

A Communicative Approach to Lexical Ambiguity in Spanish

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Abstract: *Lexical ambiguity refers to a complex linguistic phenomenon in which the meaning of a word is ambiguous or accepts two or more interpretations. Due to the broad vocabulary, the lexical ambiguity in Spanish is particularly prominent, which affects the accuracy of the expression, causes misunderstandings and constitutes obstacles in language communication. However, contrary to what they usually think, ambiguity also has a positive pragmatic effect. This paper tries to analyze the lexical ambiguity of Spanish from a communicative perspective, explores its effects and the methods to reduce it.*

Keywords: Lexical ambiguity; Spanish; Language communication; Pragmatic effect.

1. INTRODUCTION

In language, lexical ambiguity generally refers to the property by which words can be interpreted in different ways. Considering the wide variety of both intralinguistic and extralinguistic interferences and restrictions present in everyday communication, the meanings of words are far more complex than what dictionaries describe. It is therefore not as easy to establish a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and its meanings as it might appear at first glance. Words are the basic units of dialogue and, consequently, of communication itself. Genuine communication occurs only when the reader or listener correctly interprets the words used by the writer or speaker. Misunderstandings arise when interlocutors do not agree on the meaning of a word.

In recent years, research on lexical ambiguity has expanded beyond purely semantic or psycholinguistic frameworks toward more discourse-oriented and communicative perspectives. For instance, Maciejewski and Klepousniotou (2020) show that when several meanings of a word are activated at once, speakers and listeners experience an “ambiguity disadvantage,” which makes comprehension slower and more difficult. Cevoli et al. (2023) use contextualized language models to demonstrate that ambiguous words are represented as overlapping patterns of meaning, suggesting that our mental lexicon reflects multiple interpretations even within one context. Similarly, Pimentel et al. (2020) argue that speakers naturally use richer and more detailed contexts when a word is ambiguous, showing that communication itself compensates for lexical uncertainty.

In the field of Spanish linguistics, Rivière, Beatty-Martínez, and Trott (2024) create a new dataset of ambiguous Spanish words and find that computational models can predict how humans distinguish meanings, though not perfectly. Their results highlight that ambiguity in Spanish often depends on pragmatic and cultural cues that go beyond simple word sense. From a cognitive perspective, recent neuroimaging studies such as *Disentangling homonymy, polysemy, and their meanings* (2024) confirm that the brain processes homonymous and polysemous words differently, revealing that ambiguity is not a single phenomenon but a complex network of interpretive possibilities.

Taken together, these studies show that ambiguity is not only a source of misunderstanding but also an essential part of human communication. However, most existing research focuses on processing, representation, or computational modeling, rather than on how ambiguity actually works within interaction and discourse. What remains to be explored is how speakers of Spanish manage ambiguous meanings in real communicative situations—how they clarify, negotiate, or even exploit ambiguity for pragmatic purposes. This gap motivates the present study, which approaches lexical ambiguity in Spanish from a communicative perspective.

Therefore, for successful communication, it is essential to overcome the obstacle of ambiguity. At the same time, however, we cannot deny that the integration of multiple meanings within a single word may also have positive pragmatic effects. What we need, then, is to seek methods to avoid or reduce the negative consequences of lexical ambiguity while taking advantage of its communicative potential. This paper focuses on the causes and effects of lexical ambiguity and attempts to explore possible strategies for its disambiguation.

2. CAUSES OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

The first question to consider is the origin of lexical ambiguity. Although the definition may already seem clear from the introduction, it is worth exploring it in greater depth.

2.1 Homonymy and Polysemy

Many words have more than one meaning or appear to change meaning depending on the context in which they are used. When these different meanings are related to one another, the word is said to be polysemous. In contrast, homonymy occurs when there is no relation between meanings.

If we pay attention to the definition of lexical ambiguity, it becomes evident that the existence of homonymy and polysemy is precisely one of its main sources: ambiguity arises when a form allows for two or more interpretive possibilities. This is the case, for instance, in the sentence *Hay una carta en la mesa* (“There is a letter on the table”), where *carta* may mean either “a written message sent from one person to another” or “the list of dishes and drinks available at a restaurant.” The sentence, therefore, is potentially ambiguous between two readings, depending on the meaning assigned to *carta*.

This obscurity or imprecision results from the lack of sufficient information to determine the intended meaning or to identify the referent of the sign in question. There is, in effect, a partial mismatch between what is said and what is meant.

In the example above, however, the distinction between the two meanings is quite evident, and both context and extralinguistic factors would help to determine which sense is intended in a given communicative situation. More problematic are cases in which the different senses of a word express closely related concepts.

