



The Role of Context in Semantic Interpretation: Analyzing Ambiguity and Polysemy in English Discourse

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 01	<i>This research investigates the role of context in the semantic interpretation of ambiguity and polysemy in English news discourse. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and content analysis method, the study examines four selected news articles from BBC News and NBC News. The analysis identifies four main categories of ambiguity: contextual, type, relationship meaning, and source ambiguity. The most dominant type is contextual ambiguity, which often arises due to insufficient background information or vague expressions. The findings highlight how ambiguity and polysemy can hinder accurate interpretation and impact public understanding. Context proves crucial in determining meaning, especially in complex or sensitive news topics such as gender, crime, and environmental issues. This study emphasizes the need for media to present information transparently and for readers to be critically aware of linguistic nuances. The findings also contribute to improving communication effectiveness in translation, cross-cultural understanding, and natural language processing.</i>
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1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has evolved into a widely used language across various fields such as law, business, and cross-cultural communication. This development highlights the increasing importance of understanding the correct meaning of language in different contexts. One challenge that often emerges in these domains is the presence of ambiguity and polysemy, particularly in situations where words or phrases carry more than one meaning. Ambiguity is often interpreted as a word that has multiple meanings or two meanings, whose multiple meanings come from larger grammatical units, such as phrases or sentences, and

occur due to different interpretations of grammatical structures (Siompu, 2019). However the importance of understanding the right meaning is also reflected in the development of technologies such as online media, automatic translation, and natural language processing systems, where the main challenge is to overcome ambiguity and polysemy to produce accurate and relevant interpretations, so that the role of context becomes crucial in understanding meaning in various domains of modern communication.

In linguistic studies, semantic interpretation refers to the process of understanding the meaning of words, phrases, or sentences in a language. However, word meanings can change systematically depending on sentence context, highlighting the dynamic interplay between linguistic elements and contextual factors in semantic interpretation (Aguirre-Celis & Miikkulainen, 2020). Context plays an important role in ensuring the correct meaning, especially when dealing with the phenomena of ambiguity and polysemy. (Evans & Green, 2018) said that context includes not only linguistic information but also non-linguistic elements, such as cultural background, world knowledge, and intonation, all of which contribute to determining the meaning of an expression. Thus, context acts as a navigational tool that helps guide semantic interpretation in complex situations.

Ambiguity is a situation when an expression has more than one potential meaning, and without a clear context, correct interpretation becomes difficult. (Crystal, 2001) stated that ambiguity can arise at the lexical, structural, or pragmatic level. For example, the sentence "I saw the man with the telescope" can mean "*Saya melihat pria dengan teleskop*" or "*Saya melihat pria menggunakan teleskop*". Both are valid, but the actual meaning depends on the context. Pragmatic ambiguity can either fulfill the speakers' purposes or hinder communication, and addresses may either anticipate the speakers' intentions or neglect them (Albelda Marco & Estellés Arguedas, 2021), depends on the communicator's intention and how the information is processed by the hearer. This suggests that ambiguity is not only a linguistic challenge but also a pragmatic challenge involving social interaction and understanding communicative intentions.

On the other hand, polysemy refers to a word that has several related but different meanings. For example, the word "head" can mean "*kepala*" as a part of the body, "*pemimpin*" of an organization, or "top" of an object. In the last decade, polysemy has been the subject of much research across multiple disciplines which has made it clear that the complexity of polysemy precludes simple and universal answers, especially with regard to the representation and processing of polysemous words (Haber & Poesio, 2024).

Meanwhile, (Riemer, 2005), polysemy shows the flexibility of human language that allows one word to have multiple meanings without creating a new term. Further research by (Carston, 2021) revealed that polysemy is often exploited in rhetoric and creative communication to produce rich and deep meanings, which would not be possible without the existence of multiple interrelated meanings.

