

Ambiguity

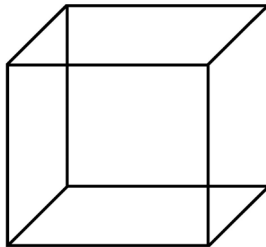
1. Definition

Ambiguity may be defined as the phenomenon of a term, an utterance, a text, an image or a concept having several meanings or potential interpretations, the Greek “ambi-” root strictly speaking suggesting exactly two meanings.

2. Example

At the simplest level, many common words in everyday language are ambiguous, words like “set” or “bank” (both as nouns and as verbs) being obvious examples. Visually, the so-called Necker cube (see fig. 1) is a well-known example: It is unclear whether we are looking at the cube from above or from below.

*Fig. 1: Necker cube; source:
Daniel Bläser, www.dbgrafik.de*



3. Explanation

Ambiguity may arise at several levels and may have several causes: Thus, we might distinguish – at least – between verbal, syntactic and semantic or conceptual ambiguity. Moreover, ambiguity needs to be distinguished from related terms such as ambivalence or contradiction, which, although frequently treated as overlapping concepts or even as synonymous, should be regarded as different categories from diverse fields of intellectual inquiry. While ambivalence is originally a psychological or cognitive concept designating a state of indecision, undecidability or unclear evaluation, contradiction is a notion from logic designating two or more irreconcilable propositions. Ambiguity, by contrast, is originally a rhetorical concept, referring to the simultaneous presence of more than one possible meaning or interpretation. Ambiguity in a text may be the *result* of attitudinal ambivalence, which manifests itself in unresolved contradictions in the text. But ambiguity is just as much a result of an act of observation and its accompanying sense of uncertainty and multiplicity. In any longer document, ambiguity may also be the result of a sequence of propositions which, each in themselves, are unambiguous but irreconcilable with one another. Even if any individual passage is perfectly clear, the unharmonized concatenation of contradictory passages, as its cumulative effect, may still create an ambiguity of the text as a whole. This sequential type of ambiguity may be the result of ambivalent attitudes on the part of one author, but it may also be the result of an unsuccessful attempt at harmonizing or combining a plenitude of interests. In a more positive sense, however, ambiguity does not have to be seen as the *result* of an imprecise use of language. Rather, language, and especially literary language, often allows for the resolution, suspension, or sublation – one might more critically also speak of the glossing over – of a multiplicity of possible meanings or of contradictions in a type of deliberate ambiguity.

While, in planning theory, there is a substantial discussion about issues of complexity, this is hardly the case with ambiguity. In the few contributions that exist, ambiguity generally appears as a problem to be solved.⁷ Where related terms such as (un)certainty, flexibility and fuzziness rather than ambiguity are used in planning debates,

in each case, it seems, there are conflicts of interest with regard to the openness as opposed to determinacy of planning policies, regulations and individual plans. Here, too, there is a tendency to regard ambiguity as ultimately problematic.

4. Applications

Think of the various living labs that have been sprouting up on the campuses of universities in the past decade: at Stanford, urban researchers meet with stakeholders – citizens, farmers, business-people and politicians – to experiment with and discuss a variety of scenarios to deal with water scarcity in Amman and Pune. In Amsterdam, partners from research institutions as well as the private and the public sector jointly seek to develop small-scale solutions to wicked urban problems.⁸ In both cases, there is plenty of ambiguity concerning the roles, the authority and the leverage of all of the actors involved, and a great part of the challenge of these labs is the effective management of this ambiguity. While most professions – law, medicine, technology, planning – will generally seek to eliminate or at least to minimize ambiguity, scholars of narrative have argued that ambiguity may also foster social cohesion: By accepting “doubt and plurality or plenty [as] the twin poles of ambiguity”, by allowing more diverse groups of stakeholders to find points of identification but also contention, narratives attain a certain fuzziness and indeterminacy.⁹ These ambiguity-tolerant narratives leave room for interpretation, for adverse readings and for negotiation; precisely because of this communal interpretive work involved they are *more* rather than *less* socially binding than precise narratives, and thus *more* conducive to generating social cohesion and to canvassing public support.¹⁰ A classic case in point would be programmes of political parties, which, if too specific, could hardly generate broad support across different societal groups and coalitions of interest.

Thus, while one will hardly want to suggest that planning documents – let alone legal texts or contracts – should deliberately be ambiguous, it may be helpful to bear in mind this social function of ambiguity. Not only is the tolerance of ambiguity a central ability for

individuals to function in complex, highly differentiated social environments. Ambiguous documents – or those which allow different stakeholders complementary, possibly even contradictory means of identification and interpretation – may productively function as “boundary objects”, objects or frames of knowledge which are flexible enough to be adopted by different communities.¹¹

Related entries: Closure, Future Narratives, Metaphor, Scenario

Further Reading

- Forester, John. *Critical Theory, Public Policy, and Planning Practice: Towards a Critical Pragmatism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
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- Rittel, Horst W. J., Melvin M. Webber. “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973). 155–169.
- Sharp, Darren, Rob Raven. “Urban Planning by Experiment at Precinct Scale: Embracing Complexity, Ambiguity, and Multiplicity.” *Urban Planning* 6, no. 1 (2021). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v6i1.3525>.