VAGUENESS AND AMBIGUITY IN PRINT MEDIA ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT
Since the philosophers of language launched a debate into the nature of vagueness and ambiguity a century ago, various scholars have engaged the subject with varying interests, commitments and outcomes on the appropriate theory and practice for the investigation of words, phrases and expressions which are 'fuzzy', 'obscure', 'vague', 'ambiguous', and which fall within the regions of 'borderline cases'. These debates have dominated discussions in philosophy until recently when linguistics started taking the subject seriously and then bringing it under the broader linguistic structure to account for the phenomena in natural languages. This study sets out to examine vagueness and ambiguity in print media advertisements used to promote ideas, products and services. Adopting a semantic-based approach, the study concludes that vagueness and ambiguity are used in ignorance, by mistake, by accident or on purpose in print media advertisements primarily to mislead, to confuse, to entertain, to hedge truth, to persuade, and to make certain ideas, products and services appear plausible or more plausible than they really are in defiance to the prevailing ideology of clarity and openness in public communication theory and research. The study, therefore, suggests the elimination of vague and ambiguous properties from print ad messages since every language has all the linguistic resources required to specify any meaning or reading.

Key words: ambiguity, language, logic, media, semantics, vagueness

1.   INTRODUCTION

There is a general consensus that theyardstick for effective public communication is comprehension and clarity of intent of the speaker or writer. In spoken or written communication, there is an apparent discomfort among the people when the words, phrases and sentences are strung in order to put the listener or reader in the dark.

An examination of literature on the subject shows that participants in communication are expected to observe conventions against the use of obscurity and ambiguity (Grice, 1975). There is failure of communication where the listener or reader cannot make appropriate cognitive or behavioural meaning of the speaker's [writer's] intention and meaning (Lyons, 1977). Scholars advise companies and businesses to always use plain language in their communication because it is easier to write, read and understand (Bailey, 1996). Customers want companies to say what they stand for and what things make them unique (Philips & Rasberry, 2005). In their communication, companies and businesses are advised to avoid using words with unclear contextual clues (Al Maskari, 2013). However, advertisements in the print media sometimes create fallacies arising from vagueness and ambiguity which are often held to be bad in public communication.

Advertisement is an important communication medium business in whichpeople and customers rely on for the sale and purchase of products and services. Sale turnover or acceptability of an idea, person, or products sometimes depends on the contents of advertisements made in the newspapers, magazines, billboards, posters, etc. It is, therefore, no wonder that most companies, organisations, individuals, and the government, among others, today place advertisements in the print media. It is, however, unfortunate that the contents of some of the advertisements are couched in a language shrouded with vague and ambiguous linguistic properties that confuse more than illumine the main purpose the advertisements are meant to serve.

Some creators of print media advertisements tend to violate the need to have advertisements written in clear language with unmistakable semantic contents and pragmatic considerations. This has often led to ambiguity which, along with its partners in logical crimes, vagueness and obscurity, can result amusing communication, yet harmful and highly deceptive (Walton, 1996). This is also contrary to the concept of 'affirmative disclosure' in some countries which requires an advertiser to provide customers with information that could affect their purchase decision.

However, as the global demand for the production and consumption of print media advertisement grow, there are apparent cases of vagueness and ambiguity in the language of advertisements in the print media. Occurring sometimes at the word level, phrasal level and sentential level, the vagueness and ambiguity violate the prevailing ideology of clarity and openness in public

communication theory and research. In fact, the vagueness and ambiguity pose not only a linguistic challenge, but also a philosophical or even a legal one.

Although in advertising it may be considered normal, even a necessity, to string ad messages in vague and ambiguous terms due to an emerging phenomenon vaguely referred to as 'MBA-speak', 'corporate speak' or 'strategic communication' which, by definition, refers to communication aimed primarily at achieving a particular goal, the need to inform and persuade the public about the importance, risks, value, or efficacy of the particular products, goal, idea, makes it extremely imperative to examine the vague and ambiguous properties usually embedded in the language of the print media advertisements. Even though not all cases of vagueness and ambiguity are considered to be harmful in daily communication as pointed out by Dascal (2002), the effects of vagueness and ambiguity must not be under-estimated in the face of the vast problems of comprehension they create and the fluidity with which they can make the owner of a dubious product or service confuse people, deceive unsuspecting members of the public, mislead people and ultimately escape justice.

2.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The need for advertisement is widespread. However, reservations about advertisements are equally age-long. Over the years, scholars have questioned the motive for the use of advertisements in business and commercial transactions. It is because of its negative use and tendency to be abused that some organizations prevent their members from seeking or placing advertisements in the media. Reservations about advertisements are shared by Bittner (1989, p.225) thus: We are concerned about how advertising manipulates and motivates us, its clutter and intrusiveness, its contents, and media support for advertising as an institution. Of these, our negative opinions center on its credibility, content, intrusiveness, and its ability to manipulate and motivate us.

Far from the reservations about advertisements is the fact that the use of words, phrases, sentences or expressions with vague or ambiguous properties or a combination of both in the print media advertisements without semantic and pragmatic considerations often result in miscommunication. Yet, the prevailing ideology of clarity and openness in public communication theory and research often require public communicators to avoid linguistic pitfalls in all aspects of language use.

