

Resolving Ambiguity in Kurdish Political Discourse: A Pragma-Theoretic Perspective

Mohammed Hussein Ahmed Bapir

m.university78@gmail.com

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Linguistics/ Pragmatics

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Abstract

Political discourse, characterized by its intricate language and high potential for ambiguity, often results in challenges for the audience in the process of interpretation. In multilingual and culturally rich contexts like the Kurdistan Region, these challenges are even magnified. Hence, this study examines the role of pragmatics in resolving ambiguity in Kurdish political discourse. By analyzing the interplay of linguistic structures and pragmatic strategies, the research aims to explore how ambiguity can be mitigated to ensure effective communication. Via a theoretical lens, the study examines the applicability of pragmatic principles, in particular Grice's cooperative maxims to interpret Kurdish political discourse. This analysis aims to unravel speakers' intentions and their agenda in a given political context. The data analyzed is taken from selected political speeches delivered by representatives of the ruling parties in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The procedure involves analyzing selected extracts using cooperative maxims and discussing the results. The conclusions of the study ascertain the applicability of pragmatic principles to the interpretation of ambiguity in political discourse; and claim that the flouting of the maxim of manner, in the samples under study, outnumbers the other maxims for particular purposes. The study can be said to contribute to the broader field of discourse analysis and pragmatics, paving the way for future research in similar multilingual political contexts.

Key Words: ambiguity, interpretation, pragmatic principles, political discourse

1. Introduction:

1.1 Political Discourse

Political discourse serves as a critical medium for articulating political strategies and obligations. The precision required in this field is often compromised by inherent ambiguities

stemming from polysemy, syntactic complexity, and cultural interpretations. These ambiguities can lead to disputes and misinterpretations, particularly in multilingual and culturally diverse regions like Kurdistan. Political speeches are expected to convey precise meanings, yet the interplay of diverse linguistic and cultural elements complicates this task. As Tiersma (2023) notes, the language used in such fields often involves political jargon and complex syntactic constructions that increase the likelihood of ambiguity. Similarly, Mattila (2023) highlights that such texts are inherently complex due to their vagueness, political jargon, and intricacy of concepts.

Language-related ambiguities, whether lexical or structural, can be significant, as highlighted by Coulthard and Johnson (2019). In political contexts, the cost of ambiguity can be severe, ranging from misinterpretation of political decisions to the complexity in political initiatives. In the Kurdish context, this complexity is further compounded by linguistic diversity, as observed by Hassanpour (2020), who underscores the interplay of dialectical variations in the process of interpretation.

1.2 Contextual Focus

In the Kurdish political framework, where multiple dialects and sociopolitical dynamics interact, resolving ambiguities requires not only linguistic insights but also cultural ones. Pragmatics, which focuses on language use in context, provides tools to analyze and mitigate these issues. Kurdistan Regional Government, with its linguistic diversity—including Kurmanji, Sorani, and other dialects—faces unique challenges in political interpretation. Moreover, the historical and political contexts further influence the interpretation and application of political norms. Gumperz (1982) emphasizes the significance of contextualization cues in multilingual environments, which are particularly pertinent to a region like Kurdistan.

Cultural norms in Kurdish society, such as respect for authority and an emphasis on communal harmony, play a significant role in shaping political discourse. As noted by Meho (2022), these cultural factors often require contextual interpretation to bridge gaps between political formalism and societal expectations. Pragmatics, through principles such as implicature offers a framework to navigate these difficulties, making it a critical tool for enhancing clarity and precision in political texts.

1.3 The Aim of the Study:

The current research aims to explore:

- the extent to which pragmatic mechanisms contribute to resolving ambiguity in Kurdish political discourse,
- the significance of utilizing cooperative maxims in the interpretation of political discourse.
- which maxim is most frequently employed by political speakers

1.4 The Procedure:

This research applies a pragmatic theory namely Grice's conversational implicature to the process of resolving ambiguity in political discourse, extracts from Kurdish political speeches, delivered by the ruling parties in the Kurdistan Region, are analyzed with the aim of clarifying the intended meaning and uncover speakers' intentions. Each analysis is accompanied by a discussion section to shed light on the extent to which pragmatic principles can address ambiguity in political texts.

