# The Ambiguity of 'Language'

## or:

## Why English Linguistics should not stick with English

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# The argument

Thesis:

> There are many more kinds of ambiguity than is generally recognised in linguistics and in literary and cultural studies

Method:

> cross-disciplinary boundaries need to be recognised in order to be overcome

Domains:

> Culture-specific contrasts
> Metaphor
> Structural ambiguity
> Ambiguity of gesture

# The context

The ambiguity of language
  production, representation, interpretation of multiple
    meanings
The ambiguity of 'language'
  standard language
  lingua franca core (if it exists)
  knowledge vs. proficiency

# FIRST:

# THE AMBIGUITY OF "AMBIGUITY"

# Empson: *Seven types of ambiguity*

The seven types:*

- metaphor, metaphysical conceit
- two or more meanings resolved into one: two metaphors at once
- two ideas connected through context in one word
- two or more meanings in one word indicate complexity
- ambiguity in writing: simile as a function of two statements
- ambiguity in reading: perhaps not intended by author
- indecision: opposites indicating a fundamental conflict in the author's mind

* My grossly abbreviated formulations - DG

# Linguist: *At least seven more types ...*

**Literal semantics:**

Ambiguity

homonymy

homography, homophony

polysemy

Vagueness

Generality

**Syntax:**

Scope

words

sentences

texts

Garden paths

**Non-literal semantics:**

metaphor, metonymy

idiom

**Translation:**

false friends

idiom mismatch

**Masking**

noise, "cocktail party"

inattention, distraction

**Effect**

misunderstanding

pleasure

art; humour

# Linguist: *... along several dimensions*

Thesis

  ambiguity is pervasive at all ranks of language and
    speech

Ranks:

  dialogues

  texts

  sentences

  words

  sounds

    it isn't easy to wreck a nice beach

    intonation:

      list vs. question

      (echo) question vs. (iterated) statement

# The evidence

Lexical ambiguity:

   traditional ambiguities

      homonymy (homophony, homography), polysemy

Structural ambiguity:

   garden paths (words, sentences)

Functional ambiguity:

   Semantic relations:

      ambiguity – generality – vagueness

      metaphor, metonymy, idiom

   Pragmatics:

      enjoyment: poetic – humorous

      misunderstanding

# In any case - ambiguities are infinite

Why?

The degree of ambiguity of a sign depends on its compositionality

In the case of linear sequences of parts:

If

each of its components is ambiguous

and it has n components

and the components are ambiguous

then the number of ambiguities is $\Pi_i$ amb(i)

where amb(i) is the number of ambiguities of any given component.

# Situational ambiguity

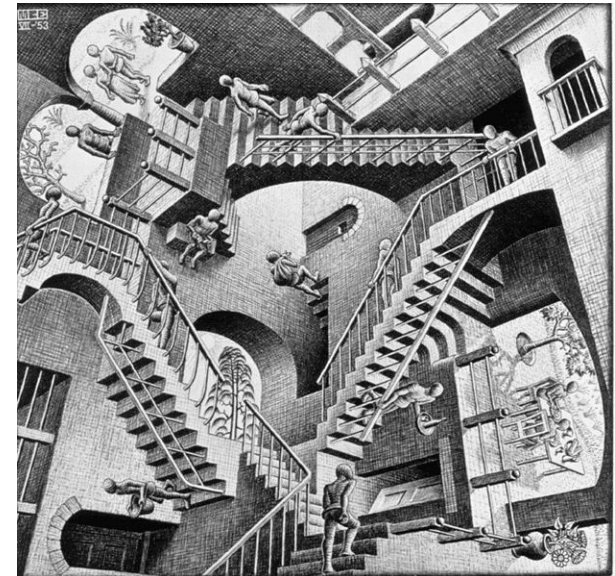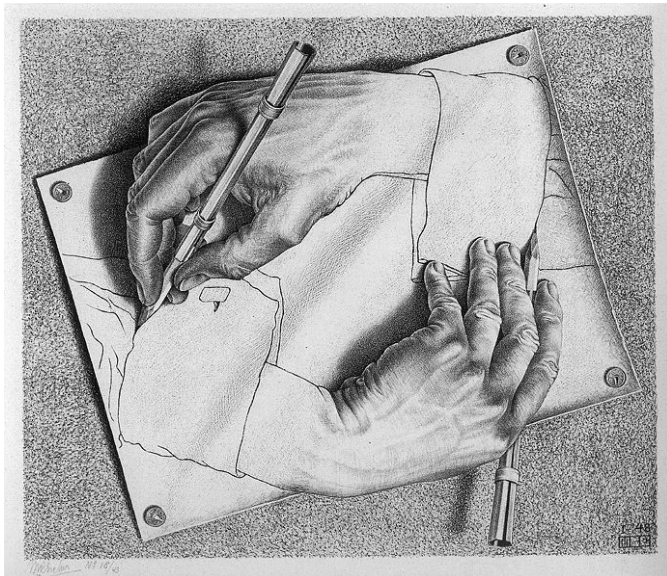Sheer apprisal of a situation may be ambiguous:

    failure to recognise all components

        underspecification and ambiguity

    interpretability of objects:

        ambivalent shapes

        indistinctness of objects - vagueness

# Levels of ambiguity

Dialogue:

  turn-switch ambiguity
  speaker ambiguity
  addressee ambiguity

Speech act:

  indirect speech act
  implicit speech act
  double bind
  hidden intention, e.g. fingers crossed behind back)

