

## AMBIGUITY IN TIV DISCOURSE

**Akase Tiav Thomas**

Department of Languages and Linguistics,  
Nasarawa State University, Keffi

### **Abstract**

*This study examines ambiguity in Tiv discourse and how it can be interpreted. Ambiguity connotes a situation where a word or sentence has more than one meaning or interpretation. Ambiguity affects communication in language where meaning is distorted between a speaker and a listener, leading to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. This study therefore examines ambiguity in general with emphasis on lexical and structural ambiguities. Other causes or factors that are responsible for ambiguity in Tiv such as homonymy and polysemy are also examined. The study reveals instances of such ambiguities in Tiv discourse. The choice of appropriate words and the role of context are used to disambiguate such ambiguities. This is done, in order to ensure effective communication in Tiv as well as to contribute to the development of the Tiv language.*

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Lexical and Structural Ambiguity, Tiv.

### **Introduction**

“Tiv” refers to an ethnic and linguistic group found largely in Benue state and other parts of Nasarawa and Taraba states. It also refers to the language spoken by this ethnic group. According to Ngutswen (2013) the word “Tiv” has a Bantu origin which means “a beloved child”. Akase (2017) claims that the word Tiv is derived from “Tive” meaning “their name”. This means that, it is a name for the Tiv race. It is also the name of the

ancestral father of the Tiv nation who had two (2) sons, *Ichôngo* and *Ipusu* who are the main sources of Tiv descents. The Tiv in Benue numbers about 6.5million people based on the 2006 demographic census data projection in Nigeria. The figure is expected to be higher than this by now. The migration and history of the Tiv to the Benue valley has different accounts. Makar (1975) maintains that the origin of the Tiv could be traced to the Bantu stock of the southern Africa. They journeyed through the Congo to the south west region in Manfa division across the mountains of Cameroon to the Benue valley in about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Bohannan (1954) argues that Tiv originated from *Swem*, a hilly area in the republic of Cameroon. Many modern scholars on Tiv histography like Dzurgba (1985), Tseror (1992) have supported the Bantu connection and origin of Tiv. Gbor (1981) concludes that linguistics and ethnological similarities have proved that Tiv are part of the Bantu ethnic stock.

Tiv language is a southern Bantu language which has severally been classified as a member of the Benue-Congo family of Niger-Congo phylum (Abraham, 1940). The language is predominantly spoken in Benue state where the Tiv are also a dominant ethnic group. It is one of the minority languages in Nigeria with a rich linguistic history. Tiv as one of the Bantu group of languages has elements of ambiguity which affects speakers or users of the language when conveying meaning to listeners.

Tiv language has some effective communication. However, in most conversation, certain words or sentences are ambiguous and are interpreted in more than one way. This in turn hinders effective transfer of ideas or messages from the speaker to the listener. It is in view of this that this work is set

out to identify such ambiguities and find solutions to them. Moreover, a lot of studies have been done on Tiv language; but, most of the studies have focused on phonology, morphology and syntax. The absence of any preliminary work on ambiguity in Tiv discourse has created a vacuum in the study of Tiv language and needs attention. It is as a result of this that the study seeks to look at ambiguity as found in Tiv discourse. Against this background also, it is hoped that the study will provide useful information for Tiv language developers. It will set the foundation for further research in this area. Teachers and learners of Tiv language will also find the study useful. This study will provide insight into the nature of ambiguity that exists in Tiv discourse as well as proffer solution to the ambiguities discovered.

### **Methodology**

The study is descriptive in nature. The method of data collection is both primary and secondary. The primary method involves the gathering of data through the researcher's interaction with the native speakers using his intuitive knowledge of the language. There were no formal questionnaires or interview questions that were used to elicit data. The researcher engaged himself in dialogues or discussions with native speakers and makes notes of some of the ambiguities found in the dialogues. Apart from this, he also listened to native speakers at various forums such as community meetings, burial ceremonies, marriage ceremonies and other social gatherings or functions where notes were made on ambiguities consciously or unconsciously used by speakers at such gatherings. These notes formed part of the data for this work. The secondary method of data collection is through copious reading of textbooks and journal articles that are related to the topic. Data collected is

analyzed in such a manner that the possible meanings of words, sentences or structure are arrived at in order to disambiguate the ambiguities in Tiv discourse.

