

## Language and Ambiguity: A Study on Unclear Titles in Linguistic Studies

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**To Link this Article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/25022> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/25022

**Published Date:** 14 March 2025

### Abstract

Titles play a fundamental role in guiding the reader toward understanding the content of scientific studies, as they serve as the first gateway to grasping the general idea of a text. However, some titles may carry a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. Vague terminology is a prominent phenomenon in the field of linguistics, posing a significant challenge for researchers in effectively comprehending and analyzing texts. This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to examine this phenomenon by describing and analyzing a selection of ambiguous titles. It aims to shed light on vague terminology by defining it, exploring its significance, and identifying its causes. Additionally, the study reviews its impact on linguistic research and seeks to analyze common examples while providing strategies to reduce ambiguity in academic studies.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Vagueness, Misconception, Misinterpretation, Secondary Meanings, Primary Meanings

### Introduction

Ambiguity and lack of clarity stem primarily from issues related to linguistic terminology. This problem can be examined from two perspectives: a general one and a specific one. The specific perspective concerns linguistic terminology itself, which faces challenges such as the abundance of terms in circulation, inconsistencies in their meanings due to loose usage and disregard for their precise scientific boundaries, the broad scope of scientific and cultural fields to which linguistic terms belong, and the ambiguity of many terms in their sources (Qaddour, 2006).

Some scholars have established criteria for an ideal term or title, including its ability to stand alone without the need for explanation or interpretation, the absence of redundancy and

excessive elaboration, the avoidance of synonymy and multiple meanings, a degree of universality, the potential for derivation, adherence to syntactic rules of the language, conciseness without sacrificing clarity, and utmost precision (Al-Saraqibi, 2008). This study focuses on analyzing unclear titles in linguistic research, highlighting the causes of ambiguity, its impact on comprehension, and the role of linguistic and cultural context in interpreting titles.

### The Concept of Linguistic Ambiguity

#### *Definition of Ambiguity*

The verb التبس (iltabasa) refers to confusion or mixture. According to Al-Mu'jam Al-Wasīṭ: "التبس (الظلام اختلط ويُقال التبس عَلَيْهِ الأمر أشكل واختلط" (Majma' Al-Lugha Al-'Arabiyya, 2011). The term (التبس) denotes suspicion and lack of clarity, as in the phrase "فِي أمره لبس" (Majma' Al-Lugha Al-'Arabiyya, 2011). Similarly, (لَبَسَ) refers to confusion or mixing up matters, as exemplified in the Quranic verse:

{وَلَلْبَسَةُ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا يَلْبِسُونَ} [Al-An'ām: 9]. The term (لَبَسَةُ), with a ḍammah on the first letter, signifies doubt or uncertainty, meaning something is not clear (Al-Rāzī, 1990).

The term (لَبَسَةُ), with a ḍammah, means doubt and lack of clarity; it is derived from the word التباس (Al-Manāwī, 1990). The phrase {فِي لبس} refers to confusion and uncertainty (Al-Kafawī, 1998).

From the above, it can be said that ambiguity refers to the multiple possible meanings of a word or phrase due to vagueness or similarity in meanings. Ambiguity occurs when there is a lack of specificity or when meanings overlap with the general context of the text.

### Ambiguity in Linguistic Titles

In the context of linguistic studies, ambiguity in titles may result from:

- The use of overlapping, unfamiliar, or multi-meaning terms.
- Ambiguous structures that allow for multiple interpretations.
- Lack of clarity in the relationship between the elements of the title.
- The absence of a clear indication of the specific field of study.

### The Impact of Ambiguous Titles on Understanding Linguistic Studies

#### The Impact of Ambiguity on the Reader

- Leads to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the study's content.
- May prompt the reader to seek additional sources for clarification, disrupting the flow of knowledge.

#### The Impact of Ambiguity on Researchers

- May cause inconsistencies in categorizing studies within different scientific fields.
- Limits the clarity of the research framework, affecting citation and utilization of the study.

### An Applied Study on Unclear Titles in Linguistic Studies

#### Illusion (At-Tawahhum) in Grammar

The title suggests that grammarians have fallen into a certain illusion or error; however, this is not the intended meaning.

