Lexical Ambiguity in Social Crime Issues News
in the 《国际日报》Guójì Rìbào Newspaper, April 2025 Edition

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Lexical Ambiguity;
International
Daily;
Mandarin
Newspaper

Lexical ambiguity where a single word licenses multiple meanings can obscure interpretation in Mandarin news, especially in brief, information-dense crime reporting; however, empirical descriptions of how ambiguity is realized and triggered in social-crime news discourse remain limited. Addressing this gap, this study investigates lexical ambiguity in social crime issues news published in the April 2025 edition of the Mandarin-language newspaper 《国际日报》(Guójì Rìbào), with three objectives: (1) to classify the types of lexical ambiguity, (2) to identify factors that cause ambiguity, and (3) to explicate the lexical meanings generated in context. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the data were collected through document analysis of crime news texts and were examined by (i) isolating ambiguous lexical items, (ii) assigning ambiguity types based on Ullmann's framework, (iii) tracing ambiguity triggers using Hurford and Heasley's factors, and (iv) interpreting meanings through contextual, co-textual, and idiomatic cues. The analysis yielded 68 instances of lexical ambiguity, dominated by polysemy (58 cases), followed by homograph (9) and homophone (1), with no homonym cases identified. Two causal patterns were observed: unclear reference (5 cases) and ambiguous phrase/sentence structure (63 cases), indicating that ambiguity is more often driven by condensed journalistic constructions than by referential uncertainty alone. Overall, the ambiguities produced literal, contextual, and idiomatic meaning alternatives, implying that accurate comprehension of Mandarin crime news relies heavily on contextual

anchoring and syntactic parsing; these findings support the need for clearer referential specification in news writing and for targeted instruction on disambiguation strategies in Mandarin reading.

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in mass communication, particularly in the dissemination of news, where clarity and precision are essential to ensure accurate public understanding (Subandi, 2013). As a primary medium of social interaction, language enables individuals to convey information, express ideas, and construct shared meanings within society (Subandi, 2015). Scholars emphasize that language is a system of arbitrary sound symbols used by members of a social group to cooperate, communicate, and establish social identity (Santoso, 2006; Septyastawa & Widiasih, 2023). In written communication, especially news discourse, adherence to linguistic norms becomes crucial, as the absence of paralinguistic cues such as intonation and gesture increases the risk of misinterpretation.

Written news texts are particularly susceptible to ambiguity. Unlike spoken communication, where intonation and emphasis help clarify meaning, written language relies heavily on lexical choice, sentence structure, and contextual completeness. As noted by Putri & Puspawati (2021), ambiguity rarely occurs in spoken discourse due to the presence of prosodic features, whereas written discourse frequently generates multiple interpretations when linguistic markers are insufficient. Ambiguity can thus hinder effective communication and lead to misunderstanding, especially when the message involves sensitive social issues. Abdul, as cited in Trismanto (2018), argues that ambiguity is one of the main factors causing communication failure, as messages are not conveyed or interpreted as intended.

Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in everyday language use and arises when linguistic expressions allow more than one interpretation (Puspitasari & Beratha, 2019). Piantadosi et al. (2012) explain that words presented outside a clear context often carry multiple meanings, requiring readers to infer the intended interpretation. This phenomenon may result from vague lexical boundaries, differing interpretations between writers and readers, or the overuse of familiar expressions whose meanings have shifted over time (Djajasudarma, 2009). In mass media discourse, ambiguity can appear in both spoken and written forms; however, it is more prominent in written texts such as newspapers, magazines, and online news articles (Mael & Subandi, 2015).

According to Ullmann (2010), ambiguity can be classified into three types: phonetic ambiguity, grammatical ambiguity, and lexical ambiguity. This study focuses on lexical ambiguity, which occurs when a word or phrase possesses multiple meanings. Lexical ambiguity commonly arises from polysemy, where a single lexical item has several related meanings, and homonymy, where words share the same form or pronunciation but differ in meaning. In Mandarin Chinese, lexical ambiguity is

particularly prevalent due to the language's high degree of homophony. Trismanto (2018) explains that lexical ambiguity in Mandarin often stems from homophones words that share identical pronunciation but differ in meaning especially in contexts lacking explicit clarification. This linguistic characteristic makes Mandarin news texts especially vulnerable to ambiguity when contextual information is limited.

