

Case study: Communication ambiguity during a TRPG session in the *Dungeons & Dragons* system

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Abstract: Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs or RPGs) group meetings follow a structure of collectively created narratives on three frames: social, game, and diegetic. Communication takes place on each one, while messages and emotions are transferred between them. The study focuses on ambiguity as a strategy chosen to achieve more than one goal. The phenomenon was analysed with the Discourse Units (DUs) taxonomy. Thirty scenes were examined, forming a four-hour meeting. Through quantitative analysis, the excerpts with the highest number of purposes were selected. The ambiguous fragments were then interpreted qualitatively. Out of 628 Discourse Units, only 13 were demonstrating an ambiguous nature.

Keywords: ambiguity, Role-Playing, RPGs, speech community

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1. Introduction

Ambiguity is one of the communicative strategies that are chosen during social interactions. Much attention in relation to the topic is paid to the register of political speeches (Cwalina, 2012), which are imbued with ambiguity on many levels (Dobrosz-Michiewicz, 2016, 2017, 2018). However, relatively insufficient consideration is given to the ambiguity present in registers of private situations, and even less in Role-Playing Games.

Ambiguity is described as a necessary element for maintaining one's identity, exchanging ideas, feelings, thoughts, and confronting one's understanding of the surrounding world (Dobrosz-Michiewicz, 2016). Evident in language, it is also related to social coexistence, gaining approval, reducing dissonances, improving one's self-esteem and giving credibility to messages (Dobrosz-Michiewicz, 2018). Subjects draw on their knowledge and experience (cognition background) when formulating ambiguous messages, allowing them to be read correctly or incorrectly, depending on the sharing of relevant information (Fauconnier, 1995). Further, this contributes to misunderstandings or lack of them, and can also be used specifically to induce misunderstanding.

Ambiguity is an indispensable element of any communication (Fauconnier, 1995) and as such should be included in analyses of a register. In the case of Role-Playing Games, there is a communication situation that happens within three frames: diegetic (*What? Don't you see it is closed? Today I am not selling anything to you!*), social (*Turn on the lights*), and game (*Give me a constitution saving throw*) (Fine, 2002). These frames are connected with different models of communication that occur during a single game session, as Surdyk (2008) writes about in his article. Participants in Role-Playing Games take on many roles. In the social frame: acquaintance, friend, colleague; in the game frame: player, game master; in the diegetic frame: player character (usually a single one per player), non-player character (usually more than one per game master).

Due to the multiplicity of roles that are constantly active during such a game, ambiguity can play additional functions: (1) making the role-played character credible; (2) transferring information between the three frames; (3) expressing feelings in order to relocate them to another frame; (4) a method to bring about confrontation with the opponent.

2. Theoretical concepts

Since the ambiguity discussed in this article is part of the work on describing the Role-Playing Game register and the analyses conducted on it, the main concepts used as a basis for the further described work will be introduced.

2.1 Register

There is no single established definition of a register, but Biber and Conrad (2009) define it as a “variety associated with a particular situation of use”, within which the communicative purposes are also included (2009, p. 6). As such, the analysis of the register can be carried out on both the completed text and excerpts from a variety of them. Although it is presumed that they should be based on comparative analyses between registers to detail differences, single register analyses also occur (Ferguson, 1975, 1983; Zimmer, 1989).

2.2 Discourse Units

The concept of Discourse Units (DUs) originates from Wald (1976) and has been adapted within several studies (Biber et al., 2021; Egbert et al., 2021; Houtkoop & Mazeland, 1985; Quasthoff et al., 2017). It is a useful tool for analysing the register, being a method for breaking down texts for the purpose of analysis as it helps examine fragments in terms of the communicative purposes present in them, and thus allows for quantitative as well as qualitative approaches.

Egbert et al. (2021) developed the notion of a Discourse Unit, which are considered coherent units of conversation in terms of the main over-reaching goal, and can be subdivided into discourse types appropriate to the register that serve different combinations of communicative goals. A Discourse Unit is required to:

1. have an identifiable beginning and end,
2. be coherent in the case of a major goal,
3. be composed of a minimum of five utterances or 100 words.

Since each Discourse Unit may have more than one goal assigned to it, their hierarchy of prevalence in a passage is established on a 3-degree scale (Biber et al., 2007; Egbert et al., 2021). It is considered that up

to 3 communicative purposes should be selected in a single passage, although in the case of labelling passages concerning situations with more than one situation frame the necessity of this restriction is questioned. However, for the purposes of the study conducted, this doubt was left for future research to test the hypothesis regarding the complication of the situation leading to an increase in communicative purposes.

