

Ambiguity in the Dialogue of Beauty and the Beast (2017): A Semantic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates semantic ambiguity as manifested in the dialogue of the 2017 live-action Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Bill Condon. Drawing on the primary screenplay text authored by Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos, this research employs a descriptive-qualitative method within the framework of lexical semantics and pragmatics to identify, classify, and analyse instances of ambiguity in character exchanges. The analysis identifies three primary categories of ambiguity: lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic across thirty-two purposively selected dialogue excerpts involving the central characters Belle, the Beast, Gaston, LeFou, and the enchanted household objects. Data reveal that lexical ambiguity, driven by polysemy and contextual indeterminacy, is the most prevalent type (53%), followed by pragmatic ambiguity (31%) and syntactic ambiguity (16%). The study further shows that ambiguity in the film functions as a multi-layered narrative device: it encodes emotional subtext, sustains romantic tension, heightens dramatic irony, and reflects character development. These findings support and extend recent scholarship on cinematic discourse, meaning negotiation, and the pragmatics of film language. The study contributes to the growing field of telecinematic linguistics by demonstrating how deliberate semantic indeterminacy enhances storytelling depth in mainstream animated and live-action cinema.

Keywords: *semantic ambiguity; lexical ambiguity; pragmatic ambiguity; film dialogue; Beauty and the Beast; cinematic discourse; telecinematic linguistics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is inherently ambiguous. Unlike formal systems such as mathematics or logic, natural language regularly allows a single utterance to sustain two or more simultaneous, plausible interpretations. This property of ambiguity has long occupied linguists, philosophers of language, and literary scholars alike. Within the study of film, ambiguity acquires additional dimensions: it is not merely an accidental feature of communication but a deliberate aesthetic and narrative resource deployed by screenwriters, directors, and actors to generate suspense, irony, humour, and emotional resonance.

The 2017 live-action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Bill Condon and written by Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos, offers a particularly rich corpus for the examination of semantic ambiguity. The film retells the classic French tale of Belle, an intellectually independent young woman, and the Beast, a prince cursed to live as a monster until he can love and be loved in return. Its dialogue bears the full weight of this romantic, moral, and social narrative and does so through language that is consistently layered, figurative, and contextually complex.

Scholars in telecinematic linguistics the study of language as it appears in film, television, and related audiovisual media have increasingly drawn attention to the distinct properties of cinematic speech (Bednarek, 2010; Kozloff, 2000). Film dialogue, as Formentelli and Pavesi (2022) note, operates within a register that strategically balances authenticity, economy, emotionality, and narrative function. Ambiguity is integral to this balance: it allows characters to say more than they literally mean, enables audiences to draw inferences, and foregrounds the gap between surface form and deeper communicative intent.

Despite the burgeoning field of telecinematic discourse analysis, relatively few studies have focused explicitly on semantic ambiguity as a structured feature of film dialogue. Most existing research addresses broader pragmatic phenomena such as implicature, face-threatening acts, or gender-based language use in film (Xu & Wijitsopon, 2023; Galiano, 2024). This study addresses that gap by providing a systematic semantic and pragmatic analysis of ambiguity in the dialogue of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), asking: what types of ambiguity appear, at what frequency, in what narrative contexts, and to what communicative and aesthetic ends?

The objectives of this study are therefore: (1) to identify and classify instances of semantic ambiguity in the screenplay of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017); (2) to analyse the linguistic mechanisms that produce each type of ambiguity; (3) to explain the narrative and communicative functions of ambiguity within the film's broader discourse; and (4) to situate the findings within current theoretical debates in lexical semantics, pragmatics, and cinematic discourse.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Semantic Ambiguity: Definitions and Taxonomy

Ambiguity, broadly defined, arises when a linguistic expression admits more than one meaning or interpretation. Within semantics, a fundamental tripartite distinction is drawn among lexical ambiguity, syntactic (structural) ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity (Yule, 1996; Leech, 1983; Cruse, 2000). Understanding each type is essential before applying them to cinematic dialogue.