Abu Al-Baqa' Al-Kafawi mentioned in Al-Kulliyāt:

"At-Tawahhum-based conjunction appears in structures such as (لَيْسَ زَيْدًا قَائِمًا وَلَا قَاعِدًا), where the genitive case in (قَاعِدًا) occurs due to the assumption of an implicit preposition (bā') in the predicate of laysa. However, the term tawahhum does not imply a mistake; rather, it refers to conjunction based on meaning. That is, the Arabic speaker mentally perceives a specific meaning in the first element and then extends that perception to the conjoined element, making the structure linguistically valid." (Al-Kafawi, 1998).

Similarly, Al-Rummani stated:

"Conjunction based on illusion or interpretation occurs when a word is syntactically dependent on an implied grammatical structure that differs from the explicit syntax but aligns with it in meaning" (Mubarak, 1995).

Thus, we can say that ḥaml 'ala at-tawahhum (syntactic dependence based on illusion) is "a conceptual interpretation that grammarians and morphologists resort to. They do so by relying on meaning to reconcile apparent anomalies in the syntax of certain well-established Arabic expressions, ensuring their consistency with grammatical and morphological rules while justifying their unique structural patterns" (Jad, 2001).

Many scholars believe that ḥaml 'ala at-tawahhum (syntactic dependence based on illusion) is essentially the same as ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence based on meaning); they are two sides of the same coin. However, the former (tawahhum) is used for texts outside the Qur'an, while the latter (ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā) is applied to the Qur'an as a sign of reverence (Jad, 2001).

Ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā occurs between two words that share a resemblance, where the meaning of the second is attributed to the first due to the presence of a contextual clue. This is because "they treat one thing as another when they share similarities" (Al-Anbari, 2003).

Additionally, it is observed that both words exist in linguistic usage, since "assigning an element certain properties does not detach it from its original function." (Ibn Al-Anbari, 2003). Since the Arabs paid great attention to their words, refining and perfecting them, observing their rules through poetry at times, speeches at others, and through the rhymed prose they adhered to and maintained, meanings held greater significance and value for them and were of higher esteem in their perception (Jinni, 1994).

Thus, Arabs would rely on meaning or substitute certain words for others to achieve grammatical accuracy and enhance the clarity of expression. In this regard, Ibn Al-Anbari states: "ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence based on meaning) is too frequent to be counted" (Al-Anbari, 2003).

Accordingly, grammarians relied on meaning to reconcile grammatical rules with actual linguistic usage. One example of ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence based on meaning) is the Quranic verse:

{وَأَنْفِقُوا مِنْ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولُ رَبِّ لَوْلَا أَخَّرْتَنِي إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ فَأَصَّدَّقَ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ} [Al-Munāfiqūn: 10].

"And spend (in charity) from what We have provided you before death comes to one of you, and he says: 'My Lord! If only You would delay me for a short period, so I would give in charity and be among the righteous' (Al-Munāfiqūn: 10).

This verse emphasizes the importance of giving charity and utilizing wealth in good deeds before death arrives. It conveys the regret of those who neglected to spend on charity and perform righteous acts, wishing for a delay in their time so they could correct their mistakes. However, such a wish will be of no benefit once the appointed time of death has arrived. The verse serves as a strong reminder to take advantage of one's life and wealth before it is too late, as charity and good deeds hold great significance in the sight of Allah.

The verb ﴿وَأَكُنْ﴾ is conjoined to a subjunctive verb, yet it appears in the jussive form. How is this explained? The reason for the jussive case is ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (dependence on meaning), as if the phrase were restructured to mean: "If You postpone me, I will give charity and be among the righteous" (Yāqūt, 2006). Another example is the Quranic verse: { وَكَمْ مِنْ مَلَكٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ لَا تُغْنِي شَفَاعَتُهُمْ شَيْئًا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ يَأْذَنَ اللَّهُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَرْضَى } [An-Najm: 26].

This demonstrates ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence based on meaning), as the verb ﴿لَا تُغْنِي﴾ is in the plural form, aligning with the implied collective meaning of {كم من ملك} (How many angels). Had the structure been based on the explicit singular form of the word {ملك} (angel), the phrase would have been: "لا تغني شفاعته" (his intercession does not avail). "And how many angels are there in the heavens whose intercession will be of no benefit at all except after Allah has permitted to whom He wills and is pleased with" (An-Najm: 26).