For example, *bueno* (“good”) can mean “useful” or “functional” (*es un buen martillo*: “it is a good hammer”), “exemplary” (*es una buena estudiante*: “she is a good student”), “pleasant” (*la sopa está buena*: “the soup tastes good”), “morally upright” (*es una buena persona*: “he/she is a good person”), or “physically attractive” (*su novio está muy bueno*: “her boyfriend is very handsome”). Thus, the sentence *Tengo una hija buena* (“I have a good daughter”) is ambiguous: it is unclear whether it refers to moral character, obedience, or physical appearance.

2.2 Connotative Meanings

Matters become more complex when the differences among meanings are subtler. From literal senses, connotative or associative meanings are often derived. These suggest meanings distinct from the primary one, carrying subjective or emotional overtones that link the literal term to another sense accepted within a given culture.

For instance, when we hear the word *mujer* (“woman”), we do not only think of its literal sense (an adult human female) but also its psychological, social, or cultural associations—whether positive or negative. In this way, the word acquires connotative meanings such as “tender,” “compassionate,” or “fragile.” Thus, the sentence *De todos modos, ella es una mujer* (“In any case, she is a woman”) may express different meanings depending on the context.

Connotative meaning also arises as a response to an inevitable paradox: the number of concepts an individual can form mentally is potentially infinite, whereas the number of words in any language is limited. This implies that language lexicalizes only some of these concepts. Consequently, speakers rely on associative meanings to expand the expressive capacity of words and to facilitate communication. As James Dickins explains, connotative meaning covers “all kinds of meaning which are not denotative meaning” and includes associative, attitudinal, allusive, collocative and other types of meaning that extend beyond the referential domain.

However, the understanding of non-literal meanings may vary among individuals or communities. The discrepancy in interpretation arises because understanding depends on the personal experience of the receiver. For instance, the word *banco* primarily refers to a financial institution for someone working in finance, but for a gardener, it may evoke the image of a bench. Often, one of the possible meanings of an ambiguous term is selected unconsciously, leading to potential miscommunication when the interlocutors’ experiences differ. Similarly, discrepancies also arise between communities that do not share the same lexical inventories—for example, between younger and older generations, or between experts and laypeople.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, connotation is tied to *conceptual frames and metaphoric mappings* — one meaning domain activates another, mediated by cultural knowledge and embodied experience (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). This implies that connotative meanings are not random but systematically structured: when a speaker uses a word like *fuerte* (“strong”), listeners activate a network of associations (physical strength, character strength, emotional resilience) and then select the most relevant sense according to context. The result is that connotative meanings become tools to enrich communication, carry emotional weight, and achieve subtlety of expression. For example, in a newspaper headline saying “*La economía da alas*” (“The economy gives wings”), the word *alas* (“wings”) evokes freedom, growth, uplift, as well as escape. Its literal meaning is secondary to its metaphorical and connotative value.

In sum, connotative meaning affects ambiguity not merely by adding meanings but by enabling interpretative flexibility grounded in culture and cognition. Because words carry associations beyond their literal reference, lexical ambiguity can arise not only from multiple senses, but from the interplay between denotation and connotation. Thus, when analyzing lexical ambiguity from a communicative perspective, we must attend to both the literal senses and their connotative extensions, the listener’s cultural experience, and how the context activates specific associative networks. Only by doing so can we understand how ambiguity becomes not just a risk, but a resource for meaning and interaction.

2.3 Vagueness

Vagueness occurs at the level of reference: it arises when the entities represented by words are not clearly delimited in physical or conceptual reality. This explains the difficulties that sometimes appear when defining certain phenomena or applying a particular word to them (for example, distinguishing between “day” and “night”), since such realities have no sharp boundaries.

When, during a discussion, one replies to the interlocutor with the phrase “It depends on what you mean by X,” it is because X is vague or imprecise. This is often the case when, in political discussions, people use terms such as “left” or “right,” *facha* or *progresista*: what exactly do these words mean? Everything depends on who uses them. Thus, one individual may be called *izquierdoso* (“leftist”) by someone on the right and conservative by another situated further to the left. Vagueness, then, reflects not an error but an inherent indeterminacy in how language categorizes reality.

3. EFFECTS OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN COMMUNICATION

In the course of successful communication, many obstacles may arise, and lexical ambiguity is perhaps one of the most difficult both to overcome and to avoid. Yet discussions of lexical ambiguity as a deficiency of natural languages often cause us to overlook its positive effects. This section therefore examines both the disadvantages and the advantages of lexical ambiguity.

