

AMBIGUITY IN JAVANESE DIALOGUE OF YO WIS BEN: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS WITH ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study explores how ambiguity functions in the Javanese dialogue of the *Yo Wis Ben* film series, focusing on its lexical and structural forms and their comparative interpretation in English. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and content analysis, eight scenes were analyzed using Lyons' (1977) framework of ambiguity. The findings show that lexical ambiguity, where a word carries multiple unrelated meanings, appears more frequently than structural ambiguity, which arises from flexible syntactic constructions. Expressions such as *singo*, *yo wis ben*, *pedhot*, and *legi* illustrate how Javanese speakers use ambiguity to produce humor and manage social relations. Theoretically, the study extends pragmatic and cross-linguistic perspectives by demonstrating that ambiguity in Javanese is not linguistic confusion but a deliberate communicative strategy reflecting high-context interaction. Practically, it offers insights for translation, intercultural communication, and media discourse analysis, emphasizing how local-language films employ ambiguity to convey cultural identity, humor, and interpersonal nuance in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: *Ambiguity, Javanese, Lexical, Structural, Meaning-relation, Film dialogue*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as key spaces for linguistic expression, multilingual interaction, and ongoing shifts in meaning. The coexistence of local, national, and global languages within these digital environments generates opportunities for ambiguity, negotiation of meaning, and cross-cultural communication (Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou, 2004). In the Indonesian context, Javanese holds a particularly significant position because it is spoken by one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in the country and increasingly appears in online discourse, often through code-mixing, translanguaging, and hybrid linguistic forms. Research on digital communication in Indonesia has shown that users frequently blend Javanese with Indonesian and English to signal identity, humor, intimacy, or social alignment, demonstrating how

social media accelerates the fluidity of linguistic boundaries (Zen, 2021). Studies in digital sociolinguistics also suggest that these multilingual practices contribute to the creation of new semiotic repertoires, enabling speakers to navigate cultural affiliations while participating in wider globalized communication (Biró, 2019).

Ambiguity in language refers to a word, phrase, or utterance that can be understood in more than one way. Lyons (1977) categorizes ambiguity into two primary types: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has more than one distinct meaning depending on context. For example, the word *bat* may refer to a flying mammal or a piece of sports equipment. In contrast, structural ambiguity arises when a sentence allows more than one grammatical interpretation, even though the individual words are unambiguous. For

instance, the sentence “I saw the man with a telescope” may mean either that the speaker used a telescope to see the man, or that the man being observed was carrying a telescope. Ambiguity often results from homonymy, homography, or polysemy (Das, 2023), and as digital communication becomes increasingly dominant, the issue of ambiguity grows more complex and context-dependent (Sitorus & Lubis, 2025).

Javanese communication is often high-context, depending on shared cultural understanding, social hierarchy, and situational cues to convey meaning. This allows for greater interpretive openness, particularly when elements such as subjects, objects, or politeness markers are implied rather than explicitly stated (Mujaki et al., 2024). English, on the other hand, generally relies on low-context communication characterized by fixed syntactic patterns and clear morphological markers that reduce ambiguity through explicit grammatical roles and structured clause relationships (Kamaluddin, 2025). Consequently, messages that remain ambiguous in Javanese due to implicit speech-level cues or flexible syntax would typically be clarified in English through lexical specification or grammatical explicitness. These differences create a valuable foundation for meaning-relation analysis, enabling an exploration not only of how ambiguity functions within each language but also of how such ambiguities are interpreted, negotiated, or translated across linguistic and cultural boundaries in digital interactions (Binsah et al., 2025).

