I. Administrative

A. Assignment Preview: Grice & Bach next week; I’ll keep loading readings after that; there will be another reading essay due in November after the long paper – this will concern ambiguity

B. Think long paper!

C. Questions about RE#1?

D. General Questions?

II. What is ambiguity?

A. Ambiguity is a term used to signal the presence of multiple meanings or interpretations.

1. Contrast this with polysemy, where multiple meanings are closely related in what is known as a “semantic field”

2. There is a relationship between ambiguity and homonymy

B. The term ‘ambiguity’ is itself ambiguous. It can mean:

1. The association of more than one meaning with a given term (viz., the ambiguous term) → here words are ambiguous

2. A term/sentence as used in a particular context is ambiguous just in case it is difficult to tell which of several meanings the term/sentence has in that context and so is misleading → here utterances or uses are ambiguous

C. Types of Ambiguity:

1. Semantic: a term, like ‘bank’ or ‘cardinal’, has more than one lexical meaning associated with it, and can give rise to sentential ambiguity for that reason. (E.g., “I keep my money in a bank.”) In a sentence, there can be multiple semantic ambiguities that contribute to an ambiguous whole: “Mary had a little lamb.”
2. **Syntactic**: a sentence is syntactically ambiguous if it is possible for the words in it to serve different structural purposes, giving rise to different meanings in the process. (E.g., “Flying planes can be dangerous.” “All students want a grade.”)

3. **Pragmatic**: some (e.g., Donnellan) have suggested that there is also pragmatic ambiguity, e.g., when an utterance implies different things to different listeners, depending on their relationship with the speaker, or in the case of referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions (e.g., “Smith’s murderer is insane”).

### III. Interacting with ambiguity

#### A. The fallacy of equivocation

1. This is committed when a person advances an argument that trades on an ambiguity. That is, an argument that contains the same word (or phrase) in two steps, but the word is intended in one sense one place and another sense in the other place.

2. These arguments will not be valid.

#### B. Ambiguity as technology

1. Ambiguity is a concept that can be understood descriptively – e.g., a word is ambiguous if it has two meanings or admits of two interpretations – but it can also be understood normatively, as implying a negative assessment of a conversational situation (“I didn’t really understand what he was saying – it seems ambiguous to me.”)

2. Although it is typically negatively valenced, ambiguity can also be used to positive ends in conversation
   
   a. Poets and other literary artists can use ambiguity to evoke a range of responses that enrich their works

   b. Ambiguity can protect someone in the context of conversation, giving them an out – *this may be good for the speaker, but may not be regarded as a good thing generally*

   c. Ambiguity can be used to get at differences of meaning, as
in Toolbox dialogues

C. The value of definitions

1. One way to resolve difficulties that arise because of vagueness or ambiguity is through the judicious use of definitions.

   a. It is important that the use be judicious—it is possible to use them so liberally that all interest in the argument is removed.

   b. By defining the terms in dispute, one can avoid unseemly equivocation.

2. Types of Definitions:

   a. Precising Definition: a definition of terms meant to draw precise lines so that vagueness is avoided (e.g., ‘city’/‘town’).

   b. Disambiguating Definition: this is a definition typically offered during the course of a conversation that is meant to indicate which of the possible meanings is intended by the speaker.

   c. Lexical Definition: a definition for terms supplied by dictionaries.

   d. Stipulative Definition: a definition supplied by someone who is introducing a new term, such as in technical discourse.

   e. Systematic Definition: a definition intended to give systematic order or structure with a theory or a subject matter (e.g., relational family terms).