2. Political Language and Ambiguity:

Ambiguity in political language is a common phenomenon in which words, phrases, or statements are deliberately or inadvertently vague, allowing for multiple interpretations. This ambiguity serves strategic purposes, such as appealing to a broad audience, avoiding direct accountability, or enabling political maneuvering.

2.1. Types of Ambiguity in Political Language:

Broadly, ambiguity in political discourse takes various forms, each playing a distinct role in conveying the hidden agendas behind political speeches.. The following are the more common types of ambiguity in political and other forms of discourse (MacDonald et al, 1994):

- a. Lexical Ambiguity – When a single word has multiple meanings.

Example: "Change is coming." (Change in leadership, policy or economy?)

b. Syntactic Ambiguity – When the structure of a sentence allows for multiple interpretations.

Example: "The government will support businesses struggling to create jobs."

(Are businesses struggling, or is job creation struggling?)

c. Intentional Vagueness – Using broad or abstract terms to avoid specificity.

Example: "We need to protect our values." (Whose values? Which ones?)

d. Euphemisms and Soft Language – Using mild or indirect terms to mask harsh realities.

Example: "Collateral damage" instead of civilian casualties.

e. Dog Whistles – Words or phrases that seem neutral but carry specific meaning for a particular group.

Example: "Traditional values" may convey different messages to different political groups..

f. Double Speak – Language that deliberately obscures, disguises, or distorts meaning.

Example: "Enhanced interrogation techniques" instead of torture.

g. Strategic Ambiguity – The deliberate use of vague language to maintain flexibility.

Example: "We will ensure economic stability." (Through regulation? deregulation? tax cuts?)

2.2 Effects of Political Ambiguity

Ambiguity, especially in political discourse, significantly affects how audiences interpret messages. It compels the audience to engage more deeply to grasp the intended meaning of political speeches or texts. The following are some of the common effects caused by ambiguity in such discourse types (Martin et al., 2020):

a. Broad Appeal – Vague language allows different groups to interpret statements in ways that align with their views.

b. Evasion of Accountability – Politicians can later claim their words were misinterpreted.

- c. Manipulation – Ambiguity can be used to subtly shift narratives or hide controversial policies.
- d. Polarization – Opposing sides may interpret the same statement in completely different ways, deepening political divides.

These effects are further complicated by the nature of political language itself, which often relies on language for specific purposes, which is distinguished by its reliance on technical terminology, long sentences, and complex structures (Tiersma, 2023, p. 45). The ambiguities that arise result from lexical polysemy, syntactic complexity, and contextual factors. In Kurdistan, linguistic diversity further complicates these issues, as political documents must cater to various dialects and cultural interpretations.

Political discourse requires a balance between precision and flexibility, which can sometimes be in conflict. This inherent duality necessitates strategies to minimize ambiguity while maintaining the adaptability required for diverse contexts. Studies such as those by Coulthard and Johnson (2019) highlight the importance of addressing these ambiguities to ensure procedural fairness and clarity.

3. Pragmatic Principles (Conversational Implicature):

Pragmatic theories, such as Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), offer valuable insights into how implicit meanings are derived in almost all types of text, especially political texts, emphasizing the importance of context and speaker intentions in resolving ambiguities.

3.1 Implicatures:

Grice's theory of implicature provides a framework for understanding how implicit meanings arise from conversational maxims (Grice, 1975). In political texts, implicatures often emerge in conditional statements or clauses with layered interpretations. This key concept in pragmatics, traces back to the work of philosopher H.P. Grice (1913–1988). Nowadays, it is widely applied in linguistics to study conversational dynamics. At its core, implicature explains how listeners manage to understand a speakers' intended message, even when the speaker says less than they mean. Grice identified two types of implicatures: conversational and conventional.

