2.8: Ambiguity

When we argue, we use language that we assume the recipients can understand. We select words with limited ambiguity. Arguers selecting ambiguous language run the risk of being misunderstood and face rejection of their advocated point of view.

What do we mean when we call language ambiguous? Here are a few definitions of what ambiguity in language is:

“A word, phrase, or sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning.”

“Any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.”

“In order to qualify as an ambiguity an expression must generate not only “at least two different meanings”, but also two incompatible and unrelated meanings. It is only then that an expression is truly ambiguous.”

Given all the many differences humans have from culture to social system to levels of education, to regional differences and more, communicating by just using words cannot be 100 percent efficient. There will always be the possibility of ambiguity. Language serves as a vehicle for transferring meaning between a sender and his/her audience. Our communication goal is to have our target audience understand the content of the message in the manner we intended.

Reference

1. Kent Bach, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Ambiguity
3. Drazen Pehar, “Use of Ambiguities in Peace Agreements,” Language and Diplomacy, Malta: Diplo Projects