

## An Exploration Into The Various Types Of Ambiguity In Arabic Language: A Pedagogical Study

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**Abstract :** *This paper tackles the issue of the ambiguity of the Arabic language. Moreover, it shows how it is different from the English language. Ambiguity is a problematic issue especially in the field of intercultural communication. The misunderstanding may cause a breakdown of the relationship among communicators. It has been recognized that the learners of Arabic language as a foreign language encounter difficulties to communicate in Arabic language since the Arabic language structure is entirely different comparing to most of the other languages. These differences among languages led learners to commit mistakes while they interact with the Arab native speakers. The Arabic language shares with the English language two types of ambiguity; the lexical and syntactic ambiguity. Interestingly, that the Arabic language has a different type of ambiguity, which is called diacritic ambiguity. Learners of Arabic as foreign language consider this type of ambiguity is the most problematic one. Briefly, this paper will explore three types of Arabic ambiguity with examples. To sum up, the Arabic foreign language learners find the diacritic ambiguity more problematic than others.*

**Key Words:** ambiguity, lexical, syntactic, diacritic.

### 1. Introduction

Ambiguity is an issue occurs at all levels of linguistics analysis. When words have more than one meaning, or phrases or sentences have more than one structure, that is lead us to the concept of ambiguity. According to Richards and Schmidt (2013, p. 24) ambiguity as noun or adjective is “a word, phrase, or sentence which has more than one meaning is said to be ambiguous.” In this regard, several types of ambiguity can be recognized; these include grammatical (or structural) ambiguity in a phrase like “The *lamb* is too hot to eat. Which can mean either *the* lamb is so hot that it cannot eat anything or the cooked lamb is too hot for someone to eat it” (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 24). Another important type of ambiguity is lexical ambiguity, which is a word has two or more meanings, for instance, the word “face meaning “human face,” “face of a clock,” “cliff face” (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 24).

In the case of lexical ambiguity speaker or the writer has added information to indicate which meaning is intended.

### 2. Ambiguity, vagueness, and Polysemy

Ambiguity in words is the ability to express more than one interpretation. It is generally contrasted with vagueness, so ambiguity is not the same thing as vagueness, Tuggy (1993) offers a classical definition of vagueness. He characterizes it as a linguistic phenomenon, where “two or more meanings associated with a given phonological form are united as non-distinguished subcases of a single, more general meaning” (p. 167). That means that vagueness involves “a lexeme with a single but nonspecific meaning.” Typical examples of vagueness are kinship terms, e.g. child, an utterance like “It’s my child’s birthday tomorrow.” is vague because the lexeme child is vague. There are two possible instantiations,

namely [a female human under 18] and [a male human under 18]. When receiving such an utterance, it is much more likely that the common schema [a human under 18] is activated instead of its instantiations.

Polysemy (or polysemia) is a compound noun for a basic linguistic feature. The name comes from Greek poly (many) and semy (to do with meaning, as in semantics). Polysemy is also called radiation or multiplication. This happens when a word acquires a wider range of meanings. For example, "paper" comes from Greek papyrus. Originally it referred to writing material made from the papyrus reeds of the Nile later to other writing materials and now refers to things such as government documents, scientific reports, family archives or newspaper.

On a scale of meaning variance ambiguity and vagueness are the two extremes, whereas polysemy is in between the other two. It shares features with both and is a common phenomenon in everyday language use.

### 3. Types of ambiguity

Although people are sometimes said to be ambiguous in how they use language, ambiguity is, strictly speaking, a property of linguistic expressions. A word, phrase, or sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. Daimi (2001) pointed out that many of the ambiguous English cases discussed in the literature are not necessarily apply to Arabic at all, and cited the example of where the pronoun her causes an ambiguity in English as it can be interpreted as either accusative or genitive, but in Arabic the pronoun is not ambiguous as it will either be verb or the noun.

I saw her yesterday ~ I saw her cat

Daimi (2001) further emphasized the idea that ambiguities are not parallel cross-linguistically, and when translating a sentence from a source language to a target language, there are four possibilities:

- (a) unambiguous source sentence → unambiguous target sentence
- (b) unambiguous source sentence → ambiguous target sentence
- (c) ambiguous source sentence → unambiguous target sentence
- (d) ambiguous source sentence → ambiguous target sentence

This is why the ambiguity problem should be investigated in each language in its own terms. Each language has its own peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, and therefore, ambiguities are distributed and resolved differently in each language. Arabic has its particular weak spots which

are prone to produce a great deal of ambiguities, and which must be handled with special attention.

