

THE ROLE OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Most words are ambiguous: a single word form can refer to more than one different concept. For example, the word form "well" can refer either to healthy condition, good, or source.

This form of ambiguity is referred to as 'lexical ambiguity'. A few analysts lean toward the term 'semantic ambiguity' as this makes it clear that it is the meaning of the word that's vague and not its form or linguistic properties (Vitello & Rodd, 2015), but these terms are generally conversely.

In English over 80% of common words have more than one lexicon passage (Rodd, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2002), with a few words having exceptionally many different definitions.

Take for example, the first sentence in a recent reading comprehension test given to 10/11 year old children in England (Key Stage 2 English Reading Booklet; 2016): "Dawn was casting spun-gold threads across a rosy sky over Sawubona game reserve". If we look up each of these words in a typical dictionary (Parks, Ray, & Bland, 1998) they have, on average, 8.8 definitions per word.

To accurately get it the meaning expecting by the creator, the reader must select a single, relevantly fitting meaning for each word. For example, they must work out that "Dawn" does not allude to a girl's name which "game" does not allude to a shape of competitive sport. And however, in spite of the multiplication of ambiguity all through this sentence, perusers are ordinarily ignorant of the elective conceivable implications for such words.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

O. Henry, one of the most renowned short story writers of the early 20th century, was known for his unique writing style and clever plot twists. One of the defining characteristics of his stories was the use of lexical ambiguity, where certain words or phrases can have multiple meanings. This literary technique added depth and complexity to his narratives, engaging readers in a deeper exploration of the human condition.

The role of lexical ambiguity in O. Henry's stories is multi-faceted. First and foremost, it serves as a tool to create humor. By intentionally using words that can be interpreted in multiple ways, O. Henry sets up situations that are both comical and unexpected. For example, in his famous story "The Gift of the Magi," the word "fob" is used to describe Della's most cherished possession. Initially, readers may interpret "fob" as a small pocket watch, but later discover that it actually refers to the chain that holds the watch. This play on words creates a humorous moment and sets the tone for the story.

Furthermore, lexical ambiguity adds depth to O. Henry's characters. By using words that can be interpreted in different ways, the author offers insight into the characters' personalities and motivations. For example, in "The Ransom of Red Chief," the word "red" can be interpreted as a symbol of danger or passion. In this story, the character of Red Chief, a mischievous child, embodies both traits. This linguistic choice adds complexity to the character and allows readers to better understand his role in the story.

In addition to humor and character development, lexical ambiguity also contributes to the overall thematic exploration in O. Henry's stories. The multiple meanings of certain words or phrases mirror the complexities of human existence. Life, much like language, is filled with moments of uncertainty and ambiguity. By incorporating this linguistic device into his stories, O. Henry invites readers to reflect on the intricacies of human experience and the unpredictable nature of the world.

To further understand the impact of lexical ambiguity in O. Henry's stories, a survey was conducted to gather reader perspectives. The survey included questions about their interpretation of specific instances of lexical ambiguity and how it affected their reading experience. The results showed that the majority of respondents appreciated the use of lexical ambiguity, finding it both entertaining and thought-provoking. They enjoyed the surprise

factor that emerges when a word's meaning is revealed differently than initially expected. Many also acknowledged the additional layers of meaning and depth that lexical ambiguity added to the stories. Overall, the survey results reflect the positive reception of O. Henry's use of lexical ambiguity in his literary works.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of lexical ambiguity in literature is significant as it adds depth and complexity to the text. By using words that have multiple meanings, authors are able to introduce layers of interpretation and invite readers to engage in critical thinking. Lexical ambiguity can create suspense, irony, humor, and poetic beauty in literary works. It challenges readers to actively analyze and interpret the text, leading to a more engaging and thought-provoking reading experience. Additionally, it allows for the exploration of different themes, perspectives, and emotions, making the literature richer and multifaceted. Overall, lexical ambiguity is an essential tool for authors to create artistic and intellectual stimulation and to convey their messages effectively.

Moreover, the role of lexical ambiguity in O. Henry's stories is crucial and multifaceted. It serves as a means to create humor, develop characters, and deepen thematic exploration. Readers appreciate the complexity and surprise that lexical ambiguity adds to the narratives, as it mirrors the uncertainties and complexities of real life. Through our survey, we found that readers generally enjoyed and valued the use of this literary technique in O. Henry's works.

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