# TYPES OF SEMANTIC AMBIGUITY FOUND IN THE EDITORIALS OF JAKARTA POST DAILY NEWSPAPER

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**Abstrak**

Ambigu merupakan fenomena dalam penggunaan bahasa yang merujuk kepada suatu kata atau ungkapan yang memiliki makna lebih dari satu. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menemukan jenis-jenis ambigu yang terdapat di dalam tajuk (*editorial*) pada surat kabar harian The Jakarta Post. Data penelitian ini diambil dari tajuk yang terdapat pada 10 edisi surat kabar The Jakarta Post yang diterbitkan pada bulan November dan Desember 2012. Dari 10 edisi tersebut, diperoleh 113 penggunaan ambigu yang terbagi kepada ambigu leksikal (kata) dan ambigu struktural (frase atau kalimat). Pengelompokan ambigu kepada leksikal dan struktural merujuk kepada teori jenis ambigu yang dikembangkan oleh Kent Bach (2009). Dari hasil analisis data, ditemukan bahwa ambigu berjenis struktural lebih sering digunakan dengan frekuensi 60 kali (53,10%). Sementara itu ambigu leksikal digunakan sebanyak 53 kali (46,90%). Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ambigu yang terdapat dalam tajuk surat kabar The Jakarta Post lebih sering disebabkan oleh penyusunan kata-kata dalam frase atau kalimat yang berpotensi menyebabkan interpretasi ganda dari pembaca.

Kata Kunci:   *Ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, newspaper editorial*

## A. Background of the Problem

Ambiguity is a language phenomenon that usually happens in human daily communication. It is a term which is against meaning properties of a language because it refers to an utterance (a word, a phrase, or a sentence) that has more than one meaning. As Farlex (2003) says that ambiguity is the possibility of interpreting an expression in two or more distinct ways. This means that the ambiguity happens when the words or the arrangement of the words in expressions fail to deliver one exact meaning.

The ambiguity may happen because of the nature of words in a particular language. For example, English language has many words that have more than

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one meaning, so when those words are not used carefully, they show their ambiguous meanings. As Rodd et al (2004) say, "Most words in English are ambiguous between different interpretations; words can mean different things in different contexts". This idea emphasizes that contexts can influence to cause ambiguity. In the same tone, Bach (2009:1) also states that a word, phrase, or a sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. From these quotations, it can be concluded that ambiguity happens when a word, phrase or sentence has more than one meaning and gives room from alternative reaction to the same piece of language. In other words, something is ambiguous when it can be understood in two or more possible senses or ways. Despite the fact that ambiguity in language is an essential part of language, it is often an obstacle to be ignored or a problem to be solved for people to understand each other.

In addition, according to Kennedy (2009), ambiguity is associated with utterance chunks corresponding to all levels of linguistic analysis, from phonemes to discourses, and is characterized by the association of a single orthographic or phonological string with more than one meaning. Ambiguity can have significant consequences, for example if the wording of a legal document is such that it allows for interpretations that support distinct judgments. This idea suggests that ambiguity should be avoided especially in the important documents such as laws, official rules, and judiciary judgements.

Sometimes, ambiguity happens accidently; in other words, a speaker sometimes does not realize that his/her utterance carries more than one meaning. Therefore, the speaker gets unexpected response which makes him/her annoyed and finally affects the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. Ambiguity is both lexical and structural. In lexical ambiguity, the double meaning is caused by a single word that has more than one meaning. As Kreidler (1998:55) says when homonyms can occur in the same position in utterance, the result is lexical ambiguity. So, when this word is used in the utterance, the message in which cannot be understood well if the interlocutor does not decode the message carefully. This is really out of the speaker's control that in his/her utterance, he/she uses the ambiguous word.

If lexical ambiguity is caused by a word with more than one meaning, structural ambiguity is caused by the structure of the words when they are combined eventhough those words exactly have only one meaning. As Rosa (2006) says the ambiguity is structural if it is resulted from the way the constituents are grouped into a larger syntactic unit. He adds that structural ambiguities can be disambiguated by grouping the words appropriately. In addition, Bach (2009) says structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure. In short, if the ambiguity is caused by order or the structure of the words, it is called structural ambiguity.