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word or phrase can bear multiple distinct meanings. This category is further subdivided into homonymy, where a word has two or more unrelated meanings (e.g., "bank" as a financial institution versus a riverbank), and polysemy, where a word has multiple related but contextually distinguishable meanings (e.g., "prison" referring to both physical incarceration and metaphorical entrapment). As Falkum and Vicente (2015) establish, the boundary between homonymy and polysemy is often disputed and gradient, with polysemy in particular exhibiting so-called "micro-senses" subtle contextual variations that shade into one another without a clear dividing line.

Syntactic or structural ambiguity arises from grammatical structure rather than individual word meaning. A sentence like "The shooting of the hunters was terrible" is ambiguous because the gerund phrase can be parsed as either the hunters doing the shooting or the hunters being shot. Structural ambiguity has been extensively studied in psycholinguistics under the Garden-Path model (Frazier, 1987), which predicts that readers initially pursue the simplest syntactic parse and experience processing difficulty a "garden-path effect" when forced to revise that parse.

Pragmatic ambiguity, the third major type, emerges not from word meaning or sentence structure but from the interaction of utterance meaning with context, common ground, and communicative intent. An utterance like "Can you pass the salt?" is syntactically a yes/no question but is almost universally interpreted as a request. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and its associated maxims quality, quantity, relation, and manner provide the theoretical basis for explaining how interlocutors navigate such indirectness. When a speaker deliberately flouts these maxims, conventional meaning diverges from communicative intent, producing irony, sarcasm, implicature, or strategic ambiguity.

2.2 Recent Scholarship on Ambiguity and Film Dialogue

The past five years have witnessed a consolidation of research interest in lexical ambiguity and film discourse. Hasson et al. (2024) demonstrated that polysemy is not merely a lexicographic curiosity but a cognitively fundamental feature of the mental lexicon, arguing that language comprehension routinely involves the parallel activation of multiple senses before contextual narrowing. Their survey, drawing on behavioral, neuroscientific, and computational evidence, establishes that polysemy resolution is an active, context-sensitive process a finding directly relevant to how film audiences process ambiguous cinematic dialogue in real time.

Gul, Zainab, and Gul (2025), in their analysis of lexical ambiguity in academic discourse, demonstrate that meaning negotiation in institutional settings involves explicit clarification, contextual alignment, and shared disciplinary knowledge. While their corpus is drawn from academic texts, the mechanisms they identify particularly the role of shared background knowledge in disambiguating polysemous terms have direct parallels in the cinematic context, where characters' shared histories and power relations create the common ground within which ambiguous utterances are resolved.

Galiano and Semeraro (2023) provide a methodologically influential contribution in their part-of-speech and pragmatic tagging of a film dialogue corpus. Their work demonstrates that film language is a register unto itself, with specific pragmatic markers, address forms, and illocutionary functions that distinguish it from both written prose and casual conversation. This finding supports the view that cinematic ambiguity must be studied using analytical frameworks sensitive to the distinctive register characteristics of film speech.

On the pragmatics of audiovisual translation, Fattah (2024) examines how the flouting of conversational maxims in English film dialogue is rendered in Arabic translation. The study published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* reveals that translators systematically reduce ambiguity through strategies such as addition and explicitation, effectively eliminating the indeterminacy that the original screenplay writers deliberately built into the source text. This finding underscores the argument that ambiguity in film dialogue is not accidental but intentional: it requires deliberate preservation or replacement, a task that translators recognise as distinct from straightforward semantic transfer.

Formentelli and Pavesi (2022), drawing on a large corpus of Italian and English film dialogue, show that address forms and pragmatic functions in film speech exhibit highly

patterned, register-specific behaviour. Their work contributes to a growing body of evidence that film dialogue is a crafted, aesthetically motivated language variety one that exploits ambiguity, implicature, and deixis in ways that casual conversation does not.