A. Conversational Implicatures:

These arise from the way an utterance is structured and follow certain unwritten rules, specifically Grice's Cooperative Principle and its associated maxims. These maxims ensure that conversations proceed efficiently and efficiently. For example, if someone says, "There is some chalk on the floor," -it may imply: "You should pick it up." This meaning is inferred by considering:

- a. The literal meaning of the words.
- b. The context and shared knowledge.
- c. The assumption that the speaker is adhering to the cooperative principle.

B. Conventional Implicatures:

These rely on conversational rules that are tied to specific words or phrases by convention. Words like however, yet, and therefore carry meanings that influence the interpretation of a statement. For instance, in "He is an Englishman; therefore, he is brave," the word therefore indicates a logical connection between being English and being brave.

According to Grice's Cooperative Principle, people generally cooperate in conversation by adhering to four maxims:

- a. Maxim of Quality (Truthfulness): Be truthful, do not state things you believe to be false or without evidence.
- b. Maxim of Quantity (Informativeness): Provide just the right amount of information, neither too little nor too much.
- c. Maxim of Relation (Relevance): Stay on topic and ensure your contributions are relevant.
- d. Maxim of Manner (Clarity): Be clear, avoid ambiguity, and present information in an organized way.

However, these maxims are not always strictly followed by the speakers. Sometimes, people violate a maxim (such as by lying or withholding information) which makes it obvious that a rule has been broken. Other times, they flout a maxim—intentionally disregarding it in a manner that encourages the listener to infer a deeper meaning. For example, sarcasm often involves flouting the maxim of quality by saying something obviously untrue to thereby implying the opposite.

In analyzing communication, especially in political discourse, we can examine how conversational implicatures shape the overall message. By considering these principles, we gain deeper insight into how meaning is constructed in communication, beyond the literal words spoken.

3.2 Contextualization Cues

Gumperz (1982) introduced the concept of contextualization cues, emphasizing how linguistic and paralinguistic signals guide interpretation. These cues are particularly significant in multilingual political settings like Kurdistan, where non-verbal elements often complement spoken language. Contextualization cues include intonation, pauses, or stress, which, in the Kurdish context, can vary considerably across dialects and cultural settings, influencing legal interpretation (Hassanpour, 2020).

The aforementioned contextualization cues, when integrated with pragmatic principles, can provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing ambiguity in Kurdish political discourse. Each theory contributes uniquely, from elucidating implicit meanings to contextualizing utterances within broader cultural and societal norms.

4. Analyzing Kurdish Political Discourse through Implicature Principles:

The Cooperative Principle, articulated by Grice (1975), ensures that contributions in discourse are relevant and clear. This principle is particularly instrumental in political contexts where precision is paramount. Recent studies, such as those by Solan (2021), emphasize the necessity of cooperative maxims in social interactions to enhance clarity and intelligibility of communication among interlocutors.

Ambiguity in Kurdish political discourse arises from various factors, including historical complexities, geopolitical constraints, intra-Kurdish rivalries, and the shifting alliances of Kurdish political actors. The following section applies Grice's cooperative principles to the interpretation of samples of Kurdish political discourse to investigate the role of such principles in disambiguating the vagueness inherent in these discourses and revealing speakers' intentions. The sample extracts illustrate ambiguity in Kurdish political discourse in Iraq, drawn from political statements, official policies, and shifting narratives:

Extract (1) Ambiguity between Independence and Federalism

Statement Before the 2017 Referendum:

"The Kurdish people have the right to decide their own future. The time has come for an independent Kurdistan that will no longer be controlled by Baghdad." — (KDP Official, 2017)

Statement After the 2017 Referendum Backlash:

"We respect the Iraqi constitution and seek a solution within the framework of a united Iraq. Dialogue is the best path forward." — (KRG Spokesperson, 2018)

Analysis:

The above samples exhibit ambiguity arising from the deliberate flouting of the maxim of manner: the first statement is clear and direct about independence; whereas, the second statement is deliberately ambiguous, avoiding strong language, and favoring diplomatic phrasing such as "a solution within a united Iraq".