Lexical ambiguity in news discourse is not merely a linguistic issue but also a communicative concern, as it can influence readers" perceptions of reported events. In news reporting on social and criminal issues, ambiguous lexical choices may obscure the nature of actions, the identity of actors, or the severity of events. Such ambiguity may be employed intentionally to maintain neutrality or avoid legal consequences, but it can also arise unintentionally from imprecise word selection or incomplete contextual framing. Chaer (2014) emphasizes that effective sentences should be free from ambiguity, as clarity is a fundamental requirement in informative texts such as news articles.

One Mandarin-language newspaper published in Indonesia is 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) a daily newspaper issued in Jakarta in both print and online formats. The newspaper is widely read among the Chinese-Indonesian community and is known for its formal Mandarin usage and strict editorial standards. 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) covers a wide range of topics, including local, national, and international news, with particular attention to social issues affecting Indonesian migrant workers abroad. The April 2025 edition was selected as the data source for this study because it features extensive coverage of social and criminal cases, such as violence against migrant workers, labor disputes, fraud, human trafficking, and unlawful detention. These reports provide rich linguistic data for analyzing lexical ambiguity within real news contexts.

Although numerous studies have discussed ambiguity from theoretical and descriptive perspectives, research that specifically examines lexical ambiguity in Mandarin news discourse remains limited. Most previous studies focus on isolated examples or general linguistic phenomena without systematically analyzing how lexical ambiguity operates across news texts within a specific social context. Consequently, broader patterns, contributing factors, and interpretive effects of lexical ambiguity in Mandarin newspapers have not been fully explored. This gap highlights the need for a focused and systematic investigation of lexical ambiguity in news reporting.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze lexical ambiguity in social criminal news published in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition. The objectives of this research are to identify the types of lexical ambiguity present in the news texts, examine the factors contributing to their occurrence, and interpret the lexical meanings generated by ambiguous expressions within their contextual frameworks. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to Mandarin linguistics and media discourse analysis by providing insights into how lexical ambiguity functions in news reporting. In addition, this research may offer practical implications for journalists, editors, and media

practitioners in improving linguistic clarity and reducing ambiguity in news texts, particularly when reporting sensitive social and criminal issues.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze lexical ambiguity in social criminal news published in the Mandarin-language newspaper 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition. The qualitative approach is selected because the research aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of linguistic phenomena, particularly the meanings, contexts, and multiple interpretations arising from ambiguous lexical items in written news discourse. Rather than quantifying data, this study emphasizes interpretative analysis of language use within its natural textual and social context, with the researcher acting as the primary instrument of analysis (Moleong, 2019; Sugiyono, 2019).

The descriptive method is applied to systematically describe the forms of lexical ambiguity, the factors contributing to their occurrence, and the meanings generated in criminal news discourse. According to Arikunto (2010), descriptive research seeks to portray phenomena as they naturally occur without manipulating variables. This method is considered appropriate for linguistic studies that focus on revealing patterns and characteristics of language use as reflected in authentic texts. In line with Creswell (2014), qualitative research is exploratory in nature and aims to understand meanings constructed within social texts; therefore, it allows for a comprehensive examination of ambiguous lexical expressions influenced by context, diction, and discourse structure.

The data source of this study consists of social criminal news articles containing lexical ambiguity published in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition. The newspaper was selected because it is a widely circulated Mandarin-language newspaper in Indonesia and regularly reports on social and criminal issues, including violence, labor exploitation, fraud, and human trafficking. The data were obtained from the official website and digital archives of 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào). The data comprise headlines and selected excerpts from news articles that contain potentially ambiguous lexical items relevant to the research focus. In qualitative research, textual data such as written documents are considered essential sources for understanding linguistic phenomena (Moleong, 2019)

Data collection was conducted using the *Simak Bebas Libat Cakap (SBLC)* technique and note-taking. The *SBLC* technique involves observing language use without the researcher's direct involvement in the communicative process, allowing objective analysis of written discourse (Mael & Subandi, 2013; Sudaryanto., 2015). In this study, the researcher carefully examined news texts and identified lexical items that exhibit ambiguity. These data were then systematically recorded using a note-taking technique to facilitate classification and analysis (Sudaryanto., 2015).