Here are examples of polysemous words along with the context of their use:

Table 1

Word	Meaning 1	Meaning 2	Context
Run	"Bergerak cepat dengan kaki"	"Mengelola" (run a business)	"She runs every morning."
Book	"Buku fisik untuk membaca"	"Membuat reservasi"	"I'll book a table for dinner."
Light	"Cahaya"	"Ringan"	"The bag is light, easy to carry."

According to (Glynn, 2014) polysemy helps language to develop efficiently without creating new words for each meaning. The study of polysemy and ambiguity in English has many benefits. For example, this research can improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, improve accuracy in translation, and improve natural language processing systems.

Glynn also added that understanding how context affects semantic interpretation is key to bridging the gap in cross-language communication, especially in the increasingly complex digital era. So, it can be said that polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon in which one word has several interrelated meanings. In addition, this is important in language efficiency, because it allows us to use one word for various contexts without having to create new words. The study of polysemy provides great benefits, especially in improving cross-cultural communication, and translation accuracy. Thus, polysemy not only reflects the richness of language, but also supports its flexibility and efficiency in various communication situations.

The following are indicators of polysemy and ambiguity:

1. Polysemy

According to (Vicente & Falkum, 2017), polysemy is a phenomenon when one word form is associated with two or more related meanings. This phenomenon occurs because the meaning of words tends to experience pragmatic modulation during the process of interpreting speech, either through conceptual specification, expansion, or metaphorical or metonymic extension. so that it becomes an important aspect in linguistic studies, especially in understanding the relationship of meaning in the semantic system of a language. Key Indicators:

- Semantic relatedness where the meanings are shared into conceptual roots or have historical relationships. For example, the words "bank" which is "financial institution" and "riverbank" have different linguistic origins.
- Contribution of context where the interpretation of polysemous meaning is greatly influenced by the context of use.

- c) Development of meaning, namely Polysemous words often develop due to changes in historical or metaphorical use.

2. Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a situation where a word, phrase, or structure has more than one unrelated interpretation. (Liu et al., 2023) emphasize that ambiguity is an intrinsic feature of natural language and managing it is a critical part of human language understanding, as it enables communicators to anticipate misunderstandings and allows listeners to revise their interpretations when necessary. Therefore, it can be concluded that ambiguity, although natural in language, has the potential to cause confusion in communication if not supported by sufficient contextual clarity. Key Indicators:

- a) Unrelated interpretations, Words or structures can produce different interpretations without semantic relationships.
- b) Context-dependent, context sometimes helps resolve ambiguities, but is not always sufficient.

Based two theories above, it can be concluded comparison of Polysemy and Ambiguity:

Table 2

Aspects	Polysemy	Ambiguity
Meaning Relationship	Interrelated meaning	Unrelated meaning
Source	Historical semantic evolution	Language structure or homonymy
Context	Helps determine meaning	Sometimes clarification is not enough
Type	Only at word level	Can be lexical or structural
Example	Bank meaning “financial institution” or “storage place” (e.g., blood bank)	Bank meaning “financial institution” or “riverbank”

This study uses English-language news as a sample because news often reflects the actual language used in everyday contexts. News also contains a variety of terms and structures that can give rise to ambiguity or polysemy. According to Baker and McEnery (2019), news is one of the most linguistically rich forms of text because it contains a variety of language styles, meanings, and contexts. Therefore, news is a relevant source of data to understand how context affects semantic

interpretation. In addition, the news used comes from online media, namely BBC News and NBC News, which are known for their use of precise and varied English, making them ideal for semantic analysis. One of the functions of online media is to convey information about problems that occur in the world. In writing news, there are predetermined writing ethics and use words or sentences that are easy for readers to understand, so that there is no misunderstanding in interpreting the news that is broadcast. But in reality there are still online media that in writing their news still use ambiguous words, which cause misinterpretation by readers.

