



THE POWER OF AMBIGUOUS TITLES IN AFRICAN
CHILDREN'S STORIES: A READER'S PERSPECTIVE
LANGUAGE

Franklin Nduka Agwu

Department of English & Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Abstract: This study explores the use of ambiguity in the titles of Nigerian children's literature, focusing on 34 randomly selected titles from a population of 76. Through a descriptive and analytical approach, the research investigates how ambiguity manifests in children's book titles and its potential role in captivating young readers. Drawing on Wittgenstein's Use Theory, the study identifies and categorizes various types of ambiguity, including lexical, structural, metaphorical, pragmatic, and referential. The research reveals that lexical ambiguity is the most prevalent type (58.8%), followed by structural ambiguity (20.6%). Metaphorical, pragmatic, and referential ambiguities make up smaller proportions of the dataset. The analysis demonstrates that ambiguity in titles enriches the reading experience by offering multiple layers of interpretation, engaging readers' imaginations, and enhancing comprehension. While prescriptive linguists may consider these ambiguities anomalies that disrupt clarity, modern linguistic approaches view them as deliberate stylistic choices, aimed at attracting and stimulating the young audience. This study contributes to the understanding of how linguistic features such as ambiguity can be leveraged to foster curiosity and interest in children's literature, thus enriching both the narrative experience and language acquisition.

Keywords: Titles, literary texts, readers, ambiguity, children's literature

1.1 Introduction

The use of language in children's literature often involves a delicate balance between simplicity and complexity, where meanings may shift to suit the developmental stage of the young audience. One key element that plays a significant role in shaping the depth and allure of such texts is the title. The title of any literary work is usually the first contact readers have with the work. When titles do not appeal to the readers, the tendency to repel the text is inevitable. From the titles, readers may make informed guesses and suggestions about how the entire content of a literary work will eventually pan out. This, however, may not be so for children who have a limited residual knowledge to make such informed guesses, thus, most writers of children's literature frame their topics in ways that will prick the interest of the child and build instant enthusiasm to want to read such work. Such open-

ended titles, are stylistically framed to arouse curiosity and inquisitiveness in the minds of these children, which ultimately drives their passion and interest to read, or say, attempt to read such works. A title offering multiple layers of meanings is referred to as “ambiguous”. Ambiguity serves an intriguing feature in titles, allowing for varied meanings that can both challenge and enrich the reading experience. An ambiguous expression might be understood in two or more different ways. Ndimele (1999), Ogbulogo (2005), Nwala (2015) affirm that ambiguity is a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation. Expressions are therefore, said to be ambiguous if they can be given more than one interpretation. Ndimele further explains that ambiguity involves judgement and opinions about sentences (p.168). Hence, the use of ambiguous titles in children’s literature justifies two of Aristotle’s 5 canon of rhetorics which are dispositio (arrangement) and elocutio (style). Here, ambiguity is seen beyond a grammatical anomaly, and is seen as a stylistic feature. This study therefore aims to explore the concept of ambiguity in the titles of selected children’s literary texts, focusing on how ambiguity manifests and the type of ambiguity manifested. It also offers an explanation to the contextual cues that bring ambiguity to life in the data. This study seeks to explore the role of ambiguity in attracting young readers, facilitating comprehension, and enhancing the overall narrative experience.

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical anchor for this study is Wittgenstein’s Use Theory. This linguistic theory holds that the meaning of an expression (word or sentence) is determined by the context in which it is used. Accordingly, to determine the meaning of an expression one must invoke the conditions under which it is appropriate to use it, including the states of mood of speakers or hearers in a given context. For Wittgenstein, language is a part of our behaviour and interactions with others in the society, because the way we use it, is useful only if it is meaningful to others who share the language with us. It therefore presupposes that the appropriate categorisation of a linguistic expression is one that accounts for how it is used and what it is used for. Hangfling (1989) asserts that Wittgenstein is known as an “ordinary language” philosopher for he proposes to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (p.16). Wisdom (1952) however, interpreted Wittgenstein’s central theme as “Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use.” Kumar explains that Wittgenstein’s use is not anything outside language. “The meaning of a word is its use in the language.” It is the meaningful use of words that he is talking about, hence, he is not explaining what meaning is with reference to something other than meaning. Strawson (1954) in interpreting Wittgenstein’s central theme, further explains that “one might get the impression that he was saying: in philosophy, you want the meaning of the theword, don’t look for mythical, uniquely related term, but look at the use, for that is the meaning”. Words therefore, are not defined by reference to the objects they designate or by the mental representation one might associate with them but how they are used. Ndimele (1999) further avows that it is a silly or serious mistake to regard meaning as an entity, rather, the meaning of any linguistic expression is determined by the context in which it is used. Ndimele’s position is further reinforced by Ogbulogo (2005) where he explains that the meaning of a word or expression is determined by the context of its use. For Ogbulogo, it is the effect created by a linguistic unit within a given context that expresses its full meaning. Wittgenstein’s Use Theory which emphasizes that the meaning of words is determined by their practical use within specific contexts, has been a significant framework for various scholars analyzing linguistic phenomena. This theory shifts focus from static, referential meaning of words to their dynamic application in everyday life. Several studies have applied this theory to analyze language use in diverse contexts, revealing the implications of how meaning is