There are three types of ambiguity are distinguished, lexical, syntactic, and diacritic ambiguity.

#### 3.1 Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguities, which is so common, indicate one word can be interpreted more than one way. Lexical ambiguities are of two basic types: category ambiguities, homographs ambiguities.

##### 3.1.1 Category ambiguity

The simplest type of lexical ambiguity is that of category ambiguity: a given word could be assigned to more than one grammatical or syntactic category (e.g. noun, verb or adjective) according to the context. There are several examples in English: light can be a noun, verb or adjective, also, control can be a noun or verb. In Arabic some words can be in more than one category, for example: [عَلَى] عَل could be a preposition with the meaning of "on", or a verb with the meaning of "raise".

##### 3.1.2 Homograph ambiguity

The second type of lexical ambiguity occurs when a word can have two or more different meanings.

Lexical ambiguity in Arabic is a notorious problem that has not been sufficiently addressed (Kiraz, 1998). This ambiguity represents hurdles in the way of part of research taggers (Freeman, 2001) syntactic parsers, and machine translation. Linguists distinguish between homographs, homophones, and polysemes. Homographs are two (or more) "words" with quite different meanings which have the same spelling: example, light (not dark or not heavy). Many Arabic words can have two or more overlapping meanings.

Table 1: an example of *Homograph ambiguity*.

Transcription	English	Arabic
[fswl]	chapters of a book	فصول
[fswl]	seasons of the year	فصول
[fswl]	semesters in school	فصول
[fswl]	acts of a play	فصول

### 3.2 Syntactic ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity arises when there is more than one way of analyzing the underlying structure of a sentence according to the grammar used in the system. Example, I know a man with a dog who has fleas, is ambiguous. It could be the man or the dog who has fleas. It is the syntax not the meaning of the words which is unclear. The classical example is “He saw the girl with the telescope”. On the other hand, Arabic language has its particular weak spots which are prone to produce a great deal of syntactic ambiguities, for example, pro-drop nature of the language, word order flexibility, and the multifunctionality of Arabic nouns. These issues must be handled with special attention by the learners of Arabic as a foreign language.

#### 3.2.1 Pro-drop Ambiguity

A great deal of ambiguity is caused by the pro-drop nature of the Arabic language. The pro-drop

theory (Baptista, 1995, Chomsky, 1981) stipulates that a null category (pro) is allowed in the subject position of a finite clause if the agreement features on the verb are rich enough to enable its content to be recovered. In Arabic, the subject can be explicitly stated as an NP or implicitly understood as a pro-drop. Arabic has rich agreement morphology. Arabic verbs conjugate for the number, gender, and person, which enables the missing subject to be reconstructed. A syntactic parser, however, is left with the challenge to decide whether or not there is an omitted pronoun in the subject position (Chalabi, 2004b). The challenge to decide whether there is a pro-drop or not comes from the fact that many verbs in Arabic can be both transitive and intransitive. In case these verbs are followed by only one NP the ambiguity arises.

Table 2: An example of *Pro-Drop Ambiguity*

Transcription	English	Arabic
[qāwm āl jndy]	„The soldier resisted“	قاوم الجندي

In above example not sure whether the NP following the verb is the subject (in this case the meaning is “The soldier resisted”) or it is the object and the subject is an elliptic pronoun meaning “he” and understood by the masculine mark on the verb (in which case the meaning will be “He resisted the soldier”). This ambiguity is caused by three facts: first there a possibility for a pro-drop subject following Arabic verbs, second the verb [qāwm] “resisted” can be both transitive and intransitive, and third the agreement features on the verb match the post-verbal NP which makes it eligible to be the subject.

#### 3.2.2 Word Order Ambiguity

A lot of ambiguities are also caused by the relatively free word order in Arabic language. The structure of sentences in the Arabic language as follow:

1. Verb + Subject + object (VSO).
2. Subject + Verb + Object (SVO).
3. Verb + Object + Subject (VOS)

SVO is easily detected by the parser and usually does not cause an ambiguity problem, VOS gets mixed up with VSO. The difference between the nominative and accusative cases which normally distinguish the subject and the object is a matter of diacritics, which do not show in the surface forms as they are usually omitted in modern writing. This means that every VSO sentence has a VOS interpretation causing a serious ambiguity problem. Allowing VOS beside VSO without any constraints in Arabic language grammar almost doubled the number of ambiguities for 15% of the sentences.

Table 3: An example of VSO structure.