However, in the task of identifying linguistic pitfalls which consist of obscurity, vagueness and ambiguity in language aimed primarily at misleading, deceiving, confusing or making certain ideas seem profound or more profound than they really are, linguists often employ 'critical thinking' in arriving at the semantic contents of the expression. An internet source quoted in Oryila (2012, p.11) captures the point more clearly thus: […] we applied our critical thinking to the problem of interpreting ideas expressed in language. Knowing the context within which a word or expression is used and the intention of the [writer] in using the word or expression is essential to making an accurate interpretation. Vagueness and ambiguity are unproblematic if the context and the purpose make the [writer's] meaning clear to the [reader]. But vagueness and ambiguity can be problematic in those contexts in which multiple plausible interpretations are possible. We may not be sure exactly what cases a problematically vague term is intended to include or exclude. We may not be sure which meaning of a problematically ambiguous term a [writer] intends.

Baldinger (1980) argues that each language possesses several levels that help each other when there are imperfections and ambiguities. Where the contextual claims do not resolve the imperfections and ambiguities, the study concludes that there is misunderstanding. Also Kempson (1977) and Akwanya (1996) suggest that the problem of vagueness and ambiguity can be resolved by using 'truth conditional semantics', which involves 'verifying the sentence and relating it to the conditions that guarantee its truth'. Akwanya demonstrates this by using his famous sentence, 'Uche is running the race' which means (i) contending in a race, and (ii) organising a race. For the ambiguity of the sentence to be resolved, the verification of the meaning consists in linking its two meanings to the state of affairs it describes in the real world, such as (i) 'Uche is running the race' means that Uche is competing in a race, if and only if Uche is competing in a race, (ii) 'Uche is running the race' means that 'Uche is organising the race, if and only if Uche is organising the race', and (iii) 'Uche is running the race' if and only if Uche is organising the race.'

It is, therefore, the doubt, confusion, deficiency in language use and miscommunications occasioned by the deliberate or inadvertent use of vague and ambiguous properties in the creation of ad messages that this study intends to remedy. It is hoped that creators of ad messages will give priority to comprehension which is the basis of public communication and for which regulatory agencies sometimes require their advertisements to observe. This, however, is not to say that all advertisements are doubtful, deceitful, deficient in language use, or always lead to miscommunication, but where it does so, it is because of the vague and ambiguous properties.

3.   THE CONCEPT OF VAGUENESS AND AMBIGUITY IN LANGUAGE

Studies of vagueness and ambiguity in language are relatively new in linguistic and language studies. Indeed, early interest in the study of words and expressions which are 'fuzzy', 'obscure', and 'vague', 'ambiguous', and which fall within the borders of 'borderline cases' were mainly undertaken by philosophers ─and much more later by linguists who brought the subject within the broader linguistic structure.

For a century, philosophers of language, followed by linguists in the 1950s, investigated the subject mainly within the context of borderline cases. The paradoxes which were and are still fashionable in stressing the so-called sorites are the 'paradox of the heap' and the 'paradox of bald'. The conditions which give rise to such language use are considered imprecise, unverifiable, and removed from credible tangible reality. The basis of disagreement is on the specific criteria that are required for one to accept that a particular condition rightly qualifies to be called 'bald' or a 'heap'. When does an accumulation of sand qualify to be called 'a heap'? How much amount of hairs on the head a man must lack for him to be called 'bald'? One grain of sand, the argument goes, does not amount to 'a heap.' Conversely, the loss of few amounts of hairs on a man's head does not qualify him to be called 'bald.' But, surprisingly, people are able to identify when a collection of sand is 'a heap' or 'not a heap.' They recognize when the loss of hairs on a man's head qualifies him to be called 'bald' or 'not bald.' The studies generate vexed controversies that have not been resolved up to this moment.

The term 'ambiguity', according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged Edition (1977, p.66), is derived from a Latin word 'ambi' ─meaning 'both', 'on both sides', or 'akin to.' The dictionary describes the features of ambiguous words and expressions to include doubtful or intellectual uncertainty, the condition of admitting of two or more meanings, of being understood in more than one way or of referring to two or more things at the same time, the maintaining of two or more logically incompatible beliefs or attitudes at the same time or alternately inconsistency resulting from vacillation between two opposing views. Ambiguous word or expression is a linguistic situation whereby an utterance or linguistic item is capable of generating more than one meaning. In essence, when a word or sentence is capable of multiple interpretations, it is labeled as 'ambiguous.' In language, ambiguity occurs at three levels, namely phonological ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, and syntactic ambiguity. Others scholars, however, identifies two types of ambiguities: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity.

Phonological ambiguity is a language situation where 'two or more utterances differ semantically but not phonologically' (Chafe, 1970). Again, phonological ambiguity occurs at three levels, namely word-level which involves the use of homophones such as 'hare and hair', 'raise and rays', 'meat and meet'; identical or orthographic, and phonetic levels which involves the use of homonyms such as bear (verb tense) and bear (noun), bank (verb tense) and bank (noun), and; phrase-level which involves the use of such expressions such as 'the sun's ray meet', 'the sons raise meat' and so on. Significantly, 'syntactic ambiguity' is usually caused by grammatical factor. According to Mayfield (1981), there are three grammatical fallacies of ambiguity, namely, semantic ambiguity, euphemism and equivocation.

Semantic ambiguity occurs with words that are never defined or left intentionally unclear. Such words are usually open to many interpretations. 'Euphemism' occurs when lexical items or expressions that are inoffensive are used in place of those that may be considered distasteful or offensive.

A Latin word meaning 'equal voice', 'equivocation', according to Mayfield (1981, p.250), is the intentional use of ambiguous words in order to mislead or deceive or hedge truth. In other words, equivocations are expressions that are meant to deny that something occurred or did not occur or that a person knows everything or could be wrong with the intention to evade being held for a particular interpretation.

