

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, there are some sub-chapters that provide. They are background of the study, research questions, and objective of the study, significance of the study, and scope and limitation of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

Language is the primary tool used by humans to communicate and convey meaning. Through language, individuals are able to express feelings, thoughts, and ideas, as well as to build social relationships and transmit information across various contexts of life (Yule, 2022). Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a system of symbols that represents human experience and knowledge. However, meaning in language is not always fixed or singular. In both spoken and written communication, language use often results in multiple interpretations. This occurs because linguistic expressions may encode more than one meaning and require contextual information for proper interpretation. One linguistic phenomenon that frequently causes such variation in interpretation is lexical ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word has more than one meaning, and the intended meaning can only be determined through the context of the sentence or discourse in which it appears (Fromkin et al., 2017). Ambiguity arises when a linguistic element, such as a word, phrase, or sentence, allows more than one possible interpretation. This phenomenon reflects the flexible and dynamic nature of human language, where a limited number of lexical items are used to express an unlimited range of concepts.

In everyday communication, lexical ambiguity may lead to misunderstanding, confusion, or misinterpretation when interlocutors assign different meanings to the same word. However, ambiguity may also function positively by creating humour, creativity, or stylistic effect. In media and literary texts, ambiguity is often used deliberately for stylistic, persuasive, or rhetorical purposes (Simpson, 2025). Therefore, understanding lexical ambiguity is essential

for examining how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted in different communicative contexts.

Lexical ambiguity is closely related to the semantic concepts of polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy refers to a single lexical item that has several related meanings derived from a shared conceptual core, while homonymy refers to two or more lexical items that share the same form but have completely unrelated meanings (Kreidler, 2002). For example, the word bank may refer to a financial institution or the side of a river, depending on the context. According to Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), lexical ambiguity is an inevitable feature of natural language because languages continuously develop and meanings expand, overlap, or shift due to historical, cultural, and contextual influences.

From a semantic perspective, lexical ambiguity is not merely a surface-level linguistic issue but a reflection of how meaning is organised in the mental lexicon. Kreidler (2002) explains that language users store multiple meanings of a word in their mental lexicon and activate them simultaneously when encountering an ambiguous expression. Contextual clues then guide the selection of the most appropriate meaning. This process highlights the importance of semantic competence in interpreting ambiguous expressions, particularly when contextual information is limited.

In the context of mass media, lexical ambiguity becomes especially significant. News discourse is designed to inform the public while simultaneously attracting readers' attention. Among various elements of news texts, headlines play a crucial role because they serve as the first point of contact between the news and its audience. News headlines are deliberately constructed to be short, engaging, and informative, often relying on condensed language and limited grammatical structure (Dor, 2003). Due to these characteristics, headlines are particularly prone to lexical ambiguity.

Khalifa (2018) argues that ambiguity in headlines often functions as a communicative strategy to stimulate readers' curiosity and encourage them to read the full article. However, such ambiguity may also lead to misinterpretation when readers derive meanings that differ from the writer's intended message. This tension

between efficiency, engagement, and clarity makes headline language an important object of linguistic analysis.

Based on these considerations, the analysis of lexical ambiguity in BBC in Online News headlines is both linguistically. By applying semantic theories, particularly Kreidler's (2002) distinction between polysemy and homonymy, this study seeks to identify the types of lexical ambiguity found in selected BBC Online News headlines published during January-February 2026 and to explain the intended meanings of the ambiguous lexical items.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the background study, it can be formulated the research questions below:

1. What types of lexical ambiguity are found in BBC Online news headlines published during January-February 2026?
2. What are the intended meanings of the ambiguous lexical items found in BBC Online news headlines published during January-February 2026?

1.3 Objective of the study

Based on the research question, the objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the types of lexical ambiguity present in BBC Online news headlines published during January-February 2026.
2. To explain the intended meanings of the ambiguous lexical items found in BBC Online news headlines published during January-February 2026.

1.4 Significance of the study

This research has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of linguistics, particularly semantics, by providing a deeper understanding of lexical ambiguity. By applying Kreidler's (2002) framework of polysemy and homonymy, this study analyses the types of lexical ambiguity and the intended meanings of ambiguous lexical items found in BBC Online news headlines. The findings are expected to enrich semantic studies how meaning is interpreted through context in media texts.

Practically, this study is useful for students, researchers, and readers in developing awareness of lexical ambiguity in news headlines. It helps readers understand how ambiguous words may lead to different interpretations and how the intended meaning can be identified through contextual clues. In addition, the results of this study may provide insights for journalists and media practitioners in selecting lexical items for headlines to minimise misinterpretation while maintaining clarity and effectiveness.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the study

To address the research problems formulated above, the scope and limitations of this study are defined within the field of semantics. This research focuses on identifying lexically ambiguous words in news headlines. Furthermore, the scope of the study is restricted to the analysis of types of lexical ambiguity based on Kreidler's (2002) framework, which categorises lexical ambiguity into polysemy and homonymy.

This study also analyses the intended meaning of the lexically ambiguous words. Although the primary data of this research are the news headlines, the accompanying news articles are also examined as contextual support to determine the intended meaning of the ambiguous words. Furthermore, this research does not examine other forms of ambiguity, such as syntactic or pragmatic ambiguity, nor does it investigate readers' interpretations or responses to the headlines. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited to a semantic analysis of lexical ambiguity and its intended meanings in BBC Online news headlines.