3.1 As an Obstacle to Communication

Let LNE refer to the speaker’s language (*lengua del emisor*) and LNR to the listener’s (*lengua del receptor*). The overlapping area of these two circles represents the shared understanding of a word’s meaning in communication. When the information is entirely unfamiliar, the circles do not overlap. When the communicative parties partially understand each other, the circles intersect only partially. When their understanding is identical, the circles fully overlap—meaning that the message sent has been completely received.

Because of differing interpretations of words—that is, because of lexical ambiguity—the information transmitted often fails to be received in full.

For example, if a person working in the food-machinery industry speaks with a housewife about a picador, the concept each envisions will differ: for the former, picador means “a machine used for mincing meat,” while for the latter, it refers to “a cutting board.” Thus, ambiguity hinders mutual understanding.

3.2 As a Stylistic Resource

At times, however, lexical ambiguity can make language more refined, vivid, and imaginative, as it allows multiple meanings to coexist within a single word. Writers and speakers can deliberately construct expressions in

which two meanings of one form are simultaneously activated.

This occurs in the rhetorical figure known as *dilogía* (or *zeugma*), exemplified by Quevedo's famous sentence: *Salió de la cárcel con tanta honra, que le acompañaban dos cardenales, salvo que a ninguno llamaban eminencia*.

Here, Quevedo plays on the double meaning of *cardenal*—both “cardinal” (the cleric) and “bruise.” The apparent honor of being escorted by cardinals ironically reveals that the man was released after having been beaten severely. The ambiguity, far from impeding understanding, becomes a vehicle for irony, wit, and expressive richness.

Another classic example appears in Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, where the protagonist says, *La pluma es la lengua del alma* (“The pen is the tongue of the soul”). The word *pluma* may refer literally to a feather or, by metonymy, to a writing instrument. This double meaning enhances the metaphor: writing, like speech, becomes the expression of one's inner being. The reader oscillates between the physical image of the feather and its symbolic value as a creative tool, and it is precisely this oscillation that gives the phrase its poetic depth. The ambiguity does not obscure meaning but rather broadens the interpretative space, allowing for both literal and figurative readings to coexist harmoniously.

Similarly, in modern Spanish, advertising frequently exploits lexical ambiguity to attract attention and provoke emotional responses. A well-known slogan for a travel agency, *Viaja sin límites*, can be understood as “Travel without limits” or “Travel without borders,” playing on the dual sense of *límites* as both physical frontiers and personal constraints. The linguistic ambiguity here produces a persuasive effect: it invites the audience to associate the product with both freedom of movement and self-fulfillment. The double interpretation, instead of confusing the message, strengthens it by appealing to both the rational and emotional dimensions of communication. In Antonio Machado's verse “*Verde que te quiero verde*”, the word *verde* (“green”) transcends its literal chromatic sense to evoke youth, desire, and even death. This polysemy invites the reader to engage interpretively, turning ambiguity into a creative force that expands meaning rather than obscures it.

Contemporary literature also employs ambiguity for stylistic innovation. In Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*, the phrase *una mirada clara* can be taken as “a clear gaze” (transparent, honest) or “a light-colored look” (physically bright eyes). The coexistence of the moral and visual senses enriches the psychological portrait of the character, suggesting that clarity of sight may reflect purity of conscience. This interplay between senses demonstrates how ambiguity operates as a creative resource, endowing words with layers of meaning that invite interpretation rather than closure.

In all these cases, lexical ambiguity serves not as a communicative obstacle but as an expressive strategy that expands the semantic potential of language. Through such deliberate play, writers exploit the flexibility of Spanish to convey complexity, irony, and emotion, illustrating that ambiguity, when artfully managed, is not a flaw but a hallmark of linguistic creativity.

3.3 As a Tool for Maintaining Relationships

In some cases, linguistic ambiguity, far from being an error or imperfection, can function as a strategic feature in social interaction. Language, as a social act, must fulfill two conditions: it must convey content (information, requests, promises, etc.), and it must also negotiate and maintain the relationship between speakers.

To balance these two levels, speakers often use language ambiguously. The literal form maintains a safe, socially appropriate stance toward the listener, while the implied meaning—the reading between the lines—allows the listener to derive a more contextually relevant interpretation, perhaps signaling a shift or redefinition in their relationship.