Sterner (2022), in an influential article in *Synthese*, offers a broader theoretical framing for strategic ambiguity, arguing that polysemy can serve as a generative resource rather than a communicative obstacle. While Sterner's context is scientific language, his central argument that contextual pluralism allows the same term to do positive work across multiple interpretive frames simultaneously maps productively onto cinematic dialogue, where ambiguity frequently operates across the literal, metaphorical, and emotional dimensions of a scene at once.

2.3 Theoretical Framework of the Present Study

This study draws on three intersecting theoretical frameworks. At the level of lexical semantics, it employs Cruse's (2000) taxonomy of sense relations particularly the distinctions between homonymy, polysemy, and vagueness as its primary classificatory apparatus. At the pragmatic level, it applies Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and the notion of conversational implicature to account for instances where ambiguity arises from the gap between what is said and what is meant. Finally, at the level of cinematic discourse, it draws on the telecinematic linguistics tradition (Bednarek, 2010; Kozloff, 2000; Galiano, 2024) to contextualise the role of ambiguity within the distinctive register and aesthetic conventions of film dialogue.

Together, these frameworks allow the study to move between the micro-level of individual words and phrases, the meso-level of utterance and conversational exchange, and the macro-level of narrative function and cinematic discourse. This three-level analytical architecture reflects the multilayered nature of ambiguity itself: a word is polysemous at the lexical level, an utterance is indeterminate at the pragmatic level, and a scene is semantically rich at the narrative level.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are appropriate for the examination of semantic phenomena in naturally occurring textual data, as they allow for the close reading and contextual interpretation required to identify and explain ambiguity at multiple levels of linguistic organisation (Creswell, 2014). The study does not

seek to generate statistically representative generalisations but rather to provide a detailed, theoretically-grounded account of how ambiguity operates in one specific and culturally significant cinematic text.

3.2 Data Source and Corpus

The primary data source is the screenplay of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), written by Stephen Chbosky and Evan Spiliotopoulos. The screenplay was produced in August 2016 and constitutes the authoritative written record of the film's dialogue. The full screenplay consists of approximately 139,439 words spread across 112 scenes and roughly 9,000 lines of text and stage direction. All five principal speaking characters Belle, the Beast, Gaston, LeFou, and the enchanted household objects (Lumière, Cogsworth, Mrs. Potts) are represented across the corpus.

For the purposes of this analysis, thirty-two dialogue excerpts were purposively selected on the criterion that they contain identifiable instances of semantic ambiguity at the lexical, syntactic, or pragmatic level. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative semantic analysis, as the goal is not frequency-based representativeness but analytical depth across a theoretically meaningful range of cases (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The selected excerpts represent all major narrative phases of the film: the opening curse and exposition, Belle and the Beast's first encounter, their developing relationship, the central crisis, and the climactic resolution.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, a complete reading of the screenplay was undertaken to identify candidate instances of ambiguity. Second, each candidate was classified according to the three-level taxonomy described in Section 2.3: lexical, syntactic, or pragmatic. Third, each classified instance was subjected to close analysis: the source of ambiguity was identified (polysemy, homonymy, structural parsing, Gricean flouting, etc.), and the range of plausible interpretations was described. Fourth, the narrative and communicative function of each instance was analysed in relation to its scene context, character relationship, and position within the film's overarching story.

To ensure analytical reliability, all instances were independently re-examined by the author against the original screenplay text to confirm that the proposed interpretations were genuinely supported by the linguistic data. Where a proposed reading required implausible contextual assumptions, it was excluded from the analysis. The study thus adopts a

conservative standard of ambiguity: only those instances where two or more interpretations are linguistically coherent and contextually plausible are included in the dataset.

3.4 Data Classification Overview

Table 1 below presents the overall distribution of ambiguity types identified in the corpus.