Discussion:

The samples show that interlocutors deliberately violate the manner maxim to avoid being direct. This indirectness creates ambiguity, leaving unclear whether the independence goal is abandoned or is merely postponed. It allows the KRG to maintain flexibility and maneuver within Iraq's political framework.

Extract (2) Ambiguity in Relations with Baghdad:

During Budget Negotiations:

"We are committed to a strong and cooperative relationship with Baghdad and will ensure that our disputes over oil revenues are resolved peacefully." — (KRG Prime Minister, 2021)

During Oil Export Disputes:

"Kurdistan has the constitutional right to manage its own natural resources without interference from Baghdad." — (KRG Energy Minister, 2022)

Analysis:

It is clear that the extract above employs strategic ambiguity in the sense that it violates the maxim of quality. The phrase "strong and cooperative relationship" suggests alignment with

Baghdad but lacks details on what “cooperation” means. Does it involve compromises, or is it just diplomatic language? The statement does not specify how oil revenue disputes will be resolved.

Discussion: the deliberate violation of maxim of quantity in the extract is intentional: both statements give partial information, making them open to different interpretations based on political needs. In this way, Kurdish officials fluctuate between advocating for cooperation with Baghdad (to secure financial benefits) and asserting full autonomy over oil resources, depending on political and economic conditions.

Extract (3):

Before the 2017 Retaking of Kirkuk by Baghdad:

"Kirkuk is an inseparable part of Kurdistan. It is our historical right, and we will never compromise on this issue." — (Masoud Barzani, 2017)

After Losing Control of Kirkuk:

"We seek a peaceful resolution to the status of Kirkuk through dialogue and cooperation with the federal government." — (PUK Official, 2018)

Analysis:

In the two speeches above, the flouting of the maxim of quantity is evident. In the first speech, after making a strong claim about the inseparability of Kirkuk, there is no elaboration on what never compromising; means in practical terms. Does it imply military defense, legal action, or just political rhetoric? The ambiguity arises from the lack of details.

In the latter, the statement ‘peaceful resolution or dialogue’ requires more clarifying details; i.e. the statement does not clarify whether this means negotiating for autonomy, recognition, or full Kurdish control again. Giving no details here, makes the discourse open to different interpretations.

Discussion: Both statements use strategic ambiguity to serve political needs. Before losing Kirkuk, Kurdish leaders used absolutist rhetoric to rally support for independence. After losing control, the language became more open-ended, likely to maintain diplomatic flexibility. This shift, analyzed through Grice’s maxims, highlights how political discourse

adapts to changing realities while maintaining a level of vagueness to avoid direct concessions.

Extract (4):

On U.S. Military Presence in Iraq:

"The presence of U.S. troops in Iraq is crucial for regional stability and the fight against terrorism." — (KRG Security Advisor, 2021)

Analysis:

This extract plainly violates the maxim of manner as there is lack of clarity in the message conveyed. The phrase “regional stability” is vague- it is not clear whether it refers to KRG stability, to Iraq as a whole, or to broader Middle East politics. Moreover, the speaker avoids direct mention of internal Iraqi debates about sovereignty and foreign troops.

Discussion: In this extract, the interlocutor deliberately uses strategic ambiguity to maintain political flexibility. The statement on U.S. troops suggests support without committing to long-term presence or directly addressing opposition from Iran and Baghdad.