construed in interaction. Harris (2017) utilizes the use theory to examine how language constructs identity in community settings. She focuses on how group members negotiate identity through linguistic choices in specific contexts. Harris argues that identity is not an inherent property but is constructed through the habitual use of language within a particular social context. Her analysis of adolescent speech in a multicultural neighbourhood reveals that linguistic identity is fluid and contextual, with the meaning of words like “cool” or “gangsta” shifting depending on group dynamics and the situation. This study reinforces Wittgenstein’s assertion that the meaning of words is not fixed, but evolves based on their practical use in specific environments. Similarly, Davidson (2019) applies the Use Theory to examine how emotional expressions such as “I love you” or “I’m sorry” are used in interpersonal communication. Davidson argues that the meaning of emotional expressions is not inherent in the words themselves but is shaped by their use within particular relationships and social contexts. Through an analysis of romantic and familial interactions, he demonstrates that these expressions carry different meanings depending on the participants’ history, intentions, and the situational context. This aligns with Wittgenstein’s view that meaning is fluid and depends on the conventional practices in which words are deployed. Finally, Clark and Mulder (2020) analyze political rhetoric using Wittgenstein’s framework. They demonstrate that the meaning of terms like “democracy” or “freedom” are not static, but shaped by the way these terms are used by political leaders and their audiences. The researchers find that meaning is constructed through repeated use and the shifting contexts in which political discourse occurs. Their work underscores the application of Wittgenstein’s Use Theory in understanding how words gain meaning through the practises surrounding their use in specific political situations. The studies above highlight the diverse applications of Wittgenstein’s Use Theory in analyzing language across various domains, from social interaction and identity construction to political discourse and metaphor usage. These studies underscore the fluid, context-dependent nature of meaning, where words gain significance not from their inherent qualities, but from how they are employed within specific contexts. While these studies have provided insights into the role of language in shaping social realities, there remains a gap in the literature concerning how the Use Theory can be applied to children’s literature, specifically in the analysis of ambiguity in book titles. The present study aims to build on these previous works by extending the application of Wittgenstein’s Use Theory to examine ambiguity in the titles of selected children’s literary texts. While the aforementioned studies have focused on everyday language use, political rhetoric and identity negotiation, this research focuses on how ambiguity in children’s book titles arises from the specific contexts of their usage and the conventions of the genre. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of work that applies Wittgenstein’s Use Theory to linguistic analysis by focusing on a new and underexplored domain – the titles of children’s literature. It will build on the findings of previous studies while addressing the gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on how ambiguity in book titles is deployed in a genre that requires specific communicative and developmental considerations.

3.1 Research Methodology

This study explores ambiguity in the titles of Nigerian children’s literature, specifically works authored by Nigerian writers. The population for the study includes titles of 76 published children’s literature, from which a random sample of 34 titles was selected to ensure diversity. Data collection spanned two months, and the analysis followed a descriptive and analytical approach. The descriptive analysis identified various types of ambiguity, such as lexical, syntactic, and contextual. At the same time, the analytical approach examined how these

ambiguities relate to the books' themes, target audience and cultural context, drawing on Wittgenstein's Use Theory.

4.1 Data Presentation

This section presents the data collected on ambiguity in children's literature titles. The data includes the title of each literary work, two possible meanings of the title, and the type of ambiguity present. The data is summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1

S	Title / of Literary Work	Meaning 1	Meaning 2	Type of Ambiguity
1	Ariella and the Talking Drum	Ariella and the type of drum called a talking drum.	Ariella and the drum that speaks.	Lexical ambiguity
2	A Child with a Child	A child carrying or being accompanied by another a child	A child pregnant with a child	Structural ambiguity
3	African Princess	A princess of African descent	A princess in Africa	Lexical ambiguity
4	A Beach Tail	A beach with a literal tail	The end part of a beach	Lexical ambiguity
5	Burning	A grass on fire	A grass	Lexical ambiguity

