



**The Use of Vague and Ambiguous  
Language in Book Titles: A Pragmatic  
and Sociolinguistic Study**

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The following study tries to investigate how vague and ambiguous language is being used in titles and the functions that it achieves. Also, the study tries to investigate whether titling is affected by readers' age and gender or not. The study hypothesizes that writers plan the process of titling and make their choices on purposes. The vague and ambiguous language is used intentionally to reach a good marketing.

In order to achieve the study aims, Grice's maxims are analyzed to investigate the use of vague language and, on the other hand, ambiguity is investigated pragmatically. Also, a discussion is made to investigate the effect of some non-linguistic variables such as age and gender in deciding title forms. Another discussion is done to show the functions of vague and ambiguous titles. Study conclusion is represented at the end.

**Keywords:** Vague language, ambiguity, book titles, Grice Maxims, age and gender.

## 1- Introduction

While vagueness is the lack of clarity and certainty in an expression or word, ambiguity is the possibility of conveying two different meanings by a word or expression. The current study aims at discovering the functions that vague and ambiguous titles convey. It also tries to show what vagueness and ambiguity are in book titles. Moreover, the study tries to investigate whether some non-linguistic variables may affect the use of vague and ambiguous language in book titling or not.

The study tries to find answers to such questions as: (1) what are vagueness and ambiguity in book titles? (2) What functions do they serve? Do some non-linguistic variables (such as age and gender) have an effect on language form choice or not, concerning literary book titles?

To achieve the aims and to reach answers for the study questions, twelve titles are chosen. A detailed analysis for each title is made to investigate vagueness and ambiguity and a discussion made concerning the non-linguistic variables, namely age and gender.

## 2- Book Titles and Vague Language

Book titles do not always give a direct and clearly related information to guide reader's understanding and guess about the content; sometimes they are vague or ambiguous. Even though, they still have to offer an image of the content. Titles are complementary part of books and they are the first thing to be noted in a book beside its cover.

Vagueness is seen to be a common nature of human language. Carter and McCarthy (2006:928) define language vagueness as "purposely and unabashedly vague" use of language. So, this study considers the use of vague language in book titles purposive.

Channell (1994:196) states that an expression or a word is said to be vague if it (i) can be "contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition", (ii) is purposely vague and (iii) indicates uncertain meaning.

Generally, there are four reasons why vague language is used, as defined by Crystal and Davy (1975:11). The reasons are: (i) the writer is not sure about the exact word or expression because of memory loss. (ii) No appropriate word or expression is finding, either because the writer does not know it or the language itself lacks it. (iii) The writer deliberately and intentionally prefers vagueness. (iv) Subject need is considered, i.e., the context requires a kind of imprecision. In term of this paper, a study of literary book titles, all those reasons are taken into consideration.

Cook (2007:23) mentions that though writers of literary works may try to avoid vagueness, there are others who prefer to use vague language for different reasons, specifically in titles. It can be used to (i) hide some effective information and content, (ii) attract reader's interest to read and find what is in (marketing goal), (iii) link something in the book to a context (in the real world), i.e., indicate a cohesive function, and (iv) some writers have the tendency to direct the readers to think of different contradictory interpretations for the book content/ story.

Grice (1975:45) also discusses the reason for using vague language saying that "there are cases (actual or possible) in which one does not know whether to apply the expression or to withhold it and one's not knowing is not due to ignorance of the facts". In other words, it means a vague title can be used because it is difficult for the writer to decide whether some information is better to be introduced or not and is appropriate and the best choice or not. Briffa and Caruana (2009:4) assert that title choosing reflects the author's mind and thinking

## 3- Co-operative Principle

Vagueness is a matter of flouting Grice's (1975) cooperative principles. Grice (1975) embodies the principle in four main maxims: (i). **Maxim of Quality** "Do not say that which you believe to be false" Do not say

for which you "lack adequate evidence"(ii). **Maxim of Quantity** "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes). Make your contribution not more or less informative than is required"(iii). **Maxim of Relation** Be relevant. (iv). **Maxim of Manner** Be clear, brief and orderly. (cited in Yule, 2010:147)

## 4- Implicature

Implicature is a main part of Grice's maxims. It is what a speaker or writer does not say or state but rather communicates. Gazdar (1979:38) defines implicature as the "proposition that is implied by the utterance of a sentence in a context even though that proposition is not a part nor an entailment of what was actually said." Conversational implicature, as a type of implicature beside the conventional one, relies on Grice's co-operative maxims. So, this study uses the term implicature to mean the conversational one.