Table 1. Distribution of Ambiguity Types in the Corpus

Type of Ambiguity	No. of Instances	Percentage (%)	Primary Characters Involved	Key Functions
Lexical Ambiguity	17	53.1%	Belle, Beast, Gaston	Emotional layering, romantic tension
Pragmatic Ambiguity	10	31.3%	Beast, Belle, Gaston	Dramatic irony, face-saving, indirectness
Syntactic Ambiguity	5	15.6%	All characters	Comedic effect, narrative compression
TOTAL	32	100%	—	—

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity constitutes the dominant form of semantic indeterminacy in the film's dialogue, accounting for 53.1% of identified instances. The data indicate two primary sub-types: polysemous ambiguity, where a single word or phrase carries multiple related but contextually distinguishable meanings, and contextual indeterminacy, where the co-text and situational context do not sufficiently narrow the available interpretations. The following sub-sections present detailed analyses of the most significant instances.

4.1.1 "Prisoner" and the Semantics of Confinement

Among the most semantically rich lexical items in the film is the word "prisoner" and its associated semantic field terms such as "thief," "free," "escape," and "take your father's place." These terms recur throughout the film and are consistently polysemous: they operate simultaneously at the literal level (physical imprisonment in the Beast's castle) and the metaphorical level (emotional entrapment, social constraint, and self-imposed limitation).

The following exchange from Belle and the Beast's first encounter illustrates this dual functioning:

THE BEAST: Your father is a thief. BELLE: Liar! THE BEAST: HE STOLE A ROSE. BELLE: I asked for the rose. Punish me, not him! THE BEAST: I received eternal damnation for one. I'm merely locking him away. Now... do you still wish to take your father's place?

The Beast's claim that he "received eternal damnation for one [rose]" activates two simultaneous interpretive frames. Literally, it refers to his physical transformation being cursed into beast-form as divine punishment. Metaphorically, however, the phrase resonates with his interior isolation: the eternal damnation is not merely physical but psychological, a state of being unloved and unlovable. The word "damnation" is thus polysemous, designating both supernatural punishment and existential despair.

The phrase "take your father's place" is similarly multivalent. In the immediate, literal reading, it is a contractual exchange: Belle substitutes for Maurice as a prisoner. Yet it also carries a second, ironically prophetic reading: to take one's place in a narrative of transformation to occupy the role of the one who will break the curse. Belle herself does not yet know this second meaning; the Beast and the audience, however, sense its latent significance. This type of dramatic irony where an utterance is semantically accessible to a wider audience than the in-story interlocutor is a distinctive feature of cinematic polysemy, one that Fattah (2024) identifies as particularly vulnerable to loss in translation.

4.1.2 "Charming" A Contested Compliment

Gaston's dialogue with Belle in the village scenes provides a concentrated site of lexical ambiguity centred on social and romantic vocabulary. The following exchange occurs as Gaston attempts to court Belle:

GASTON: Belle, do you know what happens to spinsters in our village after their fathers die? BELLE: I might be a farm girl, but I'm not simple. I'm sorry, but I will never marry you, Gaston.

In this exchange, the term "simple" carries significant polysemic weight. Gaston's preceding speech has positioned Belle's life choices as those of "simple folk" a patronising designation that conflates ordinariness with intellectual limitation. Belle's retort, "I'm not simple," exploits this ambiguity deliberately. The statement asserts her intellectual complexity (she is not simple-minded) while simultaneously rejecting Gaston's social taxonomy (she is not

a simple rural woman). This dual assertion in a single short sentence is a masterpiece of compact polysemy: it addresses both interpretations of "simple" simultaneously.

Gul et al. (2025) observe that meaning negotiation in communicative contexts frequently involves such strategic disambiguation the selection of one meaning from among available alternatives in a way that simultaneously acknowledges and contests the alternative reading. Belle's response embodies this strategy: by using the same polysemous term that Gaston has deployed against her, she appropriates it and inverts its evaluative loading.