Thus, ambiguity can serve as a subtle communicative strategy, allowing interlocutors to express delicate meanings—such as irony, criticism, or emotional nuance—without overt confrontation. As Herbert Paul Grice (1975) proposed, communication functions under a “Cooperative Principle,” where speakers and listeners assume mutual rationality and cooperation. When a speaker intentionally “flouts” a conversational maxim—such as those of Quantity or Manner—listeners infer meanings beyond the literal through conversational implicatures. In this sense, ambiguity is not an obstacle but a trigger for inference. For instance, when someone says “*Podríamos vernos pronto*” (“We could see each other soon”), the literal interpretation is friendly and open, yet the pragmatic meaning may actually be a polite refusal or avoidance of commitment. Similarly, the phrase “*Ese enfoque es*

interesante” (“That approach is interesting”) may appear complimentary, but in professional or academic contexts it often conveys mild disapproval or skepticism. Grice’s model thus shows that ambiguity can be strategically produced to enrich meaning and preserve interpersonal relations. Rather than violating communicative norms, ambiguous forms exploit them to achieve pragmatic subtlety.

Building on Grice, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that human interaction is governed by the need to maintain “face”—the public self-image each person wants to claim. Ambiguity and indirectness become vital strategies to mitigate “face-threatening acts” such as refusals, disagreements, or criticisms. By allowing multiple plausible interpretations, ambiguous utterances protect both speaker and hearer from social risk. Ambiguity also allows speakers to express emotions indirectly. A partner saying “*Has estado mucho últimamente*” (“You’ve been very busy lately”) might be making a factual observation, but more often the utterance implies feelings of neglect or longing. In political discourse, expressions such as “*Se están considerando todas las opciones*” (“All options are being considered”) serve to postpone commitment and protect the speaker’s image, projecting transparency while concealing true intentions. Even in casual conversation, a remark like “*No estuvo mal*” (“It wasn’t bad”) may oscillate between genuine praise and reserved criticism, depending on intonation and context. This aligns with corpus analyses by Blum-Kulka (2012) and Márquez Reiter (2019), which show that in Spanish-speaking contexts, mitigation and indirectness are deeply intertwined with social norms of *cortesía*. The pragmatic ambiguity of such utterances allows speakers to “do two things at once”: convey disagreement while maintaining harmony.

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995) advance a cognitive model of communication in which interpretation depends not only on linguistic encoding but also on inferential reasoning guided by relevance. Listeners choose the interpretation that yields sufficient contextual effects for minimal processing effort. Ambiguity, therefore, is not a failure of clarity but a calculated economy: it allows speakers to be under-informative while trusting the listener’s inferential competence. Consider the utterance “*Hace calor aquí, ¿no?*” (“It’s hot in here, isn’t it?”). Literally, it states a fact; pragmatically, it may function as a polite request to open a window or turn on the fan. The ambiguity is cognitively efficient: the hearer quickly infers the speaker’s intent through contextual cues. Likewise, “*Bueno, si tú lo dices...*” (“Well, if you say so...”) communicates implicit disagreement without explicit negation, relying on relevance-based inference to bridge meaning and intent.

When these perspectives are integrated, ambiguity emerges as a sophisticated communicative tool. Gricean pragmatics explains *how* ambiguity triggers implicatures; politeness theory explains *why* speakers use it to manage face and social balance; and Relevance Theory explains *how listeners interpret it efficiently* within context. Empirical and computational findings confirm that ambiguity is not random noise but a structured, context-sensitive mechanism that enables subtlety, efficiency, and social harmony in communication.

Therefore, ambiguity can function as a pragmatic resource— not a defect—that helps interlocutors negotiate meaning, preserve relationships, and navigate the social and cognitive demands of real-world language use.

4. RESOLVING LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

When lexical ambiguity hinders communication, it becomes essential to remove or reduce the obstacle to ensure normal understanding. Several methods can be used for this purpose.

4.1 Context

Ambiguity often arises when a term is used with an overly broad scope and an excessively vague comprehension. Context, however, can resolve this, as the meaning a word acquires depends on contextual factors. Context plays a central role in the resolution of lexical ambiguity, as meaning does not reside solely within linguistic forms but emerges through their interaction with situational, cognitive, and pragmatic factors.

