

**Research Article**

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**Humor in British Television Series  
*Mind Your Language Season 1***

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**Abstract**

Ambiguity in language is often considered as a problem. Ambiguity can be found in every aspect of language whether it is written or spoken text. Research in terms of ambiguity was normally found in written language, but this study conducted in spoken text. In this research, the ambiguity is spoken by non-native English in a humoristic expression. Lexical ambiguity is usually caused by homonymy and polysemy. This research aims to describe the ambiguity in the British television series *Mind Your Language Season 1* and focus on the lexical ambiguity especially in polysemy and contextual meaning. The technique of collecting the data is note-taking technique. The writer describes all possible meanings from the ambiguous joke by analyzing the contextual meaning. This study is conducted to describe all possible meanings from the ambiguous jokes within the context. There are four contextual meanings in polysemy but the author focused on two contextual meaning that are mostly found in this study. By analyzing the contextual meaning, the writer reveals the correct interpretation and intention of the ambiguous words and mostly found type of contextual meaning in polysemy used by non-native English.

**Key words:** ambiguity, contextual meaning, lexical ambiguity, polysemy

**1. Introduction**

Ambiguity usually happens in the communication that happens either in spoken or written acts. By ambiguity we mean any sentence which cannot be understood meaningfully, or it may have more than one meaning. In this way the hearer or listener does not understand exactly what is meant. Some speakers use it to make their speech more interesting to drag the hearers deeper into their subject matter. Ambiguity according to Crystal [1] is the reference to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning and this reference has to do with linguistics. This study focuses on lexical

ambiguity [2] and the object of the study is about humor. There are ambiguous jokes spoken in a British television series *Mind Your Language*, a British comedy television series. Purpose of this research is to find several possible meanings of the ambiguous jokes by analyzing the context, the jokes considered as polysemy because the hearer misinterprets the meaning [3] of words and mistook it as another meaning. There are so much people speak with ambiguous expressions but less hearer could understand the exact meaning [4]. That is why the writer puts an interest on ambiguity especially in humoristic way. This study is about humor spoken by non-native English and focuses on spoken language about lexical ambiguity especially polysemy with its contextual meaning.

## **2. Methods**

It is a descriptive qualitative research. The data of this research are spoken language, the utterances containing ambiguity spoken by non-native English speaker in humoristic way. The source of the data is a video taken from Youtube. It is a British television series entitled *Mind Your Languages*. The show is set in an adult education college in London and focuses on the English as a Foreign Language class. The methods of collecting data are non-participant observation, recording, and note-taking. The author gets the data by using the documentation method. Therefore, the author used the method of non-participant observation. It means that the author collects the data based on a document. The writer also used the note-taking method. Note taking method is a method to catch the supporting points of data based on the context.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

The findings are 51 ambiguous words considered as jokes. There are 23 ambiguous words of polysemy. There are two contextual meanings, context of purpose and context of place. In Polysemy, the writer found 15 words in the context of purpose and 8 words in the context of place. All of the words are in the following table.

**Table 1. Ambiguous words of polysemy in the context of purpose and context of place.**

Polysemy	
Context of Purpose	Context of Place
1. right	1. underground
2. sex	2. bug
3. sir	3. cold
4. present	4. naughty
5. exercise	5. follow
6. monitor	6. fight
7. come along	7. practice
8. take	8. celtic
9. stand	
10. take	
11. glasses	
12. bottom	
13. knock out	
14. bird	
15. star	

### 3.1. Polysemy

Polysemy is an identical word that may have two or more different meanings. It explains the contextual meaning of the 15 ambiguous words found in the context of purpose and 8 words in the context of place

#### 3.1.1. Context of Purpose

Context of purpose is a situation when someone is asking or expecting something like the way they want. The writer found 15 words in the context of purpose.

##### 1. *right*

The word *right* has two meanings [5], polysemy. They are:

- a. Correct or suitable or as it should be;
- b. The opposite of left.

When Ms Courtney said “right” after Ali said “turn left” means what Ali says is correct. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because

this is a situation when Ms Courtney instructed Ali the location of the class and she expected that Ali will do exactly as she wanted.

2. *sex*

This is polysemy of the word *sex*. Based on the dictionary [5], the definitions of *sex* are:

- a. The state of either being male or female;
- b. Physical activity between people involving sexual organs.

Usually, the definition of *sex* is to distinguish either someone is male or female because it is harder to differentiate whether it is male or female from the name. The answered *occasionally* is to make fun of the word *sex*, meaning that sometimes he has sex. According to the answer, the definition of *sex* is a physical activity between people involving sexual organs. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Ms. Courtney asked him a question and expected that Mr. Brown will answer as the way she expected.