Text:

  implicature
  anaphora

# PRAGMATICS:

## CONNOTATIVE AMBIGUITY

# Ancestral Faces (*Kwesi Brew*)

They sneaked into the limbo of time
But could not muffle the gay jingling
Brass bells on the frothy necks
Of the sacrificial sheep that limped and nodded after them;
They could not hide the moss on the bald pate
Of their reverent heads;
And the gnarled backs of the wawa tree;
Nor the rust on the ancient state-swords;
Nor the skulls studded with grinning cowries;
They could not silence the drums,
The fibre of their souls and ours -
The drums that whisper to us behind black sinewy hands.
They gazed
And sweeping like white locusts through the forests
Saw the same men, slightly wizened,
Shuffle their sandalled feet to the same rhythms,
They heard the same words of wisdom uttered
Between puffs of pale blue smoke:
They saw us,
And said: They have not changed!

In: Wole Soyinka, ed., 1975.
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# "cowrie shell": connotative ambiguity

Symbol of fertility
> resemblance to
>> facial lips
>> female genital lips

Ritual & erotic decoration
> headdress
>
> cache-sexe etc.

Unit of currency

most widely used currency ever

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# "wawa tree" - connotative ambiguity
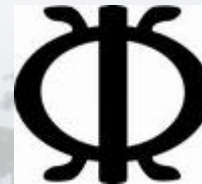


"wawa aba"
wawa seed
symbol of
endurance

# SEMANTICS:

# METAPHOR – ANOTHER LINGUISTIC VIEW

# Models of metaphor

Basic structure:

tenor, ground, primary term
vehicle, figure, secondary term
*tertium comparationis*

Approaches:

Arisotelian: comparison
Eco: cognitive comparison
Black: interaction theory (non-compositional)
Searle: speech act theory of non-literal meaning
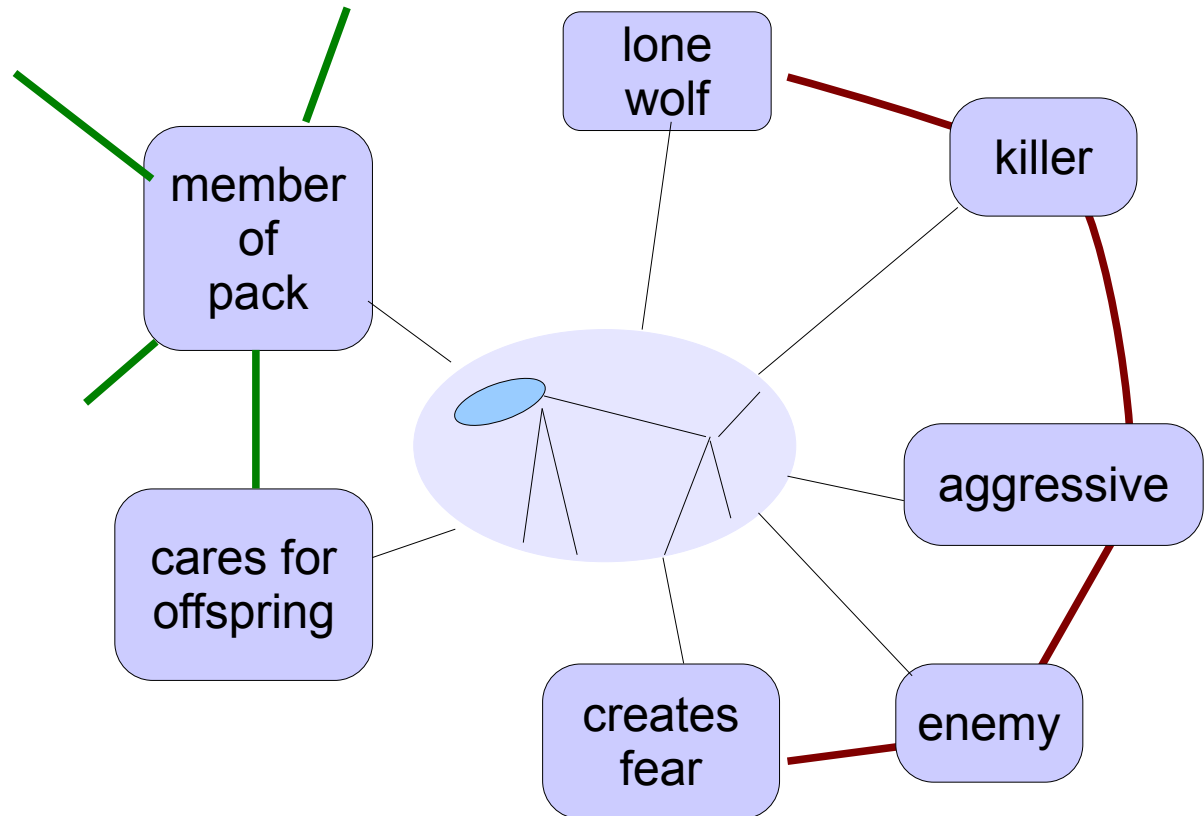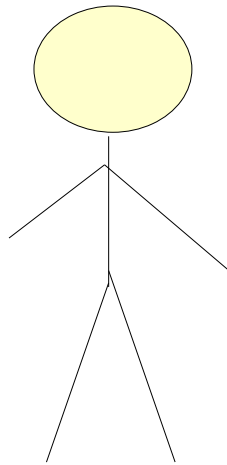sentence meaning – utterer's meaning
Lakoff: cognitive model theory