Transcription	English	Arabic
[āk̄l ālwld āltfāhh]	The boy ate the apple	اكل الولد التفاحه

Table 4: An example of VOS structure.

Transcription	English	Arabic
[āk̄l ālwld āltfāhh]	The boy ate the apple	اكل التفاحه الولد

Table 5: An example of SVO structure.

Transcription	English	Arabic
[āk̄l ālwld āltfāhh]	The boy ate the apple	الولد اكل التفاحه

### 3.2.3 Multifunctionality of Arabic Nouns

Arabic nouns are characterized by their multifunctionality. They are derived from verbs and can take verbal functions in the sentence. Some nouns also can become prepositions, adverbs, adjectives or quantifiers. Reaching a clear-cut understanding of Arabic word categories has been hindered by a millennium-long under specification of the parts of speech in Arabic. Ibn Sibawaih (late 8th century) opens his famous book

Al-Kitab with a classification of the parts of speech in Arabic into nouns, verbs, and particles. This classification has remained until this day as a leading principle of Arabic grammar (Suleiman, 1990).

The verb is an uncontested category and easily identified as an expression that denotes both action and tense. Particles as well are easily distinguished by their non-derivational aspects and by their morphological rigidity. Arabic nouns remain as the most elusive to define as they encompass a wide array of categories.

Wright (2005) uses the term “noun” as an umbrella etymology that encompasses six types: a noun substantive, adjective, numeral adjective, demonstrative pronoun, relative pronoun and personal pronoun.

Moreover, propositions are subdivided into two categories: true propositions such as [ālā] “to” الى, and [fy] “in” في, and prepositions derived from nouns taking the accusative case (considered by traditional Arabic grammarians as adverbs) such as [byn] “between” بين, and [tth] “under” تحت, There are also true adverbs such as [fqt] “only” فقط, and [hnā] „here“ هنا, and nouns taking the accusative case and functioning as adverbs, such as [kthyrān] “frequently” كثيرا, and [mjānān] “freely” مجاناً. The multifunctionality of Arabic nouns leads to an increased number of alternative possibilities and therefore leads to an increased ambiguity level. The multi-functionality of Arabic nouns can be summarized as follows:

Arabic verbal nouns are categorically nouns, as shown in (1). They can also act syntactically as verbs heading an embedded clause, as in (2), or an adjunct phrase, as in (3). When verbal nouns function as verbs they in her it the same subcategorization frames from the verbs from which they were derived.

### 3.3 Diacritic Ambiguity

The literal meaning of التشكيل [āltāshkyl] is 'forming', the primary purpose of [āltāshkyl] and [ālhārākāt] is to provide a phonetic guide or a phonetic aid. In Semitic languages, such as Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic or Syriac languages do not make use of the additional diacritic symbols, which have been elaborated, mainly, for the needs of the oral reading of sacred texts (Quran, Bible, and New Testament). The التشكيل [ālhārākāt], which literally means 'motions', are the short vowel marks. There is some ambiguity as to which [āltāshkyl] are also [ālhārākāt]; the diacritic [ālhārākāt] in Arabic language as follow:

a) فتحة [fthh] is a small diagonal line placed above a letter and represents a short /a/. The word Fatha itself means “opening” and refers to the opening of the mouth when any letter with this mark.

b) ضمة [dmmh] is a small curl-like diacritic placed above a letter to represent a short /u/ or /o/.


c) كسرة [ksrh] a similar diagonal line below a letter, and refers to a short /i/. The word kasrah literally means “breaking.”

d) السكون [ālskwn] is a circle-shaped diacritic placed above a letter. It indicates that a vowel does not follow the consonant to which it is attached. The sukoon is a necessary symbol for writing consonant-vowel-consonant syllables which are very common in Arabic.

e) تنوين [tnwyn], when The three vowel diacritics are doubled at the end of a word to indicate that the vowel is followed by the consonant /n/.



Figure 1: The diacritic [ālhārākāt] in Arabic language

f) شدة [shddh] is a diacritic shaped like a small written Latin “w”. It is used to indicate germination (consonant doubling or extra length), which is phonemic in Arabic. It is written above the consonant which is to be doubled. It is the only type of [ālhārākāt] that is sometimes used in ordinary spelling to avoid ambiguity .

