



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management

Volume 10, Issue 4, July 2023



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 6.551



Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Exploring Structural Ambiguity in the Context of Syntax

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ABSTRACT: This research paper aims to locate the difference in views of readers of a text. How the individuality, variance of thought is portrayed through the reader's outlook on the text and this paper also answers to what prompts the difference in views amongst people of a kind through Salman Rushdie's novel "Midnight's Children". The writer uses magic realism to showcase the Nation's cultural, social and psychological formation post independence. The research gives an insight of man's cognitive capacity and ability to analyze a piece of information depending on his learning, values and social strata.

KEYWORDS: Magic Realism, Saleem Sinai, Noam Chomsky, The good-enough approach

SYNTAX VS AMBIGUITY

Syntax was studied and developed by an American Linguist Noam Chomsky in his work published in 1957. It originated from the Greek word "Syntaxes" which means together and sequence. It studies how words are grouped together to form sentences. Through the knowledge of Syntax we study the formation of sentences, learn to expand sentences, and combine short, incomplete sentences into longer, grammatically correct sentences.

Example of Syntax

Crime is only fought by Batman.

Moving a word merely modifies the overall meaning of the statement. Adjectives alter the nouns that come after them, while adverbs modify the verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs that come after them. Only an adjective or an adverb can appear here.

- Meaning: Batman is the only person who fights crime. No one battles crime like Batman, not even Superman.
- Crime is only fought by Batman.
- Batman solely takes on criminals.

- Meaning: The only thing Batman does is fight crime. His only focus is on battling crime.
- Batman solely battles crime.

Guidelines for English Syntax

- A subject and verb are needed for a sentence. However, because the subject is presumed to be the person the statement is addressed towards, imperative sentences commands do not require a subject.
- There should be only one main concept for each phrase. A sentence should be divided up into separate ones if it contains two or more concepts.



- The verb is placed after the subject. If there are objects in the sentence, they come after the verb.
- A subject and verb are necessary for subordinate clauses (dependent clauses).
- The words that they describe are put in front of the adjectives and adverbs. Use the correct adjective order, also referred to as the “Royal Order,” if more than one adjective describes the same noun. Realizing these, the first step in comprehending syntax is rules.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the difference in how different people interpret the same word or sentence. Multiple interpretations of a phrase or sentence, or the occurrence of several meanings.

In the year 1400, the English word ambiguity made its debut and was defined as “uncertainty, doubt, indecision, and hesitation.” It is derived from the Old French ambiguity, which means “double meaning, equivocalness, double sense.”

A sentence that can be understood in more than one way by the reader is ambiguous. Word meaning and word order are at least two common causes of ambiguity.

Daniel Ellsberg invented ambiguity in 1961.

Why So Ambiguous?

Due to the way words are formed and sentences are written, ambiguity is caused by the presence of syntax, semantics, and other linguistic elements.

For instance: The definition of “punch” is either to hit or a drink.

The Types of Ambiguity

- Lexical Ambiguity: One word may have several meanings, which occurs at the word level.
Example : I clutched a bat.
The word “bat” might refer to a bird or a sporting good.
- Structural Ambiguity: This occurs at the sentence level when there are multiple possible interpretations or ways to understand a statement. The phrase "Ready to eat", in this statement can signify one of two things: either the food is ready or the chicken is eager to eat.
- Syntactic Ambiguity: A circumstance in which a statement’s sentence structure leaves room for many interpretations. Semantic ambiguity: This occurs when words have multiple possible meanings that change based on the context. Speakers in both languages employ it. For instance the English word "organ" can refer to both a physical organ and a musical instrument.

Poor grammar makes it simple to find ambiguity of this nature

- Phonological Ambiguity: Also referred to as homophones, they are words that sound the same yet have various meanings and applications. Instances include not/knot, here/hear, see/sea, and right/write.
- Pragmatic Ambiguity: Variation in meaning based on context.



Structural Ambiguity

The presence of alternative interpretations for a piece of written or spoken material due to the arrangement of words or phrases is known as structural or syntactic ambiguity. If a term, phrase, or sentence has more than one meaning, it is said to be ambiguous. Lexical and structural ambiguity are the two types. When a phrase, clause, or sentence can be understood in more than one way due to the arrangement of the words or lexical units, this is referred to as structural ambiguity.

Example: I noticed a person using a telescope.

The two meanings that the aforementioned sentence could have are

I noticed someone while looking through a telescope. 1. I spotted someone, and that individual was holding a telescope. Word order and word meaning are at least two common sources of ambiguity (PP changes NP).

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S: MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 and is Anise Ahmed Rushdie's son, a British American novelist of Indian descent.

His writing frequently combines magic realism with historical fiction and explores the interactions, conflicts, and migrations between Eastern and Western cultures in works that are situated on the Indian subcontinent.