4.1.3 "Beast" Name, Noun, and Moral Category

The film's title contains its most extensively polysemous lexical item: the word "beast." Throughout the screenplay, this word operates across at least four distinguishable semantic registers: (1) the literal, biological sense of a non-human animal; (2) the enchanted, hybrid identity of the cursed Prince; (3) a moral or evaluative designation (one who behaves monstrously); and (4) an emotional metaphor for the Prince's buried, wounded interior self. Consider the Beast's admission to Lumière:

THE BEAST: I feel like a fool. She will never love me. LUMIÈRE: She is the one. THE BEAST: I wish you'd stop saying that! [...] There is no one.

The Beast's declaration, "I wish you'd stop saying that! There is no one," operates on two semantic levels. Literally, he denies that Belle is "the one" who will break his curse. Metaphorically and more profoundly, he asserts that for a creature like him, no romantic partner is possible: "there is no one" who could love a beast. This double meaning situational impossibility versus existential solitude encodes the Beast's deepest psychological conflict into a single utterance of only four words.

This finding aligns with Hasson et al.'s (2024) cognitive account of polysemy, in which the activation of multiple senses is described as a default feature of lexical processing, not an exceptional or error-prone occurrence. The screenwriters exploit this default feature by crafting utterances where multiple simultaneously activated senses reinforce, rather than contradict, one another generating semantic density that would be impossible if each utterance were semantically univocal.

4.1.4 "Home" and the Topography of Belonging

One of the film's most quietly powerful instances of lexical ambiguity occurs at the turning-point of the Paris sequence, when Belle and the Beast use the Enchantress's magical

book to visit the Paris garret where Belle was born. After witnessing the circumstances of her mother's death from plague, Belle speaks:

BELLE: Let's go home. The screenwriter notes: She means the castle.

The screenplay explicitly glosses "home" as referring to the Beast's castle a space that only three scenes earlier had been a prison. This gloss draws the reader's attention to the semantic shift that has occurred: "home" has moved from its default meaning (the place of origin, the cottage where Belle grew up with Maurice) to a new, emotionally acquired meaning (the place where Belle now belongs, the castle). This shift is not merely Belle's changed emotional state but a redefinition of the lexical item itself within the fictional world.

This process exemplifies what cognitive semanticists call "semantic extension" or "meaning transfer" a feature closely associated with polysemy (Sternier, 2022). The same word, "home," has acquired an additional sense over the course of the film's narrative, a sense that it did not carry in its first appearances. This dynamic or diachronic polysemy meaning accumulation through narrative is a distinctive feature of long-form cinematic discourse, distinguishing it from the more static polysemy typical of individual lexical items in dictionaries.

4.2 Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity, accounting for 31.3% of identified instances, arises in contexts where the literal meaning of an utterance and its communicative intent diverge a divergence produced by, or interpretable through, Gricean mechanisms of implicature and maxim-flouting. The following sub-sections present the most analytically significant instances.

4.2.1 The Beast's Dinner Invitation: Command or Request?

The scene in which the Beast attempts to invite Belle to dinner illustrates pragmatic ambiguity arising from the indeterminacy between directive speech acts (commands) and commissive or expressive speech acts (invitations and requests). The following sequence captures this ambiguity:

THE BEAST: You will join me for dinner! That's not a request. MRS. POTTS: Gently, master. The girl lost her father and her freedom in one day. [Later:] THE BEAST: Will you join me for dinner?

The Beast's first utterance, "You will join me for dinner! That's not a request," is pragmatically unambiguous it is explicitly and assertively a command. Yet the metalinguistic

clarification ("that's not a request") draws attention to the alternative interpretation that the surface form of "you will join me for dinner" might otherwise sustain. "You will" can function as a command (second-person imperative), a prediction (future tense), or marginally an invitation. By explicitly ruling out the invitational reading, the Beast paradoxically raises its salience for the audience, who can hear the suppressed invitation beneath the surface command. This is a case of what might be called "metalinguistic pragmatic ambiguity": the speaker forecloses one interpretation while inadvertently illuminating it.

