanings. According to one meaning, the student is likely to leave class but not sure to leave the class. A second meaning occurs when the teacher has authorized the student to leave.

2.1.3   Structural Ambiguity

An ambiguity in structure is not a result of a word's multiple meanings but more of the relationship between words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence. An interpreter can discern more than one possible structure from a sentence when it appears to have more than one possible structure. Notice the following examples:

12. The chicken is ready to eat.
13. Flying planes can be dangerous.

There are two famous examples of Chomsky's ambiguity involving object/subject ambiguity. Recent work by Chomsky, Deep Structure, Surface Structural, and Semantic Interpretations (1971), provides a model for explaining ambiguous sentences. According to him, a sentence consists of two levels of structure: superficial (surface) and logical (baritone). It is possible to understand the first sentence as meaning that the chicken is ready to eat something; it is also possible to understand that it is ready for consumption by someone. Similar to the first example, the second can be interpreted in two ways: flying is a verb, and planes are its subject (Chomsky, 1969). A plane is interpreted as its head noun in the second meaning, in which flying is an adjective. So, this sentence can be paraphrased as follows:

a. It can be dangerous to fly by plane.
b. Planes which are flying can be dangerous.

Accordingly, structural ambiguity is not caused by the words themselves but by the relationship between the words in the sentence. It is also possible to construct alternative sentence structures, resulting in many syntactic ambiguities in a sentence. The following examples illustrate how bracketing can be applied to ambiguous sentences.

14. The man saw the girl with a telescope.

a. The man saw (the girl) (with a telescope).
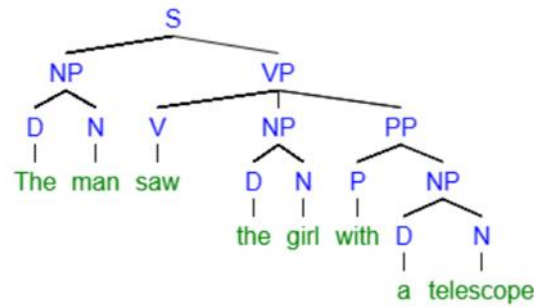
b. The man saw (the girl with a telescope).
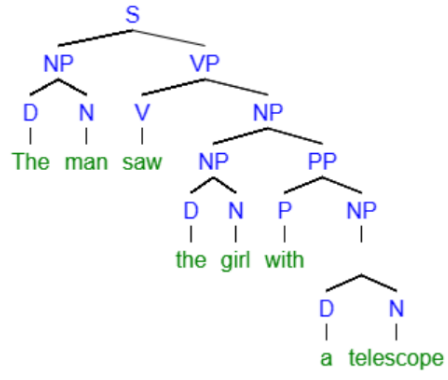
15. We dislike fat men and women.
a. We dislike (fat (men and women)).
b. We dislike ((fat men) and women).

First, the telescope is either carried by the man and used by him to see the girl or it is carried by the girl with her. Similarly, in the second example, either we dislike fat men and women equally, or we dislike men only who are fat.

2.2   Kurdish Language Ambiguity

In the following sections, we explain the types of ambiguity in Kurdish language.

2.2.1   Morphological ambiguity

This type of ambiguity is related to written expressions. In other words, the expressions are written the same way they are pronounced. The Kurdish language is independent of having silent letters and words pronounced how they are drafted. Therefore, when a morpheme is stated out of context, it becomes ambiguous. The only way to avoid ambiguity is to state the term in a context. This type of ambiguity occupies a considerable part of the language and exists in almost all linguistic components, such as morphemes, nouns, pronouns, verbs, etc . Amin (2004) explains this type of ambiguity as the single stated morphemes that carry more than one meaning.

16.Derzî
17.llqe
18.ske

Each of the examples above carries more than meaning. In example (1), "derzî" could refer to a sewing needle or an injection. Similarly, in the second example, "`llqe" can mean "engagement ring, an episode in a series or circle". Finally, when a speaker states the word "ske", it could denote "gold, the railway and hanger."

