

Ambiguity and Ambivalence

abstract

We can achieve a deeper understanding of the concept of ambivalence through its comparison and contrast with the related concept of ambiguity. In addition to defining both, via numerous illustrations this article shows proper uses, as well as confusions, of these two highly important and yet overused theoretical constructs.

We can advance a more thorough understanding of the concept of *ambivalence* by an examination of its frequent confusion with the related term of *ambiguity*. In spite of some resemblance at both the conceptual and the phonetic levels, we should not interchange these terms; this becomes apparent from a consideration of the nexus in which they properly stand. Loose usage, as well as some notable exceptions notwithstanding (see below), ambivalence characterizes individuals, while we associate ambiguity with their environment and their utterances.

At its conception, its originators used the term *ambivalence* as a characteristic of individuals suffering from some type of psychopathology: schizophrenics (Bleuler, 1911/1950, pp. 53-55, who coined the term *Ambivalenz* in German), melancholics (Freud, 1917/1959, p. 161 & p. 168), obsessional neurotics (Freud, 1931/1959, p. 263), neurotics in general (Arlett, 1955, p. 16; Brody, 1956, p. 513). Later it became apparent that normal persons also exhibit ambivalence: small children (Harriman, 1959; Flugel, 1962, p. 130), children during latency (Bornstein, 1951); entire societies (Hanks, 1986); and indeed, every human being (Mowrer & Kluckhohn, 1944, p. 72; Stekel, 1927/1949, p. 92; Roheim, 1950, pp. 430-432). Authorities differ in their opinion, some claiming inevitability of ambivalence (e.g., Balint, 1959, p. 47, in adults; Brown, 1940, in children; Kiell, 1969, in adolescents), while others mere frequency (e.g., Coleman, 1960, p. 154; Fullager & al., 1959, p. 241; Guthrie, 1938/1972, p. 109).¹

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1. For more information on attitude theory and measurement, see Kaplan (1972); Kramer, Moore & Ber (1988), and Moore (1973).

Whether through the mechanism of *pars pro toto* (i.e. the "part for the whole" synecdoche) or through simple association, a further change of usage has taken place through the years. Ambivalence now frequently describes not only individuals but also their dreams (e.g., Bunker, 1948; Freud, 1923/1959, p. 140), feelings (Freud, 1912/1959, p. 320), motivation (Hebb, 1972), culture (Charnay & al., 1967 re Arabs; McGregor, 1966 re Brazil), thought and words (Meerlo, 1952, p. 170), and behavior in general (e.g., Dollard & Auld, 1959, p. 116; Tinbergen, 1951, p. 50). An additional generalization has eventually resulted in applying the adjective *ambivalent* to objects which appear to create ambivalence in the holders of attitudes, such as mirrors (Charlot, 1979, p. 211; Golden, 1967, pp. 8-9; Moore, 1983), doors (Moore, 1981), and symbols in general (Hartlaub, 1951, p. 158; Kiell, 1969; Mircea, 1961).²

Ambiguity (from Latin *ambigere*: to drive around, both ways) has not undergone a similar process of generalization. We apply it now, as others have ever since its earliest uses (circa 1400, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), to describe not individuals, but rather aspects and results of their highly varied activities. (E.g., Cubist art in Nicki & al., 1981; the concepts of cognitive psychology in Guilford, 1982; projective tests in Veiel & Coles, 1982; professional roles in Knott, 1986; requirement specifications in software development in Berry & Kamsties, 2004). Not surprisingly, ambiguity itself shows signs of ambiguity. In his often quoted work Empson (1930) described it as meaning "...an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (p. 7). Many take the pervasiveness of ambiguity for granted. Abraham Kaplan (in Kooij, 1971, p. 1) referred to it as "the common cold of the pathology of language"³. Simpson (1984) argues that ambiguity (especially lexical ambiguity, i.e., some words having two or more dictionary entries) "is extremely common in natural language". According to Curley, Yates & Abrams (1986): "...ambiguity is present in many decision situations. In real life, we rarely know what the outcome probabilities are". Linguists tend to agree about the inherence of ambiguity in natural languages (e.g. Kooij, 1971, pp. 3-4), though they differ with respect to the importance ambiguity has and whether it presents an obstacle to communication. (See also Stoppard, 1967, p. 66, according to whom "Uncertainty is the normal state", as well as Levine, 1985, who in his book *Flight from ambiguity* argues that we systematically under-represent the ambiguities of life.)