Lastly, in 'lexical ambiguity', also known in other studies as 'structural ambiguity', 'both words and sentences can have more than one meaning' (Kempson, 1977, p.123). In essence, the ambiguity is seen at the lexical or sentential level. In an article entitled 'Ambiguity', Bach (2009) lists words which create lexical ambiguity such as the nouns 'chip', 'pen' and 'suit'; verbs like 'call', 'draw' and 'run'; and, adjectives like 'deep', 'dry' and 'hard'.

The assertion that ambiguity is an ineffaceable feature of language and that any word may on some occasion become ambiguous has been long advanced by Sidgwick (1901). His argument is that all predicate, since it involves the use of descriptive words, is liable to ambiguity. He concludes that all the meaning of descriptive words, that is, general terms, is indeterminate.

In 1918, Russell was reported to have commenced his philosophical inquiry into the nature of meaning dominated by psychological and epistemological considerations which informed his views on

language, logic, and the world (Iglesias, 1977, 1981; Faulkner 2008/9). In 'Vagueness', an article appearing in 1923 in the first volume of The Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology (later to be known simply as The Australasian Journal of Philosophy), Russell launched what later came to be known as the basis of the modern debate of vagueness. Russell attributes vagueness to partly linguistic factor, though he holds that there would still be vagueness even if we had a very precise, logically structured language. By this claim, which he states often results in 'fallacy of verbalism', he means that vagueness is not a feature of the world and people make mistakes by equating the properties of words for properties of things.

Colyvan (2001) criticizes Russell's conclusion for being rather hasty, and for ignoring the strength of the argument that makes sense for the presence of a kind of vagueness, that is, metaphysical vagueness in an article entitled 'Russell on Metaphysical Vagueness.' Colyvan (2001) concludes that vagueness and ambiguity are features of language and the world based on the theory of 'Indispensability Argument' put forward by Quine and Putnam in the philosophy of mathematics which posits that we ought to believe in the existence of mathematical objects such as numbers, functions, among others.

Moreover, Stebbing (1930) identifies a kind of ambiguity that involves only a single person, where the person misleads himself as well as others. She describes this type of ambiguity as a form of error thus: 'Ambiguity arises when [a person] is led on to extend to one referend what is true only of another without realizing that a transition has been made' (Stebbing, 1930, p.21). This occurs, for instance, when we assume that a word which appears in the premises and conclusion have the assume meaning, but soon discovers that the word applies differently in the two parts of the arguments.

Defining 'ambiguity' as a 'dangerous indistinction', which leads to a piece of unsound reasoning, Clark &Welsh (1962, p.158) identify process-product and type-archetype as the two types of shift in language that result in ambiguity.

In the process-product shift, a word, often one ending in '-ion' or '-tion' may signify an activity or its result. "I saw the destruction at Rotterdam" may be ambiguous if we are not certain whether the actual process of destruction or the result is meant. In the type-archetype shift, a word may name a thing, an activity, or an act of some sort and may mean either a good, or effective, or first-rate instance of a thing or simply any instance of the thing. When we call something a work of art it may not be clear whether we are making the claim that it is, say, a good painting, or merely something which could without mistake be called a painting, the product of a painter (Clark & Welsh,1962, p.154).

Clark & Welsh (1962) also state that ambiguity may be classified into ambiguity of reference, ambiguity of tone, and ambiguity of attitude, as well as ambiguity in meaning, ambiguity of attitude.

Grice (1975) represents one of the earliest attempts to make participants in conversation to avoid the use of ambiguity and obscurity by way of observing universal principles and maxims of language use. Although, the maxims do not apply categorically because there are apparent exceptions, Leech (1983) maintains that the maxims enable participants in conversation to communicate on the assumptions that the other participants are co-operative, thereby regulating and contributing to conversational goals. In fact, the maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally, efficiently, rationally and co-operatively way by being sincere, relevant and clear (Oryila, 2005).

Like Russell, Bach (2009) argues that even though people are said to be ambiguous in the way they use language, ambiguity to him, is strictly speaking a property of linguistic expression. This conclusion is defective because it does not distinguish genuine cases of vagueness and ambiguity which are inherent in language use from those which are inserted by the creators of the ad messages at the deep structure level to hedge truth, deceive, or pass an ambivalent message to the public for selfish motives or otherwise beneficial goals.

Lyons (1977), however, in following a different line of argument as to what constitutes 'ambiguity' distinguishes between 'sentence' and 'utterance signals.' An utterance signal is a move in communication and differs from a sentence, which is grammatically defined. Ambiguity occurs only in an utterance, not in a sentence because the sentence selects words as 'lexical items', meaning as individual entries in the lexicon. Accordingly, an item is selected not only with the strict sub-categorization restrictions, but also with it specific semantic attributes in mind. Lyons (1977, p.397) puts the point more lucidly thus: '[…] two utterances will count as utterances of the same sentences if and only if (i) they are identical at the grammatical and phonological (or orthographic) levels of representations and (ii) the forms of which they are composed are forms of the same lexeme.'

The distinction of 'sentence' and 'utterance signals' by Lyons (1977), however, distorts the difference between vagueness and ambiguity as put forward by Kempson (1977), a scholar whose study of the subject within the linguistic circles seems to be much more influential, in-depth and

persistent. According to Kempson (1977), 'vagueness' is a linguistic situation where an utterance or a linguistic item is used in an unclear way thereby creating an uncertainty or doubt in the heart as to its meaning. Kempson (1977) classifies vagueness into four groups, namely, referential vagueness, indeterminacy in the meaning of an item, lack of specification and vagueness due to disjunction in the specification of meaning. Explained briefly, referential vagueness occurs when the meaning of a linguistic item is clear enough in principle but its application to certain object or situation is hard to decide. This is common with words used for describing quality and quantity such as 'handsome.' For example, a man may be described as 'handsome', an action of a soldier as 'handsome', and a collection of water may be said to be 'handsome.'

