

A Good Essay if not the Best

Maybe the best? Clearly not the best?

[By William Z. Shetter](#)

In a recent comic strip, a lady goes into a clothing store and asks "May I try on that lovely blouse in the window?" whereupon the clerk says "What are you, an exhibitionist?" We all sense the fun in this 'misunderstanding'. The joke rests entirely on the ambiguity of what that little word *in* groups with:

- (a) *the blouse in the window*
- (b) *try on in the window*

This is a little illustration of something that happens a lot: in understanding what is said, the words don't tell us everything, and we're heavily dependant on a sense of the situation being presented.

You might recall that previous *Miniatures* have focused on how important the situational **context** is to our understanding of what is said (for instance No. 45 and No. 91).

This time we're going to look at a few examples of **ambiguity** in language - how sentences can often be understood in at least two different ways. Since you're normally familiar with the situation, you're probably mostly unaware of how much ambiguity you're really being called on to interpret.

There may be many ways in which a sentence can call forth two or more interpretations in our mind. Probably the simplest is when we can understand an individual word in two distinct ways. Look at

*I got a **mouse** today.*

- (a) I went to the computer store, and...
- (b) There was one in the trap this morning

*He hasn't been **working out**.*

- (a) We'll have to let him go
- (b) He's getting flabby

Sometimes these two alternative meanings of a word trigger more complicated networks of meaning within the sentence -

*Alice decided **on** the boat.*

- (a) She made the decision while she was sitting on deck
- (b) She decided to buy this one

*Peter is **standing up**.*

- (a) He is in an upright position
- (b) He is getting out of the chair

You get the point. Mostly the two alternatives are obvious enough that we don't need to spell out what they are.

Susie broke the barn windows with her little brother.

Ralph Lauren is no longer in fashion.

Biting dogs can be bothersome.

... the shooting of the soldiers

These are all based on ambiguity in word meanings. But the really significant point is this: words can be grouped together in more than one way. As a result, a sentence can often consist entirely of unambiguous words and still be ambiguous. Consider

The policeman killed the woman with a gun.

Who had the gun, the cop or the woman?

Steve or Warren and Doug will come.

- (a) S will come, or W&D (maybe only 1 will be there)
- (b) Either S or W, plus D (no fewer than 2 will be there)

He asked me whether I had done it this morning.

- (a) He asked me this morning
- (b) I did it this morning

They contacted me about attending the conference.

- (a) They want me to attend
- (b) They want to attend

Now you can try

...the beautiful girl's dress...

...some more convincing evidence...

He was dancing with the stout major's wife.

We'll meet every third Saturday.

(The week following every other Saturday, or the third Saturday of each month?)

And then there are those examples of contortions to avoid the mythical "split infinitive" -

You failed completely to take account of that

- (a) You completely failed ...
- (b) ... to completely take account (probably what was intended).

Sometimes ambiguity has a way of sneaking up on us when we don't notice that an expression may have two distinct - even opposite - interpretations.

Mort ran over and killed the dog.

- (a) M ran next door and shot ...
- (b) M hit the dog with his car, and it died

It is a great play if not the greatest by this author.

- (a) it may even be the greatest
- (b) it is clearly not the greatest

Now try

The team gave a poor if not its worst display of the season.

This essay is good if not the best.

In the following sentences, what belongs with what?

He refused to work until 6:00.

She did not want to eat until he came.

Is he resenting not stopping work until six, or won't he even start until six? Is she protesting against such prolonged eating, or waiting to eat with him?

This is only a tiny sample of the ways things we say may call distinctly different situations to our mind. The reason why we don't usually even notice ambiguity is that we're good at deciding what 'picture' belongs there.

If you think the ideal situation would be to eliminate all ambiguity from natural language as formal logic does, (for an example of how an artificial language can be based on this principle, see [Miniature No. 41](#)) guess again. Ambiguity is in fact a precious and indispensable feature of all natural languages. The fact that ANY given group of words can mean more than one thing gives us a glimpse into the open-ended resource that all of us are calling upon all the time. It is this that allows everyone around the globe, all 6000 languages, to talk about anything and everything.

This article is reprinted with the permission of William Z. Shetter, a retired professor of foreign language and linguistics at Indiana University. He is the author of *Language Miniatures: A Selection of Essays*, published at Indiana University. His essays can be seen on the web at: <http://home.bluemarble.net/~langmin/>