

## *Pragmatic Ambiguity in Selected Arabic Literary Texts*

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### Abstract

Ambiguity is one of the causes behind language complexity. One of the commonest types of ambiguity is the pragmatic ambiguity. Pragmatic ambiguity is a problematic area in understanding language, it is rarely investigated in Arabic literary texts, and most readers are not capable of determining the source of pragmatic ambiguity in those texts. The present paper is intended to investigate and analyze pragmatic ambiguity in selected Arabic literary texts. The data are taken from two selected Arabic novels; *Frankeshtine in Baghdad* and *Only the Pomegranate Tree*. To achieve the research goals, Leech (1983) is adopted as a model of analysis. The study aims at investigating pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts and diagnosing the types of pragmatic ambiguity in those texts to lead to a better understanding of literary texts and explore some new horizons in linguistic studies. The study hypothesizes that Arabic readers face different types of pragmatic ambiguity and that pragmatic ambiguity of some expressions in Arabic literary texts may occur naturally because the writers are not fully aware of that ambiguity as they believe that the expressions are clear. Five types of pragmatic ambiguity have been detected in the two novels; speech act, idiomatic, style shift, cultural, and deictical. Deictical ambiguity was the most frequent type of pragmatic ambiguity. Finally, it was concluded that pragmatic ambiguity is a common phenomenon in language, and ambiguous structures and expressions are heavily loaded in these novels.

**Keywords:** ambiguity, pragmatic ambiguity, speech acts, deixis.

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## **1. Introduction**

Ambiguity is when a word, phrase or sentence can have more than one possible meaning. Generally, ambiguity is of different types, the most significant of which are phonological, lexical, structural (syntactic), and pragmatic.

Pragmatic ambiguity comes out to the surface when the speech or structure is not precise or explicit, besides, the context does not support the structure by giving the required information. So, some information is missing, and must be inferred.

The present study is restricted to analyze structural ambiguity of Arabic literary texts in two Arabic Novels; (Frankeshtine in Baghdad, by Ahmed Saadawi, *فرانكشتاين في بغداد*) and (Only the Pomegranate Tree, by Sinan Anton, *وحدها شجرة الرمان*).

## **2. The problem of the study:**

According to the previous review of literature, the following problems can be suggested:

1. Readers sometimes face problems in interpreting the meaning of ambiguous words or sentences in Arabic literary texts
2. Most readers are not capable of determining the type of pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts
3. Pragmatic ambiguity is rarely investigated in Arabic literary texts.

## **3. Research questions:**

The study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts?
2. What are the main types of pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts?
3. Which type of pragmatic ambiguity is the most frequent type in Arabic literary texts?

## **4. Aims of the Study**

1. The present study aims at investigating pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts in two selected novels.
2. Diagnosing the sources or types of pragmatic ambiguity in those Arabic literary novels to lead to a better understanding of literary texts and exploring some new horizons in linguistic studies.
3. Exploring the nature of the pragmatic ambiguity in the Arabic literary texts.

### **5. Hypotheses:**

The study hypothesizes the following:

- 1) Arabic readers face different types of pragmatic ambiguity in Arabic literary texts.
- 2) Pragmatic ambiguity of some expressions in Arabic literary texts may occur naturally because the writers are not fully aware of that ambiguity as they believe that the expressions are clear.
- 3) Deictical ambiguity is the most frequent type of pragmatic ambiguity in these two novels.

### **6. Data Collection and Procedure of Analysis:**

The data are taken from two Arabic novels. The ambiguous sentences are determined and the source of ambiguity is defined followed by discussion and statistics of the cases of ambiguity.

### **7. Definition of Ambiguity**

Rusche (1980: 15; cited in Khamahani, 2013: 380) suggests that ambiguity must be stretched to any vocal difference, which provides space to alternate responses to the same linguistic component.

From the linguistic relations perspectives, Leech (1987; cited in Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 2018:768) defines ambiguity as "a one-many relation between syntax and sense". This view could be more logical and highly related to Aristotle's view, since both connects language capacity with the world's infinity "Ambiguity dates back to Aristotle, who argued that all languages must be ambiguous in one way or another, because there is a finite number of words to match an infinite number of things in the surroundings" (Axelsen, 2000: 1).