Despite their "differential diagnosis", we frequently find the two terms, ambivalence and ambiguity, interchanged. In her study of the Bori, Monfouga-Nicolas (1972, p. 3; see also p. 344) refers to the simultaneous expression of the sacred and of the profane as "l'ambiguite," only to

2. See also sacrifice in Girard (1972); le dogme in Bastide (1972); adolescence in Kiell (1969); pathological mourning in Volkan (1981); fire in Moore (1977 & 1979); tickling in Plessner (1970); the breast in Klein et al. (1970), Vienna in Dryansky (1984); occupational medicine in Walsh (1986).

3. Thomas (1979) held a different opinion, and went as far as calling ambiguity "the essential flavor of language" (p. 126).

continue and quote, in the same context, Roheim's claim: "L'ambivalence et les conflicts sont inherents a la nature humaine" (see English translation in Roheim, 1950, pp. 431-432). Similarly, Clayborough (1965) argues in one place that Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* exhibits fundamental ambivalence (p. ix), only to talk elsewhere about its prevailing ambiguity (p. 154). One can find other cases of lack of differentiation between ambivalence and ambiguity in de Beauvoir (1948, p.7), Chioles (1980-81, pp. 170-171), Epstein (1974), Hamnett (1967, pp. 381-382), Holden (1979, p. 2481), Levi-Strauss (1958, p. 170; 1963, pp. 153 and 163), Meerloo 1952, p. 170), Murphy (1947, p. 299), Peterson (1987), and Seung (1928, p. xi). Confusion has not spared fiction writers, either: When Robbins (1994, p. 29) attributes ambiguity to his heroine, the context makes it clear that he means ambivalence...

Translators, rather than the original authors, have brought about some interesting cases of confusion. Plessner's translator (Plessner, 1970), for example, inconsistently rendered the author's original *Doppelwertigkeit* (Plessner, 1961) sometimes as ambivalence, sometimes as double meanings (p. 76), the latter constituting a dictionary definition of ambiguity. Levi-Strauss' above mentioned work further illustrates this point: While the author used *ambivalente* and *equivoque* as interchangeable, his translator substituted *ambiguous* for the latter term.

Several instances of the careful use of both terms prove that one can avoid such confusion. White (1970), for example, provided the following definition: "Two main types of dissonance should be distinguished: dissonance between *ideas* (ambiguity) and dissonance between *feelings* (ambivalence). Ambiguity can be defined as *competition between two contradictory thoughts or two images of the same thing...* On the other hand, ambivalence can be defined as *liking and disliking the same thing at the same time*" (pp. 291-2; italics in original. See also Raimy, 1948, for a distinction between ambivalent vs. ambiguous self-references, as well as Conrad's 1986 article on a Russian story, "Turgenev's Asja: ambiguous ambivalence...").⁴ In his introduction to Melville's novel, *Pierre or, the Ambiguities* (1852/1949), the noted psychologist Henry Murray throws further light on the similarities between these two terms, and on the necessity to distinguish between them:

Moral conflict... results in a division, an inflexible dualism, in all branches of feeling and thought, which so influences the sufferer's apperceptions, that every significant object becomes ambivalent to him, that is, it both attracts and repels him, being composed, as he sees it, of two contrary elements, one good and one evil, which cannot be reconciled or blended... no whole-hearted embracement of anyone is possible, and the constructive tendency toward synthesis and integration is perpetually obstructed. This accounts for the majority of ambiguities (almost synonymous with "ambivalences") in *Pierre* (p. ix).

4. See also Erikson (1966): "...we suspect that in man the overcoming of ambivalence, as well as of ambiguity is one of the prime functions of ritualization" (p. 339).

Murray, of course, knew the difference between ambivalence and ambiguity, while Melville had written of the latter before the former term became available.

The above has amply demonstrated both the importance and the ubiquity of the two theoretical constructs under discussion. It has also shown the need to keep them separate. For, as Francis Bacon (1677) remarked, "the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding..."

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