Scholars have long emphasized that ambiguity is not merely a linguistic problem but also a pragmatic and cultural resource that reflects how speakers manage meaning and social

relationships. As Leech (2016) argues, pragmatic competence involves interpreting utterances beyond their literal meaning, especially when politeness and indirectness are at play. In both cinematic and everyday discourse, ambiguity frequently functions as a communicative and stylistic device that allows speakers to convey meanings beyond what is explicitly expressed. (Grice, 1975). In the context of local-language media, such as Javanese films, ambiguity also plays a role in shaping cultural identity and humor (Suryaningtyas & Setyaningsih, 2020). Moreover, as Meyer et al. (1989) explain through systemic-functional linguistics, meaning in discourse emerges from the interaction of context, culture, and language choice. This aligns with contemporary perspectives in intercultural pragmatics, which view ambiguity as a dynamic feature of multilingual communication rather than a breakdown in understanding (House, 2016). Therefore, examining ambiguity in Javanese dialogue offers insights not only into language structure but also into how speakers negotiate shared meanings across cultural and linguistic systems.

Prior research has extensively explored themes related to this study. Firstly, Nuryanti & Sa'diah (2024) carried out a descriptive qualitative study on ambiguous expressions used by characters in the Indonesian film *My Lecturer My Husband Season 2*, applying Crystal's (2008) framework of ambiguity. The study aimed to identify and classify words, phrases, and sentences in the dialogue that produced multiple interpretations. The results revealed nine ambiguous cases in total,

predominantly lexical ambiguity with only one instance of structural ambiguity. The study demonstrated that linguistic ambiguity in film dialogue emerges from particular language features and plays a role in increasing interpretive complexity for viewers.

Secondly, A further related study was carried out by Amelyana et al. (2022), who examined lexical ambiguity in the film *Dune*, with particular attention to homophones and homographs that appeared in the subtitles. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the researchers analyzed screenshots of selected subtitle excerpts, confirmed the meanings and pronunciations of ambiguous words through the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries, and categorized the data based on the frameworks proposed by Hobbs (2006) and Fox (1995). The results revealed 33 cases of lexical ambiguity, consisting of 29 homophones, such as air and heir or bean and been, and 4 homographs, including lead and live. The study demonstrated that ambiguity can be embedded in audiovisual texts, particularly in subtitled content where phonetically similar or visually identical forms may lead to multiple interpretations.

Lastly, a study relevant to the present research is that of Ladini & Heryono (2022) who examined types of ambiguity in the film *Titanic* from a semantic perspective. Employing a quantitative approach, they analyzed ambiguous words and sentences in the movie's dialogue, supported by data from scholarly sources and the film itself. Using Langacker's (1989) Cognitive Grammar framework, they conceptualized ambiguity and vagueness as existing on a continuum, with polysemy positioned between the two phenomena. Their findings indicated that lexical ambiguity (65%) occurred more

frequently than syntactic ambiguity (35%). This study demonstrates that ambiguity can be systematically classified and quantified in scripted cinematic texts. Nevertheless, the analysis was largely confined to semantic categorization in English and did not address sociolinguistic or intercultural factors.

Although ambiguity in film dialogue has been widely examined, most existing studies remain centered on lexical categorization within monolingual, predominantly English-language contexts. Research that addresses multilingual films or culturally grounded media, particularly those involving regional languages like Javanese, has received far less scholarly attention. Moreover, cross-linguistic meaning relations, especially the ways ambiguous expressions shift or remain stable when translated into English, have not been sufficiently investigated. This study responds to that gap by analyzing ambiguity in Javanese dialogue from the *Yo Wis Ben* film series through a comparative meaning-relation approach with English. Employing a qualitative descriptive design and content analysis, it identifies instances of lexical and structural ambiguity and examines how each type is interpreted across different linguistic and cultural systems.

The primary aim of this research is to uncover how ambiguity functions within Javanese dialogue and how its meanings transform when compared with English. The study posits that ambiguous expressions in Javanese are not simply cases of semantic indeterminacy but operate as pragmatic and culturally embedded strategies that

differ from English, reflecting high-context communicative practices and sociocultural nuances characteristic of local discourse.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how ambiguity functions in Javanese-language, with particular attention to its relationship to meaning construction in English. Following Creswell (2004) interpretivist paradigm, this design is well suited for investigating culturally embedded linguistic phenomena that depend heavily on context, speech levels, and implicit interpretation rather than measurable grammatical features. Ambiguity in multilingual digital environments such as Javanese social media requires an analytical perspective that can reveal layered meanings and shifting interpretive possibilities. For this reason, the study combines qualitative content analysis with sociolinguistic perspectives to identify how different types of ambiguity, including lexical and structural ambiguity.

