CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVE AMBIGUITY

This chapter deals with the notion of active ambiguity: what are its constitutive elements? After discussing active ambiguity in the first section, the proposed definition will be compared with a classification of several kinds of ambiguity offered by Walton. In the third section, Hamblin’s program for the study of equivocation will be taken as a point of departure for the study of active ambiguity in the rest of the book.

1. THE DEFINITION OF ACTIVE AMBIGUITY

The definiendum

In this section one of the colloquial senses of the expression ambiguous will be explicited. The notion will be called active ambiguity. A definition of it will be offered after it has been made clear what notion we are after.

As Walton observes, the term ambiguous is itself ambiguous between what he calls, a semantic and a pragmatic sense (Walton 1996b, 22).29 This ambiguity can be revealed by presenting a fallacy of equivocation that arises from this ambiguity. Both reasons of the argument below are acceptable, but in order to accept them individually, ambiguous has to be interpreted differently. The standpoint, however, is only adequately supported if both reasons are taken in one and the same reading of the term ambiguous.

Almost all English expressions are ambiguous
If a speaker uses an expression that is ambiguous, then we may object to the use of the expression.
Therefore, we may object to the use of almost all English expressions.

An expression can be said to be ambiguous in the sense that there are contexts in which one reading is appropriate while there are also contexts in which another reading is fitting. If we understand ambiguity in that way the first, but not the second reason is correct. This semantic ambiguity may have different linguistic sources that will be discussed in chapter 3, section 1.

The second premise, but not the first, is acceptable (but only if also some more restrictions on its interpretation are satisfied, see below) if we understand the ambiguity of an expression as its potential to express various readings in the one context where it is being used. The expression admits various interpretations, even if the listener makes use of the contextual information that is available. This kind of ambiguity can be called contextual and corresponds with Walton’s concept of pragmatic ambiguity. How a semantically ambiguous expression may become contextually ambiguous will be dealt with in chapter 3, section 2.

Several kinds of contextual ambiguity can be distinguished: the notion of active ambiguity forms a proper subclass of contextual ambiguity. To start with, there

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29 Supposedly, the term is ambiguous in at least the semantic sense, but in some situations also in the pragmatic sense.
is a class of contextual ambiguities that are overtly intended by the speaker to be understood in more than one way. In the normal course of events puns, jokes that make use of ambiguous expressions, artistic or poetic uses of ambiguity, double entendres, etc., are brought forward in a way that they can be recognised, even though recognition might need an effort on the part of the listener. The ambiguous expression occurring within such a conversational contribution is to be understood in various ways and that this is the case is made clear to the receiver. I will refer to these expressions as *overt ambiguities*. If an expression is contextually ambiguous, while the ambiguity is not intended at all, or if it is not intended to be detected by one's audience, then the expression is a *covert ambiguity*.

There are covert ambiguities of two varieties. Linguistic utterances normally aim at two kinds of purposes, the one being communicative, the other interactional (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 25). The communicative purpose is to perform a successful illocutionary act, that is, to make the listener understand two things: what kind of speech act is being performed by the speaker, and what the propositional content of the speech act consists of. The use of a contextual, covert ambiguity may bring with it certain communicative effects. It may lead to a situation where the listener does not perceive the contextual ambiguity and entertains a different interpretation than the speaker has in mind, or where he does perceive it but is unable to figure out what reading to select as the proper one.

The interactional purpose of a speech act is to perform a successful perlocutionary act, that is, to get the listener to *accept* the speech act. The interactional purpose of the complex speech act of argumentation is to convince the listener of the standpoint. More specifically, we could say that the *primary* interactional purpose of offering argumentation is to get the listener to concede the reasons as well as the warrant (that states the connection between reasons and standpoint). The *ultimate* purpose is to get the listener to concede the main standpoint. The use of a contextual, covert ambiguity may also produce effects that can be called interactional: selecting one reading might lead to a concession of a statement, while picking out another reading might lead to a challenge of it.

The first variety of a covert pragmatic ambiguity is where the ambiguity brings about only communicative effects. Such ambiguities are, by definition, of no consequence to the course of the discussion and are, from a dialectical perspective, to be qualified as inconsequential. If choosing one reading leads to accepting and challenging exactly the same standpoints, reasons, and warrants as when choosing for another reading, then choosing the former instead of the latter does not affect the external course of the discussion. The word *pen* can be imagined to be contextually ambiguous. If someone says *I own a pen*, and if she uses this only as a reason to support that there is something she owns (while the listener knows that she owns a ballpoint as well as a chicken run), then this contextual ambiguity is of no consequence for the discussion. The second variety is where the ambiguity does produce interactional effects. This kind of ambiguity is consequential and calls for repair in order for the dialogue to proceed smoothly. Semantic and contextual ambiguity are mostly only *latently relevant*, but in certain situations they can become *actively relevant* in the sense of having a role to play in the discussion at hand. After Naess, this latter kind of ambiguity will be called *active ambiguity* (see section 1.3 of chapter 3).