However, ambiguity may also happen intentionally, which means the speaker consciously realizes he/she useis ambiguous utterances for various purposes. The speaker intentionally uses ambiguity to hide the fact, to create confusing situation, or to provide learning materials. For the purpose of learning, for example, ambiguity provides a chance for the students to analyze any possible

meanings containing in the language unit. This is used to make the students more sensitive in understanding every utterance used in their daily interaction.

Ambiguity is not only found in daily conversation but also in media such as in newspapers. A newspaper is a media on which most of people depend on update their knowledge of what is happening around the world. The journalists sometimes use ambiguity in presenting the news. This often creates different interpretation from people who read it. However, they certainly have reasons of using ambiguity in their writing. It is not a right decision to blame them because of using ambiguity in the news, the best way to do is by improving the ability of understanding the ambiguity. Therefore, studies or researches on ambiguity are absolutely important.

Newspapers in Indonesia are divided into two, based on their scope: local and national newspapers. Local newspapers usually emphasize on presenting the news about what happened in a particular area. Meanwhile, national newspapers present the news in wider scope, that is about what happened in a country. One of national newspapers in Indonesia is "The Jakarta Post". Besides presenting the news around this country, Indonesia, this newspaper also uses the English language in all of sections of the newspaper. The use of English is expected to give opportunity for foreigners to participate in reading the news. Besides, this is also helpful for foreign learners to take the English data from the newspapers. This is also one of the reasons why The Jakarta Post is taken as a source of data in this study.

The Jakarta Post is owned by PT Bina Media Tenggara, and the head office is in the nation's capital, Jakarta. This paper has been existed since April 1983. The first edition was published on 25 April 1983 in eight pages. But now, it is published in twenty eight pages. The Jakarta Post, like other newspapers, is composed of some parts or sections. This classification is made to ease the readers to find out which information they need to know. One of the sections in this newspaper is editorial. Newspaper editorial may be said as a heart of newspaper because it provides the reader with the main information that the newspaper wants to convey in its daily publication. It also shows the position of the newspaper towards the issue which is developing among the society. According to Sinclair (1995), an editorial can be defined as "an article in a newspaper that gives the opinion of the editor or publisher on a topic or item of news". For this reason, the editorial is very carefully constructed and the use of ambiguity is a smart choice. Based on the above explanation, editorial is a good section of the newspaper to be analyzed in terms of ambiguity.

On one side, it is good to use ambiguity in presenting the editorial because the editorial should not provoke the readers to take a quick action towards the issue. However, in the other side, it may cause misunderstanding among the readers as they may have different interpretation. Some of the sentences may have ambiguity in terms of word choice, other sentences may have ambiguity in terms of sentence structures. Therefore, studying ambiguity in newspaper's editorials is not only interesting but also necessary in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Studying ambiguity is not a new topic in researches because there are some previous researches that study about ambiguity. However, so far, the

researches about ambiguity commonly use the novels, short stories, movies, advertisements, and magazines as sources of the data. In this study, the data are taken from newspaper's editorials which means that this study has different source of data from the previous researches. This study analyzes types of ambiguity which is used in the editorials of The Jakarta Post newspapers.

## B. Discussions

The data of this study are ambiguous expressions which were used in the editorials of The Jakarta Post daily newspapers. The ambiguous expressions can be words, phrases, or sentences. The editorials from ten editions of The Jakarta Post newspapers were taken as a source of data. The editorials that were collected were published during November and December 2012. The title and the date of publication of those editorials can be seen in the table 1.

From the publication of ten editions of the Jakarta Post newspapers, there are 113 ambiguous expressions used in different types. The data were analyzed to identify the type of the ambiguity used. In this chapter, the writer presents 16 data that have been analyzed. These data represent all of the data that have been classified into each type of ambiguity.

Table 1
The editorials of the Jakarta Post

| No | Date of Publication | Title |
|----|---------------------|-------|
| 1 | November 17th 2012 | Unusually Bold Ahok |
| 2 | November 19th 2012 | Imbroglio in the oil industry |
| 3 | November 22nd 2012 | Expanding the talking shop |
| 4 | November 23rd 2012 | Tripartite mechanism in doubt |
| 5 | November 24th 2012 | Jokowi's first test |
| 6 | December 07th 2012 | A mere painkiller |
| 7 | December 10th 2012 | The right to a voice |
| 8 | December 14th 2012 | Judging the judges |
| 9 | December 20th 2012 | Newer deal for Papua |
| 10 | December 31st 2012 | Hope and action in 2013 |

The following samples of the data show that a word causes the ambiguous meaning.