Each of the terms is ambitious when they are uttered outside of the context. However, they are said inside the sentence, and the ambiguity quickly fades away.

2.2.2   Syntactical Ambiguity

According to Amin (1976), syntactical ambiguity is constructed in the Kurdish language due to three main factors.

First, a polysemous word inside the sentence leads to ambiguity. In other words, if a statement contains a word with more than meanings, the sentence becomes ambiguous. For example,

19.   Sara `azar le dll derwênê

The sentence provides uncertain meaning due to the transitive verb "derwênê", which means "plant or remove". Thus sentence one could mean

a.   Azad plants pain in the heart
b.   Azad removes pain from the heart

Second, the intonation of the sentence could leave the listener puzzled on how to comprehend the statement. For example,

20.   Her Çwaryan hatn

During speaking, if the stress is placed on the first part of the sentence, "her",. The sentence means there were more than people, but only four of them came. In contrast, if the stress is applied to the second word of the expression, then the sentence means there were four people and all of them came.

Third, the existence of different relations among the sentence components. In other words, when the sentences allow for interpretation in both deep and surface levels. For example,

21.   Şilan w Saray xwşkm roştn bo bazar
        Shilan and Sarah my sister went shopping (word-for-word- translation)

The sentence ambiguity occurs due to the modifier phrase "xwşk". Thus, allowing us to understand the sentence as either

a.   My sisters Shilan and Sara went shopping
b.   Shilan and my sister sara went shopping

Finally, the syntactic ambiguity is caused by the transformation generative theory rule in Kurdish grammar. The movement rule allows specific pronouns to be linked to the verb or the object of the sentence if certain conditions are met. For example;

22.   Pêm deşkê
        My foot or I can break (word-for-word-translation)

a.   My foot is broken
b.   I can break it

Sentence 1 can provide the first meaning based on the criteria that in the Kurdish language, pronouns can be replaced by linking pronouns. The original statement " pe y mn my foot" can be shortened and become "pem". The "m" is the substitute for "mn". Moreover, the sentence can give a second meaning because the linking pronouns can replace the object pronoun. If after the pronoun, the term "ba" appears. Thus, the expression "bam n" transforms into "pem I can."

3   Methodology/Materials

In order to explore the nature of ambiguity in news headlines in both Kurdish and English, a dataset of 100 news headlines was gathered from popular news websites in both languages. These news headlines underwent a comprehensive analysis from a linguistic perspective, specifically focusing on semantic and pragmatic aspects, to identify instances of ambiguity and categorize each type of ambiguity. Expert linguists proficient in each language carried out the analysis, employing semantic approach to unravel the underlying ambiguities present in the headlines.

The linguists utilize the docanno program as a tool for analyzing the headlines. This program facilitates the presentation of individual headlines, allowing the linguists to choose the specific type of ambiguity and highlight the term or structure responsible for the ambiguity. The process is illustrated in the figure below.

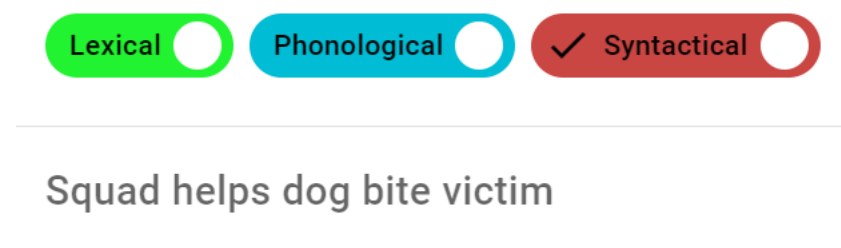Figure 1. An Example of Kurdish News Headline Using Doccano

Figure 2. An Example of English News Headline Using Doccano

4   Results and Findings

Both languages have a similar understanding of the concept of ambiguity. In both languages, ambiguity refers to an expression that can be interpreted in multiple ways. However, the two languages fall into significant differences regarding the types and structure of ambiguity. First, in English, ambiguity has three types which are phonological, lexical and syntactical. Whilst, in the Kurdish language, there are two types of ambiguity which are morphological and syntactical. The Kurdish language does not have any silent letters, and words are pronounced the way it is written. Therefore, this paramount quality prevented the language from causing phonological ambiguity.