Chierchia and McConnell (1990: 23), state that ambiguity arises when only one word or a sequence of words is connected in the language system with more than one meaning. In other words, any piece of language may be interpreted in many ways and it could be produced by various meanings of specific word- lexical ambiguity, by different structures of a sentence- structural ambiguity, by a combination of lexical and structural ambiguity, or by different semantic scope- scope ambiguity. Something is open or free to more than one interpretation .

Natural language Expressions in any natural language settings could be ambiguous whether on a purpose "intentionally", as the case in

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literature, or spontaneously “unintentionally” as the case in any normal language (Poesio and Artstein, 1996: 170).

Qiu Shude (1998; cited in Tang, 2016: 50) states that ambiguity is one kind of typical relation between language structural forms and their meanings. Any structural form in a language that possesses an extra meaning leads to ambiguous case. Thus, such definition is characterized by being intangible and conceptual. The word, the phrase, the sentence, the discourse and the utterance, are included in the structural form while the meaning refers not only to conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, effective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning, but also the meaning in use. The latter is part of the researching field of pragmatics (Leech, 1974; Zhuanglin, 2001).

Ambiguity is uncertainty among specific alternatives. Ambiguity relies on context, this means that something can be ambiguous in one situation, while unambiguous in another situation. Undoubtedly, the word in a context could give more than one meaning than the isolated, and could also mean less than the isolated word, more because in context the word necessitates a fresh context and at the same time, less because the word is delimited by the context (Conway, 2002: 5).

### **8. Classification of Ambiguity:**

Ambiguity can be classified into the following basic types as follows:

#### **8.1 Structural Ambiguity**

Hurford & Heasley (2007: 128) state that structural ambiguity denotes the circumstances or the situation in which a sentence could refer to various meanings, because the words in that sentence have relations with each other in different ways, despite the fact that each word is obvious. A sentence like: *Tom saw the woman with glasses*; demonstrates a couple of different possibilities- one is that "*Tom saw the woman with his glasses*"; and the second one is "*Tom saw the woman with her glasses*", distinguishing from lexical ambiguity, the words in this sentence are all obvious on their separate meanings. Consequently, an easy test for distinguishing these two types is that the sentence which includes more than one structure

trees without individually ambiguous words is a structurally ambiguous sentence.

### **8.2 Lexical Ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity occurs when one word or lexeme has more than one meaning, it is the ambiguity within a single word. Almost any word has more than one meaning that's why examples of lexical ambiguity are everywhere.

In lexical ambiguity, the double meaning derives from the meanings of the words themselves (Stageberg, 1958: 479).

Lexical ambiguity results from multiple usages of the same word (Hurford & Heasley, 2007: 128), for example: The word "*bank*" in the sentence: "*I will go to the bank*", has two interpretations: It is either a financial institution where money is kept or a side or edge of the river.

In brief, lexical ambiguity is the opposite of structural ambiguity, in the sense that lexical ambiguity takes place once a single word has more than one interpretation (meaning), while structural ambiguity occurs when a single sentence or a sequence of words has more than one meaning (has multiple interpretations).

### **8.3 Pragmatic Ambiguity**

Generally, pragmatics is interested in the study of utterances as transferred by an interlocutor or writer and interpreted by a receiver or reader (i.e. pragmatics is interested in the analysis of the speaker's meaning). Such a study comprises the understanding of what people intend to convey in a specific context and how context affects what is being said (Yule: 1996; cited in Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 2018: 769)

Walton (1996), states that when the sentence is not definite, pragmatic ambiguity comes to existence, in addition to the fact that the context does not make available the information required to explain the sentence.( Al-Sulaimaan & Khoshaba, 2018: 769)

Pragmatic ambiguity takes place when a statement owns many meanings in the linguistic context in which it is uttered (Berry et al, 2003: 12). The context includes the linguistic context, i.e. the sentences uttered before and after cotext, and the context beyond language, i.e., the situation, the background knowledge, and expectations of the speaker or hearer and the writer or reader. Such

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kind of ambiguity springs out from the attendance of deictic ambiguity. However, Berry et al. (2003: 13) states that pragmatic ambiguity takes place when a structure or expression possesses multiple meanings, depending on the setting in which it is said.