	Grass		that hurts the skin like a burn	Significance
6	Birds of our Land	Birds that originate from, or are found in our land	"Birds" could metaphorically refer to the people or citizens of the land	Metaphorical ambiguity
7	Bringing Rain to Kapiti	Ending drought in Kapiti	Bringing prosperity to Kapiti	Metaphorical ambiguity
8	Big Boy	A grown young male individual	A rich young male individual	Pragmatic ambiguity
9	Chicken in the Kitchen	A chicken wandering into the kitchen	A meal of chicken in the kitchen	Lexical ambiguity
10	Catch the Goat	A charge to apprehend an actual goat	A charge to apprehend a human construed to be a goat	Pragmatic ambiguity
11	Carnivorous City	A city of carnivorous animals	A city of dangerous people	Metaphorical ambiguity

1 2 3 p Boy	A boy born and raised in a coal mine	A boy who works in a coal mine	Lexical ambiguity
1 3 Desmond and the very Mean Word	A mean word uttered by Desmond	A mean word said to Desmond	Structural ambiguity
1 4 Diary of a Toddler	A diary written by a toddler	A diary written by someone else about a toddler	Referential ambiguity
1 5 Easy Motion Tourist	A fast traveller	A frequent traveller	Lexical ambiguity
1 6 Emeka's Gift	A gift given by Emeka	A gift given to or belonging to Emeka	Referential ambiguity
1 7 Fresh Water	Of a river with no salt concentration	Neat and unused water	Lexical ambiguity
1 8 Fine Boys	Boys adjudged to be handsome	Boys that are viewed as wellbehaved	Lexical ambiguity
1 9 Flying Tortoise	A tortoise that literally flies	A tortoise that is being flown	Lexical (conceptual) ambiguity

20	High School Stories	Stories about high school	Stories told in high school	Lexical ambiguity
21	Ife's First Haircut	The first haircut Ife received	The first haircut Ife gave as a barber	Structural (possessive) ambiguity
22	Monday's Ball	A match played or to be played on Monday	A ball belonging to an individual named Monday.	Structural (possessive) ambiguity
23	Magical Land	A location characterized by magical occurrences.	A place of possibilities	Lexical ambiguity
24	Not Too Young to Run	Being old enough to literally run	Being old enough to vie for an office	Structural ambiguity
25	Our Son the Minister	Our son who is a minister in the government	Our son who is a minister of the Christian gospel	Lexical ambiguity
26	Omer's Favorite Place	A place that the individual, Omer loves most	A place belonging to Omer that he likes	Structural (possessive)

				ambiguity
27	Song Bird	A species of bird that produces musical sounds	A person who sings well or likes to sing	Lexical Ambiguity
28	Shadow Dance	A type of dance that focuses on the shadow of the dancer	A secret dance	Lexical ambiguity
29	Sugar Girl	A girl viewed as nice	A young girl that is sexually involved with an older man	Lexical ambiguity
30	The Mad house	A disorganised place	A house that accommodates the mentally deranged	Lexical ambiguity
31	The Village School	The school located in the village	The school characterised by attributes of a village	Lexical ambiguity
32	Sosu's Call	A call made by Sosu	2. A call made to Sosu	Lexical ambiguity
33	Wish Maker	Someone who makes a wish	Someone who brings wishes to pass	Structural ambiguity

3 4 5	With out a Silver Spoon	Lack of a literal silver spoon	Lack of privilege or wealth	Lexic al ambig uity
-------------	----------------------------------	--------------------------------	---------------------------------------	------------------------------

4.2 Results and Analysis

This section presents the results of the data analysis, highlighting the frequency and distribution of different types of ambiguity in children's literature titles.

Frequency of Ambiguity Types

The distribution of ambiguity types is summarized in Table 2 below:

Table 2

S/N	Types of Ambiguity	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Lexical/Semantic Ambiguity	20	58.8%
2.	Structural/Syntactic Ambiguity	7	20.6%
3.	Metaphorical Ambiguity	3	8.8%
4.	Pragmatic Ambiguity	2	5.9%
5.	Referential Ambiguity	2	5.9%

4.2.1 Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase has multiple meanings. According to Cruse (2006), lexical ambiguity is a byproduct of polysemy, where a single lexical item carries more than one semantic interpretation. Similarly, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018) emphasize that context plays a critical role in resolving lexical ambiguities, particularly in creative works such as literature. Lexical ambiguity dominates the dataset, with 58.8% of the titles exhibiting this feature. For example, in *Ariella and the Talking Drum*, the title plays on the dual meaning of "talking drum"—a literal drum and a drum that metaphorically "speaks." Similarly, *Burning Grass* can denote physical combustion or a sensory experience akin to a burn. Such titles intrigue readers by relying on polysemous words.

