

Metaphors of Ambiguity in Ancient Culture

Since Empson (1930) and Jakobson (1960), ambiguity has emerged as a central theme of literary and linguistic theory, and has been studied as a significant aspect of poetic expression, in contrast with vagueness, and in the development of theories of linguistic reference. In classical scholarship, this theme has been discussed in several studies of Greek and Latin languages and literature, especially in tragedy, satire and elegy, epic, Stoic philosophy, and medical writing, as well as linguistic semantics (e.g. Stanford 1939; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987; Atherton 1993; Galinsky 1994; Moussy and Orlandini 2007).

What is arguably missing from these studies, however, is any recognition that “ambiguity” itself is a culturally constructed category. This “etic” perspective arises partly because the English word *ambiguity* derives directly from Latin *ambiguitas*, leading to the assumption that ancient and modern understandings of this concept are equivalent. Yet the perspective of a cognitive semantics suggests that Greek and Latin speakers conceptualized ambiguity in quite different terms both from each other and from modern English. In this paper, I present the findings of a collaborative research project to show that Greek speakers’ conventional understanding of ambiguity was constructed primarily through metaphors of spatial relations (usage of weaponry imagery in *amphékes* and *amphidéxios*, literally, “two-edged”, and *atékmartos*, “target-less” appears confined to poetic contexts). Most often, the preposition *amphí* delivers this figurative sense in Greek words such as *amphibállō*, *amphidéxios*, and *amphilogía*. Analysis seems to reveal, moreover, that the meaning of *amphí* involved in this metaphor most strongly entails notions of containment and even concealment (this literal sense can be seen in, for instance, Hom. *Il.* 13.439, *hréxen dé hoi amphì khitōna* or *Od.* 6.292, *en dè kréne náei, amphí dè leimón*, where adverbial *amphí* includes the notion of “(completely) surrounding”, so as to

protect and cover what is inside). The image underlying Greek's metaphor of ambiguity is therefore probably that of ENCLOSURE. Indeed, in figurative usage of *(ep)amphibállō*, *amphibolia*, *amphiboletikós*, ambiguity is straightforwardly likened to a kind of garment or net with which one "surrounds" or encloses (and therefore conceals) fish, the human body, a besieged city, or, most significantly, a truth.

As we argue, Latin also possesses a metaphor of ambiguity which draws upon spatial imagery. However, unlike Greek's metaphor centering on the image of ENCLOSURE, Latin's metaphorical conceptualization of ambiguity recruits the image of PATHS DIVERGING, as well as, in certain contexts, that of CENTRALITY. These dissimilar, yet systematically related images in fact express different types of ambiguity in the technical jargon of Roman grammarians. PATHS DIVERGING (*ambiguum*) captures an understanding of the category of words whose polysemy emerges primarily as a function of their contextual embeddedness. The image of CENTRALITY (*medium*) captures an understanding of the category of words that are instead open to interpretation in multiple senses only when considered independently of any specifying context. (In other words, these metaphorically structured concepts anticipate the distinction in contemporary linguistics between "ambiguous" and "vague" sense relations).

But the difference between the Greek and Latin metaphors is more than simply a linguistic curiosity, as the "metaphysics" implied by these metaphorical images appear to constitute distinct ways of valuing ambiguity in Greek and Roman culture. As we see it, according to the logic of the Greek metaphor, ambiguity is something that surrounds, encloses, or conceals an object – namely the meaning of a word or expression – making it inaccessible and obstructing its "truth". In the logic of the Latin metaphor, ambiguity is instead a kind of detour from an expression's meaning, presenting the availability of alternate meaning-paths "around" or "on

both sides of' this meaning. Thus, ambiguity does not seem to preclude the discovery of "true" meaning at all (just as when travelling, detours can eventually bring a traveler back to their initially set-upon path); it represents merely a different, even if perhaps indirect and unforeseen, means of discovering an expression's true meaning. The different inferential patterning engendered by each metaphor accounts, we suggest, for why in the Greek world, ambiguity was seen as something to be avoided, whereas in Roman culture ambiguity was tolerated and even welcomed in many sociocultural contexts.

Bibliography

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