Modes of Understanding and the Perceptual Phenomenon of Ambiguity

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploration was to develop a theory that contributes to the elucidation of the nature of ambiguity as it pertains to our understanding. Using two definitions of ambiguity, the author suggests core components responsible for what he refers to as the perceptual phenomenon of ambiguity. An argument is presented that demonstrates the manner in which the core components may be reconciled with one another as modes of understanding. Through comparison to the notion of deictic, ambiguity is revealed to be a perceptual phenomenon from within the conceptual framework for understanding that is constructed.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Deictic Word, Meaning, Interpretation, Understanding
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Dear (2008) suggests that science as scientific statements are inherently ambiguous. That notwithstanding, I contend that the reasons that were presented as evidence were insufficient to justify Dear’s claim.

*Ambiguity* refers to the existence of two or more meanings (Browne & Keeley, 2015). However, it may also be defined as that which has the “capacity for dual interpretation” (Peters, 2009, p.33).” Thus, as I understand the notion based on these definitions, it may be concluded that ambiguity concerns both meaning and interpretation. In addition, since I have previously argued that both meaning and interpretation are that through which comprehension may be achieved, I refer to them both as modes of understanding. These modes of understanding are responsible for the perception of ambiguity that may be experienced; therefore, I argue that scientific statements are not themselves inherently ambiguous.

The Perception of Ambiguity

When I refer to the perception of ambiguity, as opposed to the reality of it, my claim is based on a widely-acknowledged property, attribute, or concept of science: being unchanged. In a manner that is analogous to a visual illusion described by Dear (2008) remaining unaltered yet being perceived in either of two (i.e., “ambi” - both) ways, science and scientific statements are also being perceived while remaining unchanged.

If science and scientific statement are permanent, denotatively speaking, then its understanding must also be fixed. A denotative meaning or understanding of a word may be derived by appeal to conceptual-referential aspects of a word (Carter, 2009). Unlike other
entities that derive their existence through living (e.g., animals, plants), science and scientific statements do not alter. Therefore, I contend that it follows necessarily that any ambiguity encountered is as a perceptual phenomenon. As a phenomenon, the perception of ambiguity is related to the modes of understanding that are derived from either meaning or interpretation and is contingent on the perspective and framework of the individual perceiving.

**Perspective and the Concept of “Deictic”**

Taking into account the role of perspective, the perception of ambiguity, I propose, can be understood within a framework captured adequately in the notion of the term deictic. Deictic is an adjective that is commonly used in linguistics in which it refers to something (i.e., a word) whose semantic conception is fixed but has a denotative meaning that is contextually derived (Oxford, 2017). Another closely related yet equally important term, the noun “deixis,” concerns indicating that which is a function of the perspective of a participant involved or engaged in an act (Oxford, 2017). Both concepts address or consider understanding to be dependent on contextualization to a degree.

For instance, let us examine the pronouns “you” and “her.” Although their denotative conceptions may be fixed, their denotative meaning is equally dependent on the context from which, and within which, it is attempting to be understood. One may wonder whether it is possible for a denotative conception of the pronouns “you” and “her” both (i.e., “ambi-”) to be understood to have one meaning, but also be capable of having an interpretation as another. Not only do I claim that denotative conceptions entail the possibility of dualities in understanding, but it was the guidance I received from the existence of such possibility that contributed to the development of a theoretical framework concerning understanding that is based on perspective.
Regardless of the dimension over which the domain of any perspective ranges such as person-perspective, locative (i.e., place) perspective or temporal (i.e., time) perspective, I argue that for one who attempts to understand relative to the object of one’s understanding through either meaning or interpretation, the denotative concepts of the pronouns you and her, as the second and third person respectively, remain unchanged.