## **Conceptual and Empirical Review**

### **Ambiguity**

Ambiguity is not a new concept in the study of meaning (semantics) or linguistics in general. According to Fromkin and Rodman (1993), ambiguity is a term used to describe a word, phrase or sentence with multiple meanings. This definition categorizes ambiguity into word or sentence level. They further explains homonymous ambiguity; that is, when meaning can be interpreted or understood in more than one way. They maintained that ambiguity is when two or more meanings are traced to one source. This explains the fact that two meanings could be expressed by one word or sentence. They identified two (2) types of ambiguity as: lexical and grammatical or structural ambiguity. Kempson (1999) also argues that, ambiguity is the state of having two possible interpretations.

The above descriptions of ambiguity have unveiled the fact that ambiguity is associated with a word or sentence being possible of multiple interpretations. Consequently, it is seen as an obstacle to discourse, since a word or sentence could mean several things. Successful communication occurs only when the reader correctly interprets the symbol used by the writer of which ambiguous words or sentences pose obstacle to this process; hence, frustrating communication. This has in turn attracted the attention of linguistic scholars the world over.

Leech (1981) stress that ambiguity is an obstacle to communication. Meaning is essential to the study of communication and as communication becomes a more critical factor in social organization, the need to understand it becomes

more pressing. This implies that ambiguities in discourse disrupt communication of the intended meaning by the presence of an ambiguous word or structure due to the fact that such do not fall within an obvious context. Pushpinder and Jindal (2010) in a similar view assert that meaning is threatened in the domain of language by the fact of ambiguity. They point out that rarely does language convey to the hearer the meaning the speaker intends. It is an obvious fact that most words in Tiv language have more than one referent. This shows that our vocabularies are enlarged when one word has different meanings in different contexts. The single word then becomes the equivalent of many different words. This explains that ambiguity enlarges our vocabularies as much as homonymy and polysemy. Ambiguity can therefore be seen as a word or sentence which is understood in more than one way. Mathews (1997) group ambiguity into lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity (otherwise known as syntactic or grammatical ambiguity). Malmkjaer (2002) however adds phonetic ambiguity as the third group. This study however, does not focus on phonetic ambiguity.

### **Lexical Ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity is a construction that is deemed to have more than one meaning as a result of the presence of a specific word in it. Usually, lexical ambiguities are caused by homonyms. Fromkin and Rodman (1993) clearly state that homonyms create lexical ambiguity; for instance: “Bat” in the sentence “he saw the bat” might mean an animal or among others, a table tennis bat or a police bat. Without a particular context, a sentence like this will be subject to more than one interpretation. This means that a sentence is ambiguous when an ambiguous word is found in the sentence. This type of ambiguity is also known as word based ambiguity. Similar view is shared

by Akwanya (2002) that lexical items play a pivotal role in the interpretation of a sentence, such that the sentence may be subject to more than one interpretation if the item is not sufficiently specified in the context. Other causes or factors responsible for lexical ambiguity in Tiv include homonymy and polysemy as discussed below:

### **Homonymy**

Most words that create lexical ambiguity are homonyms. Ozo-mekuri (1999) defines homonyms as lexical items with the same form but different meaning. Ogbulogo (2005) sees it as a situation when a word form (spoken or written) has two or more unrelated meanings. According to this definition, the meanings of homonyms are unrelated. Ozo-mekuri (1999) also agrees that homonyms have unconnected meaning; such words are thus, treated as different lexical units. For instance: “bear” is an instance of homonyms in a sense like “she cannot bear children”. The ambiguity is created by the presence of a homonym “bear” which may mean “to tolerate” or “to give birth”.

However, it is pertinent to note that, an additional context can help disambiguate the sentence. Akwanya (2002) has observed that these lexical items are related by the meaning of one including and excluding that of another; that is, the meaning of one item is more restricted and is part of the meaning of another. However, it is possible to have partial homonym (or heteronym) where there is identity just within a single medium. Homonym is therefore distinguished from either homophony or homograph; the former relating to the spoken word and the latter to the written word. It is also distinguished from polysemy.