As noted by Kempson (1977, p.125), vagueness of indeterminacy of meaning occurs where there is the difficulty of ascertaining meaning from an utterance or sentence. She illustrates this with the expression, 'John's book' which yields itself to the following interpretation: (i) the book John wrote, (ii) the book John owns, (iii) the book John has been reading, (iv) the book John was carrying when he came in, (v) the book John borrowed and (vi) the book of John (the Gospel of Saint John).

In vagueness of lack of specification in the meaning of an item, the meaning is clear but it is only generally specified. The use of common nouns such as 'neighbour' falls into this type of vagueness as it does not give us a clue about gender, creed, age, race, class, among others, of the person. Finally, vagueness arising from disjunction in the specification of the meaning of an item occurs where the meaning involves an either-or statement of different possibilities. According to Brook (1973, p.148), vagueness is used for two reasons:

Vague words, like situations, position, and state of affairs are often used for laziness and cowardice for, if the speaker described the situation more precisely, it might be that someone would contradict him. If he is vague, there is nothing with which anyone can either agree or can disagree.

Also, Kempson (1977) provides various tests ambiguity may be subjected to in verifying the ambiguous properties of English constructions. The first in the series of tests Kempson (1977) proposes in verifying the ambiguity of sentences from those which are not is the use of 'verb phrase pro-form expression' or anaphoric processes — 'processes which refer back to an earlier part of the sentence' (p.129). Lakoff (1970) and Jackendoff (1972) are some of the studies that have attempted to show linguistic arguments which assume that negative sentences are ambiguous. In an apparently similar argument, Quirk &Greenbaum (1973) have stated that the scope and focus of negative sentences if not properly handled may give rise to ambiguity as illustrated in the following example:

'I didn't leave home because I was afraid of my father' (Quirk & Greenbaum,1973, p.189).

The sentence could mean: (a) because I was afraid of my father I didn't leave home. (b)I left home, but it wasn't because I was afraid of my father. But these arguments have been shown to be incorrect in Kempson (1975) and (1977) by the use of the verb phrase test for ambiguity to test 'the scope of negation.' In testing the 'scope of negation', it is evident as shown by the verb phrase test for ambiguity that negative sentences do not result in an ambiguity because 'negative sentences are not ambiguous with respect to variations in the scope of negation.' (134) Take, for instance, the following Kempsan's example: 'On Monday it was not a woman that came to the door, and on Tuesday it wasn't either: on Monday it was a man and on Tuesday it was a young girl' (1977, p.133). An examination of the sentence shows that the sentence is used for two purposes: (i) to assert that the reason why on Monday it was false that a woman come to the door, was that the person who came was not a female adult but a male. (ii) To assert that the reason why on Tuesday it was false that a woman came to the door was that the person who came was not female adult but a non-adult female. The reason for this conclusion is that the conditions of femininity required for the negative sentence and adulthood necessary for the truth of the positive sentence are not met for there to be a case of ambiguity.

However, Kempson (1977) is severely criticized for using the verb phrase pro-form test. Akwanya (1996), for example, points out that the pro-form test verifies what one subject does by reference to what another does. For example, 'Uche is running the race' means that 'Uche is organising the race if and only if Obika is organising the race too' (Akwanya, 1996, p.80). Another weakness of the test is that it applies to indicative sentences only and not to the wide range of communicative behaviours such as questions, imperatives, among others. The test is not also helpful in analyzing sentences couched in purely literary sense because the only tools available to it for interpretation are the lexicon and the knowledge of syntactic structure.

Bach's (2009) 'Ambiguity' also provides various tests by which ambiguity may be identified. These include the use of 'unrelated antonyms' as with 'hard', which has both 'soft' and 'easy' as opposites. Another is the 'conjunction reduction test'.

Leno (1990) has established that unintentionally ambiguous statements are sources of humour, especially when one of the possible meanings is ludicrous. While this may be the primary reason

behind some print ad messages, business and commercial messages requiring buyers making purchase decisions is a serious matter to linguistics.

Some authors have attempted to trace the origin of vagueness to epistemological as well as linguistic factors. Scholars like Sorensen (1988) and Williamson (1994) share the view that vagueness is epistemic in origin. According to them, our words refer precisely to precise objects and precise properties. Vagueness occurs because we cannot tell where borders are. But, as noted by Prinz (1998), the proponents of the epistemic theory are criticized because of their failure to show us the precise boundaries that divide words, more since no study on the subject has been able to resolve the controversy posed by borderline cases.

4.   OVERVIEW ON ADVERTISMENTS IN THE PRINT MEDIA

The term 'advertisement' or 'advertising' (or 'ad', 'advert' for short) is often thought as the paid, non-personal promotion of a cause, idea, product, or service by an identified sponsor attempting to inform or persuade a particular target audience.

According to Bittner (1989), the origin of advertising as known today began with business people who placed classified-type ads for their products. The income those advertisements produced for newspapers were important since government printing assistance in form of subsidies were declining. Ad agencies, however, first appeared in the late nineteen century when newspapers began to rely less on government subsidies and more commercial advertising to survive due largely to its scope of coverage of potential consumers because of the growth in infrastructural facilities and mode of transportation.