2.3 Communicative purposes

In the taxonomy developed by Egbert et al. (2021) the importance is given to the communicative goals, which can be labelled in separate units respectively. As they can vary between registers like sets that function for specific ones, based on previous research (Rewerska, Świdurska, 2023), the study used a set of purposes extended by a 10th, which is of relevance for the role-playing games register. Among the objectives identified are:

1. **Situation-dependent commentary (SDC)**, concerning comments about people and objects in a shared situation, as well as the rules of the game;
2. **Joking around (JOK)**, involving humorous expressions, teasing, and flirting;
3. **Engaging in conflict (CON)**, focused on disagreements, debates or serious arguments;
4. **Figuring-Things-Out (FTO)**, that is: considering options, plans, and looking for the best solution to a problem;
5. **Sharing feelings and evaluations (FEL)**, concerned with expressing emotions, opinions or beliefs;
6. **Giving advice and instructions (ADV)**, focused on giving directions, advice or suggestions;
7. **Describing or explaining the past (PAS)**, concerned with talking about past facts, events, and narratives;
8. **Describing or explaining the future (FUT)**, denoting describing plans, intentions or speculations about the future;
9. **Describing or explaining (time-neutral) (DES)**, in which descriptions or explanations of facts, information, people, and events without time specification;
10. **Performing (PER)**, addressing the situation of performative use of language.

3. Methodology

The preliminary analysis examined a single 4-hour session, the transcription of which formed the completed text of a single representative of the RPG register. The length of the session was within the average one experienced by the selected group of players. It took place in a private location, in the home of one of the players.

The participants were three students in their twenties, women, all speakers of Polish, having known each other prior to the campaign being played out. All three participants had experience with RPGs, albeit with different experience with their chosen system and exposure to other systems and RPG communities.

The recording comes from a series of sessions, being the 25th in succession, which places it near the end of the adventure. Participants were not recorded for the first time, but for the third time in a series of test recordings, allowing them time to get used to the new element of the situation present in the session. Furthermore, the choice of a recording from the end of the campaign meant that more emotion was awakened in the participants, which overall contributed positively to the naturalness of the data obtained.

The annotation process was carried out entirely in PRAAT (Boersma, Weenink, 2023), where the participants' utterances were labelled on the corresponding layers, according to the roles adopted by the participants in three frames. In this way, statements from characters, players, and friends appeared on separate layers. This approach made it possible to examine the number of utterances occurring in specific frames, as well as to conduct comparative analyses between role-play and non-role-play utterances.

Thirty scenes were elicited from the sessions, which were then divided into 628 Discourse Units, that were assigned 1,242 communicative purposes appearing in different configurations. The data annotated this way was exported and then subjected to quantitative analysis, allowing for the next step: to look at specific phenomena from a qualitative perspective.

4. Ambiguity in the data

Quantitative analysis showed that ambiguous elements represent a minority of the data, amounting to 2.3% of the collected Discourse Units. Table 1

shows the 13 cases that were found. They come from five scenes: “Meeting with the father”, “Walk with the father”, “PC2’s flat”, “Appointment”, and “Meeting with the bar owner”. Each of them is based on interaction with NPCs, and thus puts role-play at the centre of attention. Three examples that appeared in the data will be discussed in the following sections.

It is important to mention that the reception of ambiguity is difficult with no knowledge of the perspectives of all the participants in the situation, the context, and the importance of the enacted moments for the progression of the whole narrative. However, to help distinguish the high ambiguity of the situation from the low ambiguity, an excerpt from DU13.4 is offered for review. Ambiguity does not appear in it, as the characters’ goals are clearly laid out, the questions for information very specifically expressed, and the answers themselves directly address them.

DU13.4 NPC1 explains what services he provides and asks if PC1 intends to use them FUT: 3 FTO: 2

NPC1: Zajmuję się tutejszym oddziałem spożywczym i mam w obowiązku zadanie kilku pytań. Mam nadzieję, że nie przeszkadzam i ma pan czas? (ENG: I am in charge of the local food dispensary and have a few questions to ask. I hope I’m not interrupting and that you also happen to have the time?)

PC1: Hmmm, chwila się znajdzie. (ENG: Hmmm, a moment will have to do.)

NPC1: Cudownie. Czy (...) mają państwo posiłki na kolejny tydzień niepogody? Odpowiedz tak lub nie. (ENG: Wonderful. Do you (...) have meals for another week of inclement weather? Answer yes or no.)

