



## From Babel to the UN: How Semantic Confusion Undermines Peace—and the Radical Power of Clarity

By Skyline

### DIALOGUE

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*Why can't we understand each other? Language divides when meaning drifts, and peace begins with clarity.*

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In Genesis, the people of Shinar came together to construct a great temple-tower (11: 1-9). By their hubris, they supposed they could, without the aid of God, build strong and high enough to reach Heaven. God, seeing their arrogance, cursed them. The previously perfect language which had passed from generation to generation became corrupted, and the Adamic tongue broke into the languages of the world. Misunderstanding and disunity scattered and divided the people from the incomplete ruins of their tower.

Since then, fallen men have had to communicate one with another through the words of fallen language.

Over the period of a decade or more, a couple of our organization's founders have traveled to another great tower--The United Nations in New York City--specifically to attend the Commission on the Status of Women, a global policy-making body dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowering women worldwide. In many ways, they observed and participated as the nations of the world engaged in and sought to legislate a tower that might reach the Heavens and bring peace to all the Earth. But too frequently, they observed how the very language one would use corrupted, and at times manipulated, any endeavor to bring about genuine equality or empowerment. The meaning and definition of words like *love*, *equality*, *family*, *gender*, *marriage*, *feminism*, (etc.) have been debated heatedly for hours at a time and from year to year. Such focused constructions of arrangements like *family* versus *the family* bore heavy consequences and connotations in the implementation of their practice. Each word means vastly different things to each attendee.

After years of frustrated efforts, they coined the term *semantic ambiguity* as a method of explaining their frustration, only later to discover it as a majorly discussed phenomenon amongst linguists. *Semantic* (or *lexical*) *ambiguity* is a form of verbal polysemy.

Polysemy – when something has the capacity to have many meanings.

Poly – Many

Semy – Meanings

Some words are literally polysemantic. Words like *light*, *bank*, and *cool* each have multiple definitions. In addition, words' connotations and concepts can vary significantly depending on an individual's personal understanding or experience. Phrases and words like *mental health*, *spiritual*, and *politics*, or concepts like *right and wrong*, *faith and science*, or *race and equity* are all examples of words and concepts that may have very different meanings based on the context of the conversation and someone's life experiences. And polysemy is not isolated to words but could include any kind of symbol; like flags, social groups, and even fashion.

*Semantic ambiguity* is the frustrating experience when the appropriate interpretation of a word is unclear. This month's video from [TheFamilyProclamation.org](https://www.thefamilyproclamation.org/)'s *Peacemaking Series* discusses this topic.

In [the video](#) we see a playful analogy for when an innocently introduced idea turns into a squirrely conversation of a highly debated topic. Perhaps it's an uncomfortably relatable scenario, and semantic ambiguity doesn't only relate to situations mentioned in the video, like politics, religion, and culture. It happens quite often, even when a parent or spouse asks, "Will you hand me that 'thing'?" To which it seems the only useful response is, "What 'thing'?"

In an argument, it is important to start with controlling internal motivations and emotions before implementing external tactics. This is our fourth article and video for helping people peacefully resolve arguments, and you can see the other articles [here](#). One of the easiest places to start resolving an argument is by asking one clarifying question. Clarifying questions can do more than explore circumstantial details for the context of the conflict. Too often, we overlook the words others are using and incorrectly assume we know what they mean by them. In situations where a conflict seems to center around a specific set of words, concepts, or symbols, then it is very important to take time for clarity; 'unpack' the word—discover a mutual understanding of the user's intended meaning and the receiver's comprehension. In a best-case scenario, unpacking the word may resolve the perception of conflict anyway. In a worst-case scenario, clarity establishes a foundation for mutual understanding. Take the time to ask the question, "What do you mean by ...?"

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Like the scattered builders of Babel, we wrestle with the fractured nature of language, striving to construct meaning amidst semantic ambiguity. By our assumptions, words—the basic brick for building bridges to understanding—can just as easily become barriers, shaping or distorting the truths they seek to convey. In the pursuit of peace—whether in the halls of policy or the intimacy of daily conversation—clarity should not be assumed, but constructed. Seeking to understand before seeking to be understood builds something lasting: the foundation of unity for a tower to Heaven.

About the author

## Skyline

Skyline Research proudly hosts TheFamilyProclamation.org, a website dedicated to advancing the principles of The Family: A Proclamation to the World.