The data analysis process followed qualitative descriptive procedures, including data identification, classification, interpretation, and contextual analysis. Ambiguous lexical items were categorized based on their types, such as polysemy and homonymy, and analyzed to determine the factors causing ambiguity and the alternative meanings that may arise. This analytical process emphasizes the relationship between lexical choice and contextual interpretation, highlighting how ambiguity functions within social criminal news discourse. By focusing on processes rather than outcomes, qualitative analysis enables a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and interpreted in media texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on Ullmann's (2010) theoretical classification, lexical ambiguity can be divided into several forms, namely homonymy, homophony, homograph, and polysemy. An analysis of the 68 data items collected reveals a strong dominance of polysemy, accounting for 58 instances, while homograph appears in 9 instances and homophony is found in only 1 instance. This distribution indicates that semantically related meaning extension is the most frequent source of ambiguity in news texts, particularly given that Mandarin contains numerous lexemes whose meanings shift in response to social, legal, and cultural developments. This finding is consistent with Ullmann's view that polysemy is the most dynamic element of language and becomes a major source of ambiguity when contextual boundaries are insufficiently specified.

The dominance of polysemy in this research corpus can be interpreted as a form of adaptation in journalistic language, which seeks to convey information concisely while maintaining density of meaning. On the one hand, this writing style offers communicative efficiency; on the other hand, it creates opportunities for ambiguity when a single lexical item undergoes functional meaning expansion in political, criminal, or social domains. This tendency is evident in the flexible use of terms such as 案件 (Àn Jiàn), 案例 (Àn Lì), and 官方机构 (Guān Fāng Jī Gòu) in news reporting. The polysemy appears more frequently in news texts because journalistic language often employs broad and adaptable terms that evolve alongside events. The same Mandarin character may carry different meanings when it appears in different morphological structures, thereby requiring readers to interpret meaning carefully based on context. The news texts addressing international issues tend to contain lexical ambiguity due to the frequent use of legal, administrative, and social terminology with multiple semantic values.

One example of polysemy is found in data GRB.T13.K12 through the phrase 不断 出现 (Bù Duàn Chū Xiàn), which can be interpreted either as actual frequency, referring to factual events that continuously occur, or as recurring news tendencies, indicating repeated patterns of media reporting. This ambiguity arises because the word 出现 (Chū Xiàn) in modern Mandarin discourse may refer to concrete real-world events as well as

discursive emergence within mass media coverage. When the sentence context does not clearly specify what is "emerging," readers may arrive at different interpretations, resulting in ambiguity. This phenomenon reflects the fundamental nature of polysemy as described by Ullmann, namely the existence of related meaning extensions that cannot always be clearly distinguished without pragmatic contextual support.

Lexical ambiguity also appears in the category of homograph, in which identical characters carry different syntactic functions, tones, or meanings. This can be observed in words such as 调查 (Diào Chá), which may function either as a verb or a noun depending on its position within a sentence. Mandarin's reliance on word order and its lack of explicit morphological markers require readers to infer meaning based on syntactic structure and surrounding semantic context. In several data items, the context does not provide sufficiently strong cues, allowing homograph to generate interpretative ambiguity. This finding aligns with Puspitasari & Beratha (2019), who notes that homograph plays a significant role in creating semantic uncertainty in written Mandarin texts.

Meanwhile, homophony is the least frequently occurring category, appearing in only one data item, as print media generally avoids phonetic wordplay that may trigger ambiguity. Homophony is more commonly found in spoken language and informal conversation. Nevertheless, its occurrence in this study demonstrates that Mandarin's phonological system, which contains a high number of homophonous syllables, still has the potential to generate ambiguity when news content includes words that sound similar but differ in character and meaning.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that lexical ambiguity is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a pragmatic and discursive one. The causes of ambiguity are not limited to word structure alone but are also closely related to how media frame social issues, select efficient diction, and condense narratives. Journalistic practices that prioritize speed and effectiveness in information delivery further contribute to the use of lexemes with multiple meanings, particularly in reports on criminal, political, and immigration issues that frequently rely on legally elastic terminology. Therefore, understanding lexical ambiguity is essential in analyzing Mandarin news texts, as it provides insight into language dynamics, semantic development, and patterns of information delivery in mass media.

In conclusion, the analysis of lexical ambiguity types in this study shows that polysemy is the most dominant form of ambiguity in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition, followed by homograph and homophony. These findings are not only linguistically significant but also reflect the characteristics of journalistic language, which is dense in meaning and adaptive to evolving social issues. This study reinforces Ullmann"s theory and aligns with previous research, while also contributing to readers"

understanding of the importance of context in interpreting lexical meaning in Mandarin news texts.

