

Grammar Guru 14

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Do you have the habit of reading billboards and street signs? Here is a couple of them that Amalia Rubin found:

1. On a billboard for an electric company:
New Delhi Electricity Limited

(Note: Frequent power cuts in India)

2. A street sign in Himachal Pradesh:
Himachal Pradesh Police: Better late than never

According to Mike Magennis, “The secret of comedy may be timing but the secret of great comedy is ambiguity.” He concludes, “Ambiguity is genuine. Real life is ambiguous in the extreme.” While we do wholeheartedly endorse his views, let us not cultivate ambiguity; for, it could be irritating, frustrating, confusing, and misleading. Good communicators are always clear; they are never ambiguous.

The dictionary defines ambiguity as “doubtfulness or uncertainty as regards interpretation.” In literature, ambiguity gives rise to different interpretations. For linguists, ambiguity arises when a sentence could be parsed in more than one way. Their famous example is *Visiting linguists can be a nuisance*. This sentence is analyzed in two different ways:

Linguists visit us. They can be a nuisance.

We visit linguists. It can be a nuisance.

Ambiguity could be phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic. In

grammar, we are mainly concerned with syntactic ambiguity. Here are some amusing, ambiguous sentences:

He made her an omelette.

(Did he make an omelette for her, or did he squash her into something like an omelette?)

She called him a taxi.

(Did she address him as ‘Taxi’, or did she call a taxi for him to travel in?)

Often wrong word order results in ambiguity:

He killed the sparrow with a gun. (Wrong)

With a gun he killed a sparrow. (Correct)

He spent the holidays in a chair with a swollen leg. (Wrong)

With a swollen leg, he spent the holidays in a chair. (Correct)

Newspapers frequently regale us with their penchant for ambiguity. Here are some authentic snippets:

CIA held suspect in secret prison for months.

Two cars reported stolen by police yesterday.

Do you dislike or hate your mother-in-law?
Then, you might enjoy this story:

I saw six men kicking and punching the mother-in-law. My neighbour said, “Are you going to help?” “No! Six should be enough!”

Faced with an ambiguity, Albert Camus said, “That must be wonderful. I have no idea what

it means.”

Tackle these brainteasers with an ambiguous answer:

1. *Who is bigger – Mr. Bigger or his son?*
2. *What happened to the man who stole the calendar?*
3. *Which travels fast – heat or cold?*

Answers

1. The son is a little Bigger.

2. He got twelve months.

3. Heat. You can easily catch a cold!

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