

Language Ambiguity and Emotional Barriers: Semantic and Psychological Approaches in Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze interpersonal communication barriers caused by language ambiguity and emotional barriers, especially in the context of today's digital communication and social interactions. Semantic ambiguity occurs when a word or sentence has more than one meaning that allows for misinterpretation, while emotional barriers include psychological conditions such as stress, anxiety, and anger that affect how messages are received and interpreted. This research approach uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical method that allows for in-depth exploration of the meaning, dynamics, and factors that influence interpersonal communication. Data analysis was carried out thematically with a hermeneutic approach to understand the relationship of meaning in social and psychological contexts. Semantic Ambiguity Theory by Stephen C. Levinson is the main foundation in understanding the disturbance of meaning in verbal communication, which emphasizes the importance of situational context and shared knowledge between communicators. The results of the study indicate that language ambiguity is increasingly common, especially in the communication of the younger generation who often use informal language, abbreviations, and digital symbols, so that it has the potential to cause conflict when combined with emotional barriers experienced by the recipient of the message. The close relationship between semantic ambiguity and psychological barriers worsens the effectiveness of interpersonal communication, especially in the workplace, education, and social media. Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for an interdisciplinary approach that combines semantic and psychological studies so that communication strategies can be more adaptive, reflective, and humane in dealing with the complexity of contemporary communication.

Keywords: Emotional Barriers; Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Conflict; Semantic Ambiguity

1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication is a basic process that allows individuals to understand each other, form social relationships, and create emotional connectedness. In various areas of life, family, education, organizations, and even social media, the ability to communicate effectively determines the quality of interactions between individuals. However, communication does not always run smoothly. Various obstacles can arise, one of which is in the form of language ambiguity and emotional barriers. Linguistic ambiguity refers to the unclear meaning in speech or writing that allows for more than one interpretation. On the other hand, emotional barriers include a person's psychological condition such as stress, anger, anxiety, or low empathy that interfere with the process of sending and receiving messages. These two factors do not stand alone, but often interact and worsen the quality of interpersonal communication.

Amid the dominance of digital communication and increasing social pressure, the problem of ambiguity and emotional barriers in communication is increasingly complex. An

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example can be found in the phenomenon of misinformation on social media, where information conveyed ambiguously can cause disproportionate emotional reactions. Comments with multiple meanings can trigger conflict, cloud discussions, and widen the gap between individuals or groups.

In professional life, for example in the workplace or educational institutions, failure to understand the implicit meaning in emails or instant messages often leads to interpersonal conflict. An employee who receives criticism in an ambiguous form and without explanation can feel emotionally threatened, resulting in resistance to change or even burnout. This condition shows the urgency of the need for an interdisciplinary approach in studying interpersonal communication. Without a deep understanding of how meaning is formed in language and how emotions influence the perception of messages, strategies to improve interpersonal communication will tend to be technical and shallow. Therefore, the synergy between semantic and psychological studies is an important foundation in analyzing and overcoming today's communication barriers.

This study offers a relatively new approach by combining semantic and psychological analysis in one framework of interpersonal communication analysis. By focusing on two main factors of language ambiguity and emotional barriers. This study is expected to provide a more complete understanding of communication dynamics, as well as contribute to the development of more adaptive, reflective, and humane communication strategies in contemporary social contexts.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Recent research shows that ambiguity is increasingly common in digital communication. (Putri & Sabrina, n.d.) revealed that generation Z, who are accustomed to using abbreviations, emojis, and informal language styles in online conversations, often experience misunderstandings due to the double meanings contained in their messages. This shows that lexical and syntactic ambiguity are major obstacles in modern technology-based communication.

(Budiarto & Makau, 2025) emphasize the importance of understanding the theory of ambiguity, especially in linguistically heterogeneous environments. They identify that ambiguity is often not recognized by the sender and is only detected when the message is misinterpreted by the receiver. This suggests the importance of increasing semantic awareness in everyday communication practices.

In the academic realm, (Revallita Ivonna Felisha, Oktouvan Lazuardi Al, Muhammad Alif Cahya Maheswara, 2024) examined the effectiveness of Indonesian in the context of scientific delivery. They found that inappropriate sentence structure can cause ambiguity, even in formal texts. This finding confirms that ambiguity is not just a matter of informality or negligence, but is directly related to the understanding of semantics and language structure.

A similar phenomenon was discovered by (Wahab et al., 2022) when reviewing articles in online media that discuss the Islamic Student Association (HMI). They found that news containing ambiguous diction often causes controversy, because readers interpret the information based on their respective ideological affiliations or emotions. This shows that linguistic ambiguity can also be used strategically or manipulatively.