Several relevant studies support this research. The use of English in global domains such as law, media, and technology has led to growing attention to how meaning is interpreted in context particularly in resolving ambiguity and polysemy. (Evans & Green, 2018) argue that context is a key factor in semantic interpretation, encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, including cultural knowledge, world experience, and intonation. This aligns with the observation by (Aguirre-Celis & Miikkulainen, 2020), who highlight that the meaning of a word is not static but changes systematically depending on the sentence context.

Ambiguity, according to (Crystal, 2001), can occur at lexical, structural, or pragmatic levels and is a frequent source of miscommunication if not clarified by context. (Liu et al., 2023) further note that ambiguity is a natural characteristic of human language, and managing it is essential to avoid misunderstanding, especially in complex or digital communication. (Albelda Marco & Estellés Arguedas, 2021) add that pragmatic ambiguity is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a social and interactive one, depending heavily on how the hearer processes the speaker's intentions.

In contrast, polysemy involves words with multiple but related meanings. (Riemer, 2005) and (Vicente & Falkum, 2017) explain that this phenomenon reflects the flexible and economical nature of language, as it allows one word to expand semantically without introducing new lexical items. This is further supported by (Glynn, 2014), who argues that polysemy promotes efficiency in communication and contributes to linguistic richness. (Haber & Poesio, 2024) emphasize that polysemy presents challenges for computational processing, as distinguishing related meanings often depends on nuanced context.

Finally, the use of English-language news as data is supported by (Baker and McEnery, 2019), who identify news discourse as one of the richest forms of authentic language due to its stylistic variation and contextual diversity. News texts frequently contain instances of both ambiguity and polysemy, making them suitable for analyzing how meaning is interpreted in real-world communication. Therefore, these studies collectively affirm that understanding semantic meaning requires sensitivity to context whether in everyday speech, media, or language technologies.

However, there are several research gaps that can be filled through this study. First, there is still little research that explores the role of digital context in online

news, such as BBC News and NBC News, on the interpretation of ambiguity and polysemy. Second, the influence of cross-cultural context on the interpretation of polysemy and ambiguity has not been widely explored, especially in global news discourse. Third, this study can fill the gap in the integration of polysemy and ambiguity analysis results with language technologies, such as automatic translation and natural language processing. Thus, this study contributes to enriching the understanding of the role of context in semantic interpretation, especially in solving the challenges of ambiguity and polysemy in English discourse.

2. Method

In analyzing the role of context in semantic interpretation, especially regarding ambiguity and polysemy in English discourse, a qualitative descriptive approach with the selected content analysis method is the right choice. (Jasmine, 2014) said that qualitative descriptive research with content analysis is effective for identifying types of ambiguity in English texts. In addition, (Diani et al, 2022) emphasized the importance of understanding the theory of ambiguity in resolving communication misunderstandings.

This qualitative descriptive approach allows researchers to make improvements to ambiguous words in online news media that have been selected by the author as they are and without engineering from the researcher. The data collection technique used by the author is the analysis and recording of speech containing ambiguity.

The researcher will analyze 4 news story from BBC News and NBC News about environmental, legal, and social issues. The research data is analyzed through the following steps: (1) selecting and identifying ambiguity data in 4 news that have been determined by the researcher, namely "Canada's remote (but accessible) dark-sky sanctuary", "Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest", "Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants", "Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character"; (2) analyzing the types of ambiguity, meanings that contain ambiguity, in the news; (3) describing the types of ambiguity, meanings that contain ambiguity, in the news; (4) presenting the research results by analyzing the data found along with supporting theories; and (5) concluding the results of the analysis of the data found.

3. Result and Discussion

1. Identified Types of Ambiguity in Four Selected News Articles

Table 1. Types of Ambiguity in Four Selected News Articles

Tittle	Ambiguity			
	Relationship Meaning	Source	Context	Type

"Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest" (NBC News, 26 Desember 2024)	1	3	2	1
"Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" (BBC News,, 26 Desember 2024)	4	2	4	4
"Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" (NBC News, 26 December 2024)	6	5	9	6
"Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" (BBC News, 19 Februari 2025)	1	0	7	5
TOTAL	12	10	22	16

After the data were collected and categorized, four types of ambiguity were identified in four selected English news articles from BBC News and NBC News, as shown in Table 1. The most frequently occurring category was context ambiguity, followed by text ambiguity, relationship meaning ambiguity, and finally source ambiguity. A total of 60 cases of ambiguity were identified.