3. *sir*

The word *Sir* has multiple meanings-polysemy [5].

- a. An expression used as a formal and polite way of speaking to a man, especially one who you are providing a service to or who is in a position of authority. Example, *would you like to see the menu, sir?*
- b. Used as the title of a knight (a man who has been given a rank of honour by a British king or queen) with a first name or with both first and family name.

The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown told Giovanni to address him as *Sir* instead of professori. They came here to learn English so they should use an English term in anything, including how they addressed him.

4. *present*

There is polysemy [5] of the word *present*.

- a. (Adjective) In a particular place; happening or existing now;
- b. (Verb) To give, provide, or make something known. Example, *the winners were presented with medals;*
- c. (Verb) To introduce something or someone. Example, *may I present Professor Reus?;*
- d. (Noun) Something that is given without asking or demanding in special occasion;
- e. (Noun) A gift.

5. *exercise*

There is polysemy of the word *exercise*. The definitions [5] of *exercise* are as follows

- a. Physical activity that you do to make your body strong and healthy;
- b. An action(s) intended to improve something.

The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown gave them exercises to do and he expected that all students did the things the way as he expected. But Giovanni mistook the meaning of *exercise*. He thought that

Mr. Brown told them to do some physical activity. That is why he said he couldn't do any exercises because his back is feeling unwell. The correct definition of *exercise* is an action(s) intended to improve something. In this term, they have to do an action which is answering some questions so that they can improve their English.

6. *monitor*

This is polysemy of the word *monitor*. There are some definitions [5] for the word *monitor*.

- a. (Noun) A person who has the job of watching or noticing particular things;
- b. (Noun) A machine that regularly tests something. Example, a radiation monitor;
- c. (Noun) A computer screen or a device with a screen on which words or pictures can be shown;
- d. (Verb) To watch and check a situation carefully for a period of time in order to discover something about it.

The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown told that he wanted to find a *monitor* so he expects that students will understand the situation as he expected. Apparently, Giovanni didn't understand with the meaning of *monitor*. He thought that a *monitor* is something related to computer as its explained in (c). The correct interpretation for *monitor* is a person who has the job of watching or noticing particular things. The term *monitor* is referring to a person. The definition of (b) and (c) was nothing related to a person. So the correct interpretation is (*noun*) *a person who has the job of watching or noticing particular things*.

7. *come along*

This is polysemy of the phrase *come along*. Based on the dictionary [5], the meanings of *come along* are:

- a. To arrive or to appear;
- b. To go somewhere with somebody;
- c. Used in order to tell somebody to hurry or to try harder.

So the correct interpretation in terms of *come along* is to hurry Ali to finish his paper. From the conversation between Ali and Ms. Courtney, this is the context of purpose because Ms. Courtney told Ali to get started with the answers and finish the exam or at least try harder because he didn't write anything yet. But Ali interpreted it wrongly and thought that Ms. Courtney invited him to go somewhere.

8. *take*

There are many meanings-polysemy [5] of the word *take*.

- a. To remove something;
- b. To accept or have;
- c. To go somewhere with someone;
- d. To show someone how to get somewhere;
- e. To do something.

When she said she will take the class until Mr. Brown arrives, the word *take* means that she will teach the class while he is gone. The correct description for the term *take* is *to do something* or *to accept or have*. But Juan interprets it as *to go somewhere with someone*. Therefore, Juan expects that she will be taking them somewhere by saying “where are you taking us?”. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because when Ms. Courtney informs that she shall take the class, she expects that students will accept the information as the way she had expected.

9. *stand*

The word *stand* has more than two meanings [5]. They are:

- a. To be on your feet;
- b. To be in a vertical position;
- c. Used especially in negative sentences and questions to emphasize that you do not like somebody or something (dislike).

According to Anna, *stand* referred to be on her feet or to be in a vertical position. She thought that Ms. Courtney suggests her if there is any nonsense, do not stand up. That is why she response she will sit down instead of standing up. According to Ms. Courtney, the correct meaning of *stand* is (c). The word *stand* used in a negative expression to emphasize that you do not like any nonsense. If there is any nonsense, Anna should not tolerate it and sent whoever students who answered with stupid answers. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Ms. Courtney uses the word *stand* in negative expression which means she asked Anna to do so. Ms. Courtney suggests Anna what to do and expects Anna to do what she told.

10. *take*

The word *take* has multiple meanings. Based on the dictionary [5], there is some explanation of *take*. They are:

- a. To carry or move something from one place to another;
- b. To take something to sit down in or use a chair.

Ali carried the chair and tent to move it because Mr. Brown told him to do so. Based on the dictionary, Ali interprets the word *take* as in (a). It was proven because he carried the chair after Mr. Brown told him to take a chair. But the actual meaning is Mr. Brown wanted them to take a chair so they can use it. They can sit on it. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown asked them to do something and expected to do the way he wanted.