## 5- Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity is to have different meanings for an expression when interpreted in different contexts (Cushing,1997:263). Some people may confuse between vagueness and ambiguity. Vagueness is the unclear or uncertain use of expressions or words whereas pragmatic ambiguity is the existence of two meanings in a word or expression because of context. However, both of them are used intentionally at times to serve the same function and/or for the same purposes. Also, some categories can be both vague and ambiguous.

## 6- Sociolinguistic variables

### i- Age

Language use can be affected by age. People from different ages have different cognitive abilities. The different cognitive abilities tend to make people prefer specific forms of language and comprehend pieces of language differently over the life cycle. So, a person may try to arrange his/her speech/text in a way that satisfies others, taking into consideration age (Eckert,1997:151). However, age can be more affective and meaningful in some situations than other.

### ii- Gender

Reader's gender may play a role in deciding a book title's form. Stokoe (2005:119) describes gender as "an enactment, discursive construction or product of social interaction". Comprehensive studies have been made to understand language use and preference differences by men and women by analyzing their linguistic behavior. For instance, Lakoff (1975:53-56) states that women preference of language and their speech are tentative, uncertain, lacking authority and submissive; men are described as the opposite.

## 7- Data Selected

Twelve titles are selected randomly. The only point taken into consideration is the element of variety, in age and gender. The titles are the following:

Title	Author	Publication	Age	Gender	Goodreads rat
the Wind	Margaret Mitchell	1936	Adults	Male and Female	4.29
g is Easy	Dorothy West	1940	Adults	Male and Female	3.92
v You Want This	Kristen Roupenian	2019	Adults	Female	3.70
is No Man	Etaf Rum	2019	Adults	Female	4.42
Gatsby	F. Scott Fitzgerald	1925	Adult	Male	3.91
h the Bell Tolls	Ernest Hemingway	1940	Adults	Male	3.96
Mockingbird	Harper Lee	1960	Kids	Male and Female	4.27
st	Kathy Stinson	1960	Kids	Male and Female	4.08
bright girl can do	Sally Nicholls	2017	Kids	Female	4.03
ht Stories for Rebel Girls	Pa Cavallo and Eler	2017	Kids	Female	4.35
	Gray Paulsen	1987	Kids	Male	3.70
hot Buddy	Christopher Paul	1999	Kids	Male	3.91

## Data Information

## 8- Analysis

### a. Gone with the Wind

It is a title for a novel talking about the life during the American civil war up to the time of reconstruction, and particularly the life of a manipulative woman (Scarlett) conducting turbulent romance in that period. It talks about a romance story in a nation in a war. Scarlett is a beautiful rich woman who lives in a plantation (Tara) and tries hard to reach the love of a man, Ashly, she has wanted for a long time and fails. She goes through many difficulties and unsuccessful marriages. She leaves Tara. After her third marriage which fails

too (for being busy mind with her first love Ashly), she finds that she has made many mistakes and , as a result, has been left alone. She decides to go back to Tara and try to find a way to get her last husband back, for she lately realizes that he is the true love that she may want to live with.

When a reader first reads the title "Gone with the wind " and tries to interpret it to have some information about the book content (the story), s/he may get confused. The confusion results from both the vagueness and the ambiguity of the title. Readers may ask themselves what is the thing that is "gone" with the wind. The title does not specify what is gone. Thus, the title is vague. The writer flouts the maxim of manner, on the one hand, for not being clear and the maxim of quantity, on the other hand, for being less informative than is required. This flouting of maxims adds the element of excitement to the title. It makes it much exciting and curiosity triggering.