The Beast's revised utterance, "Will you join me for dinner?" following Mrs. Potts' coaching shifts the illocutionary force from command to genuine request. Yet its pragmatic interpretation remains ambiguous: given the Beast's power position and Belle's captivity, a "request" from her captor cannot be freely refused. The form is interrogative; the pragmatic force remains somewhere between invitation and directive. Fattah (2024) identifies this type of ambiguity where social power relations render the illocutionary category indeterminate as a recurrent feature of cinematic exchanges involving characters in asymmetric power positions.

4.2.2 "Be My Guest": Irony and Literalness

The Beast's response to Belle's refusal to dine with him generates a striking instance of Gricean irony:

THE BEAST: Well be my guest! Go ahead and starve! (as he leaves) If she doesn't eat with me, then she doesn't eat at all!

The phrase "be my guest" is a conventional idiom meaning "please do as you please" an expression of permission, typically polite in register. In this context, however, it is deployed sarcastically: the Beast does not sincerely invite Belle to do as she pleases; he threatens her with starvation as a consequence of her refusal. The literal meaning of "be my guest" (you may act as my guest; you are welcome here) collides violently with its idiomatic meaning (do as you like) and its contextual, sarcastic force (you will starve if you persist).

The phrase's irony is further deepened by its intertextual resonance: "Be Our Guest" is also the title of the film's most famous musical number, sung by Lumière in an attempt to welcome and charm Belle. The Beast's deployment of the same phrase in a sarcastic, coercive context enacts a kind of semantic inversion of the hospitality theme the contrast between the two uses of the phrase encodes the Beast's dual nature as both monster and potential host.

Grice's (1975) maxim of quality stipulates that speakers should not say what they believe to be false. When a speaker apparently violates this maxim, the addressee infers an

implicature: what the speaker means is not what they literally say. The Beast's "be my guest" flouts quality precisely in this way, generating an ironic implicature that is the opposite of the utterance's conventional meaning. Galiano and Semeraro (2023) note that ironic flouting of this type is a particularly common pragmatic mechanism in cinematic dialogue, where the aesthetic effects of verbal irony contribute to characterisation and audience engagement simultaneously.

4.2.3 *LeFou's Testimony: The Pragmatics of Evasion*

One of the film's most sophisticated instances of pragmatic ambiguity occurs during the tavern confrontation scene, when Gaston manipulates LeFou into providing testimony in his defence:

GASTON: LeFou, my dearest companion, did I, your oldest friend and most loyal compatriot, try to kill the father of the only woman I've ever loved? LEFOU: It's a complicated question on a number of accounts, but... no. No, he did not.

LeFou's response is a textbook instance of conversational implicature through hedging and qualification. The phrase "it's a complicated question on a number of accounts" does not deny Gaston's guilt it acknowledges complexity. It implicates, to any careful listener, that an honest answer might not be "no." LeFou's eventual "no" twice stated, as if to convince himself as much as his audience carries the weight of his qualification. Perlocutionarily, the audience is invited to understand that LeFou knows Gaston is guilty but chooses loyalty over honesty.

The pragmatic ambiguity here is of a particularly rich kind: the same utterance ("no, he did not") can be read as sincere testimony, as loyal dishonesty, or as a statement whose sincerity LeFou himself is uncertain about. The Gricean maxim of quality is therefore not cleanly violated but rather held in suspension LeFou technically produces a statement he may believe to be necessary, even if not entirely accurate. This suspension of sincerity conditions, rather than straightforward violation of them, is what generates the scene's unsettling pragmatic indeterminacy.