11. *glasses*

The word *glasses* has more than one meaning. *Glasses* is the plural form of *glass*. Based on the dictionary [5], the word *glasses* means:

- a. A hard, usually clear, substance used for making windows or bottles;
- b. A container made of glass used for drinking out of;

- c. Two lenses in a frame that rests on nose and ears, wear in order to be able to see better or protect their eyes from bright light.

Ranjeet thought the *glasses* that Mr. Brown meant is the two lenses in a frame to see better. That is why Ranjeet responded by asking Mr. Brown's eyes condition. The *glasses* is a container made of glass used for drinking. The reason Mr. Brown need other glasses because Taro will join the drink. But somehow Ranjeet interpreted it wrongly and thought that not only his body is sick but also his eyes. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown asked Ranjeet to bring the glasses and expect something happened in the way he had expected.

12. *bottom*

The phrase *bottoms up* makes ambiguous meaning. Based on the dictionary [5], the definitions of the *bottom* are as follows.

- a. The lowest part of something;
- b. The part of something that faces downwards and is not usually seen;
- c. The part of the body that you sit on.

Ranjeet thought that the meaning of "bottoms up" is the way you drink alcohol by bending down your body while drinking. But apparently, the phrase *bottoms up* is usually used to express good wishes when drinking alcohol or telling somebody to finish their drink. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown expects that they will raise the glass and finish the drink. Unfortunately, Ranjeet interpreted it the wrong way and didn't do the way as Mr. Brown expected.

13. knock out

Based on the dictionary, the phrase *knock out* have multiple meanings [5].

- a. To make somebody go to sleep or become unconscious;
- b. To defeat somebody so that they cannot continue competing;
- c. To hit an opponent so that they cannot get up within a limited time.

14. *bird*

There is polysemy of the word *bird*. Based on the dictionary [5], the word *bird* has multiple meanings.

- a. A feature that covered with feathers and has two wings and two legs;
- b. A way to refer to a young woman.

Max makes fun of the subject given by Mr. Brown. He knows that the word *bird* has multiple meanings so he adds an adjective phrase “especially blondes” to explain the meaning of *bird* itself. The word “blonde” means people who have blonde hair. According to Max’s statement, the terms *bird* is a way of referring to a young woman. The actual meaning of *bird*, according to Mr. Brown, is a feature that covered with feathers and has two wings and two legs. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of purpose because Mr. Brown gave a subject to explain so that Max could explain it as the way Mr. Brown’s expected

15. *star*

There is polysemy of the word *star*. Based on the dictionary [5], the meanings of *star* are:

- a. A large ball of burning gas in space that we see as a point of light in the sky at night;
- b. A famous and excellent singer, performer, sport player, etc;
- c. A person who has a main part in a film, play, etc.

### 3.1.2 Context of Place

A context that can be influenced by the meaning which is used. For example, when people get into a debate, the speaker will use any information related to the topic. The writer found 8 words in the context of place.

#### 1. *underground*

Polysemy of the word *underground*. *Underground* has multiple meanings [5], they are:

- a. Under the surface of the ground;
- b. Below the surface of Earth;
- c. Operating secretly and often illegally, especially against the government;
- d. A railway system in which electric trains travel through tunnels below the ground. Example, “the London Underground” or “they went on the underground”.

The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of place because Ranjeet uses the information to explain his job and added an expression that explained the meaning of the job. In this case, the *underground* is an ambiguous joke. When Ranjeet said he is a very important member of the British underground, Mr. Brown was confused about the kind of underground that he meant. Because if it’s a very important member of the British underground, it could be a spy or perhaps someone who secretly works for the British government against another government. But Ranjeet said, “MIND THE DOOR!” loudly

to give the information about the meaning of the underground. The expression of “MIND THE DOOR” is usually expressed by someone who works on the underground train station in London to warn the passengers to be careful because the train’s door was about to close.

2. *bug*

There is polysemy of the word *bug*. The definitions [5] of *bug* are:

- a. (Noun) A very small insect;
- b. (Noun) An illness that usually not serious caused by bacteria or virus;
- c. (Noun) A mistake or problem in computer;
- d. (Noun) A very small device fixed on to a phone or hidden in a room;
- e. (Verb) To annoy or worry someone. Example, *he’s been bugging me all morning*;
- f. (Verb) To place or hide a listening device inside something [often passive]. For example, *she suspected that her phone had been bugged*.

The correct interpretation for the term of *bug* in this conversation is a very small device fixed on to a phone or hidden in a room. The meaning of the headline is that the American Embassy had been bugged as in the definition (f). The word *bugged* in the headlines is passive. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of place because the conversation is talking about headlines taken place in America Embassy.