4.2.2 Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity arises from the arrangement of words, allowing for multiple interpretations. Carnie (2013) notes that ambiguity can emerge from syntactic structures that permit different parsing strategies. Structural ambiguity is closely linked to sentence constituents and their hierarchical relationships. Structural ambiguity accounts for 20.6% of the dataset. Titles like *Emeka's Gift* ambiguously suggest either a gift given by or to Emeka, while *Monday's Ball* could denote possession or a scheduled event. This type of ambiguity is common in possessive constructs, reflecting linguistic complexity.

4.2.3 Metaphorical Ambiguity

Metaphorical ambiguity leverages figurative language, where literal and non-literal meanings overlap. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphorical ambiguity is a cornerstone of cognitive linguistics, helping readers

navigate complex abstract concepts through familiar images. Metaphorical ambiguity, found in 11.8% of the dataset, uses figurative expressions to create layered meanings. Titles such as *Birds of Our Land* equate birds to citizens metaphorically, while *Carnivorous City* portrays dangerous people as "carnivores." These metaphors enrich the titles, making the titles more engaging

4.2.4 Referential Ambiguity

Referential ambiguity occurs when it is unclear what or who a title refers to. Levinson (2000) explains that referential ambiguity stems from an underspecified referent, often requiring external context for disambiguation. Cruse (2006) describes referential ambiguity as arising when the referent of a noun phrase is unclear, particularly in cases of pronouns or possessives. In the title "*Emeka's Gift*", it is unclear what is meant, whether we are talking about a gift given to Emeka or a gift given to someone else by Emeka. Such expressions show referential ambiguity as the referent is unclear. Only 5.9% of the dataset features referential ambiguity. In *Diary of a Toddler*, the uncertainty lies in whether the toddler writes the diary or about them. This ambiguity engages readers by prompting questions about the title's perspective.

4.2.5 Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity is rooted in how context, culture, or societal norms shape meaning. Pragmatic ambiguity arises when the intended meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence depends on the context of use, rather than just the linguistic form itself. It involves the interplay of meaning derived from the speaker's intention, cultural norms, and situational context. Levinson (2000) underscores that pragmatic ambiguity depends on shared knowledge or implied meanings beyond linguistic form. Pragmatic ambiguity also represents 5.9% of the dataset. For example, *Big Boy* could describe a physically grown individual or a wealthy young man, depending on societal or cultural contexts. Similarly, *Catch the Goat* humorously implies either catching an actual goat or apprehending someone metaphorically labelled as a goat.

Conclusion

This study highlights how ambiguity, especially lexical and structural, enriches the interpretive possibilities of children's literature. The prevalence of lexical ambiguity (58.8%) underscores the creative use of polysemy in engaging young readers. Structural ambiguity (26.5%) reflects the flexibility of syntactic constructs, while metaphorical, referential, and pragmatic ambiguities add depth and intrigue. Prescriptive linguists may regard these instances of ambiguity as linguistic irregularities that disrupt clarity. In contrast, modern linguistic approaches highlight them as intentional stylistic choices, carefully designed to captivate and stimulate the imaginations of young readers.

REFERENCES

- Carnie, A. (2013). *Syntax: A generative introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Clark, H. H., & Mulder, F. (2020). Political rhetoric and the use theory of meaning. *Journal of Political Discourse*, 42(3), 314-330.
- Cruse, D. A. (2006). *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, D. (2019). *Meaning and emotion: Wittgenstein's theory in interpersonal communication*. Routledge.

- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2018). An introduction to language (11th Ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Hangfling, O. (1989). Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The Macmillian Press Ltd.
- Harris, A. (2017). Language and identity: Wittgenstein's use theory in community settings. Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). Metaphors we live by. University of Chicago Press.
- Levinson, S. C. (2000). Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature. MIT Press.
- Ndiméle, O. M. (1999). Semantics: Meaning and interpretation. Linguistic Association of Nigeria.
- Nwala, T. (2015). Studies in ambiguity: Theoretical and applied perspectives. University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Nwala, M.A. (2015). Introduction to Linguistics: A first course. Wisdom Publishers Ltd. Ogbulogo, C. (2005). Concepts in semantics. Sam Iroanusi Publications.
- Strawson, P.F. (1954). Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations. Mind. Vol. 63. Wittgenstein, L. (1953). Philosophical investigations. Blackwell Publishing.
- Wisdom, J. (1952). Wittgenstein's philosophy: Meaning and use. Harvard University Press.