The title is ambiguous too. As a result of the vagueness of the title, readers try to figure out the implicature to get the exact interpretation. They read either a summary of the novel (which is what usually happens) or the whole novel. However, even after reading the summary, readers work out two different interpretations for the expression "gone with the wind". They may, first, think that it is the love that she has wanted for a long time (Ashly) is what is gone because Scarlett has realized at the end that her hope was an illusion and a mistake. The second interpretation is that the whole life and style of life that she used to live it in Tara is the "gone" thing, This last interpretation may result from the fact that ,at the end, she wonders if she can go back and get that life again after she has left it for irrational reasons

### b. The Living is Easy

This novel talks about a black manipulative narcissistic woman called Cleo. It generally deals with two main ideas: a narcissistic sociopath character represented by Cleo and the idea of intra-community discrimination and racism that happens as a result of the lighter skinned black being much admired.

Cleo takes after her little sisters for some time, then travels to Boston and marries a rich man. She deceives him and gets benefit of his wealth. Later, for a reason or another, she wants to bring her sisters to take of their advantages again. She manages to ruin their marriage, as they have got married and used to live happily. She gets them back and starts to ruin their life by being too rude, manipulative and horrible.

The title indicates that the story is going to highlight the bright side of the life. Readers may be excited to know how living is easy! They may feel weird for the expression sounds unrealistic! When readers go deeper and start reading the story, they find that the situation is completely opposite. They later reach the implicature of the title which relies on sarcastic. This sarcastic effect that caused vagueness is resulted from the fact that the writer has not followed the maxim of quality. The title is not saying what is adequate and it is not truthful. Also, the title is flouting the maxim of quantity as it is not as informative as it required.

### c. You Know You Want This

The book is a collection of dark short stories for adult women. It tells stories about different kind of relationships, particularly the romance one, but in a dark way. It that examines different kind of relationships, gender matters, and sex.

The title is no doubt vague. The writer herself admits it. She writes on the cover "if you think you know what this collection will be like, you're wrong. These stories are sharp and perverse.". These lines prove that vagueness is mostly used intentionally by literary book writers for specific purposes. However, the title is vague for being uncertain and unclear about the "this" thing that everyone (you) may want. Thus, the writer flouts the maxim of manner for being unclear. Also, the maxim of quantity can be said to be flouted as the title is less informative than is required.

Moreover, when the writer says, "You know you want." in a very general and dogmatic way, she flouts the maxim of quality. That is because she says something that she lacks adequate evidence for. She states what she personally believes as if it is a fact.

### d. A Woman Is No Man

It is adult women type novel. It tells the story of an oppressed woman. In Brooklyn, an eighteen-year-old Arab-American girl suffers from and struggles with her family about marriage. Her family forces her to meet suitors though she does not want to. She starts suffering from the very complex, difficult and dark community she lives in.

The title clearly flouts the relation maxim as there is no logical relationship between its linguistic elements, the subject part (A woman) and the predicate part (is no man) . However, though the title is vague, but it can be understood when there is a shared background knowledge between the reader and the writer, which usually exists in this case. The reader can interpret the title by understanding the implicature which is gender



discrimination and oppression of some communities. After calling the implicature, the reader can easily understand how a woman is no man. The reader understands that it means women have no similar rights comparing to men. Even more, when the reader reads the whole story, s/he can figure out the exact right (the right to choose a life partner) that the navel is talking about.

### e. The Great Gatsby

A novel is favored by men. The story centers about a man (Gatsby) who lives in an extravagant life style and a life full of wild parties as an attempt to impress and reach the love of a rich girl called Daisy whom he loves deeply. Daisy is a married woman. She is married to Tom, who is as rich as her and belongs to the same upper class that she belongs to. Gatsby is from another class, the middle class. However, Gatsby is a willing to work hard and a smart man. He has been able to recreate himself rising above his very humble beginning. Generally, and as Gatsby is considered a tragic hero, the novel empathically compares between Gatsby's ill-conceived love and the American dream. It tries to show, at the end, that the love of Gatsby was destroyed and corrupted by dishonesty and materialism just like the American dream (individualism and happiness) that was corrupted by the same things.

The title of this novel is considered vague because of the use of the term "great" as a modifier describing a person named "Gatsby". Readers have no one fixed and shared definition for the term "great" that corresponds with every situation. The term "great" can be used to describe many qualifications / actions, etc. in people and in life generally. Thus, the title does not give a clear hint about who "Gatsby" is and the thing that makes him great. The writer by this flouts the maxim of manner for not being completely clear.