In the following section, each type of ambiguity will be discussed in detail, beginning with context ambiguity, followed by text ambiguity, relationship meaning ambiguity, and ending with source ambiguity.

Contextual Ambiguity

This contextual ambiguity arises when a sentence or phrase lacks sufficient information to allow for a single correct interpretation. It typically occurs when the meaning of a word or expression is heavily dependent on pragmatic context, which is not made fully explicit in the text (Vicente & Falkum, 2017). While the sentence structure was grammatically sound, the absence of contextual cues made the intended meaning uncertain, especially for readers unfamiliar with prior events related to the report. Below is an example that shows how contextual ambiguity arises in news discourse:

Data 1. "She said she felt sick and became unconscious after she was served two premade drinks by waitresses." (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest" NBC News)

Explain: The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. The lack of details about how or why this effect occurred. The ambiguity in this sentence is that it is unclear if the drink was intentionally manipulated (for example, medicated) or if there were other factors such as not feeling well that caused her stomach to hurt.

Data 2. "Ms. Grayson admits she has no memory of the events alleged in her complaint, does not know who was supposedly involved, and has never spoken to Mr. Combs" (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest" NBC News)

Explain: The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. In this context because it lacks clarity on how the conclusion is drawn. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that "Grayson's mother" has no memory or direct evidence, so it becomes difficult to prove.

Data 3. "Poaching has been booming since the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation : The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. The specific causes of the rise in "poaching" are not detailed whether due to economic factors, weakened law enforcement, or increased global demand.

Data 4. "This is a low-income area, people are not rich here, and people will exploit opportunities for income." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation: The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. The word "exploit" is ambiguous it can mean using opportunities effectively (neutral) or taking unfair advantage (negative). The context does not clarify the speaker's intent, so the interpretation is open to the reader.

Data 5. "There's more drugs, more alcohol, children are neglected because mummy is drunk, daddy is drunk..." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation: The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. The social causes behind child neglect are not clearly stated is it due to personal habits, economic pressure, or broader external conditions.

Data 6. "It brings so much joy and pleasure and you just forget about all the nonsense that's happening in the world." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation: The category that this ambiguity falls under is the context category. The term “nonsense” is subjective and undefined. It could refer to global issues, media noise, or personal stress, but the exact referent is unstated, leaving it open to individual interpretation.

Data 7. "Felt forced instead of organic" ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The words “forced” and “organic” are metaphorical and context dependent. It is not specified whether they refer to acting, plot, dialogue, representation, or emotion. This

Data 8. “The LGBTQ community is still marginalized...” ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. This sentence makes a general claim without specifying who is doing the marginalizing, where it is happening, or in what form (social, economic, political). The lack of detail makes the claim open to multiple interpretations and the source unclear.

Data 9. "...once she started her gender transition, ‘everything changed.’" ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The word is unclear whether “everything” refers to social, financial, emotional aspects, or one’s entire life as a whole.

Data 10. "...my life became so much harder." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. This statement is ambiguous because it does not clarify in what aspect life has become more difficult. It could refer to emotional stress, social discrimination, economic challenges, family relationships, or other factors. Without further explanation, its meaning is open to various interpretations.

Data 11. “While some viewers speculated that the storyline could help bring attention to the trans community...” ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. It is not explained what kind of attention is meant: educational, sensational, or political.

Data 12. "...she wants to stick with the game rather than opt out..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The motivation behind the decision is not explained whether it's due to money, pressure, or personal reasons.