Ambiguity arises in the Kurdish language when Kurdish politicians employ personal pronouns to refer to opposing parties outside the government. This ambiguity occurs due to the presence of multiple political parties within the Kurdish political system. Specifically, the pronouns "ew"(he/she) and "ewan" (they) are frequently utilized in news headlines. The following examples illustrate this phenomenon.

Table 1. Example of Kuridsh News Headlines

No	Kurdish Text	Translation
1	<u>Ewan</u> wtyan le turkia kurd keşay nia	<u>They</u> announced kurdish have no issues in Turkey
2	<u>Ew</u> layanay ka dayanawet rekawtn basar parlman teparet ba haladwch	<u>He</u> who wishes to make a treaty outside parliament is wrong
3	<u>Ewan</u> xoşhal nyn ba sarkawtni ema	<u>They</u> are not content with our success
4	Hande kas lan Kurdistan wak daaş birdakanawa	Some people in Kurditan follow ISIS ideology
5	Parlamn kamek grzhy tekawtwa	Few conflicts exist among Kurdish Congressmen
6	La 7kumat tozek keşa haya ka natwantret charasar bkret	There is a little bit of money government

The provided examples 1, 2, and 3 raise questions regarding the attribution of statements and the identification of individuals involved. In the first example, it remains uncertain who made the claim that Kurds have no issues. Additionally, the second example lacks clarity regarding the source of the announcement and the person expressing the desire to negotiate outside the parliament. Lastly, the identity of the individuals referred to as "they" in the last example remains unspecified.

In the Kurdish language, another type of ambiguity arises from the utilization of quantity pronouns like "handek" (some), "kamek" (few), and "tozek" (a little) as shown in the examples 3, 4, and 5. This ambiguity stems from the lack of information regarding the exact number or ratio. Specific instances of this ambiguity are presented in Figure 2.
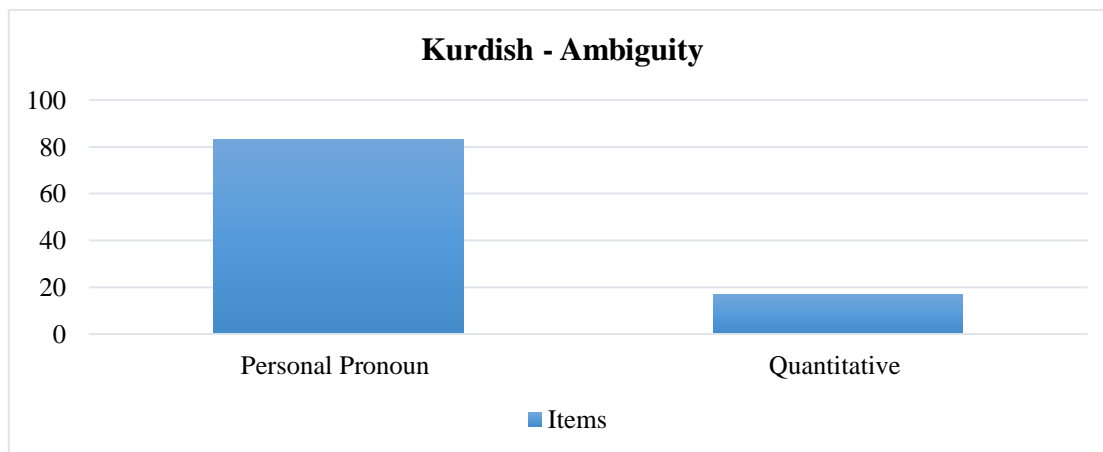

Figure 3. Percentage of Ambiguity in Kurdish News Headlines

As depicted in the Figure 3, a significant portion of Kurdish news headlines exhibit ambiguity arising from the use of personal pronouns. This can be attributed to the multi-party nature of Kurdistan, where each political party operates its own news channel, employing personal pronouns to criticize opposing parties without explicitly mentioning their names.