From the overall data analyzed in social issue news published in the April 2025 edition, it is evident that the occurrence of lexical ambiguity is more strongly influenced by phrase or sentence structures that allow multiple interpretations than by referential vagueness. This is reflected in the dominance of 63 data items exhibiting structure-based ambiguity, compared to only 5 data items involving unclear referential meaning. Journalistic language, which tends to be concise, compact, and focused on delivering core information, often omits details that are essential for restricting meaning. When such details are removed for the sake of communicative efficiency, certain phrases become open to multiple interpretations. In other words, media writing style itself becomes a major trigger for ambiguity, which aligns with Hurford & Heasley (1983) view that language inherently contains ambiguity when contextual information is not made explicit.

Phrase structure and syntactic construction in news texts constitute a significant cause of ambiguity. Sentences that are arranged without clear syntactic markers or that involve ambiguous word order create the possibility for readers to derive different interpretations. For instance, phrases such as "扩大影响力" (expand influence) or "确保行动顺利进行" (ensure the smooth execution of actions) do not explicitly indicate who or what functions as the subject or object of the action. This sentence construction and pragmatic context play a crucial role in determining the final meaning of an expression. Accordingly, lexical ambiguity does not arise solely from the lexical item itself, but also from how it is embedded within a broader syntactic structure that permits multiple interpretations.

Referential vagueness also contributes to the emergence of lexical ambiguity in news discourse. Certain words and pronouns, such as "相关部门" (relevant departments) or "他们" (they), lack immediate and specific referents, requiring readers to infer the intended subject independently. This observation corresponds with Hurford & Heasley (1983) assertion that unclear reference is one of the primary causes of lexical ambiguity. The context of English–Mandarin translation further confirms that referential ambiguity leads to semantic confusion, particularly when the original textual context is not elaborated in detail. In news reporting, such referential vagueness often arises from journalistic considerations, including the protection of sensitive information or the simplification of narratives to facilitate rapid public comprehension.

Discourse context and the nature of news reporting itself also play an important role in shaping ambiguity. News reports on social and criminal issues frequently employ abstract or general terms, such as "机制" (mechanism), "措施" (measures), or "权利" (rights). The use of such terms allows semantic flexibility so that news coverage can

accommodate a range of possible events or actors involved. This observation is in line with Cheng (2023) findings, which suggest that lexical and structural ambiguity in academic writing often results from limited lexical specificity and imprecise sentence construction. In the context of news discourse, ambiguity arises not only from linguistic imprecision but also from editorial strategies that enable information to be conveyed succinctly without sacrificing thematic scope.

The phenomenon of lexical ambiguity observed in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) is also consistent with the findings of Rosalia et al. (2023) and Bangun et al. (2024), who report that polysemous and homonymous words in news texts frequently generate multiple interpretations. The similarity between those studies and the present research lies in the shared object of analysis news texts and the emphasis on contextual understanding as the key to meaning interpretation. However, this study differs in that it explicitly applies Ullmann (2010) theoretical framework to classify forms of lexical ambiguity in Mandarin, whereas previous studies primarily adopted descriptive analyses without direct reference to this theoretical model.

The lexical meanings that emerge because of lexical ambiguity in social issue news published in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition reveal a distinctive linguistic phenomenon in which a single word or phrase possesses more than one lexicographically valid meaning. This condition enables readers to interpret multiple meanings within a given context. According to Ullmann (2010), lexical ambiguity occurs when a word has more than one meaning, the interpretation of which depends on its contextual use. Such ambiguity may arise from polysemy, where a single lexical item has several semantically related meanings, or from homonymy, in which two words share the same form but have unrelated meanings.

Based on the data analysis, ten instances of lexical ambiguity were identified in news texts addressing social and criminal issues. For example, in the data coded GRB.T30.K07, the phrase "赌场大酒店" (Dǔ Chǎng Dà Jiǔ Diàn) presents two possible interpretations: first, denotatively referring to a large hotel that includes a casino, and second, emphasizing the location as a gambling venue, highlighting the casino activity itself. This ambiguity is polysemous in nature because both meanings remain conceptually related, yet they generate different interpretive nuances for readers (Ullmann, 2010). Another example appears in data GRB.T13.K01, where the word "解救" (Jiě Jiù) gives rise to homographic ambiguity between the meaning of "physical rescue" and that of "administrative or diplomatic protection". The news context does not clarify whether the 34 Indonesian nationals were physically evacuated or merely assisted through administrative procedures, compelling readers to infer the intended meaning based on the broader discourse context. A similar case is found in data GRB.T13.K11, where the phrase "获救并遭遣返" (Huò Jiù Bìng Zāo Qiǎn Fǎn) can be interpreted either

as rescue followed by procedural repatriation or as forced deportation, resulting in significant ambiguity regarding the victims" legal and social status.