Data 13. "I wasn't done with the treatment and the procedures." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The treatment and procedures are not specified, it could be hormonal, surgical, or psychological.

Data 14. "There are these historically embedded structural inequalities..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The phrase is too general; the historical context or the specific forms of inequality are not explained.

Data 15. "But these conversations need to be much more expanded and complicated..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. It is unclear which aspects need to be expanded: issues, narratives, participation, or social dimensions.

Data 16. "Symphony Under the Stars is one of many events at the annual Dark Sky Festival..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. It is not explained whether "Symphony Under the Stars" is a formal concert, a small performance, or a spontaneous music session; the interpretation depends on the context.

Data 17. "thousands of stars, even from the middle of town" ("Canada's Remote

(but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The phrase "middle of town" is ambiguous because it can refer to the geographical center of the town (the central point in terms of location) or the hub of social/economic activity (a busy and active area). Without additional context, its meaning is open to different interpretations.

Data 18. "You get to see something you don't get in other [accessible] places..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. It is not specified whether the type of "accessible" being referred to is physical, related to transportation, financial, or based on exclusivity, which makes the meaning of "accessible" ambiguous.

Data 19. "Ringed by rugged peaks and hauntingly silent..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The phrase "hauntingly silent" is figurative and ambiguous it could describe a peaceful, eerie, or emotionally moving silence. Without context, the tone (beautiful or unsettling) is unclear, leaving the interpretation open to the reader's perception.

Data 20. "...provides a natural barrier from the artificial light created by nearby cities." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The phrase "natural barrier" is could refer to a physical obstruction (like mountains or trees) or a more abstract concept (such as distance or elevation). The sentence does not specify the type of barrier, leaving its interpretation open.

Data 21. "We have unique experiences that are really of interest to a wide range of people, including families." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The term "families" is could refer to nuclear families, extended families, parents with children, or household units in general. The sentence doesn't specify which type, leaving the reference open to interpretation.

Data 22. "...the pearl necklace that is Maligne Lake..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is context category. The phrase “pearl necklace” is metaphorical and ambiguous. It could refer to the visual appearance of Maligne Lake (e.g., a string of islands or sparkling water), or it could imply beauty, rarity, or elegance. Without more context, the exact intention behind the metaphor remains unclear.

Type Ambiguity

Type ambiguity involves confusion about the category or nature of a word or phrase, especially when idioms, metaphors, or vague descriptions are used. Type ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase has a basic meaning that does not specifically fall into one category, requiring its interpretation to be adjusted according to the context of the sentence (Frisson, 2009). The following example demonstrates how contextual ambiguity arises in news discourse:

Data 23. “She said her vagina hurt for about a week, which she believed was from rough intercourse that she did not remember” (Woman claims she was ‘lured’ to Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs’ party through radio contest” NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. Because it is based on assumptions without supporting facts. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that there is no medical evidence or further investigation to support this belief.

Data 24. “Succulent species range in size, shape and colour – some look like small multi-coloured buttons and some look like cacti...” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News)

Explanation : The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. Additionally, “succulent” is a polysemous word that can refer to either a plant or a juicy texture in food, depending on the context.

Data 25. “They use screwdrivers to uproot the succulents...” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The word uproot may be taken literally (removing plants) or metaphorically (disrupting ecosystems or community structures).

Data 26. “People are being abused and enslaved by syndicates and buyers.” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The terms “abused” and “enslaved” are ambiguous because they can refer to

physical abuse and forced labor (literal), or to economic, psychological, or systemic exploitation (metaphorical). The sentence does not clarify the type of abuse or enslavement, making the interpretation uncertain.

Data 27. "...a contestant who enters the high-stakes game..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The word "High-stakes" can have a literal meaning (life-or-death stakes) or a metaphorical one (moral or psychological stakes).

Data 28. "...missed the mark..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The phrase "missed the mark" is an idiom that can mean failing to achieve a goal, falling short of expectations, or being off-target. However, its specific meaning is not explained, and it is unclear in what sense the subject failed (emotionally, morally, artistically, etc.), making the phrase open to multiple interpretations.