Studies reveal that there was initial resistance from merchants who felt that it was unorthodox to market any products in any way other than a storefront. Creative advertising was absent in newspapers and magazines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely because the foundation for such an innovative service was yet to be laid. Merchants worked with retailers for distribution of goods retained talented copywriters/design artists with the growth of the print media with new opportunities for design and layout. It became obvious that talent and creativity were not only a premium but also a necessary to compete in the market place.

Advertising are of different types and purposes. Bittner's (1989, p.225) has captured the types and purposes of advertising clearly thus:

Standard advertising attempts to persuade us to purchase a certain products and services, public service ads are those devised by nonprofit organizations to answer a public need. Social responsibility ads seek to warn us against the dangers inherent in the excessive use of some products or service. Counter-advertising concentrates on warning consumers about illegal fraud or misrepresentation of in advertising. Corrective advertising is employed when an enforcement agency has determined that a previous ad has misrepresented product or service. Advocacy advertising champions preventive action against conditions affecting the public welfare. Image advertising is a term primarily applied to messages sponsored by corporations to improve their cooperate image.

Even though, no specific attempt is made under this study to show the classes each of the ads treated here belongs to, as that is far beyond the bounds of the current study, Bittner's taxonomy appears relevant as it reveals the principle behind the creation of messages in all forms of mass media. As it is, ads come in different shades and forms.

As major advertising media in Nigeria, newspapers, magazines, billboards, etc are utilized by advertisers and customers for news stories and information of general interest. This gives companies, advertisers and media organizations opportunity to bring various advertisements to the public. However, some of these ads are couched in vague and ambiguous language which results in miscommunication. As mentioned earlier, this study sets out to examine the vague and ambiguous properties usually embedded in snippets of ad messages in Nigerian print media under the guise of 'MBA-speak' or 'ad-speak'. It identifies the types of vagueness and ambiguity in these media as well as provides various cues on how to avoid them in the stringing of ad messages. It is hoped, therefore, that the study will be of sufficient salience to all
.

5.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research design involves the collection and analysis of data from the print media only. The device is useful because, being a research based mainly on examining the semantic content (but also not neglecting the inter-dependence of the syntactic structure of ad messages) it is only the collection and analysis of data from the secondary sources which is of primary concern here.

In line with the five features of newspapers outlined in 1928 by a German scholar and quoted in Bittner (1989), the magazines and newspapers collected are those whose features include publishing periodically at intervals of not less than once a week, employing mechanical production, accessibility

of admission by anyone who can pay the price of production, variation in content and inclusion of everything of public interest to anyone not merely to a small select group, timeliness of production with some continuity of organization.

Random Sampling was used to choose the newspapers and the magazines whose advertisements were used. The method is random because every newspaper or magazine had equal opportunity of being selected. The main instrument for data collection is the use of secondary sources, that is, the use of advertisements in the print media.

To make the instrument achieve what is expected, the authors subjected every ad to semantic evaluation to determine if it manifests vague or ambiguous properties. This is necessary because as pointed out by Kempson (1977, p.8) 'Environmental influences, social influences, perceptual ability, psychological makeup, constraints on memory and linguistic ability, all interact to determine what is said and how it is understood on particular occasions.'

The authors thus used 'content analysis' technique in the collection of the data. 'Content analysis', according to Stone et al (1966, p.5) is 'a research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within a text.' In this way, advertisements which were found not to be vague or ambiguous were left out. Similarly, the researcher left out advertisements which were 'long', that is, running into several sentences. This is because such advertisements would have made the study too bulky. Pictorial images accompanying the advertisements were also left out. The reason is that the inclusion of the pictorial images demands a semiotic analysis which is far beyond the scope of this study. Again, the advertisements that were treated here were those whose pictorial images did not furnish any evidence for the resolution of their vague and ambiguous contextual renderings.

Since it is the words, phrases and sentences which contain vagueness and ambiguity (Kempson, 1977; Yule, 2007), the study focused on identifying, describing, analysing and resolving the different types of vagueness and ambiguity in print media. In order to uncover vagueness and ambiguity, the study adopted the practice of 'descriptive linguistics.' Clark& Welsh (1962) outlines the procedures to include identifying and resolving the contexts of words, identifying and resolving particles of negation and opposites in the language, explicating similar grammatical forms that may hide a difference in meaning or alter the context of a word or phrase structure, paying attention to the etymology of some. Problematic words as well as describing in some details if necessary circumstances in which we should use one phrase or the other.

For the purpose of avoiding the repetition of a whole advertisement at a particular point in time throughout the study, it is only the linguistic item, phrases, or sentences which contain the vague or ambiguous properties that are isolated and analysed. As it is, the unit of presentation and analysis varied from case to case with individual types of vagueness and ambiguity. It must be stressed that in isolating and analysing vagueness and ambiguity, it is common to sees a 'word', 'phrase', or 'sentence' being said to 'mean', or 'to refer' to a certain meaning or meanings. 'To mean' or 'to refer' gives the possible meaning-interpretation(s) relevant for the explication of the words, phrases, or sentences.

Therefore, the words which form subject of the study, except with evidence of contextual variations, retained the meaning(s) given them in English. Lyons (1977, p.4) has put the point more bluntly thus:

[…] the fact remains that the meanings of words and sentences is learned and maintained by the use to which language is put in communicative situations. […] what the words and sentences of a language mean is in the last resort, both theoretically inexplicable and empirically unverifiable except in terms of what the speakers of the language mean by their use of these words and sentences.