This verse highlights that even the intercession of the angels—who are among the most honored creations of Allah—will not be effective unless Allah grants permission and is pleased with the one being interceded for. It refutes false beliefs that rely on intermediaries without Allah's consent. The verse serves as a reminder that true authority and decision-making belong solely to Allah, and no one can intercede independently without His will.

Another example is the Quranic verse:

{ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ يَسْتَمِعُونَ إِلَيْكَ أَفَأَنْتَ تُسْمِعُ الصُّمَّ وَلَوْ كَانُوا لَا يَعْقِلُونَ } [Yūnus: 42].

"And among them are those who listen to you. But can you make the deaf hear, even though they do not understand?" (Yūnus: 42).

This verse addresses the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, stating that among the disbelievers are those who physically hear his message but do not truly comprehend or accept it. Their hearts and minds are closed, making them like the deaf who cannot perceive guidance. The verse emphasizes that true understanding and acceptance of faith require sincerity and an open heart, not just passive listening. It also reassures the Prophet ﷺ that guidance is in Allah's hands, and not everyone will accept the truth.

The verb ﴿يَسْتَمِعُونَ﴾ is based on ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence on meaning) because the subject refers to a group of people, aligning the verb with the plural meaning. Had the construction followed the singular form explicitly indicated by {مَنْ} (who), the phrase would have been: "ومنهم من يستمع" (And among them is he who listens).

Another example is the Quranic verse:

وَمَنْ يُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا يُكْفِّرْ عَنْهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِ وَيُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ {At-Taghābun: 9}.

"And whoever believes in Allah and does righteous deeds—He will remove from him his misdeeds and will admit him into Gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding therein forever. That is the great success" (At-Taghābun: 9).

This verse highlights the reward of true faith and righteous actions. It reassures believers that Allah, in His mercy, forgives sins for those who sincerely believe in Him and follow their faith with good deeds. As a reward, He grants them eternal residence in Paradise, where they will enjoy everlasting bliss. The verse concludes by affirming that this is the ultimate and greatest success, emphasizing that nothing in this world can compare to the eternal joy and salvation promised in the Hereafter.

The word ﴿خَالِدِينَ﴾ follows ḥaml 'ala al-ma'nā (syntactic dependence on meaning), aligning with the plural sense of the subject, even though {مَنْ} (who) is singular in form. Had the structure been based on the explicit singular form of {مَنْ}, the phrase would have been: "خالداً" (eternally abiding therein). "Yughtafaru fī ath-thawānī mā lā yughtafaru fī al-awā'il" There will be leniency in grammar (in words that follow others) and there will be no leniency in words that are followed by others.

The term "ath-thawānī" (الثواني) refers to words that occupy secondary syntactic positions and are dependent on preceding elements in a sentence, such as conjuncts ('atf) and appositives (badal). The term "al-awā'il" (الأوائل) refers to words that occupy primary syntactic positions and are independent in structure. The verb "yughtafaru" (يغتفر) in this context means leniency or tolerance, indicating that irregularities in grammatical structure are more acceptable in dependent elements (thawānī) than in primary elements (awā'il). In other words, what is overlooked in a dependent word is not necessarily permissible in the primary word it follows.

### Example In the Phrase

"رُبَّ رَجُلٍ وَأَخِيهِ" (Rubba rajulin wa akhīhi)

The word "رُبَّ" (Rubba) is a particle that typically governs only indefinite nouns. However, "أَخِيهِ" (akhīhi) is a definite noun, which seems grammatically problematic. The justification for allowing this construction lies in the rule that leniency applies to secondary elements. Since "أَخِيهِ" is conjoined (ma'ṭūf) to "رَجُلٍ", it is considered among ath-thawānī (secondary elements), allowing the genitive case under the assumption that it follows the structure imposed by "رُبَّ" (Ibn Hisham, 2018).

Another example is the appearance of "أَنْ" with a verb conjoined to a verb in the subjunctive case after "حتى", as seen in the phrase: "حتى يكون عزيزاً في نفوسهم... أو أن يبين جميعاً وهو مختار" (As-Suyūṭī, 1985).

They do not show their neighbor or guests any superiority over them, so they feel as if they are one of them. They do not need to ask or reveal their need, as they are in a position of honor and respect. However, if they choose to express their need, it is entirely their choice, without any pressure.