Moreover, ambiguity can be seen in the title too. Readers many get ambiguous when trying to work out the interpretation. Different shapes for the idea of greatness may come to mind, for example a great business man, a great fighter, a great dancer, etc.

### f. For Whom the Bell Tolls

A famous novel that is specifically preferred by male readers. It tells the story of a man named Robert Jordan in 1937 during the Spanish civil war. He is an American journalist who works for the Republic side, which fights for freedom, common people and democracy. He goes for an operation (with some people helping him, including a girl called Maria whom Robert falls in love with) to destroy a bridge. A lot of exciting things happen during the operation until reaching the end of the story where Robert is forced to stay alone facing death. He makes his friends leave him after recognizing that he will slow them down because of his broken leg.

Suffice to say, that the title of this novel is borrowed from John Donne's Meditation XVII. For John, the expression "for whom the bell tolls" is a sign for death of a human being. It indicates that everyone will die, and the toll will ring for everyone. He, also, tries to clarify that all human kind are linked to one another. Thus, the loss of any human kind is a loss for everyone.

Readers who have no background knowledge of the above-mentioned explanation and the origin of the title will face difficulties in interpreting the title. Thus, the title is vague. It flouts number of maxims. It flouts the maxim of manner for being unclear and the maxim of quantity for not being as informative as it requires. So, readers need to work out the implicature to be able to reach to the interpretation of the title.

### g. To kill a Mockingbird.

A story written for kids. It takes place in Alabama during the depression. A highly moral lawyer named Atticus Finch is widowed. He has two young children, a boy (Jem) and a girl (Scout). Atticus Finch defends a black man who is charged for raping a white man. Meanwhile, Scout and Jem, and their two friends, get curious about a man called Boo in the neighborhood. Boo is made out to be a monster because of a few rumors. As a result of the kids' curiosity, a lot of exciting and dramatic events happen till reaching the end of the story.

The title is clearly vague. Readers, mostly, cannot figure out the interpretation of the title. The title flouts the maxim of quantity for being less informative than is required. Even more, when readers try to work out the implicature, so they read the whole book, it still stays a vague title. This is because the title has a very slight literal connection to the story. It is a symbolic kind. It requires a kind of shared background knowledge between readers and the writer to understand it. According to [spareknotes.com](http://spareknotes.com), mockingbird refers to the idea of innocence. Thus, the title can be interpreted as indicating the way innocence is destroyed. Also, the title does not follow the maxim of manner as it is not clear in any way.

### h. Red is Best.

A story for kids. It centers about a child girl named Kelly. She is obsessed with red. She likes everything in red. Her mother does not understand the way her daughter likes red. However, the little girl keeps standing up for what she likes and giving justifications (defending).

The story is of a very simple kind, but the title is vague and ambiguous as well. It is vague because it does not tell readers what makes red the best color. The title flouts the maxim of manner for being unclear and ambiguous and, on the other hand, it flouts the maxim of quality. Quality maxim is not following for the writer is saying through his title something that she believes and has no adequate evidence for. The writer states it as a fact.

Moreover, the title can be said to be ambiguous for it does not specify what "red" refers to! Even when considering the book cover, readers may still get confused about whether red is generally and always the best color (for everything) or it is only the best for some specific things. This is because of the fact that not everything on the cover is red, for example the little girl's dress is blue.

### i. Things a Bright Girl Can Do.

This is a title for a story written mainly for female children. It talks about three teenage girls. They are fighting for women rights and defend their suffering. Each of the three is coming from a different background, one from an upper class (Evelyn) , another from the middle class (May) and the last one from the working class (Nell). The story talks about their suffering in life and how specifically the World War has affected their life. The characters are intelligent, courageous and ambitious. They are trying to make changes in the world and fight for vote, each in her own way.

The title is vague because of the term "bright". Readers who face this title will definitely ask themselves, consciously or unconsciously, the question "what are the things that qualify a girl to be called "bright"? However, no one can give an accurate answer to this question for there is no fixed definition for the word "bright" as collocated with "girl" that corresponds to it and satisfies every person. The writer flouts the maxim of manner for not being totally clear. Also, the term "things" is used in a vague way too. There is a flout in the maxim of quantity as the expression is not so informative, it is rather general. As usual, readers seek to figure out the implicature and, thus, read the whole story to know what are the "things" that define "bright" girls.