For example, in the sentence *Sus padres creen que se trata de un lío de faldas y si no lo resuelven, se convierte en un escándalo* (“Her parents believe it’s a *lío de faldas*, and if they don’t resolve it, it will become a scandal”), both *lío* and *falda* admit two possible interpretations. *Lío* may mean “a bundle of tied things” or “a mess,” while *falda* can denote both “a skirt” and, metaphorically, “a woman.” Without context, one cannot determine whether *lío de faldas* refers to “a pile of clothes” or “a love affair.” Yet with contextual clues, the intended meaning becomes clear. Ultimately, context functions not merely as a background but as an active interpretive mechanism that filters, narrows, and refines possible meanings. Ambiguity, therefore, is not inherently problematic; it becomes manageable—even functional—through the dynamic interplay between lexical semantics, cognitive frames, and

pragmatic inference. In this sense, context transforms ambiguity from a linguistic obstacle into a communicative resource, enabling speakers and listeners to negotiate meaning fluidly and efficiently.

4.2 Complementation

In cases where ambiguity is not resolved by context, a complement can be added to specify the intended meaning. Dictionaries often illustrate typical uses, such as *avalancha* (“avalanche”), which usually refers to snow. If the context does not make this clear, one can add complements—*una avalancha de tierra* (“landslide”), *una avalancha de gente* (“crowd surge”), or *una avalancha de nieve* (“snow avalanche”).

Excessive reliance on such specification can lead to redundancy, but depending on the type of discourse and the goal of clarity, it may be justified. Conversely, omitting necessary details in editing can introduce ambiguity and make a text less precise.

Complementation thus serves as one of the most direct and practical strategies for disambiguation, as it anchors abstract or polysemous words in a concrete semantic field. By adding modifiers or complements, speakers narrow the interpretative range of a term, reducing uncertainty and guiding the listener toward the intended sense. This mechanism operates not only at the lexical level but also within syntax, where complements define the semantic relations among words. For instance, the verb *tomar* (“to take”) can generate several meanings depending on its complement: *tomar café* (“to drink coffee”), *tomar un tren* (“to take a train”), or *tomar una decisión* (“to make a decision”). Each complement specifies a distinct semantic frame, transforming an otherwise ambiguous form into a clear communicative act.

In written discourse, complementation also functions as a stylistic choice that balances precision and fluency. Academic and journalistic writing often favors explicit complements to ensure accuracy, while literary and poetic language may deliberately omit them to invite interpretive multiplicity. Thus, the use of complements must respond to communicative intention: where clarity and efficiency are required, they prevent misunderstanding; where expressive richness is desired, controlled omission may enhance depth and resonance. Ultimately, mastering complementation means mastering the art of linguistic precision, allowing ambiguity to be resolved or, when appropriate, consciously preserved for stylistic effect.

4.3 Bilingual Notes

It is evident that a word ambiguous in one language may not be ambiguous in another. For example, the English sentence “The soldiers took the port at night” is ambiguous because port can mean “harbor” or “port wine.” However, its Spanish equivalent *Los soldados tomaron el puerto durante la noche* is unambiguous.

Conversely, *Los soldados tomaron Santa Rita al amanecer* is ambiguous in Spanish, since *tomar* (“to take”) and *Santa Rita* (which can mean a village or a wine brand) are both polysemous. In such cases, when ambiguity is inevitable in Spanish, interpreting or paraphrasing it through another language—English, Chinese, or even a regional dialect—can help clarify meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

Ambiguity can be considered an inherent property of natural languages, and Spanish is no exception. Although lexical ambiguity is not the only type—there are also phonetic and grammatical ambiguities—it remains one of the most fascinating phenomena, as it functions as a mechanism of economy and flexibility, and thus as an essential condition for linguistic efficiency. Through the coexistence of multiple meanings within a single linguistic form, speakers can express complex realities succinctly, while listeners, guided by context and shared knowledge, can reconstruct the intended sense dynamically.

Lexical ambiguity becomes “negative” only when it results in imperfect or deficient communication. In such cases, the speaker must choose words more carefully, and the listener must avoid misinterpreting the intended meaning to prevent distortion of the transmitted information. However, when precision is not the primary communicative goal, lexical ambiguity can have desirable—even necessary—effects. It enriches discourse, fosters expressive creativity, and reflects the cognitive and cultural complexity of human communication. The examples drawn from literary, conversational, and pragmatic contexts demonstrate that ambiguity allows for irony, humor, and emotional subtlety, while also serving as a strategic tool for managing politeness, face, and social distance.

Ultimately, the communicative value of ambiguity lies in its adaptability. Within the framework of pragmatic and cognitive linguistics, ambiguity is best understood not as a flaw in language but as a manifestation of its interpretive flexibility and human creativity. The key, therefore, is not to eliminate ambiguity but to learn to exploit its advantages while minimizing its drawbacks, so that sender and receiver can reach a shared understanding of the message conveyed—an understanding that, in many cases, depends precisely on the interpretive space that ambiguity allows.

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