The particle "حتى" (ḥattā) governs the subjunctive mood by implying an elided "أَنْ" before the verb. However, in this case, "أَنْ" explicitly appears before "يبين" (yabīna).

The reason for this is that "يبين" is conjoined (ma'tūf) to "يكون" (yakūna), making it a thawānī (secondary element). Since leniency applies to secondary elements, the explicit mention of "أَنْ" is tolerated here, whereas it would not have been permitted in the primary element (awā'il).

Similarly, in the verse: {وَاللَّائِي يَيْسَنَ مِنَ الْمَحِيضِ مِنْ نِسَائِكُمْ إِنْ ارْتَبْتُمْ فَعِدَّتُهُنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ أَشْهُرٍ وَاللَّائِي لَمْ يَحْضُنَّ} [At-Talāq: 4]. As for those women among you who have reached an age where they no longer experience menstruation, if you are uncertain about their waiting period after divorce, then their prescribed waiting period is three months. The same applies to those who have not yet begun menstruation due to young age their waiting period is also three months. This ruling clarifies the waiting period for women who do not menstruate regularly, ensuring justice and order in matters of divorce and remarriage.

One grammatical interpretation considers "اللَّائِي" (al-lā'ī) in the second instance as conjoined (ma'tūf) to the first "اللَّائِي", making it a secondary syntactic element. The issue here is that the predicate ("فَعِدَّتُهُنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ أَشْهُرٍ") is prefixed with the conjunction "ف", raising the question: How can a predicate preceded by "ف" appear before the conjoined element?

As As-Sabbān (1997) explains, a predicate prefixed with "ف" must be delayed because it functions similarly to a response in a conditional clause. However, in this case, since the second "اللَّائِي" is conjoined (ma'tūf) to the subject rather than standing independently, the rule is relaxed—what is tolerated in dependent elements (thawānī) may not be tolerated in primary elements (awā'il) (As-Sabbān, 1997).

#### *Khala' al-Adillah*

This term is ambiguous and requires explanation, clarification, and definition of its meaning and scope. In the context of grammar scholars, Khala' al-Adillah refers to stripping grammatical indicators (adillah) of their commonly understood meanings and ascribing to them alternative meanings or removing some of their conventional meanings ('Abdullah, 2015). An example of Khala' al-Adillah is found in Al-Khaṣā'is, where Yūnus narrates: "Ḍaraba man manan" (A person struck a person or A man struck a man). Don't you see how "man" was stripped of its usual interrogative function? That is why it was inflected (I'rāb) (Jinnī, 1994). Yūnus' narration means that the Arabs removed "man" from its interrogative role and treated it as a noun referring to a specific person, which is why they applied visible case markings to it.

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Another example, as mentioned by Al-Zamakhsharī, appears in the verse: {وَيَقُولُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَإِذَا مَا {مِثُّ لَسَوْفَ أُخْرَجُ حَيًّا} [Maryam: 66]. The human being, in his denial of resurrection, mockingly

asks: "Will I truly be brought back to life after I have died?" This statement reflects the disbelief of those who doubt the afterlife, questioning the possibility of being resurrected after their bodies have decomposed. However, Allah affirms throughout the Quran that resurrection is certain and inevitable, as He who created mankind in the first place is fully capable of bringing them back to life.

The Lām of initiation (Lām al-Ibtidā') that precedes the present-tense verb typically gives it a present/habitual meaning, so how does it coexist with "sawfa", which indicates future tense? He answers: "It does not coexist with it except when stripped of its habitual meaning and used solely for emphasis, just as the Hamzah in 'Yā Allāh' is stripped of its defining function and becomes a compensatory element. Likewise, 'mā' in 'idhā mā' serves as an intensifier" (Al-Zamakhsharī, 2007).

Thus, Al-Zamakhsharī asserts that the Lām, which typically indicates a habitual or present meaning, and "sawfa", which exclusively marks future tense, are seemingly contradictory when applied to the verb "ukhriju" (I will be resurrected). The resolution is to strip the Lām of its present-tense function, assigning it only an emphatic role—this is an application of Khala' al-Adillah.

#### *Presenting Effective Strategies to Reduce Ambiguity in Research*

We will introduce some strategies that we consider important and effective in making titles and terminology unambiguous. These include:

##### 1. Using Clear and Precise Language

It is essential to choose specific and unambiguous words so that titles and terms accurately convey their intended meaning.