# Lakoff's cognitive model theory

Pretty much everything in language is a metaphor...

Metaphors are not just based on *similarities* but also on structured *models*

"Man is a wolf"

member of pack

cares for offspring

lone wolf

killer

aggressive

creates fear

enemy

# LEAVING ENGLISH BEHIND:

## MULTIMODALITY

# GESTURE SEMANTICS

# Gesture semantics: deixis

Deixis:

concentric sphere:
inside: here
  (ego – hic – nunc)
next: there
last: yonder



http://www.nefaria.com

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cone:

section of sphere, i.e.

solid angle in sphere:

sides:

emanate from centre
of sphere

base:

intersection with
surface of sphere



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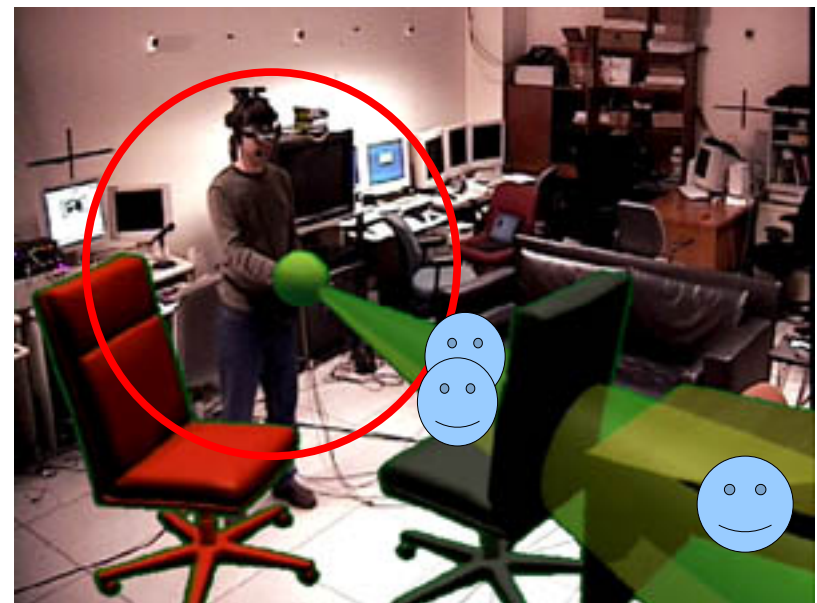
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# GESTURE PRAGMATICS

# Gesture pragmatics: interaction

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# OUTLOOK

# Functionality of ambiguity

Ambiguity is pervasive, so:

  does ambiguity have an identifiable functionality?

Yes, ambiguity contributes to major non-Gricean
  functions of language:

  as a CAUSE of

  misunderstandings, misperceptions, false impressions
  diverse kinds of conflict

  as an INGREDIENT of humour:

  ambivalent situations resolved by punch-line
  puns

  as a CHARACTERISTIC of literature:

  *see Empson...*

# ENVOI

Further dimensions of ambiguity:
- multimodality
- translation
- universal language

Language the ambiguity of scientific models:
- the ambiguity of "English/Englishes" !!!
- the ambiguity of "language contact":
  - Core-periphery models (many authors)
  - Lingua Franca core model (Jenkins)
  - Multiple Centres Network model ("Englishes")
  - Family Resemblance model (Gibbon)
  - Habitat model (Leitner)
- borrowing (copying!), code-switching

# Dziękuję bardzo za uwagę!