Technically speaking, the words isolated here may be termed 'key words.' Although, some linguists object to the approach which makes inclusion of 'key words' under some semantic studies, the explanation for this approach is that, whereas not all the words isolated may be appropriately called 'key words', not all the words in a string required explication or definition. 'A definition', as Goddard (1998, p.26) points out, 'is an attempt to show the meaning of one word (or other linguistic expressions) by means of some other words which 'say the same thing'.' Again, not all linguistic items can be defined because some are 'semantic primitives' Arnauld & Nicole (1996, p.64) envisage semantic primitives when they state:

We say it would be impossible to define every word. For in order to define a word, it is necessary to use other words designating the idea we want to connect to the word being defined. And if we then wished to define the words to explain that word we would need still others and so on to infinity. Consequently, we necessarily have to stop at primitive terms, which are undefined.

The study thus used these strategies to resolve problematic vagueness and ambiguity. Applying critical thinking skills to the content of the ads, the researchers asked probing questions to contextualise, to clarify intent, to work out the meaning, to ascertain exclusions and exceptions, or to

specify the meaning for a given purpose. To re-work or disambiguate the ads, it is common to find out that the alternative versions may be longer or shorter than the original versions.

The study attempts also to determine the falsity and truthfulness of the ads by linguistically examining the structures of the words used in the advertisements. Akmajian et al (2001, p.243) justify this when they say:

A sentence is linguistically true (or linguistically false) is determined solely by the semantics of the language and not necessary to check any facts about nonlinguistic world in order to determine its truth or falsehood. A sentence is empirically true (or empirically false) if it is not linguistically false ─that is, if is necessary to check the nonlinguistic world in order to falsify it; knowledge of the language alone does not settle the matter. Semantics is not concerned to explain empirical truths and falsehoods, but it is concerned to explain those sentences that are linguistically true or false.

6.   DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the data is presented and analyzed in order to show vagueness and ambiguity in the snippets of print ad messages, as well as approximate versions of the original ads.

1. Ad by an Advertiser for the Sale of Drugs

'Be free from killer disease. It can lead to H.I.V. AIDS'—Arsenal Focus Mid-Week, May 10-13, 2011, p.6.

Ad 1 reveals the problem of ambiguity caused by grammatical factor. The ambiguity of the ad is caused by 'denominal adjectives'. According to Quirk & Greenbaun (1976, p.123), denominal adjectives are adjectives derived from nouns.

The use of the 'killer disease' casts doubt on the meaning of the ad. The phrase implies: (a) a killer of disease; and, (b) a disease that kills. This makes the ad to be interpreted at the lexical level as well as the sentential level thus: 'Be free from (a) killer of disease. It can lead to H.I.V. AIDS' and 'Be free from (a) disease that kills. It can lead to H.I.V. AIDS.'

Consider the uses of the following phrases which are employed in the same way as above: (a) boy killer or killer boy (b) killer student or student killer. In 'boy killer', the phrase means (a) a boy who kills or (b) a killer of boy. In 'student killer', on the other hand, the phrase also means (a) a student who kills or (b) a killer of student. The same interpretations would be given even if the phrases are applied in the other way round. The ad can be disambiguated to convey the exact meaning the advertiser wants to express: whether the aim is to advertise a killer of disease or a disease that kills. But, since this ad does not manifest this clue, it is difficult to recast the original ad into a coherent piece.

2. Ad by an Advertiser for the Sale of Drugs

'Be totally free from all sexual diseases this millennium'—*Arsenal Focus Mid-Week*, May 10-13, 2011, p.6

In ad 2, a similar indictment as in 1 is applicable. The troublesome phrase is 'sexual diseases', which makes the phrase to be semantically ambiguous. The ad opens itself to the following interpretations: (a) diseases that are contracted through sexual intercourse (b) diseases that are sexual in nature, whose contraction depends on the host's sex status. The problem here is created by the troublesome lexical adjectival element, 'sexual'. Therefore, although this phrase may be taken to refer to diseases people get as a result of having sexual intercourse, it also makes an underlying assumption about diseases people contract as a result of their sex nature. To string the ad, the ambiguity must be removed in line with the intention of the advertiser. As it appears, what the ad sets out to canvass is:

Be free from sexually-transmitted disease. It can lead to H.I.V. AIDS.

3. Ad by the Market Magazine

'Read The Market. Nigeria's leading, policy and economy magazine now published bi-monthly'–*Leadership Sunday*, February 17, 2009, p.1

In ad 3, the phrase, 'Now published bi-monthly', causes the interpretative problem because of the semantic ambiguity of 'bi-monthly.' The prefix, 'bi-', according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2006, p.129), when used 'with a period of time can mean either 'happening twice' in that period of time, or 'happening once in every two' periods.

Indeed, the confusion the reader has is in understanding the specific time or periods of time the magazine is published. Does 'Now published bi-monthly' mean the magazine is published 'once every two months' or does it mean 'twice every month'? To resolve this confusion, the phrase must be disambiguated to any of the following:

'Now published twice every month' or 'Now published once every two months.'

4. Ad by Quincy Herbal Slimmers

'Lose more than 10kgs and 10 inches in ten days. Skin treatment, breast enhancement, could all be done with natural herbs. Remember, if it is not Quincy, it is not slimming. We have access to nature' – *TELL Magazine*, February 9, 2009, p.11

'Lose more than 10kg and 10 inches in ten days...' in in ad 4 is vague due to the unspecified amount of weight loss as a result of using the product. In other words, the specified amount of weight loss here is still general as the reader is not able to know the exact amount of weight loss or the exact number of days the specified weight loss would be achieved.