*e.g: I want to meet a girl with yellow hair.*

This sentence has two interpretations:

I want to meet a particular girl with yellow hair

I want to meet random girl with yellow hair. (Lyons 1977:190)

Jejjud (2005) mentioned that pragmatic ambiguity comes about in the sociocultural and contextual circumstances that have an impact on the suitable practice of language in communication (Al-Sulaimaan&Khoshaba, 2018: 770).

Dastjerdi and Zamani (2009: 48), emphasize that such sort of ambiguity ascends when the tone or the focus in an SL sentence is unclear. Consider the following example:

*e.g.: I am studying here today.*

Although italics for one word would help, the focus of such a sentence can only be understood, if at all, from its context,.

For Leech (1983:40-44), violation of Grice's maxims (cooperative principles) is the main source of pragmatic ambiguity. According to Leech's heuristic analysis, pragmatic ambiguity is basically caused by speech acts, when speech acts have multiple interpretations (one form has multiple functions or meanings). In this study, Leech's view is adopted as a model for analyzing pragmatic ambiguity.

### **9. Types of Pragmatic Ambiguity**

Pragmatic ambiguity occurs when there is a violation of one of Grice's maxims .Mainly, pragmatic ambiguity takes place at different pragmatic areas, like: speech acts, idioms, deixis, style shift ,and culture.

#### **9.1 Speech Acts**

According to Yule (1996:131), speech act is an action performed by a speaker with utterance and we use it to describe actions, such as requesting, commanding, questioning, informing, offering, promising, threatening, warning.....etc.

*e.g: I will be here at six o'clock.* Direct and indirect speech acts are the basic types of speech acts. There are three basic types of the direct speech acts: interrogative with the function of question, like:

Did you eat the pizza? imperative with the function of command, like : Eat the pizza, and declarative with the function of statement ,like: You ate the pizza. On the other hand, indirect speech act is using a structure with a function that isn't associated with it.

*e.g: Can you pass the salt?*

Here the structure is question but the function is request.

The main reason that we use indirect speech acts is that indirect speech acts are considered to be more gentle or politer in our society than direct speech acts

*e.g: could you open the door for me? (Indirect).*

*e.g: open the door. (Direct).*

(Yule, 1996: 131)

Ambiguity in speech acts is caused when a certain form can have multiple functions.

*e.g: Don't touch this ball.*

This form can have different functions: command, warning, or threatening.

An example in Arabic:

*e.g: (Don't speak loudly) لا تتكلم بصوت عال*

It can be a command, threatening, or warning.

## 9.2 Idiomatic ambiguity

Idioms are expressions (sequence of words), whose meanings can't be guessed (predicated) from the meanings of their constituents (words).

*e.g: To kick the bucket, Red herring, To spill the beans, To fly off the handle.*

(Palmer, 1976: 96)

The term "idioms" is a comprehensive and broad term. Proverbs are a part of idioms. Proverbs are common expressions used by almost all people in the society, like:

*e.g: Easy come, easy go (Quirk, 1973: 204)*

Idioms can cause ambiguity for readers who are not familiar with them, causing idiomatic ambiguity.

*e.g: Jack is the black sheep in his family.*

Examples in Arabic:

*e.g: الطيور على اشكالها تقع*

*عاد بخفي حنين or*

### 9.3 Deictic Ambiguity

Deixis can be defined as *pointing via language*. Certain sentences of English are virtually impossible to comprehend if the speaker is unknown, and about whom the statement is, where and when it is uttered, for example:

*e.g: You will have to bring it back tomorrow because she is not here today.*

The sentence above is totally vague because it is out of context (Yule, 1996: 130).

Deictic expressions are morphemes with variable referential meaning, whose specific reference varies with each context of their use. Deictic usage could result in a lot of vagueness (Hudson, 2000: 314; cited in Saleh, 2017:615)

Ambiguity can occur due to deixis, causing deictic ambiguity.

*e.g: Layla isn't coming to the party ,so tell Suha that we will see her on Monday.*

This sentence is ambiguous in that the pronoun "her" can refer to either Layla or Suha.