Lexical ambiguity is also evident in terms related to social action, such as "和平集会" (Hé Píng Jí Huì) in data GRB.T22.K04, which may be interpreted as a peaceful demonstration or a solidarity gathering. This ambiguity arises because the news text does not specify the form of the activity, the number of participants, or the specific objectives of the event. In addition, several terms associated with criminality display polysemous ambiguity. For instance, "搬迁" (Bān Qiān) in data GRB.T22.K13 may refer to physical relocation or operational relocation, while "诈骗公司囚禁" (Zhà Piàn Gōng Sī Qiú Jìn) in data GRB.T13.K02 may denote either physical detention or socio-economic confinement through exploitation. Similarly, the phrase "接受调查" (Jiē Shòu Diào Chá) in data GRB.T13.K05 is polysemous, as it may indicate a formal legal investigation or a relatively minor administrative inquiry.

Within the media context, lexical ambiguity significantly influences readers" comprehension and opens space for multiple interpretations. Phrases such as "网络诈骗公司" (Wǎng Luò Zhà Piàn Gōng Sī) in data GRB.T13.K07 may be interpreted as a legally registered company engaged in online fraud or as an underground criminal organization, while "不断出现" (Bù Duàn Chū Xiàn) in data GRB.T13.K12 generates ambiguity between actual frequency of events and recurring media reporting patterns. Finally, the phrase "遭欺诈的认识" (Zāo Qī Zhà De Rèn Shí) in data GRB.T13.K15 produces ambiguity between "preventive awareness" and "understanding derived from victimization experience".

The results of this analysis are consistent with previous studies. The importance of contextual clarity and translation strategies in reducing lexical ambiguity in Mandarin translations, The influence of sentence construction and pragmatic context on the interpretation of ambiguous expressions. Cheng (2023) and Rosalia et al. (2023) likewise find that lexical ambiguity frequently arises from unclear structural organization or imprecise lexical choices, making meaning interpretation highly context dependent. These findings reinforce Ullmann's theory that lexical meaning is inherently flexible and varies according to usage context, underscoring the critical role of discourse context in understanding messages conveyed through print media (Ullmann, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of this study, it can be concluded that the types of lexical ambiguity, their contributing factors, and the resulting meanings identified in social criminal news published in 《国际日报》 (Guójì Rìbào) April 2025 edition exhibit distinct linguistic patterns. The analysis reveals four categories of lexical ambiguity, namely homonymy, homophony, homograph, and polysemy, with polysemy emerging as the most dominant type, accounting for 58 out of 68 data items. Homographic

ambiguity was found in 9 data items, homophonic ambiguity appeared in only 1 data item, and no cases of homonymy were identified. This dominance of polysemy indicates that Mandarin, as a language rich in lexemes with broad and context-dependent meanings, is highly susceptible to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, the causes of lexical ambiguity in social criminal news were primarily attributed to two main factors: referential vagueness and ambiguous phrase or sentence structures. Referential vagueness was identified in 5 data items, occurring when events, actors, or objects were not explicitly specified, while ambiguous syntactic structures accounted for 63 data items, particularly in concise and compact news sentences that allow more than one interpretation. The predominance of structural ambiguity reflects the characteristics of Mandarin journalistic language, which frequently employs short and direct sentences that do not always provide complete contextual information. In addition, the findings demonstrate that lexical ambiguity generates multiple layers of meaning, including literal, contextual, and idiomatic interpretations. Lexical items such as "处理" (Chǔ Lǐ), "跳楼保命" (Tiào Lóu Bǎo Mìng), and "和平集会" (Hé Píng Jí Huì) illustrate how meaning varies depending on contextual framing within news discourse. These variations may influence readers' perceptions of the severity of criminal acts, the actions of authorities, or the nature of reported events when contextual information is insufficient. Therefore, lexical ambiguity plays a crucial role in shaping readers' understanding of Mandarin news texts and highlights the importance of contextual clarity in journalistic writing.

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