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30 Acceptance of speech acts seems to be a more general notion than acceptance of a reason or standpoint, for also doubts, advises, warnings, etc., can be said to become accepted.
This study is restricted to three kinds of speech act that are important for theorising about argumentation. *Conceding* a statement may lead to the instalment of an actively ambiguous concession. *Requesting* the opponent to concede a statement may lead to an actively ambiguous concession. *Asserting* a statement may lead to an actively ambiguous standpoint, reason or warrant. Further, the focus is restricted to the ambiguity of linguistic expressions, neglecting possible other modes of presentation, like visual and musical modes (Groarke 2002) or emotional, physical and nonsensory modes (Gilbert 1997).

Moreover, we will not deal with locutions that are ambiguous between various illocutionary forces, such as those due to the performance of an indirect speech act. Such force ambiguities can lead to interesting problems, for instance, when an opponent expresses doubt in such a way that it might also be taken as expressing a contrary standpoint. However, this study of ambiguity is restricted to propositional content. Another restriction will be the focus on ambiguity on the level of phrases and sentences, but not on larger stretches of discourse. The account in this study will have to be enriched in order to accommodate the kind of ambiguity that enables an analyst to come up with various plausible argument structures.

The kinds of ambiguity are summarised in the figure below. Moreover, it shows how the subject matter of this book is delimited.

![Figure 1. A survey of different kinds of ambiguity](image)

**The definition**

The definition will be partly stipulative and partly lexical: it is meant to provide the meaning of the occurrences of *active ambiguity* in the rest of this book and it explicates one of the conventional meanings of *ambiguity*. Because the definition mentions a certain set of criteria for the correct use of language, without choosing any specific set, the definition is skeletal. The components of the *definiens* will be dealt with below. The first defining clause will be called the *linguistic clause*, the second the *relevance clause*.

An expression \( E \) that occurs within a question \( S? \) or a statement \( T \) is actively ambiguous in a context of discussion \( C \) if and only if (1) \( E \) admits of several interpretations in \( C \), expressed by \( E_1, \ldots, E_n \), such that (1a) each of these \( E_i, i \leq \)
n, is more precise than E in C and (1b) none of these $E_i$, $i \leq n$, expresses an incorrect interpretation in C according to some set of criteria for the correct use of language, and (2) neglecting to notice and articulate this specific distinction between $E_1, \ldots, E_n$ may plausibly influence the course of the discussion.

The linguistic clause

An occurrence of an expression E in a context of utterance C can only be said to be actively ambiguous between $E_1, \ldots, E_n$ if every $E_i$, $i \leq n$, expresses in C meanings that E might express in C according to the (semantic and pragmatic) rules of language. Stated more shortly, the linguistic clause of active ambiguity demands E to be contextually ambiguous.

Naess denotes the relation 'E is more precise than E' with the Norwegian name *en precisering* and under the English name of a precization (Naess 1953). I adopt Barth and Krabbe’s suggestion that one might translate these as *disambiguating reformulation*, although they themselves did adopt the alternative translation *clarifying reformulation* (1982, 22).31

The following definition of 'x is more precise than y' will be used (Naess’s definition can be found in section 2 of chapter 5):

An expression $E_i$ is more precise in a context of utterance C than an expression $E$ if and only if all meanings that $E_i$ expresses in C are expressed by $E$, but not vice versa.

Hence, in a conversational situation where the expression *golf club* might refer to a golf association as well as to a kind of stick, the expression *golf association* is more precise than *golf club*.

If $E_i$ is more precise than $E$, $E_i$ will be called a proper disambiguating reformulation of $E$. The expression $E_i$ is a disambiguating reformulation of $E$ will be reserved for expressions that are put forward by a party with the aim of providing a proper disambiguating reformulation, whether or not they succeed in providing a proper disambiguating reformulation.