The dataset consists of eight scenes extracted from the *Yo Wis Ben* Netflix series. These scenes were selected through purposive sampling based on their dense linguistic content and noticeable presence of potentially ambiguous utterances. Inclusion criteria required that a scene (1) contained Javanese dialogue with at least one utterance exhibiting multiple possible interpretations; (2) involved conversational interaction rather than monologic narration; and (3) displayed cultural elements such as speech levels,

informal expressions, or humor. Exclusion criteria involved (1) scenes dominated by Indonesian or English dialogue; (2) scenes where ambiguity arose solely from unclear audio rather than linguistic features; and (3) instances where ambiguity could not be reliably analyzed due to incomplete contextual cues. All selected scenes were downloaded legally, segmented, and manually transcribed to retain nuances such as ellipsis, prosody, speech-level markers, and informal morphophonemic variation.

Data analysis followed a three-phase content analysis procedure. First, all transcribed utterances were coded for ambiguous forms using Lyons' (1977) distinction between semantic/lexical ambiguity and structural/syntactic ambiguity. Each instance was examined to determine whether ambiguity originated from polysemy, homonymy, idiomaticity, or alternative syntactic parses. Second, the ambiguous forms were analyzed pragmatically by considering speaker intention, conversational implicature, humor, and cultural references embedded in Javanese communicative norms. This phase draws on sociolinguistic principles to interpret how ambiguity contributes to interactional meaning. Finally, each ambiguous expression was subjected to contrastive analysis with English, focusing on whether the corresponding meaning would remain ambiguous, become disambiguated, or require additional grammatical specification in English. This analytic procedure provides insight into how meaning relations shift across languages and what linguistic or pragmatic factors influence interpretive outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the findings on lexical and structural ambiguity in the Yo Wis Ben series. Ambiguous expressions were identified in selected dialogues, showing how a single word or syntactic structure can trigger multiple interpretations

depending on context. Furthermore, it is found in the study that both literal and alternative meanings were examined to highlight pragmatic effects such as humor, misunderstanding, or cultural nuance. The main examples are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Lexical and Structural Ambiguity in Selected Dialogues

No	Utterance / Dialogue	Ambiguity Type	Initial Meaning	Alternative Meaning	Pragmatic Effect / Humor
1	Mia: "Aku dicokot singo" Doni: "Singo nyokot opo, Mi?" Bayu: "Wis ta lah, ora usah dipikir, Singo kan jeneng anak e"	Lexical	singo = "lion" (literal, animal)	singo = proper noun (name of a child)	Humor from misunderstanding; literal vs proper noun reading clash
2	Man 1: "tontonan opo iki, cak?" Man 2: "yo wis ben, sing penting. Anakku seneng."	Lexical	yo wis ben = "let it be / just leave it alone"	yo wis ben = proper noun, band name	Double reading creates humorous reference ambiguity
3	Bayu: "Kulo niki sampun wonten pacar, nanging sak niki, kulo pedhot" Pak Ustad: "Oh, lha iku dudu benang gelas to"	Lexical	pedhot = "break up" (romantic)	pedhot = "snapped / broken" (kite string)	Humor from semantic domain shift (emotional vs physical)
4	Rini: "Legi opo ora?" Doni: "Wah, ning kene legi kabeh, Mbak."	Lexical	legi = "sweet" (taste)	legi = "sweet / attractive" (figurative, social)	Humor from literal vs figurative interpretation
5	A: "Jodoh iku bakal teka dhewe. Nek iso teka dhewe, lha nek ning dalan kena macet? April, Mei, Juni.." B: "Maret, dudu macet"	Structural	macet = "stuck in traffic"	macet = interpreted as mispronounced month	Humor from syntactic reanalysis; playful parsing of sequence
6	"Kawin iku pancen seneng, nanging ojo seneng kawin"	Structural	kawin (nominal) = "marriage is joyful"	kawin (verbal) = "to engage in sexual activity"	Humor from parallelism creating dual syntactic reading

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single linguistic form corresponds to two distinct semantic entries in the language. In this research, four data of lexical

ambiguity occur in Javanese conversation context.