## **Polysemy**

Polysemy occurs when one form of a word (written or spoken) has multiply meanings which are related by extension. It is also a single lexical item with several related meanings. Kempson (1999) defines polysemy as an item whose semantic representation involves a disjunction between all the interpretations that the lexical item may bear; each listed with the context which determines the particular interpretation. A thing of importance to note from the above definitions is that the words must be related and all senses related to one thing. For instance, “head” refers to part of the body, leader of group, position or part of furniture. The different senses of “head” are derived from an autometal referent. One of the meanings is central and the others metaphorical. The relationship between polysemy and ambiguity is similar to that of homonymy. A word used in a sentence is possible to be interpreted in several ways.

Ejele (2003) distinguishes polysemy from homonymy that polysemy has to do with identical form having related meanings while homonymy has to do with identical forms having unrelated meaning. Kempson (1999) further argues that, the initial problem in assessing the homonym-polysemy distinction is to decide whether one has to allow for vacillation of meaning within a single lexical item according to context. This points to the fact that while homonymy allows for a few vacillations in a context, polysemy goes beyond a single view. Ogbulogo (2005) also shares the same view that distinction between polysemy and homonymy is not always clear. However, one indication of this can be found in the typical dictionary entry for words. Polysemous words are entered as simple units in dictionaries with numbers suggesting the list of possible meanings while homonyms are listed as different lexical items.

The study of polysemy reveals to our understanding the sense relations of words. Words often have senses of use. These are the primary and secondary senses. Primary sense of a word connotes the popular and dictionary meaning understood by speakers of the language at the mention of the word in isolation. All other meanings given to the word are secondary. Ullmann (1977) therefore defines sense as the information a name conveys to the hearer. A true understanding of ambiguity therefore lies in the identification of the sense of the word as used in a particular context or discourse especially where lexical ambiguity is involved. Homonyms and polysemy cause ambiguity and the identification of such word as used in context helps in interpreting ambiguity. The grammar of every language gives its speakers the ability to detect and interpret discourse. Ambiguity can therefore be seen as a central notion in understanding discourse. It is not only lexical or structural but also associated with homonyms, polysemy and senses of the word which are the possible causes of ambiguity. It is based on this fact that a single word can be used to stand for more than five different things that are related.

### **Structural Ambiguity**

Words are combined to form sentences which form larger units of discourse. Structural ambiguity derives from the organization of the elements of the sentence rather than a word in the sentence. Fromkin and Rodman (1993) argue that two or more meanings may not be as a result of lexical ambiguity, but two or more structures underlying the same string of words. This is ambiguity as a result of different structures, permitted by the rules of syntax rather than an ambiguous word. Structural ambiguity therefore, entails sentences which are syntactically ambiguous, and are not dependent for their ambiguity on any



word in them. Rather, it is their grammatical structure which causes the ambiguity. This type of ambiguity can also be explained in terms of deep and surface structures. When a sentence is structurally ambiguous, it has two underlying interpretations which would be represented in the deep structure; that is, one surface structure can express those two deep structures (Yule, 2007). Structural ambiguity is also known as constructional homonymy. Ullmann (1977) explains that most ambiguities of this nature could be clarified by context and the speaker of a language by intonation.

### **Role of Context in Disambiguation**

Context helps to remove ambiguity if words could be put in their right context. The context will always determine which interpretation will be possible. This means that the meanings of the greater part of ambiguous sentences used in conversation are worked out by referring to the context of the speech act. Context helps to limit the range of possible interpretations that are possible. Many words have more than one meanings but the context of surrounding circumstances will usually clarify the sense in which is used. The context of discourse is necessary in order to understand it. Though sentence interpretations is generally facilitated by the context, the linguist must nevertheless develop techniques of analyzing ambiguity and such techniques should be available for analyzing sentences whose ambiguity is known to arise from isolating the sentence from its context. What this means is that recent linguistic research has its focus on the techniques of general grammar in analyzing meaning. This means that communication is adequately analyzed by means of techniques of general grammar that allows one to take account of all and temporary conventions of discourse including actual context of use.

