

## Ambiguity

Language loaded with multiple meaning is called *ambiguous*, a term like *equivocal* that more often than not suggests that the sender has failed to communicate clearly by not stipulating which of several possible meanings is the one the receiver should select. But it is equally clear that the story of Moby Dick is meant to be ambiguous and that when people speak of the “rich meaning” of much great literature they are praising its ambiguity. Puns and double-entendres are *supposed* to mean more than one thing. So whether ambiguity is desirable or not depends on whether it is intended or not and whether, if intended, it is appropriate or not. Who wants manuals for Strategic Air Command missions to be rich in ambiguity? Most composing problems stem from unintended ambiguity, stemming in turn from egocentricity. Most comprehending problems result from not expecting ambiguity in what one is hearing or reading, so that one is misled by others’ unintended ambiguity or interprets figurative language literally.

**Growth Sequence 6: Toward increasing ability to verbalize literally, when unintended and pointless ambiguity will otherwise result, and to verbalize figuratively when multiple meaning is desirable.**

To grow is to become aware of ambiguity, whether engendered by design or by default. This awareness relates directly to the decline of egocentricity, since it is egocentricity that prevents the learner from knowing whether a verbalization is ambiguous. As composers we must know what we have not made explicit that our receiver needs to know. As comprehenders, we must know when a talk or text should be taken literally and when it aims for multileveled meaning of metaphor and pun and representative token. Further, we need to understand when a speaker or writer is creating unintended ambiguity through egocentricity. What teachers call “literal-minded” is a tendency to interpret all discourse on a single level even when the language is figurative and the discourse allegoric or symbolic. Likewise, some learners seem tone-deaf or insensitive to connotations and overtones, the subtler effects of holistic simultaneity, for the similar reason that they are overfastened in the linear, literal, denotative mode.

This kind of incapacity sounds suspiciously school-induced, however, rather than native to childhood, because children are coming from a global state of mind in which the synthesizing mode is

most natural, as we can see from their love of far-fetched and highly symbolic stories in which “incongruity” is permitted. Since they can’t be identifying with such unrealistic figures and events, they must be attached to what those things represent. Teachers often err in forcing students to paraphrase deliberately ambiguous works in an unambiguous, literal statement—an endeavor that is bound to fail, that makes students detest literature, because it makes them look stupid and that thwarts the whole point of such works, which is to communicate to the analogical hemisphere of the mind.

Tolerating ambiguity is a mark of maturity, for it is often useful and, even when not, must be expected and dealt with. There is no way to avoid it, but as people grow they learn increasingly how to exploit it when they want and minimize it when they want. But literal-minded people fear ambiguity. They do not want to believe that things may not be what they seem. They insist rigidly on literal meanings in language as they do on physical appearance in life. The absurd lengths to which some English teachers push symbol-chasing and the hunt for hidden meanings make such people feel justified in reading both books and reality as flat and single-leveled. If not pushed constantly to translate figurative into literal, they would respond fearlessly to ambiguity and thus handle it appropriately. So growth here amounts to really undoing a culturally induced problem, the child certainly not being born to reject metaphor.

Many children have experienced disturbingly mixed messages from parents or other adults and fear plural meanings because these have been contradictory. Beaming contradictory messages to someone at the same time places the receiver in a double bind—unless that person can become aware that precisely that is happening to him. Classically, a child hears others say one thing and sees them do another, or say with words something that their voice or gesture contradicts. If he responds to the signal in one channel, he is wrong by the other. The underdeveloped person just tunes out altogether.

Such a student misses both metaphor and irony. Irony scares him, because it is saying the opposite of what you mean in order to say better what you do mean. An A. E. Housman poem about death skips nimbly along in a lively meter. When you know this is deliberate and can accept multiple signals for their richness, you appreciate this consonance between form and content under the apparent dissonance. Understanding the reason for the ambiguity or dissonance—the confusion or the artfulness of other people, as the case may be—releases the fearful person from the double bind. This requires “standing in the other’s shoes.” Learners need to know that they can respond to mixed signals at once and don’t have to select

only one to respond to. Only awareness and a larger perspective will permit them to make some whole in their minds of the mixed signals. Then they can respond to the whole at once.

**Growth Sequence 7: Toward increasing ability to attune to multiple meaning levels in discourse and to discriminate between egocentric and intended ambiguity in messages one receives.**

Next let's look at growth more specifically in successively larger units of discourse—the word, the phrase, the clause, the sentence, the paragraph, and the organization.

The main way a learner grows verbally is toward increasing the number of options about how to compose thought into language and how to interpret language into thought. This enables learners to send and receive messages with people increasingly different and distant from themselves. These options are played in four main language actions—the naming, phrasing, stating, and chaining of ideas. That is, individual words are assigned to stand for concepts; concepts are elaborated by clustering words into phrases; the clusters are related by predicates to make clauses; the clauses are related in turn by logical connectives; and sentences are organized into sequences and patterns to make whole discourses. For developed speakers choices exist about how to name, phrase, state, and chain their own ideas, and about how to interpret the way others have named, phrased, stated, and chained their ideas. Of course, they're making these choices in context, holistically, not one at a time, discontinuously, as we will examine them next.