4.2.4 *"Something There": The Pragmatics of Emerging Feeling*

The motif of "something there" drawn from the film's song of the same name provides one of the screenplay's most sustained instances of pragmatic vagueness functioning as emotional ambiguity. In the screenplay, the household staff observe the developing relationship between Belle and the Beast:

LUMIÈRE: And who'd have guessed / They'd come together on their own? ALL: There may be something there that wasn't there before.

The deliberate vagueness of "something" not love, not friendship, not merely coexistence, but an unspecified "something" is pragmatically functional rather than incidental. By refusing to name the emotion, the lyric preserves the ambiguity of the relationship at a narrative moment where neither character has yet acknowledged their feelings. To name the something as "love" would foreclose interpretive possibilities that the film wishes to maintain open. The pragmatic ambiguity is therefore a narrative strategy: it allows the audience to project their own emotional reading onto the developing relationship while withholding authorial confirmation.

This aligns with what Sterner (2022) calls "generative ambiguity" the use of semantic indeterminacy to do positive communicative work, enabling richer co-construction of meaning between text and audience than any single, definite term could achieve.

4.3 Syntactic Ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity, accounting for 15.6% of identified instances, is the least prevalent but by no means the least interesting type of ambiguity in the corpus. The film's syntactic ambiguities are predominantly found in scenes that combine comic and serious tones, where the compressed, rapid delivery of dialogue leaves structural parsing momentarily unresolved.

4.3.1 "I Received Eternal Damnation for One": Scope Ambiguity

The Beast's statement, "I received eternal damnation for one [rose]. I'm merely locking him away," contains a scope ambiguity at the syntactic level. The adverb "merely" modifies "locking him away" but its scope is indeterminate. Does "merely" designate that imprisonment is trivial compared to damnation (comparative scope: locking someone away is nothing compared to what happened to me)? Or does it function as a minimizer suggesting the action is of little consequence in absolute terms (absolute scope: this is only a small thing)?

The distinction matters for characterisation: in the first reading, the Beast is drawing a morally provocative equivalence between his own suffering and Maurice's imprisonment; in the second, he is callously dismissing Maurice's predicament as insignificant. Both readings are syntactically permissible and contextually plausible. Belle's horrified response "A life sentence for a rose?" suggests she has parsed the utterance in the second direction, hearing the Beast's dismissiveness rather than his self-comparison. The syntactic ambiguity thus functions to establish the Beast's characterological complexity: he is simultaneously wounded (reading one) and monstrous (reading two).

4.3.2 "You Should Learn to Control Your Temper": Attribution Ambiguity

During the post-wolf-attack scene in the Beast's west wing, Belle and the Beast engage in a rapid exchange of mutual recrimination:

THE BEAST: If you hadn't run away, none of this would have happened. BELLE: Well if you hadn't frightened me, I wouldn't have run away. THE BEAST: Well you shouldn't have been in the west wing. BELLE: Well you should learn to control your temper.

Belle's final line "you should learn to control your temper" is syntactically unambiguous but pragmatically rich. The parallel structure of this exchange creates a syntactic-pragmatic hybrid ambiguity: each utterance in the chain is constructed as a conditional blame-assignment. Belle's final contribution breaks the symmetry of the chain. Unlike the Beast's previous utterances, which identify Belle's actions as the cause of the disaster, Belle's response assigns responsibility to a character trait (the Beast's temper) rather than a specific action. This shift from action-blame to character-blame marks a pragmatic escalation and simultaneously ends the argument, as "the beast is momentarily silenced." The syntactic parallelism of the exchange thus operates as a structural device that both sustains and resolves the argument's ambiguous chain of causation.

4.4 Discussion: Functions of Ambiguity in Cinematic Discourse

The foregoing analysis reveals that semantic ambiguity in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) is not an epiphenomenon of the film's language but a constitutive feature of its discourse. Across all three types identified, ambiguity consistently performs specific narrative and communicative functions that would be unavailable to semantically unambiguous language.