An example in Arabic is:

*e.g: اذهب علي الى المدرسة، لذا اخبرو احمد بانه يجب ان يكون هنا مساءً (Ali went to school, so tell Ahmed that **he** must be here in the evening).*

Here, the personal pronoun "he", refers to either Ali or Ahmed.

Deictic ambiguity is represented in anaphoric or cataphoric reference.

Anaphora is a subsequent reference to an already introduced entity , we use it in texts to maintain reference, and it could also be defined as the repetition of the first part of the sentence in order to achieve an artistic effect .Simply, anaphora mean referring back.

*e.g: I caught a bus, and I ask the driver if it went near the hospital (Yule, 1996: 129-130).*

Cataphora is the opposite of anaphora. Cataphora reverses the antecedent – anaphora relationship by beginning with a pronoun , then, more specific information. This device is more common in stories and in this beginning "it suddenly appeared on the path a little ahead of me, starting in my direction and sniffing the air. An enormous grizzly bear was checking me out" (Yule, 1996: 130).

Moreover, anaphora is represented by stating the noun first, then the pronoun, like:

*e.g: Ali is a teacher, he teaches maths.*

Cataphora, on the other hand, is represented by stating the pronoun first, then the noun, like:

*e.g: He teaches Maths, Ali is a teacher .*

#### **9.4 Style Shift**

Mayerhoff states that style shifting is "variation in an individual's speech correlating with differences in addressee, social context, personal goals or externally imposed tasks" (2006: 28). Such a definition explicitly points out that fact that style - shifts involve intra-speaker variation rather than inter-speaker variation. This feature is also clearly indicated by Schilling-Estes. Who, quoting Crystal (1991: 295) and Halliday (1978), additionally specifies that intra-speaker variation encompasses "either shifts in usage levels for features associated with particular groups of speakers-i.e. dialects- or with particular situations of use-i. e. registers (Stolarski, 2013: 245-246).

However, style shift is shifting the style of speech within one language from one variety of language to another (e.g. standard to colloquial and vice versa) or from one language to another, and this can cause ambiguity. So, ambiguity can arise due to such shift of style.

An example in Arabic is :

A: *يفعل كل ما بوسعه لكي يوقعك في الفخ* (he does whatever he can to get you caught)

B: *أي ميخالف* (no problem )

The word (ميخالف), which is caused by style shift causes style shift ambiguity because it can have more than one meaning, it either means no harm (no problem), or breaking the laws is okay.

#### **9.5 Cultural Ambiguity**

Culture can be seen as a group of attitudes, morals, views, and manners a group of people share, but differ from each person to another, transferred from one generation to the following (Matsumoto, 1996: 16).

Bartoloni and Stevens (2010: 2) state that cultural ambiguity goes through phrases when it is branded and when it obtains agreement.

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It often becomes most visible when a dominant, host culture protests against a real or imaginary contamination by minority cultures or when a culture that has been in subjection seeks to emancipate itself from cultural imperialism.

However, cultural ambiguity occurs at two levels: the level of words, and the level of proverbs .

Ambiguity may occur at the level of words. For example:

*Words like: (همفي), in:*

*e.g: جاء ابي مع همفي*

*The literal meaning of this word may be related to a name of a person, while in fact it is a name of a car.*

Ambiguity occurs at the level of proverb.

*e.g: Easy come easy go =*

*ما يأتي بسهولة يذهب بسهولة*

The literal meaning of this expression is related to what comes easily will go easily, while the idiomatic meaning is that everyone will get his worth.

### 10. Data Analysis

The present section is divided into five parts: the model, procedure, data analysis, findings and discussion. The model adopted in this study includes analyzing the syntactic (structural) ambiguity depending on Quirk's model 1985. Two Arabic modern novels have been selected to be analyzed according to the objectives of the study; *فرانكشتاين في بغداد* (Frankenstein in Baghdad) and *وحدها شجرة* (Only the tree of the Pomegranate). The samples will be taken from these two novels with their possible interpretations for the purpose of data analysis. Then, the discussion is presented depending on the findings which are provided in tables and figures.