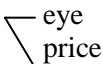
## Data Analysis

The data for this work is now presented and analyzed below. Some of the **lexical ambiguities** identified in Tiv discourse include the following:

1.

À        vìhí   *íshé*   yòl   ná  
He/she   spoil   eye   body   his  
“He has spoilt his eye himself”

The word *íshé* in sentence (1) is ambiguous for it has more than one meaning and can be interpreted to mean any of the following:

íshé    eye  
   price

The ambiguity can be removed by restructuring the sentence as follows:

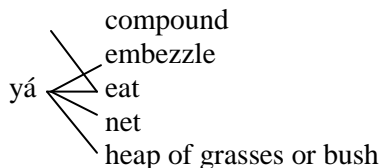
- i.    Abo vìhí   *íshé*   kwàghyán   ké   kàsúá  
      Abo   spoil   price   food   in   market  
      “Abo spoilt the price of food in the market”
- ii.   Wán là   ká   òr   *íshé*   ímôm  
      Boy   the   is   person   eye   one  
      “The boy is one eye person”

From the above analysis, the ambiguity in sentence (1) has been resolved.

2.

Msen   ngù   á   *yá*  
Msen   has   a   compound  
“Msen has a compound”

From example 2, the word *yá* is ambiguous for it has more than one meaning as seen below:



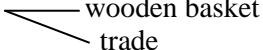
The sentence can be reconstructed to disambiguate the ambiguity as follows:

- i. Msen ngù éren m̀zòúgh ké **yá** nà  
Msen is doing meeting at compound his  
“Msen is holding a meeting at his compound”
- ii. A **yá** ínàrégh k̀ m̀zòúgh  
He embezzle money belong meeting  
“He embezzled the meeting’s money”
- iii. Vè **yá** m̀ngíshím kpishí  
They eat garden eggs plenty  
“They should eat plenty garden eggs”
- iv. Ìnyòn wà **yá** shá kòn nè  
Bird lay net on tree this  
“A bird has laid net on this tree”
- v. Ngóm kósù àkôr kèn **yà**  
ké ìtyév  
Mother my keep seed yams in heap of bush  
on farm  
“My mother kept seed yams in a heap of bush on  
the farm”

3.

Kwàsé né zúá á m̀tsérà shá **kpéngà** nà  
Woman this gets profit on wooden basket this  
“This woman gets profit on this wooden basket”

The lexical item *kpéngà* from example 3 is ambiguous and can be interpreted to mean the following:

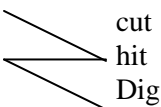
Kpéngà   
wooden basket  
trade

The ambiguity in example 3 can be resolved by restructuring the sentence as follows:

- i. Aya wá íkyáv shín *kpéngà*  
Aya put load in wooden basket  
“Aya put load in the wooden basket”
- ii. Ako èrén *kpéngà* ú kwágh mán  
Ako do trade in something drink  
“Ako trades in drinks”

Examples of homonymous ambiguity in Tiv are:

4.

Tsèhé   
cut  
hit  
Dig

- i. Á *tsèhé* kpèkpè yòú  
He cut wall house  
“He has cut the wall of the house”
- ii. Tom *tsèhé* ngùhár ké íwèn  
Tom hit leg on stone  
“Tom hit his leg on the stone”
- iii. Térèm *tsèhé* ítyô yòú ná  
Father my dig foundation house his  
“My father has dug the foundation of his house”

From example 4, sentence i – iii have different meanings due to the ambiguity of the word “tsèhé” found in those sentences.


5.

Tindí  send  
law

- i. Aba **tindí** wán nà ké màkérántá  
Aba send child his to school  
“Aba has send his child to school”
- ii. Álú u vîhî **tindí** yô, ánà ú rîtsáhà  
If you spoil law then give you punishment  
“If you break any law, you will be punished”

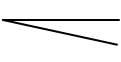
Examples of polysemous ambiguity in Tiv include:

6.

Ìtyòúgh  head  
leader  
brilliant

- i. **Ìtyòúgh** nâgh ìv á ìvú  
Head his full of gray hair  
“His head is full of gray hair”
- ii. Kàán nán lú **ityòúgh** kì tsómbúr né?  
Who is the leader of family this  
“Who is the leader of this family”
- iii. Wàn né ngù á **ityòúgh**  
Child this is brilliant  
“This child is brilliant”

7.