Extract (5):

On Relations with Iran:

"We have historical and strong ties with our neighbors, including Iran, and we do not wish to be part of any regional conflicts." — (PUK Leader, 2022)

Analysis:

This extract is also relevant to the violation of the maxim of manner: the phrase “we do not wish to be part of any regional conflicts” is vague and unclear. The statement could be interpreted as either neutrality or indirect support for Iran, depending on the audience hearing it.

Discussion: the sense of neutrality expressed in the extract introduces vagueness to the statement. The PUK’s statement on Iran presents an image of neutrality but leaves room for maneuvering based on regional power dynamics.

Extract (6): KDP on Political Unity:

"The unity of the Kurdish people is our top priority, and we will work together for the benefit of all." — (KDP Official, 2022)

Analysis:

The way the message is expressed in the extract above hints at a strategic ambiguity via which the spokesperson maneuvers around and without elaborating on the issue imparted. The phrase "work together" is unclear—who is included in "we"? Does it mean cooperation with all Kurdish parties, specific groups, or only within the KDP leadership? Moreover, the wording avoids direct mention of political strategies, potential obstacles, or any concrete steps, making it open to multiple interpretations.

Discussion:

The ambiguity in the statement appears intentional, likely to maintain broad appeal while avoiding political commitments. By keeping definitions of "unity" and "benefit" open-ended, the KDP allows different stakeholders to interpret the message in ways that align with their own perspectives. This strategic vagueness aligns with political rhetoric that aims to appear cooperative while leaving room for flexibility in action.

Extract (7):

PUK on Political Power-Sharing:

"We must ensure that power is not concentrated in the hands of one party. True democracy means fair representation for all Kurdish groups." — (PUK Official, 2022)

Analysis:

Among Grice's cooperative principles, more than one maxim can be said to have been violated in this extract; however the most prominent is the violation related to the maxim of manner. The expression "true democracy" is vague—democracy can take many forms, and what is considered "true" is subjective. Furthermore, "Fair representation" is another ambiguous term. It is not clear whether it refers to equal representation for all Kurdish groups, to a coalition government, or to something else. Without clarity, the statement remains open-ended.

Discussion:

Similar to the previous extract, this PUK statement employs strategic ambiguity to convey a general principle while avoiding explicit confrontation. It implies a critique of power concentration, likely targeting the KDP, but remains vague enough to be interpreted flexibly. This allows the PUK to present itself as a champion of democracy without committing to specific reforms or policies.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that pragmatic strategies, particularly Grice's implicature principles, play a vital role in the interpretation of interlocutors' speeches, especially in political discourse. These strategies enhance the clearer interpretation of texts and discourses expressed in a pragmatically sophisticated style.

The most important and noticeable conclusion the research has come out with, in relation to the extract samples analyzed, is that among the four principle maxims, outlined by Grice for a cooperative communication, the flouting of the maxim of manner outnumbers the other maxims investigated in the analyses. This is tantamount to saying that among the discourse genres, political discourse is more prone to the flouting of this particular maxim; and this characteristic enables political authorities and party spokespersons to always maneuver in their speeches, give evasive answers in critical situations, especially when they are unexpectedly interviewed by people in the mass media.

By integrating pragmatic theories into the analysis of Kurdish political discourse, this study contributes to the broader field of political linguistics and pragmatics, offering a robust framework for addressing ambiguity in multilingual and culturally rich contexts. Future research could further explore the practical applications of these findings, particularly in policy reform, the modernization of political insights, and the development of tools to enhance the accessibility of political discourse.