In the English language, ambiguity can be observed in both lexical and syntactic aspects. This occurs primarily to capture the readers' attention. Let's examine the following examples to illustrate this phenomenon.

New drone strike in Iraq kills ISIS militants   *(1)*

The ambiguity in the given sentence stems from the word "drone," leading to multiple possible interpretations. The term "drone" can be associated with the noun "strike," forming the noun phrase "drone strike." This interpretation suggests an attack carried out by a drone, resulting in the killing of al-Qaeda militants in Yemen. On the other hand, "drone" can also be linked to the adjective "new," creating the noun phrase "new drone." This implies the presence of a recently discovered drone that targeted ISIS militants in Iraq. The ambiguity in this headline revolves around the attachment of the word "drone" and how it affects the interpretation. Different attachments give rise to different meanings, thereby introducing syntactic ambiguity to the sentence.
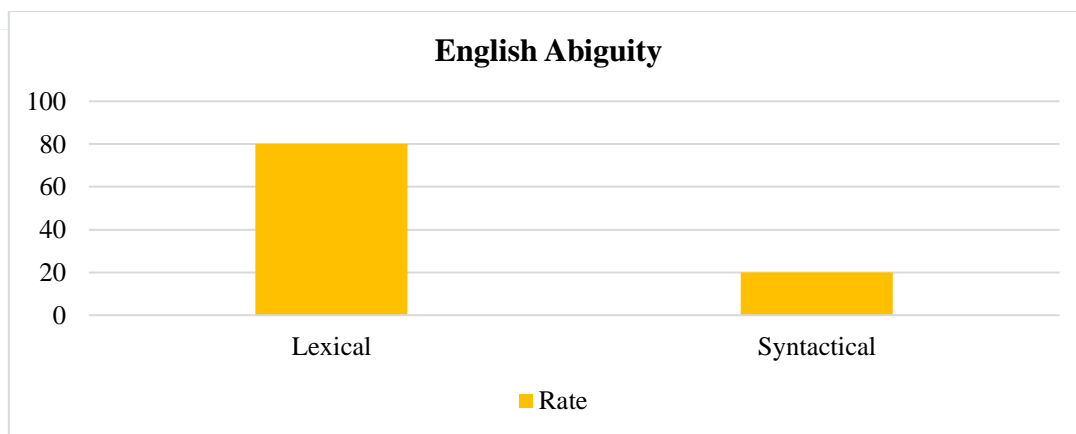
Figure 4. English Ambiguity Percentage

5   Conclusion

Ambiguity is one great difficulty for new language learners. It may cause significant misunderstanding if one needs more efficient knowledge about it. In this paper, we explained some critical aspects of ambiguity for both Kurdish and English languages and highlighted their main differences. We discover that in the English language, ambiguity falls into three categories, phonological, lexical and syntactical. However, in the Kurdish language, ambiguity is classified into two categories morphological and syntactical. In the Kurdish language, morphological ambiguity can be eliminated by placing vague terms inside a sentence. The issue is not very easy with English. Since in English, providing more information about the context can remove doubts about the unclear penalties. Furthermore, our investigation focuses on exploring the notion of ambiguity in news headlines in both Kurdish and English languages. Our findings reveal that in the Kurdish language, ambiguity predominantly arises from the use of personal pronouns. Conversely, in English, lexical ambiguity is more prevalent compared to syntactic ambiguity.

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