PC1: Odpowiadam tak. (ENG: I answer yes.)

NPC1: Ymm, czy coś jeszcze jest potrzebne? Jakaś uwaga (...) lub zastrzeżenie? (ENG: Ymm, is anything else needed? Any comment (...) or objection?)

PC1: Uwag nie ma, (...) zastrzeżeń nie ma. (ENG: There are no comments, (...) no objections.)

4.1 Variables in ambiguous scenes

The variables that were considered important in discussing the data were those related to the context of the situation, allowing to capture the

elements that can influence the appearance of ambiguity. They are linked to the three types of ambiguous situations that Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) distinguishes in her paper, that is, situations that are completely new, highly complex, and impossible to categorise.

In the instance of this particular paper, attention was paid more specifically to: the **target person**, identifying those actors for whom emotionality was intended through scene design; the level of **emotionality** of the scene, determined by the expressed emotions of the participants; the **place** where the scene was undertaken, divided into private, public and unspecified; the **actors** of the scene, specifying who participated in ambiguous situations; and the level of improvisation of the scene (referred as **expectancy** in the table), concerning whether the scene was planned or spontaneous, and thus expected or unexpected by the participants.

In the examination of the selected scenes, it was also noted what the ambiguity of the exchanged messages may as well be due to the procedure of deliberate misunderstanding. It should be noted that these misunderstandings do not take place in the social frame, and therefore do not reach the person playing the role.

Table 1. The list of Umbrella Instances in the dataset

No. DU	Theme	DU1P	DU2P	DU3P
9.14	PC2 reports a worrying incident, is ignored, so explains what her mission is and the problems that arose	PAS: 3	FEL: 2	DES: 1
9.15	NPC2 changes the subject and invites PC2 once again to family dinner	FEL: 3	ADV: 2	PAS: 1
9.16	PC2 uses rhetorical question to make NPC2 realise how big a problem she has	FTO: 3	FEL: 2	PAS: 1
10.8	NPC2 enquires about PC2's relationship	FTO: 3	FEL: 2	PAS: 1
10.9	NPC2 enquires about PC2's housing conditions	FTO: 3	PAS: 1	FEL: 1
10.12	PC2 recognises that children in the organisation they belong to is a bad idea, which NPC2 disagrees with	FEL: 3	ADV: 2	PAS: 1
11.1	NPC2 looks around PC2's flat	PER: 3	SDC: 2	JOK: 1
11.3	NPC2 offers PC2 to live in the same building with him	FEL: 3	ADV: 2	FUT: 1

15.6	NPC1 calls out to PC2 for PC1 to ask PC2 if he goes with them, in the process NPC1 and PC2 greet each other mischievously.	FTO: 3	FEL: 2	JOK: 1
15.7	PC1 asks where they are going and expresses dissatisfaction with the situation with NPC1, as PC1 had agreed with the DM to be able to hear the conversation beforehand	FUT: 3	PAS: 2	ADV: 1
15.10	PC2 suggests resolving the dispute with NPC1 in a practical way, PC1 expresses worry about the situation	ADV: 3	FEL: 2	FTO: 1
17.34	PC2 praises NPC1's dish	FEL: 3	PER: 1	-
17.40	NPC1 expresses doubt about whether the city will provide food for his organisation	FUT: 3	FEL: 2	-

4.2 Hidden messages under Figuring-Things-Out

Context: PC2 sends a letter to her NPC2 supervisor to arrange a private meeting in order to obtain additional information regarding the mission she is undertaking.

Situation: A clandestine meeting between NPC2 and PC2, both move to a safe place to have a conversation about work. The transition to another location is used by NPC2 to raise private issues, inconvenient for PC2.

The dialogue shown in DU10.8 demonstrates the use of ambiguity with the aim of making the role-played character credible and as a method to bring about confrontation with the opponent. Characters are believable due to their shared history (PAS, Describing or Explaining the Past), their own objectives and not understanding each other or seeing the other's negativity (FEL, Sharing Feelings and Emotions). At the end of the excerpt, one can see the provocation undertaken by PC2 to confront NPC1, as if in response for raising an uncomfortable topic.

DU10.8 NPC2 enquires about PC2's relationship FTO: 3 FEL: 2 PAS: 1

NPC1: Jak twój związek z Seline się trzyma? (ENG: How is your relationship with Seline working out?)

PC2: Cóż, Seline jest w Portowej, a ja jestem w Obrotu. (ENG: Well, Seline is in the Harbour and I'm in the Rotation.)