1. Mia : "Aku dicokot **singo**"
Doni : "**Singo** nyokot opo, Mi?"

Bayu : “Wis ta lah, ora usah dipikir, **Singo** kan jeneng anak e”

Doni : “Tapi **Singo** nyokot opo, kuwi penting, Bay”

The dialogue illustrates lexical ambiguity through the word *singo*, which activates two distinct semantic meanings within the same conversational context. In Mia’s utterance “*Aku dicokot **singo***”, *singo* can be interpreted literally as “lion,” creating the alarming reading that she has been bitten by an animal. Doni’s reply, “***Singo** nyokot opo, Mi?*”, continues this literal interpretation by treating *singo* as a ferocious creature capable of biting. However, Bayu reinterprets *singo* as a proper noun referring to a person, clarifying that **Singo** is the name of someone’s child. This shift forces a second possible meaning: Mia was not bitten by a lion, but by a person named Singo. The humor arises when Doni resists the clarification and still questions “*Tapi **Singo** nyokot opo, kuwi penting, Bay,*” maintaining the literal reading of *cokot* even after the proper-noun interpretation is introduced.

2. Man 1 : “tontonan opo iki, cak? Band gak jelas ngene ditanggap”

Man 2 : “**yo wis ben**, sing penting. Anakku seneng.”

The exchange “***Yo wis ben**, sing penting anakku seneng*” presents a clear instance of lexical ambiguity, since the expression *yo wis ben* can activate two distinct semantic interpretations depending on contextual cues. In everyday Javanese, *yo wis ben* functions idiomatically to mean “let it be” or “just leave it alone,” expressing resignation or acceptance. However, in this dialogue the phrase simultaneously corresponds to the proper name of the band being criticized in the preceding line, which allows the utterance to be reinterpreted as a referential expression meaning “Yo Wis Ben is the band.” This creates a humorous double reading: while Man 1

expresses dissatisfaction with the unclear performance, Man 2’s response can be taken either as an attempt to calm the complaint (“just let it be”) or as a literal reference identifying the band by name. This constitutes lexical ambiguity because a single surface form triggers two unrelated semantic representations—an idiomatic expression and a proper noun—both of which are contextually plausible within the conversational setting.

3. Bayu : kulo badhe tanglet, pak ustad. Kulo niki sampun wonten pacar, nanging sak niki, kulo **pedhot**”

Pak Ustad : “Oh, lha iku dudu benang gelas to”

Bayu : Mboten pak ustad, sanes layangan”

In the utterance “*Kulo niki sampun wonten pacar, nanging sak niki, kulo pedhot,*” the speaker uses the word *pedhot* to mean “broken up” in the context of ending a romantic relationship. However, the interlocutor humorously interprets *pedhot* through a different lexical meaning, namely “snapped” or “broken” as used for a *benang gelas* (kite string). This creates ambiguity because the same word has two distinct senses that belong to different semantic domains—emotional or relational separation versus physical breakage of an object. The humor arises when Pak Ustad rejects the intended meaning and instead responds, “*Oh, lha iku dudu benang gelas to,*” treating *pedhot* as if it were referring to a kite string rather than a romantic breakup. This shift in meaning illustrates lexical ambiguity, where a single word gives rise to multiple, unrelated interpretations depending on the context.

4. Demila : “Mbak, tak gawekke sing anget-anget ya”

Rini : “Oh iyo. **Legi** opo ora?” (asking to the three guests)

Doni : “Wah, ning kene **legi** kabeh, Mbak.”