Whatever subject we are discussing in English, the expression *bank* cannot be said to be contextually ambiguous between *banking institution* and *couch*, for the reason that *couch* does not express any meaning that *bank* expresses (although the Dutch *bank* is ambiguous in such a way). In a case like this one, the semantic rules disqualify this second reading as inadmissible. When we are discussing financial affairs it is easy to imagine that *bank*, in the context of utterance, cannot be said to be contextually ambiguous between *banking institution* and *river edge*, for the reason that pragmatic rules for language use disqualify the latter expression as expressing any meaning that *bank* does express in this particular context. Thus, correct use of language refers to correct use of language in some particular context of utterance according to semantic and pragmatic rules.

However, the correct use of, for example, English is extremely accommodating and allows many formulations to express, even within one and the same context, a wide range of meanings (cf. Naess 1953, 39 and Pinkal 1995, 18).

31 This latter phrase, however, suggests a much wider use than for disambiguating expressions.
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This concurs with the fact that the context of utterance is often not specified to a very high degree.\textsuperscript{32} In chapter 3 we will explore various ways in which natural language allows for differences of interpretation.

Nevertheless, not anything goes. We have access to instruments that enable us to establish that some expression, $E_1$, does not express any meaning in $C$ that $E$ expresses. That $E_1$ would be a proper disambiguating reformulation of $E$ can be rejected by reference to shared linguistic intuitions, or to a linguistic expert system such as a dictionary or to a semantical database. However, in this book no specific instrument will be proposed at the expense of others. Instead, it will be presupposed that participants in a discussion have some linguistic device $X$, of whatever nature, at their disposal that enables them to check whether or not $E_1$ is an admissible and proper disambiguation of $E$ in a specific context of utterance. This device $X$ will be called the \textit{utterance meaning machine}, and the dialectical procedure by which the discussants may utilise the ‘machine’ is called the \textit{utterance meaning testing procedure}. Following the procedure results in a verdict, binding both parties, about the issue of whether or not $E_1$ is a proper disambiguating reformulation of $E$.

Depending on the kind of ‘mechanism’ inside the machine, the scope of what can be called \textit{actively ambiguous} may change. The procedure can make use of linguistic sources at different levels of sophistication. Suppose the parties would in the opening stage decide that a disambiguating reformulation $E_i$ of expression $E$ is inappropriate if it does not match a meaning that is given by a definition of one of the senses of the lexical entry of $E$ in some dictionary. Suppose further that the parties choose the Oxford English Dictionary (1989). Then they are not allowed to say that \textit{obligatory} can be actively ambiguous between a legal and a moral sense, because there are no entries that correspond to such senses (what can be found is a meaning that is unspecific with respect to a legal and a moral reading of the term). It is also feasible that different procedures lead to different outcomes due to the circumstance that different linguistic theories are implemented in the ‘machine’.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, if the machine includes implicatures or emotive connotations amongst a term’s meaning then a suggestive expression can be called actively ambiguous. Taken strictly \textit{you won’t find any photograph that depicts me in a military uniform} does not express that the person in question has never worn a military uniform, but it does suggest it. When used in a situation where it is unknown whether the speaker did ever wear a military uniform but in which it is taken to be possible, the expression might become actively ambiguous.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} The concept of a context of utterance refers to the available information about the environment of an occurrence of an expression. A context of utterance can be more or less specific, the more specific it is, the less contextually ambiguous are the expressions used in it.

\textsuperscript{33} Implementing a cognitive linguistic theory, along the lines of Taylor (1995), would lead to emphasising the semantic aspects of determining the utterance meaning, and would provide less space to the pragmatic process of interpretation. In contrast, implementing a compositional approach to semantics would be economical in assigning semantic meanings to expressions, and would provide more space to the pragmatic aspect of utterance meaning. These differences in theoretical make up may possibly affect the answer to the question whether or not an expression in some situation is contextually ambiguous. This issue will be left aside.

\textsuperscript{34} The Dutch Minister Bijlhout said something like this in 2002. However, journalists did find such a picture, after which she stepped back (after having been in office only seven hours) for the reason that it showed that she had been a dedicated follower of the Surinam military leader Bouterse.
Often, the parties do not adopt any very sophisticated method to resolve these
linguistic differences. If one of them alleges that $E_i$ is a disambiguating reformulation
of $E$ and if using the utterance meaning testing procedure adopted by them is “rough
and ready” and does not lead to a clear refutation of that contention, the contention is
regarded as sustained.