Chalabi (2000) assumes that the absence of discretization in Arabic poses a computational complexity “one order of magnitude bigger than handling Latin-based language counterparts.” In Arabic, in most instances, a word can have different pronunciations without any explicit orthographical effect due to the lack of diacritics. These different pronunciations distinguish between a noun and verb active and passive form, and imperative and declarative forms. Some verb forms have the middle letter doubled to make the verbs causative, but this also does not appear in orthography. Some agreement morphemes on the verbs are ambiguous leaving the open the selection between a variety of gender and person features.

Table 6: An example of Diacritic Ambiguity.

Transcription	English	Arabic
[qbl? ]	before	قَبْل
[qbjl ?]	accept	قَبِل
[qbbll ?]	Kiss	قَبِل
[qwb ?]	kisses	قَبِل

### 4. Riddles in the Arabic language

Ambiguity is used in jokes and riddles to arise humor and ambiguity. In the following example, a man his name is حذيفه بن اليمان [hzyfhn bñ ālymān] uses ambiguity that is based on hiding the real intended meaning:

Someone asked *hzyfh bn ālymān* how do you feel today? He answered: today, I like the disturbance, and I hate justice. Also, I pray to Allah without ablution, and I have on this earth what Allah does not have in the sky.

Table 7: An example of Riddles in the Arabic language.

Transcription	The Unintentional meaning	The Intended meaning	Arabic
[ālfthn]	Disturbance	Money, sons and daughters	الفتنه
[ālhq]	Justice	Death	الحق
[āsly]	Pray to Allah	Say: peace be upon our prophet	اصلي
[ly fy ālrd mā lys lāh fy ālsmā]	To have what Allah does not have	To have a wife or a child	ل ي في الارض ما ليس له في السماء

## 5. Conclusion

Ambiguity has a vital role in the language use among the individuals from the same community. And it has a serious consequence in the intercultural communication. In the case of Arabic language learners as a foreign language, ambiguity is unavoidable. English language and Arabic language share lexical and grammatical ambiguity. Whereas, the diacritic ambiguity exists only in the Arabic language. A well-developed knowledge of syntax and semantic for learners of Arabic as a foreign language would definitely play an exceptional role in the disambiguation of ambiguous phrases, utterances, and sentences. Moreover, in the Arabic language diacritic ambiguity is may be a problem to native language, and it will cause serious problems for learners of Arabic it will be tricky especially in the writing

form. It can be seen. Therefore, that ambiguity in language is both a blessing and a curse.

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APPENDIX A  
Transcription of Arabic letter

pronunciation	Transliterated	Isolated	Transcription	pronunciation
ألف	ālif	ا	ā	Like A in Apple
باء	bā'	ب	b	Like B in Baby
تاء	tā'	ت	t	Like T in Tree
ثاء	thā'	ث	th	Like the Th in Theory
جيم	jim	ج	j	Sometimes like the G in Girl or like the J in Jar
حاء	hā'	ح	h	Like the h in he yet light in pronunciation
خاء	khā'	خ	kh	Like the Ch in the name Bach
دال	dāl	د	d	Like the D in Dad
ذال	zāl	ذ	z	Like the Th in The
راء	rā'	ر	r	Like the R in Ram
زاي	zāy	ز	z	Like the Z in zoo
سين	sin	س	s	Like the S in See
شين	shin	ش	sh	Like the Sh in She
صاد	sād	ص	s	Like the S in Sad yet heavy in pronunciation
ضاد	dād	ض	d	Like the D in Dead yet heavy in pronunciation
طاء	tā'	ط	t	Like the T in Table yet heavy in pronunciation
ظاء	zā'	ظ	z	Like the Z in Zorro yet heavy in pronunciation
عين	ain	ع	ġ	Has no real equivalent sometimes they replace its sound with the A sound like for example the name Ali for علي/ع ali/
غين	ghain	غ	gh	Like the Gh in Ghandi
فاء	fā'	ف	f	Like the F in Fool
قاف	qāf	ق	q	Like the Q in Queen yet heavy velar sound in

pronunciation	Transliterated	Isolated	Transcription	pronunciation
				pronunciation
كَاف	kāf	ك	k	Like the K in Kate
لَام	lām	ف	l	Like the L in Love
مِيم	mīm	م	m	Like the M in Moon
نُون	nun	ن	n	Like the N in Noon
هَاء	hā'	ه هـ	h	Like the H in He
وَاو	wāw	,	W(aw, au, u)	Like the W in the reaction of astonishment saying: WAW!
يَاء	yā'	ي	Y (ay, ai, ī)	Like the Y in you
هَمْزَة	hamza	ء أ إ آ	Latter will be discussed separately	Seen latter because it differs according to case and cont