Unclear Example: The impact of dialects on the Arabic language.

Clarification: This title is too broad and does not specify the nature or aspect of the impact.

Clear Examples:

- The impact of phonetic phenomena in Arabic dialects on Classical Arabic grammar.
- The influence of dialects on grammatical standardization.

Improvement: Additional details have been included to clarify the nature of the impact and its specific area, eliminating any potential ambiguity.

#### *Avoiding Misleading or Figurative Expressions*

Using figurative or ambiguous phrases in research titles can lead to confusion and misinterpretation. It is important to choose precise wording that directly reflects the study's focus.

Unclear Example: The revolution of terminology in the modern era.

Clarification: The word "revolution" is metaphorical and does not explicitly define the nature of the change in terminology.

Clear Example:

- The semantic development of scientific terminology in contemporary Arabic.

Improvement: The revised title eliminates figurative language and clarifies the exact focus of the research.

### *Clearly Defining the Scope of Research*

A well-defined research scope helps prevent ambiguity and ensures clarity regarding the study's focus.

Unclear Example: The issue of grammatical case in language.

Problem: The phrase is too broad and does not specify the language, factors, or context being examined.

Clear Example:

- The impact of grammatical factors on the development of case systems in Arabic between Standard and Colloquial varieties.

Improvement: This version clarifies the linguistic aspects, scope, and comparison involved in the study.

### *Avoiding Titles That are Too Long or Too Short*

Unclear (Too Long):

"An analysis of the use of various rhetorical techniques in modern political discourse and their impact on the audience through a comparative study of several political speeches."

Problem: The title is overly detailed, making it difficult to read and remember.

Clear Example:

- Rhetorical Techniques in Modern Political Discourse: A Comparative Analytical Study.

Improvement: The revised title retains key details while making it more concise and effective.

### *Including Essential Keywords*

Using key terms relevant to the research ensures that the study is easily discoverable and accurately conveys its focus.

Unclear Example: Figurative Language in Poetry.

Problem: The title is too vague and does not specify the poet, style, or analytical approach.

Clear Example:

- The Role of Figurative Language in Shaping Poetic Imagery in Al-Mutanabbi's Works: An Analytical Study.

Improvement: This version clarifies the subject, poet, and research method.

### *Using Questions When Appropriate*

Posing a question in the title can make it more engaging and indicate the research's purpose.

Unclear Example: The Importance of Context in Understanding Meaning.

Problem: The title is too general and does not specify how context influences meaning.

Clear Example:

- How Does Linguistic Context Influence Meaning Interpretation in Literary Texts?

Improvement: The revised title adds specificity and an investigative tone.

### *Avoiding Bias in Titles*

Titles should remain objective and avoid making subjective claims.

Unclear Example: Arabic is the Best Language in Terms of Grammar and Morphology.

Problem: The title expresses a biased opinion rather than presenting an academic analysis.

Clear Example:

- The Characteristics of Arabic Grammar and Morphology Compared to Semitic Languages.

Improvement: The revised version frames the topic as a comparative study rather than a subjective assertion.

#### *Avoiding Excessive Brevity*

Overly short titles can be ambiguous, making it difficult for readers to grasp the research's scope. A balance between conciseness and clarity is essential.

Unclear Example: Metaphor in Poetry.

Problem: The title is too brief and lacks specificity.

Clear Example:

- The Function of Metaphor in Romantic Poetry: A Stylistic Analysis.

Improvement: The revised title clarifies the literary period, focus, and approach.

#### Conclusion

When crafting a title for linguistic studies, it should be clear, specific, well-balanced, and accurately defined within its field. Using precise linguistic terminology while avoiding ambiguity or bias ensures that the research is accessible and effectively communicated.

#### Findings

This study explores ambiguity and vagueness in the titles of linguistic studies. It defines ambiguity as the multiple possible meanings of a word or phrase due to vagueness or semantic similarity.

The study reveals that ambiguity in linguistic titles may result from:

- The use of unclear terminology
- Ambiguous structures
- Excessive brevity
- Bias in wording

To address this issue, the study proposes effective strategies to reduce ambiguity in research titles, ensuring clarity and precision in conveying the study's main idea. Implementing these strategies helps minimize misinterpretation, making research more accessible and beneficial.

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