The relevance clause

Crawshay-Williams points out that if there are no restrictions on what may be called
different then nothing can be called the same, and that would reduce us to the level of
‘imbeciles’: "[w]e must get rid of the idea that, once we have made a distinction, we
are saddled with it for ever" (Crawshay-Williams 1957, 113). This also applies to
distinctions with respect to meaning. Restrictions on meaning distinctions are
provided by the linguistic correctness criterion, as well as by the prerequisite that the
ambiguity must matter to the course of the dialogue. Because not every distinction
makes a difference some covertly ambiguous expressions are not actively ambiguous.
Even though we will be able to reject some distinctions between interpretations as
irrelevant, there may exist intractable discussions where the need for making
distinctions between meanings recurs again and again.

The relevance clause of the definition says that the differences between the
disambiguating reformulations must make a difference to the way in which the
discussion might develop. Stated in other terms, failing to notice the ambiguity would
produce interactional consequences. These interactional consequences will be
examined in chapter 4.

Unspecified expressions

One way of clarifying the notion of active ambiguity further is to contrast it with two
phenomena that resemble it: expressions that are not very specific and expressions
that are vague. A more detailed comparison between vagueness and contextual
ambiguity will be presented in section 1.4 of chapter 3. Here it suffices to say that
vagueness is a semantic phenomenon that may, in special situations, produce a
contextual or active ambiguity.

Specification can be used to refer to the act of narrowing down the scope or
extension of a predicate expression. A monadic predicate $P$, like horse, can be
associated with a positive extension (Positivbereich, Blau 1978, 26), that is, with the
set of entities that are properly said to be $P$, such as Black Beauty, Jolly Jumper, etc.
With a polyadic predicate, such as to love, the positive extension is a set of ordered
pairs, or triples, etc. If Bob loves Ann but Ann does not love Bob, then <Bob,Ann> is
a member of love’s positive extension, while <Ann,Bob> is not. A predicate $P$ is said
to be a specification of a predicate $Q$ in case $P$’s positive extension is a proper subset
of $Q$’s positive extension, that is, if $P$’s positive extension is smaller than that of $Q$
and contained within that of $Q$ (cf. Pinkal 1995, 57). Thus, horse is a specification of
animal and to love is a specification of to like. By extending the scope of the concept
of a specification, it is also possible to say that the sentence this is a horse is a
specification of this is an animal.

Specification does not need to have anything to do with ambiguity, because
sentence $S$ may be a specification of sentence $T$ while $S$ is not an interpretation of $T.$
This is a horse is a specification of This is an animal, but in most contexts the first is not a linguistically admissible interpretation of the latter. Confusion between specification and disambiguation may, however, arise for various reasons.

1) The terms exact and precise can both express that an expression is free of active ambiguity as well as that an expression is specific and expresses a thought in detail. Moreover, the verb to specify can be used to refer to the action of disambiguating a formulation. This is so for a good reason, which brings us to a second source of possible confusion.

2) If a sentence $S$ can express in a context $C$ several propositions, expressed by disambiguating reformulations $S_1, \ldots, S_n$, then we can assign to $S$ and to each $S_i$ sets of possibly intended meanings in $C$. Suppose $Px$ means $x$ is a possibly intended meaning of $S$ in $C$ and $Qx$ means $x$ is a possibly intended meaning of $S_i$ in $C$. Replacing $S$ by $S_i$ narrows down the set of possibly intended meanings of $S$ into a smaller subset. Thus, predicate $Q$ is a specification of predicate $P$. Consequently, it makes sense to say that by disambiguating $S$ to $S_i$ one specifies what was possibly meant by $S$. The request can you be more specific? can sometimes be interpreted correctly as having the same meaning as can you express yourself in a less actively ambiguous way?

3) A special way of making clear in what sense an expression is meant is by specifying it: You are an animal, not in the sense of being brutal, but in the sense of being either a fish, a mammal, an insect, etc. The sentence You are an animal in the sense of being either a fish, a mammal, an insect, etc is a disambiguating reformulation of You are an animal, and it makes use of three specifications of is an animal: is a mammal, is a fish, and is an insect.

4) Actively ambiguous expressions and unspecified sentences can both lead to a lack of information (cf. Pinkal 1995, 57-58). Active ambiguity may lead to a situation where a listener does not know how to interpret an assertion and does consequently not obtain information that he was supposed to obtain. Using an unspecified expression may also lead to a situation where the listener gets too little information. I saw an animal gives much less information then I saw a horse.

5) Disambiguation and specification go together in the following way. If one disambiguates a formulation then one specifies the context of utterance, and if one specifies the context of utterance one may disambiguate a formulation.

