



## A Semantic Analysis of Lexical Ambiguity in English Online News Headlines

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**Abstract.** *This study examines lexical ambiguity in English news headlines published in online media, focusing on how ambiguous word choices may lead to different interpretations among readers. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has more than one meaning, especially in context-limited texts such as headlines. The data for this study consist of eight selected headlines taken from The Jakarta Post and BBC News. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to identify ambiguous words and analyze their possible meanings based on semantic theory. The findings reveal that all selected headlines contain lexical ambiguity, particularly in words such as following, race, summons, post, looms, hears, spike, and alarm. These ambiguities mainly arise due to polysemy and the limited context in headlines. While lexical ambiguity can make headlines more engaging and attention-grabbing, it may also lead to misinterpretation. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding lexical ambiguity in order to interpret news headlines more accurately.*

**Keywords:** *semantics, lexical ambiguity, news headlines, polysemy*

**Abstrak.** *Penelitian ini mengkaji ambiguitas leksikal dalam judul berita berbahasa Inggris yang diterbitkan di media daring, dengan fokus pada bagaimana pilihan kata yang ambigu dapat menimbulkan interpretasi berbeda di kalangan pembaca. Ambiguitas leksikal terjadi ketika satu kata memiliki lebih dari satu makna, terutama dalam teks yang konteksnya terbatas seperti judul berita. Data penelitian ini terdiri dari delapan judul berita terpilih yang diambil dari The Jakarta Post dan BBC News. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif untuk mengidentifikasi kata-kata yang ambigu dan menganalisis kemungkinan maknanya berdasarkan teori semantik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa semua judul berita terpilih mengandung ambiguitas leksikal, khususnya pada kata-kata seperti following, race, summons, post, looms, hears, spike, dan alarm. Ambiguitas ini terutama muncul akibat polisemi dan konteks yang terbatas dalam judul berita. Meskipun ambiguitas leksikal dapat membuat judul berita lebih menarik dan mencuri perhatian, hal ini juga berpotensi menimbulkan salah tafsir. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya memahami ambiguitas leksikal agar interpretasi judul berita dapat dilakukan secara lebih akurat.*

**Kata kunci:** *semantik, ambiguitas leksikal, judul berita, polisemi*

### 1. Introduction

Language plays a central role in delivering information, particularly in the digital era where online media has become one of the main sources of news. Among the various elements of news writing, headlines are especially important because they function not only to summarize the content but also to attract readers' attention. To achieve this, headlines are typically written in a concise and impactful way. However, this brevity often results in limited context, which can lead to ambiguity.

In semantics, ambiguity refers to a condition in which a word or expression has more than one meaning. One common type is lexical ambiguity, which occurs when a

single word can be interpreted in different ways. This phenomenon frequently appears in news headlines because journalists tend to choose words that are short, effective, and sometimes open to multiple interpretations. As a result, readers may understand the same headline differently depending on their interpretation.

Lexical ambiguity can serve both functional and problematic purposes. On the one hand, it can make headlines more engaging and appealing, encouraging readers to explore the full article. On the other hand, it may also lead to misunderstanding if the intended meaning is not clearly conveyed. In the context of news media, where clarity and accuracy are essential, this issue becomes particularly important to examine.

Although ambiguity in language has been widely discussed in semantic studies, its presence in news headlines still deserves closer attention, especially in relation to how meaning is constructed and interpreted by readers. Many headlines rely on compact expressions that may unintentionally create multiple meanings, yet this aspect is often overlooked in everyday reading practices.

Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing lexical ambiguity in English news headlines taken from online media sources. The objectives of this study are to identify ambiguous words and to explain their possible meanings based on semantic analysis. This study offers a focused analysis of lexical ambiguity in contemporary online news headlines, highlighting how meaning is shaped in context-limited media texts. By doing so, this study is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how lexical ambiguity functions in real-life media discourse and how it influences readers' interpretation of news headlines.

## **2. Literature Review**

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of meaning in language. It examines how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning and how that meaning is interpreted by language users. According to John I. Saeed, semantics is concerned with the systematic study of meaning as expressed through language (Saeed, 2009). This shows that meaning is not only attached to individual words but also influenced by how those words are used in different contexts.