Kèér  make  
limp

- i. Wantor sòó ú **kèér** úsú  
Wantor want to make fire  
“Wantor wants to make fire”
- ii. Á pásè ér wán ná **kèér**

He reveal that child his limp  
“He revealed that his child limps”

Examples of **structural ambiguity** in Tiv include:

8.

Ká nyí ú lú ôrôn  
It what you are reading  
“What are you reading?”

The question is ambiguous as any of the following answers will be correct:

- i. M ngù ôrôn wàsíkà  
I am reading letter  
“I am reading a letter”
- ii. M ngù ôrôn bíbílò  
I am reading Bible  
“I am reading Bible”

The above two (2) answers and many others are correct and suitable to the question since it is ambiguous. The ambiguity from the question can be disambiguated by restructuring the question as follows:

- iii. Ká nyí tàkérádá u ôrôn ke bíbílò?  
It what book you reading in Bible?  
“What book are you reading in the Bible?”

The restructuring of the question above provides a specific answer to the question to avoid the ambiguity as follows:

- iv. M ngù ôrôn gènésè  
I am reading Genesis  
“I am reading Genesis”

The response here is different and more specific. There is no ambiguity in the response.

9.

Sé zúà shín ínyà

We meet in ground

“We will meet downstairs”

This sentence is ambiguous for it can also be translated to mean “we will meet in the great beyond” as seen below:

Sé zúà shín ínà

We meet in ground

“We will meet in the great beyond”

The sentence can be restructured to remove the ambiguity as seen below:

Mé kóhól wé shín kpòyòú ú shín ínà lá

I meet you down room which in ground the

“I will meet you downstairs”

There is no ambiguity in the above sentence since it is reconstructed to resolve the ambiguity.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, efforts have been made to discuss ambiguity, its types and other causes of ambiguity in Tiv discourse as well as the role of context in disambiguation. A point of note however, is that, ambiguity affects communication and therefore attention should be given to language use; that is, the use of words and sentences especially in Tiv discourse. This involves a careful choice of lexical items and sentences in Tiv in order to avoid ambiguity; but to enhance effective communication and development of the language.

### **References**

- Abraham, R.C. (1940). *The Tiv religion*. London: Crown Agents.  
Akase, T.T. (2017). *Tiv personal name: form and meaning*. Mauritius: Lambert Academic Publishing (LAP).

- Akwanya, A. (2002). *Semantics and discourse theories of meaning and textual analysis*. Enugu: ACENA Publishers.
- Dzurgba, A.A. (1985). *Tivian people and their traditional religion: the critical historical, sociological and ethnical perspective*. Katsina-Ala: Celebrity Press.
- Ejele, P.E. (2003). *Semantics, lexical structure and lexical relations*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Fromkin, V. & Rodman, R. (1993). *An introduction to language (5<sup>th</sup> edition)*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Gbor, J.T. (1981). *Mdugh u Tiv man mnyer ve ken Benue*. Jos: Gaskiya Corporation.
- Kempson, R.M. (1999). *Semantic theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G.N. (1981). *Semantics: the study of meaning*. London: Penguin Books.
- Makar, T. (1975). *A synopsis of the history of Tiv people*. Makurdi: Sato Press.
- Malmkjaer, K. (2002). *The linguistic encyclopedia (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. London: Routledge.
- Matthews, P.H. (1997). *The concise oxford dictionary of linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ngutswen, F. (2013). *Tiv man tsombur na*. Makurdi: FBTN Ventures.
- Ogbulogo, C.U. (2005). *Concepts in semantics*. Lagos: Sam Iroanusi.
- Ozo-mekuri, N. (1999). *Semantics and the frontiers of communication*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.



- Pushpinder, S. & Jindal, D.V (2010). *Introduction to linguistics, language, grammar and semantics*. New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited.
- Tseror, T. (1992). *Tiv and their neighbours*. Jos: Alpha Press.
- Ullmann, S. (1977). *Semantics: an introduction to the science of meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Yule, G. (2007). *The study of language (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.