The conversation shows a case of lexical ambiguity through the word *legi*, which in Javanese carries two unrelated meanings depending on contextual cues. When Rini asks, “*Legi opo ora?*”, she is using *legi* in its basic gustatory sense, meaning “sweet,” referring to whether the guests want their warm drink to contain sugar. However, Doni responds with “*Wah, ning kene legi kabeh, Mbak,*” shifting the meaning of *legi* from “sweet (taste)” to “sweet (attractive),” using it metaphorically to describe the women in the room as “sweet,” “pretty,” or “charming.” The humor arises because the same lexical form simultaneously activates a literal meaning about drink preference and a figurative meaning referring to physical or social appeal.

1. A : Jodoh iku bakal teka dhewe. Nek iso teka dhewe, lha nek ning dalan kena **macet**? April, Mei, Juni..

B : Maret, dudu macet.

The dialogue contains a clear case of structural ambiguity as described by Lyon (1995), in which the ambiguity arises from the syntactic structure rather than the lexical meaning of an individual word. In the utterance “*Jodoh iku bakal teka dhewe. Nek iso teka dhewe, lha nek ning dalan kena macet? April, Mei, Juni...*”, the word *macet* is first interpreted within a clausal structure meaning “stuck in traffic,” so the following sequence—*April, Mei, Juni*—is understood as months passing while the journey is delayed. However, Speaker B then performs a structural reanalysis by treating *macet* as if it occupies the same syntactic position as *April, Mei, and Juni*, thereby humorously interpreting it as another item in a month sequence. This reinterpretation allows B to correct it with “*Maret, dudu macet*”, as though *macet* were a mispronounced

month name rather than a predicate describing a traffic event. The humor arises from this shift between two different syntactic parses, illustrating Lyon’s notion of structural ambiguity where the surface form supports more than one structural interpretation.

2. “**Kawin** iku pancen **seneng**, nanging ojo **seneng kawin**”

The sentence “*Kawin iku pancen seneng, nanging ojo seneng kawin*” also presents structural ambiguity because the two identical lexical items, placed in parallel syntactic positions, create two possible clause structures that guide interpretation differently. Structurally, the first clause “*Kawin iku pancen seneng*” frames *kawin* as a nominal subject referring to the social institution of marriage (“being married is joyful”). However, the second clause “*nanging ojo seneng kawin*” reuses the same surface structure but shifts the syntactic function of *kawin* into a verbal predicate, meaning “to engage in sexual activity.” The ambiguity arises not only from the dual meanings of the word *kawin* but from the syntactic parallelism between the two clauses, which makes it appear as though both instances should belong to the same grammatical category.

The analysis reveals that ambiguity in Javanese conversational discourse operates through two major mechanisms: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity, both of which are deeply rooted in the cultural and pragmatic norms of Javanese communication. These two types emerge naturally in spontaneous speech, where meaning depends more on shared context, pragmatic inference, and cultural familiarity than on explicit grammatical markers. Lexical ambiguity identified in the *Yo Wis Ben* series corresponds with Lyons’ (1977) definition, which states that lexical ambiguity occurs when a single lexical

item carries two or more distinct meanings stored separately in the mental lexicon. This feature appears in utterances such as *singo*, *yo wis ben*, *pedhot*, and *legi*, each triggering more than one unrelated meaning. For example, *singo* alternates between “lion” and a personal name, while *yo wis ben* functions both as an idiomatic expression meaning “let it be” and as the name of a music band. Likewise, *pedhot* shifts between denoting romantic separation and the physical breaking of a kite string, and *legi* alternates between the literal sense “sweet” and the figurative “attractive or charming.” These instances show that speakers intentionally exploit lexical ambiguity to achieve humorous, ironic, or expressive effects, allowing interpretation to shift between literal and figurative layers.

