

Ambiguity

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(1) a statement which has two or more possible meanings.

(2) a statement whose meaning is unclear.

Depending on the circumstances, ambiguity can be negative, leading to confusion or even disaster (the ambiguous wording of a general's note led to the deadly charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War).

On the other hand, writers often use it to achieve special effects, for instance, to reflect the complexity of an issue or to indicate the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of determining truth.

The title of the country song "Heaven's Just a Sin Away" is deliberately ambiguous; at a religious level, it means that committing a sin keeps us out of heaven, but at a physical level, it means that committing a sin (sex) will bring heaven (pleasure).

Many of Hamlet's statements to the King, to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, and to other characters are deliberately ambiguous, to hide his real purpose from them.

Sir John Tenniel's illustration of the Caterpillar for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is noted for its ambiguous central figure, whose head can be viewed as being a human male's face with a pointed nose and pointy chin or being the head end of an actual caterpillar, with the first two right "true" legs visible.



The lexical ambiguity of a word or phrase pertains to its having more than one meaning in the language to which the word belongs. "Meaning" hereby refers to whatever should be captured by a good dictionary. For instance, the word "bank" has several distinct lexical definitions, including "financial institution" and "edge of a river". Another example is as in "apothecary". One could say "I bought herbs from the apothecary". This could mean one actually spoke to the apothecary (pharmacist) or went to the apothecary (pharmacy).

The context in which an ambiguous word is used often makes it evident which of the meanings is intended. If, for instance, someone says "I buried \$100 in the bank", most people would not think someone used a shovel to dig in the mud. However, some linguistic contexts do not provide sufficient information to disambiguate a used word. For example, "biweekly" can mean "fortnightly" (once every two weeks – 26 times a year), or "twice a week" (104 times a year). If "biweekly" is used in a conversation about a meeting schedule, it may be difficult to infer which meaning was intended.