The psychological aspects of communication have also been widely studied. (Alamsyah, 2024) examines the failure of communication between parents and children from the perspective of psychology and Islamic values. He found that when parents are unable to manage their emotions, communication becomes ineffective, even tending to damage family relationships. Emotional barriers in communication often occur in the form of anger, impatience, or lack of space to listen. Other research by (Damayanti & Purnamasari, 2019) parents of deaf students revealed that the limitations of verbal communication that are not balanced with emotional understanding actually increase stress. This barrier shows that emotions play an important role in mediating communication, especially when verbal communication tools are not optimally used.

Emotional intelligence is one of the solutions offered in various studies. (Hutagalung, 2014) shows that the combination of interpersonal communication skills and emotional intelligence can reduce stress levels in the work environment. This is also supported by the findings (Butsainah et al., 2025), who found that students with high emotional intelligence were better able to manage conflict and maintain healthy social relationships.

Among teenagers, (Jannah & Warastri, 2024) found that poor interpersonal communication skills are one of the causes of toxic relationships. Lack of openness, difficulty in conveying emotions, and a tendency to blame partners are recurring patterns in unhealthy relationships, rooted in a failure of emotional communication.

3. Proposed Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical study type. This approach was chosen because the study aims to deeply understand the meaning, dynamics, and factors that influence interpersonal communication barriers, especially in the context of language ambiguity and emotional barriers. Qualitative allows researchers to explore communication phenomena contextually and reflectively, by exploring the subjective perspectives of participants and the representation of meaning in everyday communication practices..

According to Creswell (2016), qualitative research is used to understand the meaning that individuals construct towards a social or human problem. Researchers become the main instrument in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and involve intensive interaction with data to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied. In the context of this research, ambiguity and emotion as aspects of communication are not

sufficiently reduced to numbers or statistics, but must be interpreted in the complex realm of language and psychology.

Data analysis was conducted interpretively, with a thematic approach. This process involved identifying key themes emerging from the data, such as forms of linguistic ambiguity, types of emotional barriers, and communication response strategies between individuals. Researchers interpreted the data with a hermeneutic approach, in accordance with the principles of qualitative analysis as explained by Creswell, namely moving from partial to holistic understanding of context and meaning.

This study uses the Semantic Ambiguity Theory initiated by Stephen C. Levinson as a basis for analyzing meaning disturbances in verbal communication. Ambiguity occurs when a word, phrase, or sentence structure has more than one valid interpretation (Levinson, 1983). In the context of interpersonal communication, semantic ambiguity can stem from non-specific word choices, vague syntactic structures, or incompletely conveyed pragmatic contexts. For example, in text messages or online communication, the use of sentences such as "we'll see" can contain meaning uncertainty that opens up room for misunderstanding.

4. Results and Discussion

In interpersonal communication, openness of meaning often becomes a bridge connecting individuals with diverse cultural, psychological, and social backgrounds. However, it is not uncommon for this bridge to become a weak point when the message sent is not understood properly because it contains linguistic ambiguity and is reinforced by emotional barriers. This phenomenon is increasingly complex in a world that is interconnected through digital media, where text often replaces facial expressions and voice intonation. In this context, the exchange of meaning becomes a dynamic field between the signifier and the signified, and the mismatch between the two opens up space for systemic misinterpretation.

In interpersonal interactions, especially through social media, the phenomenon of ambiguity is becoming increasingly apparent. Research by Putri and Sabrina (2024) in the *Tambusai Education Journal* shows that generation Z often uses short expressions, emojis, or slang that tend to be ambiguous. Expressions such as "okay" or "whatever" in text, for example, can have different emotional content depending on the context and mental intonation of the reader. This ambiguity can lead to conflict if the recipient of the message is in a negative emotional state or is experiencing stress.

In cross-cultural studies, semantic ambiguity becomes more complex due to differences in cultural references to the meaning of certain words or symbols. (Arimbi, 2022), in her research on NTT students interacting with Javanese students at Slamet Riyadi University, noted that misunderstandings often occur not only because of language differences, but also because of the symbolic meanings carried by each culture. For example, silence in a certain culture can mean respect, but in another culture it can be interpreted as a form of rejection

or disinterest. This kind of ambiguity requires good intercultural communication skills so as not to end in latent conflict.

A similar phenomenon is also reflected in the experience of Papuan students in Semarang as noted by (Fitrianti & Riyandani, 2023), where they face intercultural communication barriers that are not only verbal, but also involve perception, motivation, and past emotional experiences. In this case, language is not only a tool for conveying messages, but also a carrier of collective identity and emotions that if not understood with empathy, can actually create a gap between one individual and another.

The theory of semantic ambiguity as explained by Stephen C. Levinson explains that the meaning of an utterance is highly dependent on the situational context, the relationship between the communicators, and the shared background knowledge. In reality, not all interpersonal communication takes place in ideal conditions where all of these elements are met. Therefore, in practice, linguistic ambiguity is often unavoidable. However, ambiguity is not always negative. In certain contexts, such as poetry or diplomacy, ambiguity actually provides a productive space for interpretation. The problem occurs when ambiguity arises in functional communication that requires clarity of meaning.