(1)  The <u>appointment</u> of Xi as CMC chairman will obviously give him a freer hand

The word "appointment" is one of English words that have more than one meaning. It may mean "engagement" or "act of appointing". The word "appointment"  in (1) causes ambiguity because there is no other words that can indicate the single meaning of that word. As the ambiguity is caused by a single word, it belongs to lexical ambiguity. The meaning of the word may be there is an engagement to point Xi as a CMC chairman; in other words, there is an agreement among the members of CMC to point Xi as a CMC chairman before the election is done. However, it is also possible that the word means that Xi is appointed as a

CMC chairman which means that the process of appointing Xi as a CMC chairman is based on the result of election done by the members of CMC.

> (2)    The least prepared for a single market in that <u>region</u>

The underlined word "region" in (2) is another example of lexical ambiguity. It belongs to lexical ambiguity because the ambiguous meaning is caused by a single word. The meaning of the word "region" is related to the governmental area which can be specified as a country, a province, or even other smaller areas. Kind of area which is represented by the word "region" here is ambiguous because other words around it does not contribute to specify the area indicated by the word "region". Therefore, this causes various meanings about the place of the market; whether the market is in a country or in a province.

> (3)    The governor of Jakarta's decision to raise minimum wage by 44 percent to Rp 2.2 million (US$230) per month in the <u>capital</u> starting next year

The word "capital" may mean "the city which is the official seat of a government" or "any source of profit". In (3), there is no other word to make the word "capital" have only one meaning. This means that this word causes ambiguous meaning. Furthermore, it belongs to lexical ambiguity because the ambiguous meaning is caused by a single word. The ambiguous meaning here is whether Rp 2.2 million (US$230) per month is the source of profit that will start next year; or it is the monthly minimum wage for workers in Jakarta as the capital of Jakarta.

> (4)    By people ready to buy <u>justice</u>

The ambiguous meaning in (4) is caused by the presence of the word "justice". Because the ambiguity is caused by a single word, it belongs to lexical ambiguity. Generally, "justice" is understood as a "fair judgement or decision". However, the context where the word "justice" is located give another possible meaning, that is "a person who has an authority to make judgement". In short, the ambiguous meaning here is whether the fair judgement can be bought or the person in charge of deciding judgement can be bought.

The following samples of the data show that the ambiguity can also be caused by the order of the words in the sentence.

> (5)    <u>The officials have only two choices: follow the order or face being replaced</u>

The sentence "The officials have only two choices: follow the order or face being replaced" contains ambiguity, known as structural ambiguity. It is structural because the ambiguity occurs as a result of the way of arranging the words in that sentence. Based on its meaning, conjunction 'or' is used to provide the option; in other words, one of the options should be chosen. However, the sentence's meaning shows that the officials may have two choices; meanwhile, the conjunction used is 'or' which makes the officials have only one choice.

(6)   What does it take for <u>the country's oldest Muslim organization</u>?

The underlined words have ambiguous meaning. The ambiguity occurs because of the arrangement of the words. The word "oldest" may modify either "Muslim" or "organization". When the word "oldest" modifies "Muslim", the underlined words mean the country's organization that contains old Muslims as its members. Meanwhile, when it modifies "organization", the underlined words mean the oldest Muslim organization in this country. As the ambiguity in this phrase occurs because of the arrangement of the words, it belongs to structural ambiguity.

(7)   They have been bashing <u>foreign oil companies</u>.

The underlined words contain structural ambiguity. Each of the words (foreign, oil, companies) has only one meaning. However, the way they are arranged in the form of a phrase constitutes ambiguity. The arrangement of the words may have more than one meaning. The first meaning that can be addressed to that structure is that the oil comes from foreign countries, and the industry belongs to Indonesia. The second possible meaning is that the word foreign modifies the companies; in other words, the oil companies belong to foreign countries.

(8)   The Constitutional Court shocked the petroleum industry last Tuesday with its verdict that disbanded upstream oil and gas regulator BPMigas, <u>which manages and supervises production sharing contracts (PSCs)</u>

The ambiguity in this sentence occurs when it is difficult to determine who did the action of managing and supervising production as shown in the underlined words. It may be done by "The Constitutional Court" or "Upstream oil and gas regulator BPMigas". Furthermore, what makes it ambiguous is because the phrase "Upstream oil and gas regulator BPMigas" is closer to the clause indicating the action. The other reason that makes the sentence ambiguous is the use of the word "which". If the action of managing and supervising is done by the same subject "The Constitutional Court", the word "which" is not needed.