One important concept in semantics is ambiguity. Ambiguity occurs when a linguistic expression has more than one possible meaning. Stephen Ullmann explains that

ambiguity arises when a single linguistic form is associated with two or more meanings (Ullmann, 1972). In everyday communication, ambiguity can often be resolved through context. However, in short written forms such as news headlines, where contextual information is limited, ambiguity becomes more noticeable and sometimes unavoidable.

Lexical ambiguity is one of the most common types of ambiguity. George Yule states that lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word can be interpreted in more than one way (Yule, 2010). This type of ambiguity is closely related to polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy refers to a word that has several related meanings, while homonymy refers to words that share the same form but have different and unrelated meanings.

In media language, especially in news headlines, lexical ambiguity frequently occurs due to the need for brevity and impact. Headlines are designed to be short and attention-grabbing, which often leads to the omission of contextual details. As a result, certain words may carry more than one possible interpretation. While this strategy can make headlines more appealing, it may also reduce clarity for readers.

Previous studies have shown that ambiguity is a common feature in media texts, particularly in headlines, because journalists tend to use concise and impactful language. However, many of these studies focus more on general ambiguity or on literary texts rather than specifically examining lexical ambiguity in contemporary online news headlines. This indicates that there is still a need for focused analysis on how lexical ambiguity functions in modern digital media contexts.

### **3. Research Method**

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze lexical ambiguity in English news headlines. This method is appropriate because the research focuses on identifying and interpreting meanings rather than measuring numerical data. Through this approach, the study aims to describe how ambiguous words appear and how their meanings can be understood in context.

The data of this study consist of eight English news headlines collected from online media sources, specifically *The Jakarta Post* and *BBC News*. The data were collected within a specific period (March–April 2026) to ensure relevance. These headlines were selected purposively based on the presence of lexical ambiguity,

particularly words that have more than one possible meaning. The selection of data was limited to headlines that clearly demonstrate ambiguity in order to support a focused and in-depth analysis.

The data collection process was carried out in several steps. First, the researcher browsed online news platforms to find relevant headlines. Second, the researcher identified headlines that potentially contain lexical ambiguity. Third, the selected headlines were compiled and organized as the primary data of the study.

The data were analyzed using a descriptive technique. The analysis began by identifying the ambiguous word in each headline. Then, the possible meanings of the word were examined based on semantic theory. Finally, the meanings were interpreted in relation to the context of the headline in order to determine how ambiguity occurs. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of explanations for each data item.

In this study, the researcher acts as the main instrument, as she is directly involved in selecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. To support the analysis, dictionaries and relevant semantic references were used to ensure the accuracy of meaning interpretation.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Results**

This study analyzes eight English news headlines that contain lexical ambiguity. The ambiguity arises from specific words that have more than one meaning. These words may lead to different interpretations, especially because headlines often provide limited context.

The findings show that all selected headlines contain at least one ambiguous word. The identified words include *following*, *race*, *summons*, *post*, *looms*, *hears*, *spike*, and *alarm*. Most of these words are commonly used in everyday language, yet they become ambiguous when used in short and context-limited expressions such as headlines.

### **4.2 Discussion**

The following section presents a detailed analysis of each headline containing lexical ambiguity.

#### **Data 1**

Headline: *Military intelligence chief steps down following acid attack on activist*

In this headline, the ambiguity centers on the word following, which can indicate either a temporal sequence or a causal relationship. On one level, it may simply mean that the resignation occurred after the acid attack. However, it may also suggest that the resignation happened because of the incident.

This dual possibility affects how responsibility is interpreted. If understood temporally, the event appears coincidental. In contrast, a causal reading implies accountability or institutional response. This shows how a single lexical choice can subtly shape readers' interpretation without making the relationship explicit, allowing the headline to remain concise while still open to inference.

### **Data 2**

Headline: *China is winning one AI race*

A notable ambiguity appears in the word *race*, which can refer either to a competition or to a category of people. In this context, the intended meaning clearly relates to technological competition. However, the alternative meaning remains linguistically available, at least momentarily.

This example illustrates how headlines rely heavily on shared background knowledge. This finding is in line with previous studies which suggest that ambiguity requires readers to rely on contextual and background knowledge in interpretation (Zhang, 2021). Readers who are familiar with discussions about artificial intelligence will likely interpret *race* correctly without difficulty. Nevertheless, the presence of multiple meanings shows that interpretation is not purely automatic but involves a quick process of contextual adjustment.