Data 29. "...to put an end to it and protect his fellow players..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The phrase "end it" is unclear in its reference whether it refers to the game, violence, or another form of conflict. Similarly, the word "protect" can mean physical or emotional protection, depending on the context.

Data 30. "...a trans woman contestant in the deadly games" ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. It is unclear whether "trans woman" refers to the character or the real-life actor.

Data 31. "Through her resilience she breaks down stereotypes..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. It is unclear what kind of stereotypes are being referred to gender, cultural, or professional.

Data 32. "...to win money for gender-affirming surgery." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The term "gender-affirming surgery" is ambiguous in type, as it can refer to various medical procedures (e.g., chest surgery, genital surgery, facial feminization surgery, etc.), making it unclear which specific procedure is meant in the narrative.

Data 33. "Through her resilience, she breaks down stereotypes and shines as an inspiring character" ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The ambiguity lies in what kind of stereotypes are being broken (gender? cultural? social? professional?), and what makes her inspiring is also not clearly defined. The phrase uses emotionally loaded language but lacks precise details, making the interpretation subjective and open-ended.

Data 34. "...it's nearly impossible to tell a town is even located in the vast blackness..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The word "Blackness" can have a literal meaning (the darkness of night) or a symbolic one (emptiness or alienation). The meaning is not explicitly stated.

Data 35. "...this year's festival will be bigger than ever before." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The word "bigger" is vague it could refer to attendance, scale, budget, number of events, or media coverage. The sentence lacks detail, so the type of "bigger" is left undefined.

Data 36. "...a drone show where 200 synchronised drones put on a light display..." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The phrase "light display" is ambiguous it could mean aesthetic visuals, informational signals, or entertainment effects. Without further context, the type or purpose of the light display is unclear.

Data 37. "...weaving our fates in the dark sky..." ("Canada's Remote (but

Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. "Weaving" can carry a literal meaning (to weave fabric) or a symbolic one (shaping destiny). The interpretation may be spiritual or narrative in nature.

Data 38. "...the fire becomes a place to gather." ("Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the type category. The word "fire" can refer to a physical flame, or symbolize community, emotional warmth, and spiritual connection. Without additional context, the true meaning of "fire" remains open to interpretation.

Relationship Meaning Category

Relational ambiguity arises when the relationship between two concepts is unclear or not explicitly defined. This is often found in metaphorical, evaluative, or emotionally charged expressions. Relational ambiguity occurs when the semantic relationship between two ideas is not directly stated, so its interpretation relies heavily on context and pragmatic inference (Nahi, 2025). This type of ambiguity is common in emotional language, rhetoric, or media representations, where the relationship between ideas is implicit and carries judgment. As a result, the meaning perceived by readers can vary depending on their background or perspective. The following example shows how relational ambiguity appears in news discourse:

Data 39. "The lawsuit which contains photos appearing to show Grayson with other guests at the party does not mention any interaction with Combs" (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest" NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. Because there is no direct connection shown in this narrative. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that there is no direct evidence or description of the interaction between Grayson and Combs at the party.

Data 40. "They've not just stolen our land or our plants, they've stolen our heritage as well." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation : The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The ambiguity contained in this sentence is The term "heritage" is unclear whether it refers to cultural heritage, community identity, or natural

assets. The relational meaning of what exactly is being stolen remains unspecified.

Data 41. “Plants were one of the only things that in your house, could connect you to the outside world.” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The word “connect” is ambiguous because it lacks clarity about the type of connection. It could mean a literal connection (e.g., plants as natural elements linked to the outdoors) or an emotional/mental connection (e.g., plants providing comfort or a sense of nature). The sentence does not specify how the connection works, leaving its interpretation open.

Data 42. “This brings distrust. It brings a split in the communities...” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News) The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category.