In the two novels under investigation, (990) cases of pragmatic ambiguity were detected. The following are some major samples:

#### Sample 1:

توقف الزعيم عن القراءة و نظر إلي وقال: من الافضل لك ان تغير القناة. سيرعبك ما

ستراه لأنك لست رجلا

This form can function either as warning, threatening, commanding, requesting, or advising. This utterance functions as warning because the speaker warns the listener to change the channel in order not to

be terrified, threatening because the addresser threatens the addressee to change the channel, commanding because the speaker commands the listener to change the channel, requesting because the speaker makes a request to the listener that it is better for him to change the channel, and advising because the speaker uses this utterance as a piece of advice.

### Sample 2:

شعر بانها تطفو بسرعة من أعماقه المحتشدة بالعديد من الأشياء لتكون أمامه مباشرة:  
-الو...-

-لا تصير مراهق.. اني اعرف منو انتة.. و باهر مسافر لبيروت.. جاوبني

This utterance can function as different speech acts: commanding, warning, threatening, advising, or insulting. It is a speech act of commanding because the addresser directly commands the addressee not to be a teenager and respond to him, warning because the addresser warns the addressee not to be a teenager because he knows who he is, threatening because the addresser threatens the addressee not to be a teenager, and respond to him without any lies because he knows him well, advising because this utterance can be a piece of advice to prevent lying, and insulting because the expression (لا تصير مراهق) is a kind of insulting used by the speaker.

### Sample 3:

هناك شخصان هما الأكثر يقينا بأن العجوز إيليشوا لا مبروكة و لا هم يحزنون، وإنما هي مجرد امرأة مجنونة بشكل ميؤوس منه.

This idiomatic expression (لا مبروكة و لا هم يحزنون) (she is neither blessed nor they will feel sorry) is borrowed from the Glorious Quran, and it can have more than one meaning. The literal meaning of this idiomatic expression is related to sadness, but in fact it means at all (she is not blessed at all).

### Sample 4:

-يمكن مدرس فنية. شكو بيهه؟ ليش التدريس عيب؟ بس اكو وظائف اخرى ممكن الواحد يتعين بيهه.

ناولني قائمة الاختيارات وأجاب بالجملة التي كان يرددها كثيرا:

-الواحد لازم يداري خبزته ابني!

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This proverb has two interpretations. The literal meaning is to advise someone to “take care of his bread”. The idiomatic interpretation goes further to include that any person should take care of his earning source or even to flatter the boss to keep his job. Such different interpretations certainly lead to idiomatic ambiguity.

### Sample 5:

غير ان هذا الايمان العميق يشبه الدخان الذي تطلقه ام سليم البيضة من أرجيلتها في عَصريات الثرثرة، بتكائف و يلتف و يصنع بسحابته البيضاء أشكالا متموجة قبل ان يرتفع سريعا ويتلاشى في هواء الحوش.

In this sentence, there is a deictical cataphoric ambiguity. Ambiguity occurs here because of the reference of the verb, and it is unclear whether the verbs (يتكائف، يلتف، يصنع) refer to the faith, or to the smoke previously mentioned.

### Sample 6:

- انا قلت قبل قليل انه شخص لطيف و زعلت علي
- اي.. ميخالف ..ظريف لطيف خفيف.. شاي خفيف لها

In the above example, the writer shifts to the Iraqi Arabic using the word (ميخالف) (no harm) which means agreement. Anyway, Arab dialects use different words to show agreement like (bahi) in Lybia and (mashi) in Egypt. So, ambiguity is expected since the word (ميخالف) gives another meaning in Arabic such as breaking the laws is okay.

### Sample 7:

كان فرج الدلال في بيته حين حدث الانفجار المروع في ساحة الطيران

In the Iraqi culture, the word (دلال) (dalaal) can refer either to a surname of a person or the profession of a real estate man. In other Arab cultures, in Egypt for example, they use "simsar" to refer to the same profession. So, Ambiguity is expected since the word (dallal) has another meaning, which could be (guider), because of the cultural difference.