### **Data 3**

Headline: *Govt summons Meta, Google over noncompliance*

The term *summons* in this headline carries more than one possible interpretation. It may refer to a formal legal order, or more generally, to a request to appear. Although the legal meaning is more likely in this context, the less formal interpretation cannot be entirely excluded.

This distinction influences how serious the situation appears. A legal reading suggests strong regulatory action, while a general interpretation may make the issue seem less urgent. This indicates that even a single word choice can affect the perceived authority and tone of a headline.

**Data 4**

Headline: *Press groups decry govt's restriction of Magdalene's acid attack post*

The ambiguity in this case lies in the word post. It may refer to online content or to a position or role. Given the context, the intended meaning is related to a social media post, but the alternative meaning still exists at the lexical level.

This example reflects how language evolves alongside technology. Words like post have developed new meanings in digital contexts, which may not always be immediately clear to all readers. As a result, interpretation depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on familiarity with contemporary media usage.

**Data 5**

Headline: *Online child exploitation looms amid restrictions*

Here, the word looms introduces ambiguity through its multiple meanings. It can refer to something that is about to happen, or to a type of weaving machine. In this headline, the figurative meaning is clearly intended.

What makes this interesting is how figurative language contributes to the overall effect of the headline. The use of looms creates a sense of urgency and impending threat, even though the literal meaning is unrelated. This demonstrates how ambiguity can coexist with clarity, as readers are generally able to select the appropriate interpretation based on context.

**Data 6**

Headline: *India's top court hears challenges to ruling*

The word hears in this headline can be interpreted in two ways: as the act of perceiving sound or as examining a legal case. Within legal contexts, the second meaning is standard, yet the more general meaning remains accessible.

This highlights the role of domain-specific language. Readers who are familiar with legal terminology will immediately understand the intended meaning, while others may briefly interpret it differently before adjusting their understanding. This suggests that ambiguity is sometimes resolved not by the text itself, but by the reader's background knowledge.

**Data 7**

Headline: *Inflation down despite oil price surge, Idul Fitri demand spike*

In this example, the word spike can refer to a sharp increase or to a pointed object. In economic reporting, the first meaning is clearly intended. However, the presence of an alternative meaning still reflects the word's lexical ambiguity.

Compared to other cases, this ambiguity is relatively minor because the surrounding context strongly directs interpretation. Even so, it shows how economic terminology often relies on metaphorical extensions of everyday words, which may not always be immediately transparent to all readers.

#### **Data 8**

Headline: *Indonesia's data center boom raises alarm over water use*

The ambiguity in the word alarm lies between its meaning as a feeling of concern and as a warning device. In this context, it refers to concern about water usage.

This distinction, although subtle, can influence how readers perceive the issue. Interpreting alarm as concern suggests a growing problem, while the alternative meaning may imply a more urgent or immediate warning. This demonstrates how lexical ambiguity can shape not only meaning but also the perceived intensity of a situation.

#### **4.3 Overall Discussion**

The analysis shows that lexical ambiguity in news headlines is mainly caused by polysemy, where a single word has multiple related meanings. In addition, the limited context of headlines plays a significant role in creating ambiguity. Because headlines are designed to be brief and impactful, they often omit details that could clarify meaning.

These findings indicate that lexical ambiguity is a common feature of news headlines. While it can make headlines more engaging and attention-grabbing, it may also lead to different interpretations among readers. Therefore, understanding lexical ambiguity is important in order to interpret news headlines more accurately and avoid misunderstanding.

These findings support the theory proposed by Yule (2010), which states that lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word carries multiple meanings depending on context.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study concludes that lexical ambiguity is a common feature in English news headlines, particularly in online media. The analysis shows that all selected headlines

contain ambiguous words such as *following, race, summons, post, looms, hears, spike, and alarm*, each of which has more than one possible meaning. These ambiguities mainly arise from polysemy and the limited context provided in headlines.

The findings indicate that while lexical ambiguity can make headlines more engaging and effective in attracting readers' attention, it may also lead to multiple interpretations and potential misunderstanding. Therefore, readers need to consider context carefully when interpreting headlines, and writers should be aware of how word choice can influence meaning. Overall, this study highlights the importance of semantic awareness in both producing and understanding news headlines. This study is limited to a small number of headlines and focuses only on lexical ambiguity. Future research may explore other types of ambiguity or use a larger dataset to provide broader insights.

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