NPC1: Właśnie, rozmawiałem z nią i nie mówiła, że utrzymujecie jakiś kontakt? (ENG: Indeed, I spoke to her and she didn't say that you two keep in touch at all?)

PC2: Powiedziałabym dobrze. (ENG: I would say fine.)

NPC1: Wręcz zdziwiłem się, że dostałem pierwszy list zamiast (...) w drugiej kolejności, jako (po) Seline. (ENG: In fact, I was surprised that I got the letter first instead of (...) in the second place, as (after) Seline.)

PC2: Czyli inaczej nie miałbyś mi za złe, że najpierw piszę do dziewczyny, a potem piszę do ojca? (ENG: So otherwise you wouldn't hold it against me that I would write to my girlfriend first and then later to my father?)

At the same time, in favour of ambiguity, we have a highly complex, unexpected scene in which the private and professional spheres are mixed. The characters are not only father and daughter to each other, but also superior and subordinate. It can be said that PC2 attempts to solve the problem of a professional nature by private means, and the hidden messages, adding to the complexity of the situation, are bound up in reliance on the characters' shared cognitive background. This in turn is the character's story agreed between the player and the game master. In this domain, some inconsistencies also arise due to differences in perceptions of the characters or differences in access to the history of the two characters.

Table 2. Variables marked in DU10.8

No. DU	10.8
Target person	PC2
Emotionality	High
Place	Unknown and public
Actors	PC2; NPC1
Expectancy	Unplanned; At the initiative of the player; Concerning a personal plot

4.3 Hidden messages under giving advice and instructions

Context: NPC1 is arranged with PC1 to go to a bar together. NPC1 is a member of a gang that PC1 is trying to infiltrate, taking advantage of NPC1's affection for himself.

Situation: PC2 overhears PC1 and NPC1 going out and wants to join in, pretending she is already a bit tipsy. To stop PC1 from forbidding her from going out together, she provokes NPC1, who cannot help but prove his superiority.

The situation depicted in DU15.10 takes place in a private setting, in the players' safehouse. Within the excerpt, there is ambiguity associated with making the role-played character credible and transferring information between the three frames. The characters (PC2, NPC1) in the scene are enlivened by spontaneity and rivalry, triggered by resentment (FEL, Sharing Feelings and Emotions) towards one another.

DU15.10 PC2 suggests resolving the dispute with NPC1 in a practical way, PC1 expresses worry about the situation ADV: 3 FEL: 2 FTO: 1

PC2: Siedemnasta? Osiemna-? (...) Jezus Maria! (ENG: Seventeenth? The eighteenth-? (...)) Holy Mary!)

PC1: **Widzę, że ci się pogorszyło.** (ENG: I can see you've taken a turn for the worse.)

PC2: Idę. Możemy się ścigać na tamto miejsce. Gdziekolwiek by nie było. (ENG: Coming. We can have a race to that place. Wherever it may be.)

NPC1: O, wygram. **Z tego co wiem to nie wiesz gdzie idziemy.** (ENG: Oh, I'm going to win. As far as I know, you don't know where we're going.)

PC1: Na pewno nie wystarczy-? (ENG: Surely you haven't had enough-?)

PC2: Najpierw mi powiecie. (ENG: First, you will tell me.)

PC1: **Na pewno nie wystarczy ci picia na dzisiaj?** (ENG: Haven't you had enough to drink for today?)

At the same time, information is transferred between frames through questions about PC2 wellbeing (FTO, Figuring-Things-Out). Hidden beneath these are suggestions that the character should not go with them, as well as concern (FEL, Sharing Feelings and Emotions) about the success of a mission linked to gaining the trust of NPC1.

The situation unfolding in the diegetic frame is complex, resulting from the different goals of the participants, and a certain strategy that

the players adopt. Two goals collide: those of a private and professional nature. PC2 and NPC1 want to go to the bar to enjoy themselves, let off steam and unload their emotions, but PC1 has other plans, related to the work done by PC1 and PC2.

Table 3:. Variables marked in DU15.10

No. DU	15.10
Target person	PC1; (release of emotions for PC2)
Emotionality	Average
Place	Known and private
Actors	PC1, PC2, NPC1
Expectancy	Planned; At the initiative of the player; Related to the main plot

4.4 Hidden messages under sharing feelings and evaluations

Context: The characters present in the scene are divided into two camps, two of them: NPC1 and 2, are characters from within the gang, and PC1 and 2 are from outside the gang, doing the infiltration. The gang members have been told that someone will try to enter their ranks, hence their distrust of outsiders.