6) An expression can be contextually ambiguous between several readings, such that one of its disambiguating reformulations is a specification of another disambiguating reformulation. Cat can become contextually ambiguous between domestic cat (Felis catus) and member of family Felidae, which includes the lion, tiger, leopard, and lynx. The former disambiguation is a specification of the latter. Another example can arise from the semantic ambiguity of American between someone from the United States or someone from North America. A disambiguating reformulation that expresses such a more inclusive reading of an expression will be called an unspecified disambiguating reformulation.

2. Walton’s Classification

This section deals with Walton’s classification of types of ambiguity and with the way this classification is related to the classification summarised in figure 1. That some

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35 If an expression can denote a set as well as a subset of this set, then the expression in the second sense is called hyponymous to the expression in the first sense (Leech 1981, 100-101).
expression is ambiguous can be taken to mean that it is either semantically and potentially ambiguous or that it is ambiguous in context, ambiguous in use and pragmatically ambiguous (Walton 1996b, 22). Walton does not present neat definitions of these concepts. The following explication seems plausible: an expression is semantically and potentially ambiguous if in some contexts the expression means one thing, while in other contexts it means something else. An expression is pragmatically and actually ambiguous in a given context if its ambiguity plays some sort of role within that very context. In the last chapter of Fallacies Arising From Ambiguity Walton presents a scheme comprising the different types and subtypes of ambiguity that he distinguishes.

![Diagram of types of ambiguity]

**Figure 2. Types of ambiguity according to Walton (1996b, 262)**

Although Walton observes that ambiguity is itself ambiguous between pragmatic and potential ambiguity, this scheme is not to be interpreted as a scheme in which also other meanings of ambiguity are classified. The threefold distinction between potential, actual and imaginary ambiguity is derived from Alexander of Aphrodisias.  

**Potential ambiguity** refers to linguistic, or what has in section 1 been called semantic, ambiguity. Potential ambiguity is lexical if a word or phrase has two distinct lexical meanings. It is syntactic if a sentence has two possible grammatical constructions. The ambiguity is inflective when an "ambiguity of the key term arises from, or is related to a grammatical transformation, or inflection, from one form of speech to another" (1996b, 156, see also 261-2).

**Imaginary ambiguity** is connected to optional interpretations. A sentence may instantiate imaginary ambiguity if it is given stress or special intonation, or if it is uttered in a context where it suggests something. If the interpreter is able to interpret it directly, without taking into account the stress, the intonation or the suggested message, as well as with taking the stress, intonation or suggestion into account, then the statement is an example of imaginary ambiguity. If parts of speech are emphasised by, for instance, intonation or the use of italics the ambiguity is an example of emphatic ambiguity. If the sentence suggests some proposition by implicature, it is an example of suggestive ambiguity. Imaginary ambiguity has "the result that different optional presumptions can be drawn from the use of that sentence" (Walton 1996b, 262). An example of stress that introduces ambiguity is where the normal, non-stressed, interpretation lingers on. ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour’: should we take it to be about all people or only about our neighbours next-door? (Walton 1996b, 125-6).

The name imaginary ambiguity is not a proper one for the phenomenon at hand. It suggests that the interpreter wrongly imagines an interpretation to be admissible. However, in certain situations, a sentence can really be taken in two ways:

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36 Walton is inspired by these terms, but does not claim that his interpretation of these terms corresponds to Alexander of Aphrodisias’s own interpretation (Walton 1996b, 262).
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either as having a specific implicature or as lacking it. The message of logging for a
certain date *The captain was sober all day* can be really unclear due to two possible
interpretations and the contextual ambiguity is not imagined.

*Pragmatic ambiguity* refers to ambiguity in use, to a conversational situation
where the ambiguity plays a role. Walton is unclear about the connections between on
the one hand pragmatic ambiguity, and on the other potential and imaginary
ambiguity. The perspective adopted in this study starts from the following picture. An
expression may express one thing in one context and another thing in another context
(semantic ambiguity, in my terminology). This difference can originate in the
structural characteristics of language or in the ways expressions are put to use. Some
expressions are lexically or grammatically ambiguous and for that reason suited for
expressing different things in different contexts. Other statements may convey a
special message if some part is stressed, or if it is presented in a context where some
suggestion arises. Without that stress, or in another situation, it would not convey that
message. Both kinds of statement constitute semantic ambiguity, and can become
pragmatically (contextually, in my terminology) ambiguous within a certain context
of utterance. According to this picture, pragmatic (contextual or active) ambiguities
are always also lexical, syntactical, grammatical, emphatic, suggestive or inflective
ambiguities.