In the contemporary workplace, where cultural diversity and ways of thinking meet in collaborative spaces, the need for clarity in communication is increasingly important. Ineffective communication due to ambiguity or unmanaged emotions can reduce productivity, cause internal conflict, and even impact an individual's mental health. Therefore, companies and educational institutions are starting to pay attention to communication training that includes linguistic and psychological aspects.

In the current social and political context of Indonesia, linguistic ambiguity is often evident in the communication of public officials captured by the media and the wider community. One case study that can be analyzed is a statement by a government official regarding the issue of increasing subsidized fuel prices at the end of 2022. In a press conference, the official stated that "the government is considering the option of adjusting prices by taking into account people's purchasing power." This statement, although seemingly linguistically neutral, gave rise to various interpretations among the community. Some considered the statement as a form of subtle rejection of the planned increase, while others interpreted it as a strong signal that an increase would occur soon.

The semantic approach also shows that the words in the statement fall into the category of high-context language, whose meaning is highly dependent on the social and political context in which the statement is uttered. Within the framework of Hall's theory of high vs. low-context communication, Indonesia as a country with a high-context communication culture often produces public communication that is not explicit and requires contextual interpretation. As a result, in an unstable social situation, semantic ambiguity not only

becomes a gap for multiple interpretations, but also strengthens public distrust of the government.

Interestingly, a study by (Gunas, 2021) shows that urban Indonesian society is currently increasingly critical of ambiguous government statements. Their research found that ambiguity in public statements is often perceived as an attempt to hide a certain agenda. This perception creates emotional barriers in the form of skepticism and distrust, which worsen the effectiveness of interpersonal communication between the government and citizens.

On the other hand, from the perspective of interpersonal communication in organizations, a study by (Mahendra & Putra, 2025) shows that the use of ambiguous language by institutional leaders can disrupt the performance of work teams because it creates role ambiguity. In a work environment that demands clear instructions, semantic ambiguity triggers stress and decreases team collaboration, especially when communication is carried out online without supporting nonverbal expressions.

Theoretically, this is reinforced by the concept of semantic underdeterminacy, where a linguistic form does not fully determine the meaning, and the final meaning must be constructed by the listener or reader through inference. In the context of interpersonal communication, if this inference process is framed by negative emotions (anger, anxiety, or fear), then the interpretation results tend to be biased or misguided.

In addition to linguistic factors, emotional barriers play a major role in creating misunderstandings. Emotions can affect both the encoding and decoding processes of messages. When someone is anxious or angry, their ability to capture the meaning of a message objectively tends to decrease. The COVID-19 pandemic found that many employees had difficulty understanding their superiors' messages due to unstable emotional conditions. This is exacerbated by online communication which eliminates many nonverbal aspects, such as body language and tone of voice, which usually help convey emotional nuances in messages.

One form of psychological barrier that often occurs is a negative emotional state, such as anxiety, fear, or anger, which can affect the way individuals process and interpret messages. In this situation, semantic ambiguity can exacerbate misunderstandings, because individuals tend to interpret messages based on their feelings at the time, rather than on the objective meaning of the message. For example, the word "fine" in one context may be interpreted as agreement, but in another context, especially if delivered in a flat tone or in a tense situation, it may be interpreted as a form of disapproval or sarcasm.

Research by (Samuel & Marbun, 2025) in the Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences highlighted the importance of empathetic communication in overcoming psychological barriers. They analyzed the representation of interpersonal communication in the Korean drama "Daily Dose of Sunshine" and found that empathetic communication and active listening can help individuals overcome emotional barriers and improve message

comprehension. This suggests that a communication approach that takes into account the recipient's psychological condition can reduce the negative impact of semantic ambiguity.

In addition, research by (Aysah & Rahmat, 2025) in the proceedings of the National Seminar of LPPM UNISA Yogyakarta showed a significant relationship between interpersonal communication skills and emotional regulation in adolescents. Adolescents with good interpersonal communication skills tend to have better emotional regulation, which in turn can help them overcome psychological barriers in communication. This emphasizes the importance of developing interpersonal communication skills as part of emotional education to reduce misunderstandings caused by semantic ambiguity.

The relationship between semantic ambiguity and emotional barriers is very close, especially in the work and educational environment. When a superior gives ambiguous instructions, for example, and the employee is under stress, the interpretation of the instructions can be misinterpreted. In this case, communication is no longer a means of solving problems, but instead becomes a source of additional stress. (Purwaningsih et al., 2020) emphasized that emotional intelligence is very important in interpersonal communication. They showed that individuals who have the ability to recognize, manage, and express their emotions appropriately will be more effective in communicating.