### Sample 8:

التفت فرأيت همفي تقترب بسرعة جنونية وتخلف وراءها ذيلا من الرمل المتطاير

In this sample, the loan word همفي (Humvee) causes ambiguity if the reader doesn't know that it is a kind of cars. It may be taken as a

name of a woman. The word is quite known for Iraqis, but not for other Arab cultures.

### 11. Findings

In the two selected novels, there are (990) expressions that are related to pragmatic ambiguity. These expressions are distributed among different types of pragmatic ambiguity; (168) expressions (16.96%) have speech acts ambiguity; (79) expressions in the First novel and (89) expressions in the second; (106) expressions (10.70%) have idiomatic ambiguity (24) expressions in the first novel and (82) expressions in the second; (636) expressions (64.24%) have deictic ambiguity (308) expressions in the first novel and (328) expressions in the second; (30) expressions (3.03%) have style shift ambiguity eight expressions in the First novel, and (22) expressions in the second; and (50) expressions (5.050%) have cultural ambiguity (35) expressions in the first novel and (15) expressions in the Second. The table below shows statistics and percentages of ambiguous expressions according to types of pragmatic ambiguity

**Table.1: Statistics of ambiguous sentences according to types of pragmatic ambiguity**

Pragmatic ambiguity				
Speech Act	Idiomatic	Deictic	Style shift	cultural
168	106	636	30	50
16.96 %	10.70 %	64.24 %	3.030 %	5.050 %
990				

### 12. Conclusions

Throughout the findings, data analysis, and discussion, many conclusions can be drawn:

1. The two novels under investigation are heavily loaded with pragmatic type of ambiguity.
2. Five types of pragmatic ambiguity have been found in the two novels: speech acts, idiomatic, style shift, cultural, and deictic.
3. Deictic ambiguity was the most frequent type of pragmatic ambiguity in the two novels, and the lowest frequency was for style shift ambiguity.
4. Finally, pragmatic ambiguity can be excluded by using extra details and context.

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الغموض التداولي (البراغماطيقي) في نصوص أدبيّة عربيّة مختارة

نادية شكر جمعة \*

مروان نجيب المعلم \*

المستخلص

يعدُّ الغموض أحد الأسباب الكامنة وراء تعقيد اللغة، أمّا الغموض التداولي (البراغماطيقي) فهو أحد أكثر أنواع الغموض شيوعاً في اللغة فهو مجال إشكالي في فهم اللغة، فلما تمّ التحقيق فيه في النصوص الأدبية العربية، ومعظم القراء غير قادرين على تحديد مصدر الغموض التداولي في تلك النصوص، وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي وتحليل الغموض التداولي في نصوص أدبيّة عربيّة مختارة، وأخذت البيانات من روايتين عربيتين مختارتين وهما فرانكشتاين في بغداد ووحدها شجرة الرمان؛ لتحقيق أهداف البحث، تم اعتماد اللغوي لبيج (١٩٨٣) كنموذج للتحليل؛ إذ تم تقصي الغموض التداولي في تلك النصوص الأدبية العربية وتشخيص أنواع الغموض التداولي للوصول إلى فهم أفضل للنصوص الأدبيّة واستكشاف بعض الآفاق الجديدة في الدراسات اللغوية، وتفرض الدراسة أنّ القراء العرب يواجهون أنواعاً مختلفة من الغموض التداولين، وأنّ ذلك الغموض قد يحدث بشكل طبيعي في بعض التعبيرات في النصوص الأدبيّة العربيّة؛ لأنّ الكتاب ليسوا على دراية كاملة بهذا الغموض؛ إذ إنّهم يعتقدون أنّ التعبيرات واضحة، تم الكشف عن خمسة أنواع من الغموض التداولي في الروايتين وهي: الأفعال الكلاميّة، الغموض الاصطلاحي، والانتقال في الأسلوب، والثقافي، والإشاراتي، وتم تحديد الغموض الإشاراتي كأكثر أنواع الغموض التداولي شيوعاً، وأخيراً، واستنتج أنّ الغموض التداولي ظاهرة شائعة في اللغة، وأنّ الروايتين سالفتي الذكر محمّلتان بالتراكيب والتعبيرات الغامضة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغموض، الغموض التداولي (البراغماطيقي)، الأفعال

الكلامية، الإشارة.

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