Walton occasionally uses *pragmatic ambiguity* in accordance with this picture.
However, when explaining his classification, he departs from that usage and states
that pragmatic ambiguity excludes ambiguities arising from differences of emphasis,
stress or pronunciation. Moreover, his scheme suggests that an expression cannot be
both potentially as well as pragmatically ambiguous.

In the last two sections, we have seen what active ambiguity amounts to. In the
next section, a dialectical research program for dealing with active ambiguity will be
outlined.

3. **Hamblin’s Program of a Theory of Charges**

The present study intends to carry out part of a research program that has been
outlined and initiated by Hamblin (1970, chapter 9). Hamblin defends a *dialectical
theory of meaning*: “all properties of linguistic entities are ‘dialectical’, in the sense of
being determinable from the broad pattern of their use” (285). For instance, the nature
of a question or an assertion is determined by its function in dialogue. Similarly, the
existence of meaning constancy or, conversely, equivocation must be derived from
external considerations such as they can be found in dialogues (286). We should not
presuppose a text to exhibit meaning constancy or equivocation in an *a priori* way.

Hamblin examines whether the following external consideration is capable of
providing a satisfactory criterion for equivocation: “‘What a person means by his
utterances is what he tells or would tell you if asked’” (287). Such a criterion can be
extended by considering a group of persons and carrying out a poll. However,
Hamblin objects that we want to remain able to say that someone is incorrect when he
says that he means X when saying Y. Moreover, the speaker might be unable to say
what he means for the reason that he is himself confused. The expression *locate* can
be ambiguous between ‘finding out where it is’ and ‘deciding where to put it’.

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37 Equivocation refers to an invalid argument based upon a meaning shift, such that the arguer
either deceives his interlocutors or himself (Hamblin 1970, 292).
Suppose an officer argues as follows: “Battalion B has been told to go to G; that is Battalion B has been located at G; therefore Battalion B must be at G” (287). If the officer conceives of units as chessmen that can be moved at will then he will be at a loss when someone asks him to distinguish two senses of locate (289).

The following external criterion is also inadequate: “Two words W and X have the same meaning for (group) G if members of G, in the face of any experience, consistently and stubbornly allocate the same truth-value to any zero-order statement containing X as they do to the corresponding statement containing W and, in particular, if they consistently and stubbornly maintain the truth of ‘All (W)s are (X)s and all (X)s are (W)s’” (291). If not, then W and X can be said to have different meanings for the members of G. Hamblin’s objection to this criterion is that an argument can be equivocal although this cannot be derived from the pattern of use exhibited by the arguer: the arguer himself can be deeply deceived by the ambiguity. We can imagine a speaker presenting a subtle equivocation like “All acts prescribed by law are obligatory. Non-performance of an obligatory act is to be disapproved. Therefore, non-performance of an act prescribed by law is to be disapproved” (292). It might be possible that there is no indication whatsoever in his zero-order utterances of obligatory that indicates equivocation: the speaker might think that legal and moral obligation are the same thing.

Hamblin does not propose a specific criterion of his own, but recommends a new approach to the issue that gives criteria like those two above, a new twist (295). According to Hamblin, the issue of equivocation should only be raised if we run into trouble with the assumption of meaning-constancy: “a theory of meaning-constancy that can be applied independently of whether the constancy actually matters or makes a difference must be fundamentally on the wrong track. There is, as we might put it, a presumption of meaning-constancy in the absence of evidence to the contrary” (294).

If someone interprets an argument, he tries to find out the developing patterns of use of the several expressions that are being used. If this leads to trouble a point of order should be raised, that is, the one party should charge the other party with equivocation. Hamblin’s program for fallacies in general, and for fallacies dependent on language in particular is to construct a theory of charges, that is, a theory of points of order.

One of the arguments for the appropriateness of this approach is that the term equivocal does not describe a locution, but objects to it. The statement “P, therefore Q, and that's equivocal' is a piece of nonsense of the same order as 'S and that's false” Hamblin (302). A similar thing holds, it is supposed here, for an assertion like I hold that A, and A is ambiguous, if we understand ambiguous in its active sense. The purpose of asserting or conceding sentence A is to commit oneself to some proposition, and holding that A is actively ambiguous undermines this purpose at least partly. This argument shows that also the term actively ambiguous objects to a locution, rather than that it describes one. Besides, the argument suggests that active ambiguity is not only a kind of ambiguity, but that that active ambiguity denotes a standard pejorative interpretation of ambiguity.