'Treatment' in 'skin treatment', when used together, is semantically ambiguous as the meaning of the word is left intentionally unclear. Does 'treatment' refer to 'a cure for the skin' or 'improvements made on the skin to bring out its beauty'? 'Enhancement' in 'breast enhancement' has a similar interpretive problem as the preceding one. It may be applied to a situation where the advertiser means: (a) improving the physical outlook of the breast or (b) improving the milk production quality or quantity of the breast. It is opined that to eliminate the vague properties, the advertiser must take into consideration the syntactic properties that render the ad vague in several respects.

5.Ad by Etisalat

'I don hammer o! Kizitoegeonu (20 years old) Thanks to etisalat, I'm now the million dollar man, far richer than my wildest dreams. All I can say is, to be a 9jillionaire, get on the 0809ja network' –*Sunday Sun*, November 15, 2009, p.14

According to Guth (1977), the use of abbreviations and figures save much time and space, a factor that motivates some media advertisements to use them. But, abbreviations not generally acceptable in ordinary language create misunderstanding. Use of abbreviations has become a problem when abbreviations from local languages not known to the majority of the people are employed. The combination of alpha-numeric elements in print media advertisements creates the problem of ambiguity evident in ad 5. The ad has 'vague words', of the kind defined by McArthur (1996, p.988) thus:

Any occasional semi-technical term for a word of imprecise reference, such as thungummy, widget... They are usually casual, often have whimsical spellings and may be regionally distinct...They tend to be plays on numbers ... [and] open to improvisation and miscegenation.

'Million dollar man', '9jillionaire', and '0809ja network' are the problematic syntactic units of ad 5. The analysis shows that 'million dollar man' is structurally ambiguous in the following respects: (a) it means a man who has millions of dollar (b) a man who is worth millions of dollar. 'Has' and 'worth' represents a major bi-polar scale in the metric of wealth possession. The problem is aggravated by the absence of a hyphen between 'million' and 'dollar' to denote that the words are used as a compound word. '9jillionaire' has no known meaning within the lexicon. Its use here is obscure and vague as the alpha-numeric elements do not clearly specify what the construction means or stands for. The reader is confused because the use of '9jillionaire', though stylistic enough, does not conform to the sense of 'million dollar man'—theelated young man earlier ascribed to himself in the advertisement. '0809ja network' is not clear either. 'Naija', or its variant '9ja', is a Nigerian slang for the country 'Nigeria'—terms considered as uncharitable by Nigeria's former Minister of Information, Late Mrs. Dora Akunyili.

The telephone code for most Nigerian mobile phone network companies starts with 080. Is '080naija' different from '0809ja'? The point here is this: it is difficult to accept that '0809ja' refers to the Etisalat network as any other communication network can use it without being accused of copyright infringement since the application of the alpha-numeric elements is a mere slang expression whose meaning is indeterminate.

6. Ad by AGAT Ltd

'We manufacture even baked longspan aluminum roofing sheets, cladding doors & windows'—*The Guardian*, Wednesday, November 9, 2005, p.59

The use of 'even' in ad 6 presents the problem of dangling modifier or dangling intensifier within a linguistic structure. A dangling modifier or intensifier is a modifier or intensifier that is applied wrongly within a linguistic communication. In this case, does 'even' mean 'equal', 'also', 'smooth', or 'flat'? 'Even' creates the problem of vagueness due to disjunction in the specification of the meaning of a lexical item. The prediction of the meanings of the word as applied here holds simultaneously true for all readings which makes it to fail as a clear case of ambiguity. But, the vagueness will be eliminated when the word, 'even', is applied before its preceding verb, 'manufacture'. The reading that will become clearly manifest is 'also':

'We even manufacture baked longspan aluminum roofing sheets....'

Other disjunctions are also eradicable in line with the readings earlier mentioned:

'We manufacture smooth baked longspan aluminum roofing sheets....'

'We manufacture flat baked longspan aluminum roofing sheets....'

'We manufacture equal baked longspan aluminum roofing sheet....'

Creators of ad should choose the specific ad whose content reflects their desire and purpose.

7. Ad by AMS Computers

'HP, DELL, Sony, Toshiba, Acer, etc. We beat or match any price in the country provided they are genuine computers'—*Leadership*, Wednesday, June 18, 2008, p.48

Ad 7 manifests the problem of vagueness arising from disjunction in the specification of the meaning of a phrase. As stated earlier, this occurs where the meaning involves an either-or statement of different possibilities. The ambiguity is in the phrases, 'beat or match any price' and the proviso, 'provided they are genuine computers' ─which, taken together, gives the ad a somewhat disjunctive reading. The ad is liable to be interpreted at three different levels.

To 'beat any price' means to sell below or above the prices set by other similar companies. To 'match any price' is to sell according to the prevailing market prices. This is a contradiction because the price of sale is not stable and it depends on the precondition that distorts the specific price for which the computers are sold. The ad may be paraphrased as follows:

'We sell below, above or according to the prevailing market prices provided the computers are genuine.'

To eliminate the disjunction, it is imperative to cast this ad to possess only one of these meanings only:

'We beat any price in the country provided the computers are not genuine.'

'We match any price in the country provided the computers are genuine.'

'We sell according to the prevailing market price provided the computers are genuine.'

The prerequisite, 'provided the computers are genuine', makes it difficult to know whether the Company, AMS Computers, specializes in selling computers only, buying computers only, or both. This makes the ad to be guilty of what Clark & Welsh (1962, p.153) call 'ambiguity of tone'. The tone of ad is ambivalent.