In this context, semantic and psychological approaches to communication become important to develop simultaneously. Semantics helps in understanding the structure and meaning of words, phrases, and sentences in various contexts, while psychology provides insight into how emotions and perceptions influence the understanding of messages. Both form a unity in building effective and meaningful interpersonal communication.

The phenomenon that reflects the combination of these two obstacles can be seen in the viral case on social media, where a public figure makes an ambiguous statement and causes public uproar. One example is when the statement "we are reviewing the option of a limited lockdown" is interpreted as a direct threat by some people who are in an unstable emotional state due to the post-pandemic economic crisis. Here, semantic ambiguity ("reviewing options") and the psychological condition of the public play a role together in creating chaotic interpretations.

5. Comparison

In the realm of interpersonal communication, the effectiveness of message exchange is greatly influenced by various factors, including semantic barriers and psychological barriers. Both have different characteristics and impacts, but are complexly interrelated. A deep understanding of the differences and interconnectedness between the two is important, especially in social situations that are full of emotional content and diverse cultural contexts.

Semantic barriers refer to misunderstandings that arise due to differences in the interpretation of the meaning of words, terms, or linguistic symbols used in communication.

This is often related to semantic ambiguity, which is when a word or phrase has multiple meanings, either due to grammatical structure or use in a non-explicit context. For example, the word "nanti" in Indonesian can refer to a near time or an uncertain time, depending on tone, facial expression, or the situation of the conversation. When this context is not explained or not uniformly understood by the communicator and the recipient, there is a disruption in the understanding of the message.

Meanwhile, psychological barriers refer more to the mental or emotional condition of an individual that interferes with the process of receiving and processing messages. Factors such as stress, anxiety, anger, fear, or even prejudice can cause the recipient of the message to fail to interpret the speaker's intent objectively. In this case, it is not the message that is linguistically ambiguous, but the psychological condition of the recipient that causes interpretation bias. For example, someone who is experiencing high work pressure tends to respond to a simple question like "are you finished?" as a form of pressure or criticism, when in fact it may only be a form of attention or need for information from the other person.

The main difference between the two lies in the source of the barrier. Semantic barriers come from the language code or system itself, while psychological barriers come from the individual's internal condition. Semantic barriers are structural and tend to be consistent across language contexts, while psychological barriers are situational and personal. Therefore, solutions to semantic barriers are generally related to language clarification, message simplification, and the use of mutually agreed-upon terms. On the other hand, psychological barriers require more interpersonal and affective approaches, such as building empathy, creating a safe atmosphere in communication, and conducting emotional validation.

However, in practice, these two barriers are often intertwined. Semantic ambiguity can strengthen psychological barriers, especially if individuals are already in a certain emotional state. For example, in the context of social conflict, a government statement using the term "regulation" can be understood neutrally by some people, but by people who have experienced violence from the authorities, the term is understood as "forced eviction." This means that the meaning of words is not only determined semantically, but also shaped by past psychological experiences.

6. Conclusions

In modern interpersonal communication that takes place in both digital and physical spaces, semantic and psychological barriers are two crucial elements that are intertwined and contribute significantly to the occurrence of misinterpretation of messages. Semantic ambiguity that arises due to the use of language that has multiple meanings, non-explicit symbols, or contextual phrases, increases the potential for misunderstanding if not accompanied by adequate clarification and linguistic awareness. In a digital communication culture such as social media, this phenomenon is further exacerbated by the absence of

nonverbal elements such as intonation and facial expressions, which should help explain the true meaning of a message. When linguistic symbols are no longer able to fully represent the speaker's intent, the communication process turns into an arena of interpretation that is prone to bias.

Meanwhile, psychological barriers have an equally large impact. Mental and emotional conditions such as stress, fear, prejudice, or anger can cloud the objectivity of the message recipient, even when the message itself is semantically clear enough. Empirical studies prove that emotions play a direct role in the process of encoding and decoding messages, and in certain emotional situations, interpretation will be more influenced by subjective perception than the structure of the language itself. In this context, semantic ambiguity and emotional barriers cannot be separated strictly. Both reinforce each other in creating deviant interpretations, especially in communication that takes place in an unstable socio-political atmosphere, hierarchical work relations, or intercultural interactions with minimal empathetic understanding.

Therefore, the effectiveness of today's interpersonal communication demands an integrative approach that combines semantic and psychological dimensions. The ability to understand language structure, cultural context, and linguistic symbols must be accompanied by emotional skills, such as empathy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation skills. In an increasingly pluralistic and digitally connected world, failure to understand the interaction between semantic ambiguity and psychological barriers not only impacts interpersonal communication, but can also spread to a crisis of trust, disinformation, and even social conflict. Therefore, both in the world of education, organizations, and public communication, the development of communication competencies that touch these two domains is an urgent strategic need.

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