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The word split may refer to literal physical division or metaphorical breakdown of social/community bonds. The exact meaning is not clarified.

Data 43. “We have this resource, and there are other countries that are majorly benefiting from this, why aren’t we?” (“Illegal trade booms in South Africa’s ‘super-strange looking’ plants” BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The word resource is vague it could refer to plants, biodiversity, or economic potential. The sentence lacks clarity on how the resource should benefit the nation, making the intended relationship unclear.

Data 44. “...help bring attention to the trans community...” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The phrase “bring attention” is unclear in terms of the nature or intent of the attention whether it is positive (support, recognition), negative (criticism, controversy), or neutral (general publicity). Without additional context, the meaning of the relationship between the action and its impact on the trans community becomes ambiguous.

Data 45. “...an emotional rock and a competitive force” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The phrase “emotional rock” is a figurative expression that can mean someone who is emotionally strong or someone who serves as a source of support for others. Meanwhile, “competitive strength” can refer to physical skill, strategic ability, or influence within a competition. Both meanings are open to multiple interpretations depending on the context.

Data 46. “Through her resilience, she breaks down stereotypes...” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The relationship between resilience and breaking stereotypes is not clearly explained. It is unclear how the individual's resilience directly contributes to changing perceptions or dismantling stereotypes. The nature of the connection between the action and its outcome is implicit and open to multiple interpretations.

Data 47. “Proper representation involves more than just talent” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The phrase “proper representation” is ambiguous because it could refer to several things — the authenticity of the actor’s identity, the credibility of their acting, or how the public receives the performance — but it does not provide a clear definition.

Data 48. “My mom cried a lot. And my father stopped talking to me.” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The emotions may be interpreted literally or symbolically as a form of rejection or family conflict.

Data 49. “The fact that a man is acting as the trans woman... doesn’t sit right with me” (“Viewers call out ‘Squid Game’ for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character” NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The specific reason for discomfort is not explained whether it relates to representation, morality, or cultural concerns.

Data 50. “...we call that the Cipayuk. It means ancestors dancing, or ghosts dancing.” (“Canada's Remote (but Accessible) Dark-Sky Sanctuary” BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is relationship meaning category. The word “spirit” can be interpreted as an ancestral soul, a supernatural being, or simply a symbol of cultural memory. The line between spiritual and supernatural meaning is not clearly defined, making its interpretation vary depending on cultural and belief backgrounds.

Source Ambiguity

Source ambiguity occurs when the origin of information, claims, or statements is not clearly explained, either in terms of the speaker's identity, level of authority, or the clarity of the source's position within the discourse. Source ambiguity arises when the media uses narratives that disguise or hide the source's identity (Xie, 2018). This type of ambiguity can confuse readers and is often used strategically to avoid direct accountability for the information conveyed. The following is an example showing how relational ambiguity appears in news discourse:

Data 51. “She said she woke up in a hospital with a ripped shirt, missing underwear and shoes, and no recollection of how she got there” (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest” NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The lack of supporting information or witnesses. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that there is no information about who took him to the hospital or how he was found.

Data 52. “Grayson said in the suit that she later received a call from an unknown woman with a New York number” (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest” NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. As this information cannot be verified. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that the identity of the caller is unknown, making it difficult to understand the caller's relationship to the case.

Data 53. “Ten 'John and Jane Does' are also listed as defendants, but the lawsuit says Grayson does not yet know who they are” (Woman claims she was 'lured' to Sean 'Diddy' Combs' party through radio contest” NBC News)

Explain: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The lack of definitive information. While the ambiguity contained in this sentence is that the identity of “John and Jane Does” is unclear, so their role in this incident is unknown.

Data 54. "They turned to local people to collect succulents for them and post them out of the country." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The ambiguity contained in this sentence is the pronoun "they" is ambiguous it could refer to syndicates, traders, or another party, making the source of the action unclear.