3. *cold*

This is polysemy of the word *cold*. Based on the dictionary [5], there are some definitions of *cold* are:

- a. A common infection especially in the nose and throat, causes cough and sneeze;
- b. Having something in a low temperature;
- c. Not showing kindness, love, or emotion.

This is the context of place. The place was taken in a doctor’s place, such as hospital, the meaning of cold is having an infection that makes you sick. But Ranjeet replied, “a cold what?”. It means Ranjeet was referring to a cold or something. The correct definition for the term *cold* based on Ranjeet is having something in a low temperature such as a cold beer, a cold chicken for lunch, or cold meat and salad, etc. Mr. Brown already gets what Ranjeet means. He is not in the mood to explain it so he replied: “let’s forget about it”.

4. *naughty*

Based on the dictionary [5], *naughty* means:

- a. Behaving badly;
- b. Not willing to obey;
- c. Slightly rude; usually connected with sex.

Mr. Brown thought that the word *naughty* referring to (b). But then Danielle told him that the police made her boyfriend stopped the car because he was driving at hundred miles per hour. On Danielle perspective, the word “naughty” refers to (a). Danielle’s boyfriend is speeding at the moment, so the police had to pull him over. According to the description above, the contextual meaning is in the context of place because Danielle used information

related to the condition that she experienced, such as a motorway, her boyfriend was driving and the police made them stop the car.

5. *follow*

Based on the dictionary [5], *follow* means:

- a. To come or go after or behind somebody or something;
- b. To understand an explanation or the meaning of something.

The context of this conversation is the context of place because they were discussing where did Taro go to spend his weekend. The word “follow” caused ambiguity because it has multiple meanings. Taro thought the word “follow” means that Mr. Brown comes or goes after or behind Taro by saying that Taro didn’t see him there. The word *follow* based on Mr. Brown refers to (b), which he understood about Taro going to Buckingham Palace.

6. *fight*

There is polysemy of the word *fight*. Based on the dictionary [5], the *fight* means:

- a. To struggle physically with somebody;
- b. To have an argument with somebody about something;
- c. To take part in a contest against somebody;
- d. To take part in a boxing match.

According to the dictionary, the *fight* means to take part in a contest against somebody. It is a football match. In Britain, a football match is the most popular sport. In some certain cities, such as London and Manchester, they have big football teams. Those big teams were assumed as one of the most considered teams in Europe. For example, in London, there are two big teams, they are Arsenal F.C. and Chelsea F.C. In Manchester, they have Manchester City and Manchester United. If those teams compete, it is called a big *fight*. The big *fight* is a football match between a big team against a big team. But the word *fight* is usually referring to struggling physically with somebody. So Mr. Brown’s first guess is a boxing match, which is wrong. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of place because Max tell about the place that he spent his weekend.

7. *practice*

This is polysemy of the word *practice*. Based on the dictionary [5], *practice* means:

- a. Doing an activity or training regularly so that you can improve your skill;
- b. A way of doing something that is the usual or expected way in particular organization or situation.

Giovanni thinks that he doesn’t need to improve anything on the Church because he is already perfect. Mr. Brown assumed that Giovanni is doing something usual or expected way in the Church. It means that Giovanni prays in the Church. The contextual meaning of this conversation is the context of place because they discussed something related to the Church.

8. *Celtic*

There is polysemy *Celtic* and race. The definitions [5] of *Celtics* are:

*Celtics* connected with the Celts or their language. The Celts is a race of people;

The most popular meaning in terms of Celtic when you search it on the internet was Celtic Football Club or Celtic FC. Celtic FC is a football club based in Glasgow, Scotland, which plays in the Scottish Premiership.

#### **4. Conclusions**

From the data, the findings are 23 words considered as polysemy. The writer used contextual meaning to describe the situation and to deliver the jokes so that the reader also understands the jokes and the meaning of it. There are two contextual meanings found in the data, context of purpose and context of place. The findings are 15 words in the context of purpose and 8 words in context of place. In this research, some words considered as lexical ambiguity because it contains multiple meanings and identical sound with another word. The role of the words as the jokes was crucial because it represents that from a word, we can make fun of a conversation by playing either the meaning or the sound of the word. The ambiguous jokes that are mostly found are context of purpose. It occurred when the speaker expressed the purpose by saying some words but the hearer misinterprets the words and mistook it as another meaning. This situation makes misunderstanding between the speaker and the hearer so that the message cannot be delivered correctly. On the other hand, context of place happened because in the conversation between the speaker and the hearer are talking about places. It could be about something where they got an unexpected experience visiting somewhere, or words that explained about something but in other language the words already used for the name of the places.

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