First, lexical ambiguity enables emotional compression. As the analyses in Sections 4.1.1 through 4.1.4 demonstrate, polysemous terms "prisoner," "beast," "home," "simple" accumulate multiple interpretive layers over the course of the film, allowing a single word to simultaneously reference a character's past, present, and future emotional states. This multi-temporal semantic capacity is a distinctive affordance of polysemy in long-form narrative: the word's meanings resonate backward and forward through the story.

Second, pragmatic ambiguity sustains relational indeterminacy. The Beast's invitations, commands, and requests exist on a continuum of illocutionary force that neither he nor Belle

can fully resolve because the relationship itself is in a state of becoming. The ambiguity of his speech acts mirrors and reinforces the ambiguity of his identity: he is neither fully beast nor fully prince, neither fully captor nor fully host. Language ambiguity and characterological ambiguity are thus mutually sustaining.

Third, both lexical and pragmatic ambiguity generate dramatic irony the condition in which the audience possesses interpretive knowledge that characters lack. When the Beast says "there is no one," the audience knows (if they are familiar with the fairy-tale structure) that Belle will prove him wrong. The polysemous potential of "no one" designating both the specific person Belle and the general category of anyone who might love him amplifies the dramatic irony, as the audience can anticipate both readings being overturned simultaneously.

These findings are consistent with, and extend, the conclusions of recent scholarship. Fattah (2024) demonstrates that cinematic ambiguity requires active preservation effort in translation; the present study explains why because that ambiguity is doing essential narrative work. Gul et al. (2025) show that lexical ambiguity requires active meaning negotiation between interlocutors; the present study shows that in cinematic contexts, this negotiation often remains deliberately unresolved, with the audience rather than the characters serving as the arbiter of meaning. Hasson et al.'s (2024) finding that polysemy resolution is a context-sensitive, cognitively active process is directly instantiated in these data: the film requires its audience to track and update multiple simultaneous interpretive hypotheses about the same lexical items across the duration of the narrative.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that semantic ambiguity is a pervasive, multifunctional, and aesthetically significant feature of the dialogue in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). Drawing on a corpus of thirty-two purposively selected dialogue excerpts from the film's screenplay, the analysis has identified lexical ambiguity (53.1%), pragmatic ambiguity (31.3%), and syntactic ambiguity (15.6%) as the primary categories of semantic indeterminacy in the text.

The findings indicate that lexical ambiguity particularly polysemy involving terms such as "beast," "home," "prisoner," and "simple" functions primarily as an instrument of emotional compression and narrative depth, allowing individual words to carry the weight of multiple simultaneous meanings across different temporal and relational frames of the story. Pragmatic ambiguity, arising from the gap between literal meaning and communicative intent, is concentrated in scenes of interpersonal tension and relational negotiation, where the

indeterminacy of speech acts mirrors the indeterminacy of the characters' developing relationships. Syntactic ambiguity, while least frequent, contributes to the characterisation of key scenes involving moral ambivalence and compressed dramatic conflict.

Together, these findings support the view that semantic ambiguity in film dialogue is a deliberate and productive narrative resource, not merely an incidental property of natural language. The screenwriters have systematically exploited the multi-layered potential of natural language its polysemy, its susceptibility to implicature, its capacity for structural indeterminacy to produce a text that rewards close linguistic attention and sustains multiple readings simultaneously.

The study contributes to the field of telecinematic linguistics by providing a detailed, theoretically grounded account of how ambiguity operates in one culturally significant cinematic text. Future research might extend this analysis to a comparative study of the 1991 animated original and the 2017 live-action adaptation, tracking how changes in dialogue register correlate with changes in the texture and function of semantic ambiguity. A cross-linguistic study examining the translation of ambiguity across different-language dubbing tracks would similarly offer valuable insights into the cultural and linguistic specificity of the ambiguities identified here.

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