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بوخته

گوتاری رامیاری که به زمانیکی ئالوز و ناروون ناوزه ند ده کریت، زورجار له پیواژوی لیکدانهوهدا ئاستهنگ بو گویگر دروست دهکات. له چوارچیوهی فره زمانی و دهولمهندی کولتوری وهک نه وه ی له ههریمی کوردستاندا ده ببیریت، ئاستهنگهکه گهورتر دهکرین. لیرهوه نههم لیکولینهوهیه ورد دهبنتهوه له رۆلی پراگماتیک له چارمکردنی لیلی له

گوتاری رامیاری کوردیدا. ئامانجی توێژینهوهکه ئهوهیه که بزانیته چۆن دهتوانریت ناروونی کهم بکریتهوه بۆ دنیابوون له پهیوهندییهکی کاریگهر. توێژینهوهکه له رووی تیۆریهوه، کاریکردنی بنهما پراگماتیکهکان، به تایبتهتی ماکسیمه هاوبهشهکانی گرایس، بۆ لیکدانهوهی گوتاری سیاسی کوردی دهکۆلێتهوه؛ و ئهمهش به ئامانجی ئاشکراکردنی مهبهستهی وتاردهران و کارنامهکانیان له چوارچۆیهکی سیاسی دیاریکراودا. ئهو داتایانهی شیکاری بۆ دهکریت له وتاره سیاسیه ههلبژێردراوهکان و مرگهراون که له لایهن نوێنهراوانی حزبه دهسهلاتدارهکان له حکومهتی ههریمی کوردستان پێشکەش دهکری. ریکارهکه بریتییه له شیکردنهوهی ههلبژێردراوهکان به یارمهتی ماکسیمه هاوبهش، و باسکردنی ئهجامه بدهسته هینراوهکان. دهرهجامهکانی لیکۆلێنهوهکه کاریکردنی بنهما پراگماتیکهکان بۆ لیکدانهوهی ناروونی له گوتاری سیاسیدا دنیای دهکهنهوه؛ و ئیدیعی ئهوه دهکهن که پێشیلکردنی ماکسیمه شیواز، له نمونهکانی ژیر لیکۆلێنهوهدا، ژمارهیان له ماکسیمهکانی تر زیاتره بۆ مهبهستهی تایبته. دهتوانین بڵین ئهوه توێژینهوهیه بهشداره له بواری فراوانکردنی شیکاری گوتار و پراگماتیکدا، که ریگه خۆش دهکات بۆ لیکۆلێنهوهکانی داهاوو له چوارچۆیهی سیاسی فره زمانی هاوشیوهدا.

الملخص

غالبًا ما يُسبب الخطاب السياسي، الذي يتميز بتعقيد لغته واحتمالية غموضه العالية، تحدياتٍ للجمهور في عملية التفسير. وفي البيئات السياسية المتعددة اللغات والثقافات مثل إقليم كردستان، تتفاقم هذه التحديات. لذا، تتعمق هذه الدراسة في دور البراغمية في حل غموض الخطاب السياسي الكوردي. ومن خلال تحليل التفاعل بين البنى اللغوية والاستراتيجيات البراغمية، يهدف البحث إلى استكشاف كيفية تخفيف الغموض لضمان تواصل فعال. ومن منظور نظري، تدرس الدراسة مدى تطبيق المبادئ البراغمية، ولا سيما مبادئ غرايس التعاونية، على تفسير الخطاب السياسي الكوردي؛ وذلك بهدف كشف نوايا المتحدثين وأجنداتهم في سياق سياسي معين. استُخلصت البيانات المُحللة من خطابات سياسية مختارة ألقاها ممثلو الأحزاب الحاكمة في حكومة إقليم كردستان. ويتمثل الإجراء في تحليل المقتطفات المختارة بمساعدة المبادئ التعاونية، ومناقشة النتائج المتوصل إليها. تؤكد استنتاجات الدراسة مدى انطباق المبادئ البراغمية على تفسير الغموض في الخطاب السياسي، وتؤكد أن تجاوز قاعدة الأسلوب في العينات قيد الدراسة يفوق القواعد الأخرى لأغراض محددة. ويمكن القول إن هذه الدراسة تُساهم في توسيع نطاق تحليل الخطاب السياسي والبراغمية اللغوية، مما يُمهّد الطريق لأبحاث مستقبلية في هذا المجال.