Midnight's Children is Rushdie's second book, which won the Booker Prize in 1981.

His writings combine magic realism with historical fiction and focuses on the interactions, disruptions and migration between the Eastern and Western Worlds.

The Plot

It is a novel that is set at the time of India's independence and discusses the political and

Historical events of the era. It tells the interconnected fate of two infants who were born just hours after being released from the invaders.

Saleem Sinai, who was raised by a wealthy Muslim couple, is the illegitimate son of a low caste Hindu woman and a fleeing British colonist. The story moves with the birth of two Boys at

Midnight on August 15, 1947, in a hospital in Bombay, who are exchanged by the nurse. Given to a destitute Hindu street performer whose adulterous wife had passed away is Shiva, the son of a Muslim couple. Saleem is an example of New India. He began writing his memoir, Midnight's Children, at the age of thirty. Shiva will eventually become. Both Saleem's adversary and India's most revered war hero. In the 30 years following independence, Saleem is present at each significant event that occurred on the Indian subcontinent in this multifaceted tale.

McConnell Prize. The book was selected as the top Booker Prize novel in 25 years in 1993. Saleem Sinai is the protagonist and the narrator.

The Themes

Sex and Gender: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children offers a scathing indictment of the gender-based power struggles that characterized postcolonial Indian culture.

British Colonialism and Post colonialism: Colonialism and Post colonialism, Salim Sinai, who was born at precisely midnight on the eve of India's independence from British colonialism, is the country's first freeborn citizen to be born there in nearly a century. In Rushdie's

Midnight's Children, postcolonial India, the challenges of surviving in a society that has had its culture substantially destroyed and irrevocably changed by an outside, dominant force are highlighted.



STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY: IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

If one decides to unveil this literary piece, by Salman Rushdie one has to know the tale of time and firstly erase the barrier between real and unreal. The novella *Midnight's Children* is divided in 3 portions. In which the book one talks about narrator's personal and political interaction. Book one has eight chapters all linked with each other, As I flipped through the pages, I learnt that to befriend the writer's thoughts and accordingly understand the narrative It's necessary to have lexical knowledge to relate to the words in the novel that hold many meanings each understood by the reader's involvement with the text which is complicatedly expressed.

To support the above argument, there are a few instances from the novel that shall showcase the ambiguity or difference in meaning at sentence level.

- In the first chapter of book one i.e. "The Perforated Sheet", The narrator says

"Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came". The meaning of the sentence in the novel is that Saleem Sinai, the narrator was born at the hour of India's Independence when whole of India rejoiced in the moment and the narrator's birth was a celebration.

But it can be understood in more ways such as: maybe the hands of the clock come together to welcome the person or indicated a new day.

- The narrator was called by names such as "Stain face" that in the novel means his birth marked face. But it can also mean a stain on the face or an unclean face.
- The narrator says that He is the "swallower of lives" which in the novel means in his 30 years on the planet he has witnessed many things and has met different people. But in layman language it can also mean the predator of life.

There are many more sentences like these that is aimed to perplex the readers, the reader's like me will find themselves juggling between what is real and unreal and this constant questioning would insist us to bring out the true sense of the speaker who himself travels between past and present throughout the narration to bring to light the story of Independent India and parallelly unwrapping the personal chapters of the protagonist.

Ambiguity in the Title

The narrator is the true child of the Nation transforming with the stories around him, He claims to have matured along with the Nation, The title of the book i.e. "*Midnight's Children*" is itself ambiguous, with respect to the novel it means the two babies born at midnight on August 15th, 1947. But it can also be assumed as the children of night or the children who belong to midnight. In book two the narrator talks about his lifestyle and experiences from birth till adulthood. Book two has 16 chapters preceded by book three which has seven chapters all written with intent to share about India post freedom and how religion and psychology of the masses were greatly affected. Saleem Sinai as a child loved playing the game of "Snakes and Ladders" which was ambiguous in nature, for a child it is a game of snakes, ladders and dice while for a philosopher or a literary lover like me It's a lesson in which life is enclosed that teaches us, the players the art of rising and falling. As a whole the novel is a teamwork of magic and reality that is depicted through the narrator's ability to predict the future and the life he lived. There is variety in the character type and number of characters in the novel each struggling with their own story.

A written or oral literary work can be understood in many ways because of the reader's or the listener's cultural, social and cognitive set-up which affects their views and ability to grasp.

Observation

While I sat to sum-up my research, I felt my head spinning with the words that I read and reflected upon from the text and I think that is where ambiguity lies, In discovering the right and finding what is exact. The concept of ambiguity is clearly reflected through Padma's character in the play. Who is a passive viewer and voices to speak about the ongoing



storyline, her constant questioning and advice on the narrator's story explains the difference in thought and cognitive processing amongst Homo sapiens and hence leading to the birth of ambiguity.

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International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management (IJARASEM)

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