Despite remaining denotatively unaltered from the point of any fixed perspective, one’s understanding of both pronouns “you” and “her” varies. The variation in understanding depends on an individual’s background, his or her customary usage, and any words by which these pronouns are surrounded. For instance, although two people P and Q may read the same self-help book, whenever the book states “you” to refer to the reader, to person P and Q “you” is understood to mean the same thing denotatively: the second-person who is doing the reading. However, to each person reading the self-help book, “you” must be understood differently. It is not by meaning, but through interpretation of “you,” that “you” denotes P to P and Q to Q. Thus, in this fashion, it may be appreciated how what I claim is perceived as ambiguity may actually be explained through both meaning and interpretation, which I call the modes of understanding. Moreover, meaning and interpretation as modes of understanding are based on the concept of deictic.

Deictic As Foundation for the Modes of Understanding

Deictic explains how understanding the single fixed denotative meaning of a word is what causes the second understanding of the same unchanged word to exist through interpretation of it based on the primary denotative meaning. Together, background, usage, and surrounding, which Browne & Keeley (2015) describe as the context (p. 49), are that based on
and according to which one may understand ambiguous words. Words that are considered ambiguous are what I claim to be *deictic* words.

According to Ravitch & Riggan (2016), meaning is contingent on the way one thinks such that beyond one’s interpretation there exist none. I propose that our understanding with regard to notions of *deictic* pronouns, to science, and to scientific statement remaining unchanged may be considered the *property, attribute, or qualitative characteristic, which allows for the multiplicity of understanding derived from the fixed denotative concepts represented by, or embedded in, deictic terms*. Furthermore, I argue that it is the natural conflation associated with deictic words resulting from having a singular *meaning* yet multiple *interpretations* in understanding, which is responsible for the tendency for people to fail to distinguish the *perception of the existence of inherent ambiguity in things such as science from the perceptual illusion of the existence of inherent ambiguity*.

It should be noted that although opposing one another, both my theory and argument regarding ambiguity is actually consistent with that of others who claim it exists. The consistency is based on the fact that difficulties concerning the ambiguity of (deictic) words are appropriate given that it reflects the inherent duality and seeming inconsistency of the notion of deictic itself.

That is, I contend that anything referred to as ambiguity is not inherent in a word itself; ambiguity is experienced by an individual as a consequence of their failure to reconcile the meaning of a denotative concept with how it can be interpreted. The experience of perceiving ambiguity results from what I call *modes of understanding, which may provide alternate ways for us to come to know*.  


In consideration of science being unaffected like a denotatively-fixed concept of a particular lexeme, how people understand it necessarily depends on what it means to them, or how it is interpreted by them. Moreover, any changes in understanding through meaning and interpretation cannot be manifested without a corresponding alteration to the circumstances surrounding their occurrence; I argue that as modes of understanding, both meaning and interpretation may be more accurately said to supervene on the context (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017).

**Concluding Remarks**

Ambiguity relates to the existence of two or more understandings. Supposing we now come upon an 8 oz glass containing 4 oz of water. The glass as we know it at this point would be understood as ambiguous. It would be so through either meaning or interpretation. On the one hand, had the glass been full initially, then it would be half-so with 4 oz. Conversely, had the glass been initially empty, then it would be half-so now with 4 oz. In fact, in either case, the amount of water before we see the glass is irrelevant; it is the possibility of the amount of water in the glass being as we conceive it that matters.

Our mind attempts to “fill in the blanks,” which provides the context or framework because the fact that there is half the space available in the glass leads to the possibility of all the space being available in the past or future (i.e., empty). Additionally, the presence of half the glass’ space occupied with water leads to the notion that at some point past or future (as long as the glass continues to exist) all the space was, or may be, possibly filled. What is presently perceived will always give rise to conceiving possible points in past, or future worlds in which what is present is not the case but taken to the fullest extent. Nevertheless, because we do not
know the future, and the present is as such, the mind subconsciously frames the conception of possibility in the past as follows: “had x been the case, then y would result.” Since factually, x was not the case, the statement so constructed is counter to the fact, which renders the construction a *counterfactual conditional*. It is for that reason that I contend that subjunctive, or counterfactual conditionals, may also contribute to the misperception of the existence of ambiguity inhering in what is being perceived.
References