### j. Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls

A book for litter girls that presents the story of about 100 extraordinary women. Those women are represented as examples for girls to be followed. The stories inspire girls to fight for what they believe and what they want.

Once again, the title is vague because of the use of the term "Rebel". Readers, at the beginning, cannot define exactly what kind of rebellion the writer is referring to until they read the content. Similar to the analysis of the term "bright", there is a flout to the maxim of manner for not being totally clear.

Moreover, when readers try to figure the implicature of the title "for rebel girls" (before reading the whole book), they face a pragmatic ambiguity. The ambiguity lies in the different interpretations that the term "Rebel" can indicate. It can mean a rebellion against the political or social authorities. It also can mean a rebellion against the home authority (parents).

### k. Hatchet

The is a story particularly written for male children as it talks about a brave boy in isolation. It tells the story of a thirteen years old boy (Robeson). His parents are divorced and each of them lives in a different place, the mother in New York and the father in Canada. He travels by plane to see his father and the plane gets crushed. He stands alone in a shallow wilderness. His only tool to fend for himself is a hatchet. He tries to survive using that hatchet for 54 days until he is rescued by a bush pilot.

By reading this title, readers will expect the story to be about a farmer (because farmers use hatchets to cut wood) or about a butcher (who cuts meat by a hatchet) or a killer (who uses a hatchet as weapon ) or even other expectations. The word can give many indications, particularly as the cover of the book does not give any insight. Thus, the title is ambiguous. Readers cannot define the exact interpretation from the title alone. They need to read the story to know what the word "hatchet" represents.

### l. Bud, But not Buddy.

This is a story for male kids in particular. It states the life of an orphan boy named Bud Caldwell. He is a ten-year-old brave boy who barely opens up with people. He runs away from his third foster family to seek a better life. He hopes that he may find his father. In his way to his goals, he goes through a lot of dramatic

events. At the end, when he feels that he has reached the place he belongs to, he opens up all the way, specifically to a character named "Miss Thomas" whom treats him as if she were his mother.

The title of this story tells nothing about the book content. It is vague. It flouts manner maxim for being unclear. Readers who read the title by itself will be unable to reach an interpretation for it. They can only understand the meaning of the title when they read the whole story. Title interpretation is stated in a chapter in the book. It is clarified when Bud's mother tells him that he must not let anyone to call him by any other names than "Bud". She specifically aware him to not let people call him "Buddy". She explains what his name "Bud", means (" A flower to be. A flower in waiting") so he appreciates his name.

Reading the whole story will show that Bud's name resamples his character. That is, he is a kind of person who waits for the proper time to completely open up.

### 7. Discussion

#### 7.1 Age and Gender discussion

Analysis shows that writers generally do not take the age of the readers into consideration when they decide the form of the title (clear or unclear). That is, they focus only on the purpose and the function of the form being used. Readers of all ages, adults and kids, are seen equal. It is seen in the use of the vagueness in all the samples of book titles (novels and stories for adults and kids) that are analysed. Even more, most of the above titles analysed are among the most sold, preferred and successful ones, which indicates that the use of vague and ambiguous language has positive effect on readers. Some of the books has won awards, for example, *Gone with The wind* received the "Pulitzer Prize for Fiction" . Moreover, they are highly rated on [goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com). Goodreads is a website that real readers rate the books after reading them and giving a review. Thus, it reflects common readers' and some critic ones' opinion. (see 4.data selected)

Ambiguity is just used in the same way. That is, with no taking into consideration readers age. Though ambiguity is less used than vagueness, it is used for purposes in both adult and kid book titles.

Gender, on the other hand, is seen to have no specific effect on the choice of literary book titles form too. Both, vagueness and ambiguity are used for readers from both gender, males and females.

#### 7.2 Function Discussion

It seems that the use of vague and ambiguous language is not less preferred than the clear one in book titling. Even more, it seems to have a lot of positive functions in the literary field.