Data 55. "Plants that have been confiscated by law enforcement..." ("Illegal trade booms in South Africa's 'super-strange looking' plants" BBC News)

Explanation: The sentence is ambiguous because it does not explain what happens to the confiscated plants whether they are destroyed, reused, or sold.

Data 56. "Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The word "viewers" is not specifically defined who they are, how many, or which group they belong to. This creates source ambiguity and potentially leads to overgeneralization, as it may imply that all viewers share the same opinion, when in fact it could be only a small portion.

Data 57. "...near impossible to find a trans actor..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. It is not stated who claimed or believed that finding a trans actor was nearly impossible. The statement is not supported by any data on the search for trans actors, making it potentially biased or unverified.

Data 58. "...but in an interview with TV Guide, Hwang said it was 'near impossible' to find a trans actor..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The phrase "near impossible" is ambiguous because it does not specify the criteria or particular obstacles that make the search difficult.

Data 59. "Netflix confirmed that the show did work with trans and LGBTQ consultants..." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a

trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The roles of the consultants are not explained, whether they served as technical advisors, narrative contributors, or symbolic figures.

Data 60. "In a poll of south korea LGBTQ youth ... 96%... experienced discrimination or bullying in school." ("Viewers call out 'Squid Game' for casting a cisgender actor as a trans character" NBC News)

Explanation: The category contained in this ambiguity sentence is the source category. The statistic is mentioned without source details no year, methodology, or survey organization is provided.

2. The type of ambiguity that most frequently appears in the four predetermined news articles

The analysis shows that ambiguity in the four selected English news articles falls into four main categories: contextual (22 casses), type (16 casses), relationship meaning (12casses), and source (10casses).

Contextual ambiguity is the most dominant, occurring when information is insufficient to produce a single, clear meaning. Vicente and Falkum (2017) argue that contextual ambiguity arises when meaning depends on background knowledge or pragmatic context that is not made explicit in the text.

Type ambiguity involves unclear categories due to vague terms, idioms, or metaphors. According to Frisson (2009), such ambiguity occurs when the literal meaning of a word must be adjusted based on the sentence context, often leaving room for interpretation.

Relationship meaning ambiguity appears when the connection between two ideas is unclear or implied rather than stated. As Nahi (2025) explains, this type of ambiguity often relies on emotional or evaluative language that leaves the relationship between concepts open to inference.

Source ambiguity refers to unclear or unidentified sources of information, which can affect credibility. Xie (2018) highlights that source ambiguity is often used strategically in media to shift responsibility or avoid direct accountability. Overall, ambiguity in news reporting can mislead readers, encourage multiple interpretations, and influence public opinion. This highlights the importance of media literacy among audiences and the need for greater clarity and transparency in journalistic writing. Overall, ambiguity in news can confuse audiences, lead to varying interpretations, and influence public opinion. Therefore, it is essential for readers to think critically and for the media to present information more transparently.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that ambiguity in English news discourse can be categorized into four types: contextual ambiguity, type ambiguity, relationship meaning ambiguity, and source ambiguity. Among them, contextual ambiguity appears most frequently, indicating that the absence of adequate background information significantly affects how readers interpret meaning. The findings confirm that context is a vital element in guiding semantic interpretation, particularly in media texts that often involve sensitive or complex issues. As previously discussed in the introduction, the interpretation of meaning in language especially in digital media and global communication requires a deep understanding of how words interact with context.

The study substantiates that ambiguity and polysemy are not merely linguistic phenomena but also pragmatic challenges that influence communication clarity and audience perception. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of language use in journalism and point to the importance of linguistic transparency in media writing. Future research may expand this study by exploring more diverse news sources, including non-English texts, or by integrating computational tools to automatically detect ambiguity.

Moreover, investigating how readers from different cultural backgrounds interpret ambiguous or polysemous content could deepen insights into cross-cultural semantic interpretation. This research ultimately underlines the essential role of context in resolving ambiguity and supports the development of more accurate language processing systems in an increasingly digital and multilingual world.

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