Structural ambiguity in the data aligns with Lyons' (1977) explanation that ambiguity can also result from syntactic arrangements permitting multiple interpretations. This is exemplified in the utterance involving *macet*, where the phrase is initially interpreted as “stuck in traffic” but is humorously reanalyzed as another item in a list of months (*April, Mei, Juni*), leading to an unexpected meaning. Similarly, in the expression “*Kawin iku pancen seneng, nanging ojo seneng kawin*,” the same lexical item *kawin* appears in both clauses but with different grammatical functions, first as a noun meaning “marriage,” then as a verb meaning “having sex.” The sentence's structural parallelism encourages listeners to assume equivalent meaning, producing a comic reinterpretation that relies on syntactic symmetry rather than vocabulary itself. These findings confirm that Javanese ambiguity operates through the flexible interplay between linguistic form and pragmatic context.

When compared with previous studies, the present research both confirms and extends existing scholarship. Like Nuryanti & Sa'diah (2024), this study identifies lexical ambiguity as the most dominant form in cinematic dialogue. However, it goes beyond classification by also examining structural ambiguity and emphasizing the influence of Javanese sociolinguistic norms. In a similar way, while Amelyana et al. (2022) concentrated on homophones and homographs in English subtitles, this study demonstrates that ambiguity in a multilingual setting involving Javanese, Indonesian, and English operates not only at the lexical level but also at the structural level, shaped by speech registers, idiomatic expressions, and cultural double meanings. Furthermore, unlike Ladini & Heryono (2022), whose analysis remained within English and was primarily semantic, this research introduces a cross-linguistic perspective by exploring how ambiguous Javanese expressions are interpreted or resolved in English. As a result, this study offers a new contribution by placing ambiguity within culturally grounded multilingual dialogue and by examining how meaning changes when transferred into English, a dimension that has not been fully addressed in earlier research.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that ambiguity in Javanese is not treated merely as an accidental feature of speech, but is instead employed as a strategic communicative resource. The language's orientation toward indirectness, contextual dependence, and playful reinterpretation enables ambiguity to function socially, including for the softening of criticism, the production of humor, the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, and the signaling of group solidarity. Lexical ambiguity is shown to depend on cultural

familiarity and shared semantic knowledge, whereas structural ambiguity is grounded in syntactic economy and the flexible parsing of spoken utterances. The interaction between these two mechanisms reflects the dynamic character of meaning construction in Javanese discourse, in which interpretation is jointly constructed and shaped by linguistic form as well as by pragmatic context.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ambiguity in the Javanese dialogue of the *Yo Wis Ben* film series primarily occurs in two forms: lexical ambiguity, produced by words with multiple unrelated meanings, and structural ambiguity, arising from syntactic constructions that allow more than one interpretation (Lyons 1977). These ambiguities are not incidental but are intentionally embedded within the conversational structure to convey humor, emotional nuance, and cultural resonance. Comparison with English shows that while ambiguity tends to be reduced through grammatical precision in English, it functions in Javanese as a communicative and cultural resource. The study contributes to pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and media discourse by demonstrating that ambiguity in local language media operates at lexical, syntactic, and broader cultural levels. Cross-linguistic comparison further provides insight into how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and reshaped across languages, highlighting the relevance of multilingual discourse.

Methodological limitations are acknowledged. First, the analysis is restricted to selected scenes from a single film series, which may not fully represent ambiguity across Javanese media or everyday communication. Second, the English comparison relies on linguistic analysis rather than empirical

responses from bilingual participants, limiting insight into actual comprehension and translation strategies. Third, audience interpretation and resolution of ambiguity were not examined, even though these are critical for understanding communicative effectiveness. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to: (1) expand the analysis to other Javanese films, television programs, or digital content across diverse genres; (2) incorporate audience reception studies and bilingual translation analysis to investigate how ambiguity is perceived and resolved; and (3) explore interactions between ambiguity, speech levels, politeness strategies, and humor in other regional languages. These steps will provide a more comprehensive and user-centered understanding of discourse, enhancing both theoretical and practical insights.

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