The functions that can be said to be achieved by the use of vague and ambiguous forms of language are as follows:

i- They help in reaching a better marketing. People normally get much curious about working out the exact interpretation of an expression (title) which they cannot directly build an image in the mind for it. So, they get much excited about knowing the content that the vague or ambiguous title stands for. Such titles attract people and make them more likely to read the book. This can be proved through considering the fact that these books, which are analyzed, and which have vague and ambiguous titles, are among the most read books and they are highly rated.

ii- The diversity and the variety elements are important in different situations, specifically in book titles. Vague and ambiguous titles can add specific literary tastes to the whole work. Zhang (2012) says that vagueness "create[s] more space for artistic description". They enhance language expressiveness. This can be seen in g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*; it represents the idea of destroying innocence in people in an artistic vague way. Also, in l. *Bud, but not Buddy*, an artistic description of the whole story is seen through a simple vague title. This simple vague title summaries and describes the whole story in special way that cannot be understood unless the whole story is read. (see 6. l.*Bud, but not Buddy*)

iii- They foster the idea of the title. That is, they give readers much chances to reach different interpretations in a way that fits their desire (that satisfies the taste of each single reader). Ye (2012) states that "for the sake of economic principle, language needs to be highly generalized and vague to convey messages to the greatest extend with a small quantity of signs". For example , in the case of the use of some uncertain expressions (vague ones) such as e. "great", h. "red", i. "bright", j. "rebel" and k. "hatchet, they give a chance to different people to attach the words different meanings in a way that fits the one that is conceived in their mind. Also, the use of ambiguous language can serve this function too. In a. *Gone with the Wind*, the ambiguity of the title provides it with the property of being interpreted in number of ways. So, it gives reader the chance to select the interpretation they most desire.

iv- They are sometimes used to guarantee the adequacy of the title. Writers sometimes find it difficult to choose a title that fits the content in its exact manner, so they tend to use a vague or ambiguous one. For

instance, e. The Great Gatsby uses a very general and vague title. It can be said that the writer has chosen a main character to stand as the title of the book to give the readers much space and freedom to decode the main point and idea of the novel. Thus, this general title that is modified with a general vague adjective guarantees its adequacy.

v- They can be used as a means to show politeness, such as in the case of. You Know You Want This. The writer does not specify what is the thing that everyone wants. The book talks about a lot of sexual matters which will be impolite to be mentioned explicitly in the title.

vi- They can have a euphemistic function. In b. The Living is easy, the writer does not explicitly say that life is much difficult than one might think. Instead, she says it through the story and hide the painful fact in a vague sarcastic title. Moreover, in you Know You Want This, there is no explicit indication of the kind of the stories in the book, e.g. some sexual ones which some people find them difficult or unpleasant to show directly their desire to read. Thus, vague and ambiguous languages make the communication much flexible.

vii- They can make the expression informal and natural. For instance, the title d. A Woman is no Man can be seen much natural when it is vague to the readers. Though the discrimination against women and the oppression are well-known facts in almost all communities, the idea is not accepted by all readers. For some, it is not natural to say and admit that women are not seen as equal to men in almost every time and place. The vagueness in the title makes it more natural and acceptable.

### 8. Conclusion

The paper finds that the use of vague and ambiguous forms of language has a lot of positive functions. They enhance and improve the flexibility of the title sometimes by making it much polite and natural and other times by giving it a euphemistic role. They foster and enrich the idea of the title. They also protect the writer from stating an inadequate title and, thus, guarantee its adequacy. They give readers freedom of interpretation. Moreover, most important, they help in a successful marketing.

Also, the paper finds that there are times where the background knowledge places an important role in working out the implicature of the title. To understand what is intended, sometimes there must be a kind of shared background between readers and writers. Otherwise, there arises some kind of difficulties in reaching the interpretation.

Moreover, it is found that the use of vague and ambiguous title in literary books is not affected by age and gender (the two non-linguistic variables under investigation). Writers either do not consider readers age or gender, or they see and treat them equally concerning the choice of title forms. They use vague and ambiguous title in all kinds of books, those for adults and kids and those for male and female or both. Thus, the only point that is typical in choosing title forms is the functions and the purposes to be achieved.

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