Situation: PC1 takes the tactic of pleasing NPC1 in order to get into his group while trying not to sympathise with him. NPC1, in turn, tries not to be approached by a suspicious person, feeling a strong need to confide in his problems.

The situation played out in DU17.34 takes place in a private setting, that is, in a closed bar. It is a case where ambiguity is used as an opportunity to express feelings in order to move them into a different frame: from game to diegetic. Ostensibly, PC2 expresses her feelings about the dish that NPC1 has made. She speaks about him in positive terms (FEL, Sharing Feelings and Emotions) and tries to be affirmative. NPC1 does not help in that, approaching compliments with distrust and expressing his feelings about the situation (FEL, Sharing Feelings and Emotions). PER (Performing) in

this situation is a means to show an attitude of readiness to talk and openness to such a possibility, despite NPC1's reticent responses.

DU17.34 PC2 praises NPC1's dish FEL: 3 PER: 1

PC2: Na zimno też jest dobre. (ENG: It is also good cold.)

NPC1: Wszyscy mówią, że czegoś brakuje w daniach. (ENG: Everyone says there is something missing in the dishes.)

PC2: Mało co – Mało co jest dobre na zimno. (...) To jest dobre na zimno, więc nie wiem czego może brakować. (ENG: Hardly – hardly anything is good cold. (...) This is good cold, so I don't know what could be missing.)

NPC1: **Serca? Niektórzy by tak stwierdzili.** (ENG: **Heart? Some would say so.**)

PC2: Uśmiechu z-? (ENG: A smile from-?)

DM: Siada za barem. (ENG: He sits behind the bar.)

PC2: **Uśmiechu może niektórym brakować. (...) Niektórzy o takie rzeczy dbają.**
(ENG: **Smile may be missing for some. (...) Some people care about such things.**)

Table 4. Variables marked in DU17.34

No. DU	17.34
Target person	None
Emotionality	Low
Place	Unknown and private
Actors	PC1, PC2, NPC1, NPC2
Expectancy	Planned; At the initiative of the player; Related to the main plot

In this case, there is a conflict of interests and feelings. The active actors, PC2 and NPC1, are experiencing dilemmas about each other. On the one hand, they need the other person to influence them in connection with

their own goal (to get into the group, to keep strangers out of the group), and on the other hand, they begin to feel fondness for each other. Thus, we can have an intertwining of goals from different frames, concerning the character's goal, the friend's sympathy, and the player's strategy.

5. Conclusions

Analyses of Discourse Units have shown that ambiguity is linked strongly to the diegetic frame that is brought to the fore. Situations played out in the secondary world are complex and give the player a sense of agency and the played character a sense of subjectivity. At the same time, it seems to involve a two-layered meaning of messages that are linked to felt emotions, sympathy, and goals—often resulting in a conflict between the private and professional spheres.

The more familiar the setting is to the character, not necessarily the player, the more emotional the scenes become. The same is true of the player's involvement in the plot. The emotions evoked by personal plots are greater than those elicited by the main storyline. Scenes triggered on the player's initiative, preferably spontaneously triggered, also lead to a higher degree of expressed emotion.

In conclusion, in order to increase immersion in the secondary world, the player should be allowed the freedom to choose the storylines that are important to them, to which it is good to add unexpected details and expectations of the NPCs themselves. In this way, the gaming experience mimics the real world to the extent of entertaining those at the table. The dilemmas, worries, naivety or violence of the characters add human elements to the game, important for increasing the emotional involvement in the gameplay.

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Studium przypadku: Wieloznaczność komunikatów podczas sesji TRPG w systemie *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstrakt: Spotkania grup grających w *Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (TRPG lub RPG) przebiegają w strukturze zbiorowo tworzonej narracji na trzech ramach sytuacji: społecznej, gry oraz diegetycznej. Komunikacja przebiega na każdej z nich, a wiadomości oraz emocje przenoszone są między nimi. Badanie skupia się na wieloznaczności jako strategii obranej dla realizacji więcej niż jednego celu. Zjawisko zostało przeanalizowane przez zastosowanie taksonomii *Discourse Units* (DUs). Przeanalizowano 30 scen, tworzących 4-godzinne spotkanie. Poprzez ilościową analizę zostały wyselekcjonowane fragmenty z największą liczbą celów przypisanych do pojedynczej jednostki. Następnie wieloznaczne fragmenty zinterpretowano jakościowo. Spośród 628 jednostek dyskursu wyłoniono 13 wykazujących wieloznaczność komunikatów.

Słowa kluczowe: dwuznaczność, Role-playing, RPGs, wspólnota językowa