8. Ad by Hyundai Motors in Nigeria Limited

'Not sunlight, its stylelight'—*Leadership*, Tuesday, July 26, 2011, p.37

Ad 8 illustrates the use of word-play in print media advertisement. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2006, p.1696), 'word-play' is the act of '… making jokes by using words in a clear or amusing way, especially by using A WORD THAT HAS TWO MEANINGS, DIFFERENT WORDS THAT SOUND THE SAME….' (Emphasis added).

The words that have triggered the vagueness of indeterminacy by way of word-play are 'sunlight' and 'stylelight'. Whereas the meaning of 'sunlight'─ that is, '(as bright as) light from the sun'─ is clear for the reader, the meaning of 'stylelight' is vague because it is a lexical coinage whose real meaning is not known within the English lexicon. It is only the advertiser who perhaps knows the putative meaning of 'stylelight' in the context. The implication of this is that the possession of exclusive knowledge about a word's meaning by the creator of the ad alone makes the knowledge and inquiry into the meaning of the word by another complex, subjective and unattainable.

7.   CONCLUSION

As seen in the preceding discussion, vagueness and ambiguity are inserted in the surface as well as deep structure levels of print media ad messages. The descriptions and explanations provided in the study are attempts to find rational explications and some are fundamental bases for understanding what happens when vagueness and ambiguity are used in print media advertisements. Many reasons account for the multiple meaning of vagueness and ambiguity in print media advertisements. These include a shift in meaning due to the ignorance of the advertiser, the accidental, mistaken or deliberate shift in meaning, the appeal to metaphors and the extension of meaning to reflect the advertiser's needs. Some scholars are of the opinion that since vagueness and ambiguity are inherent properties of language, it is futile trying to eliminate them, more because of the potential benefits they play in language use, reasoning and thinking. But, the proponents of elimination, a line of argument toed by this study, argue that vagueness and ambiguity can be eliminated in human communication.

The reason for the elimination of vagueness and ambiguity stems from the discovery that in print media advertisements, vagueness and ambiguity may be used to persuade, to deceive, to confuse, to hedge truth, to mislead, and to make certain ideas, products and services appear profound or more profound that they really are. Vagueness and ambiguity in print media advertisements are meant to persuade because the words or language of the ad glowingly paints a beautiful picture about the value, efficacy, and goal of the idea, product, or service by the use of vague and ambiguous terms.

They deceive when the words or language is laced with vague and ambiguous properties to influence the reader's purchase decision or to cajole the reader to buying an idea, product or service. It confuses when the meaning of the ad is unclear, doubtful, and general for the reader to know which specific meaning is intended. It hedges truth when the content of the ad is evasive, ambivalent, and

noncommittal. It misleads when the reader is led to flirt with multiple meaning with no cue to make a definitive meaning out of the content of the advertisement. It makes certain ideas, products and services appear plausible or more plausible than they really are when the content brilliantly paints unverifiable and inconclusive representation of the ad which has no basis in credible concrete reality, thereby downplaying the negative side of the ideas, products, or services, by the use of vague and ambiguous expressions couched in stylistic brilliance.

Above all, the conclusion about the truth and falsity of some of the print media advertisements is based on truth relations as well as truth properties that are most central to the semantics of the messages. Again, it is possible to determine the truth and falsity of vague and ambiguous ads because some truth properties and truth relations apply irrespective of reference and the way the world is actually is, in so far as meaning is kept constant.

8.   RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the problem of vagueness and ambiguity is caused by faulty grammatical and semantic constructions, the study makes a number of suggestions which are relevant in avoiding vagueness and ambiguity in print media advertisements. Apart from the individual corrections made in each case in the body of the work, the following strategies are offered as panaceas in solving the problem of vagueness and ambiguities in print media.

1. The advertiser must give priority to precision and comprehension. This requires the use of words whose contexts express clear and exact meaning. It is not a call for the advertiser to make use of unnecessarily large number of words. It is rather a call for the advertisers to be able to march the goal of economy in the use of words with brevity, conciseness, and aptness of the message.

2. To achieve clarity, brevity, and conciseness, the contents of the ads together with the words and expressions must be appropriately delineated. There should not be doubt or confusion about the specific meaning of the words or language in a particular context. It is true that most words have several meanings. But, the advertiser must strive towards making the context of a word or language definitive and incontrovertible.

3. The creative use of language as evident in the use of metaphors and other literary expressions spice up the beauty of ad messages. But, this act of 'spicing up', 'garnishing', or 'embellishing' of ad messages under the guise of MBA-speak or ad-speak, downgrades the meaning of the ads, creating confusion, doubt, ambivalence, and generality in the meaning of the words or language. Care must, therefore, be taken not to jeopardize or sacrifice the precision required of ad messages by the promise of artistic or aesthetic beauty offered by metaphorical usage because it can lead to insincerity, vagueness and ambiguity.

4. The observation of the mechanics of writing in print media advertisements should be obligatory against the current trend which seems print media ads deserve separate standards of mechanics of writing. A case in point is the abuse or neglect of punctuation markings. Punctuation markings ensure consistency, uniformity, and legibility. The need for the use of punctuation markings is well-informed by the fact that they ensure clarity and readability of the writing, add meaning to the words and enable the readers to understand the writing easily.

5. Caution must be taken in the use of capitalization, the unorthodox use of small and big letters as well as spelling forms which may demand unnecessary time and energy to interpret.

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