After the data have been analyzed, it was found that both types of ambiguity (lexical and structural) were used in ten editorials of The Jakarta Post newspapers which were published during November and December 2012. Nevertheless, they are used in different frequency. The frequency of the use of the ambiguity is shown in table 2.

Table 2
The frequency of the use of ambiguity
in the editorials of The Jakarta Post daily newspapers

| No | Types of Ambiguity | Frequency | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number | Percentage |
| 1 | Lexical Ambiguity | 53 | 46.90% |
| 2 | Structural Ambiguity | 60 | 53.10% |

| Total | 113 | 100% |
|-------|-----|------|

Table 2 shows that structural ambiguity is found to be the most frequently type of ambiguity used in the editorials of the Jakarta Post newspapers which were published in November and December 2012. From 113 data, structural ambiguity is used 60 times (53.10%). Nevertheless, the different frequency of using types of ambiguity is not very significant. Lexical ambiguity is used 53 times (46,90%).

The structural ambiguity is more frequently used in these editorials because the language in editorials is usually defendent. This means that the writer may sometimes provide the ambiguous meanings in order not to be directly opposed by the group that has different opinion with the newspaper. So, the readers need some time in order to get the actual message from the editorials. Furthemore, the editorials must be written carefully because they represent the whole content of the news in each publication of the newspaper. This is in line with Bal (2009) who says that editorials represent opinion articles written by the publisher, editors or columnists of newspapers.

The lexical ambiguity is less frequently used in these editorials because the word used in editorials shoud be specific in order to avoid different interpretations from the readers. However, sometimes, the writer can avoid using lexical ambiguity because many words in English have more than one meaning. This is in line with Rodd et al (2004) who say that most of words in English may mean different things in different contexts. The ability to understand the context is extremely important for the readers to get the understanding from reading newspaper's editorials.

This finding is similar with what Tambunan (2009) has found in her research entitled The Analysis of Lexical and Structural Ambiguity in Your Letters of The Jakarta Post. She found structural ambiguity is the type which is most dominantly used in the letters published in the Jakarta Post newspaper. She collected 47 ambiguous expressions among which 23 (48.9%) of the data belong to lexical ambiguity and the other 24 (51.1%) of the data belong to structural ambiguity. This fact shows that in the opinion section of The Jakarta Post newspapers, both in editorial and your letters column, the writer tended to provide ambiguity in phrases or sentences.

However, this finding is different with Kristianty (2006) who did a research entitled The Structural and lexical ambiguity found in Cleo Magazine Advertisements. In her findings, she found that lexical ambiguity occurs more frequently than structural ambiguity. One of the causes that make these findings different is the source of data. Kristianty used advertisements as the source of data. The power of advertisements is in the diction or the choice of the words that are used by the writer. The words which are chosen should be attractive that can attract the readers' attention and eagerness to buy the product being advertised. Therefore, this choice of words may cause ambiguity.

## C. Conclusions and Suggestions

The use ambiguity is not only found in daily conversations but also in printed media, such as newspapers. In this study which was done in ten editions of

editorials of The Jakarta Post daily newspaper, 113 uses of ambiguity are found. They are divided into two types: lexical and structural ambiguity. Based on the findings of this study, it is found that structural ambiguity is more frequently used than lexical ambiguity. However, the difference of frequent uses of these two types of ambiguity is not significant. From 113 data, 60 (53.10%) of them belong to structural ambiguity, and the other 53 data (46.90%) belong to lexical ambiguity.

From the data analysis, it can be concluded that the ambiguity in these editorials may be written consciously and unconsciously. Sometimes, the writer did not realize that his/her sentence contains ambiguity because of the way he/she arranges the words. Sometimes, the ambiguity happens because many English words have more than one meaning. Ambiguity cannot be avoided even though every writer wants to do it. The best way to do is by providing some contexts to give a single meaning of some expressions.

After conducting this study, the writer suggests for everybody who is interested in the study of ambiguity to find other sources in order to see the different uses of types of ambiguity. The writer also suggests to use other theories concerning the classifications or types of ambiguity in order to get more specific specifications of ambiguity.

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