Analysis of Ambiguity

1. Semantic Ambiguity

Headline: Iraqi head seeks arms
Ambiguity type: Semantic.
Identification and explanation: "Head" can be interpreted as a noun meaning either chief or the anatomical head of a body. Likewise, "arms" can be interpreted as either weapons or body parts.

2. Lexical Ambiguity

Headline: Teacher strikes idle kids
Ambiguity type: Lexical (part of speech or category ambiguity).
Identification and explanation: "strikes" can occur as either a verb meaning to hit or a noun meaning a refusal to work. Meantime, "idle" can occur as either a verb or an adjective.

3. Structural Ambiguity

Headline: Stolen painting found by tree
Ambiguity type: Structural.
Identification and explanation: The headline can be understood as:
(1) A tree found a stolen painting.
(2) A person found a stolen painting near a tree.

Syntactic ambiguity means having more than one meaning because there is more than one way to interpret the grammatical structure. This can happen even when it is clear what the meanings of the individual words are. Consider the sentence "we shall be discussing violence on TV." It might mean the discussion will be conducted during a television program, or it might mean violence on TV is the topic to be discussed.

4. Anaphoric ambiguity

A phrase or word refers to something previously mentioned, but there is more than one possibility.

"Margaret invited Susan for a visit, and she gave her a good lunch."

"Harry scratched his head, and so did Mike."
Practice - Identify the type of ambiguities in the sentences below:

1. The chickens are too hot to eat.  
   **Semantic ambiguity:** ‘Hot’ may mean ‘spicy’ or ‘contains too much heat’

2. Eye drops off shelf (Headlines)  
   **Lexical ambiguity:** Two possible interpretations - ‘eyedrops’ refers to the cleansing liquid used to relieve eyes, in this case, the sentence means the items have been taken off the market; ‘drops’ refer to the verb to fall from certain height; here it means an eye ball has dropped off a shelf.

3. Reagan wins on budget, but more lies ahead (Headlines)  
   **Lexical ambiguity:** ‘lies ahead’ (verb) could mean anticipated in the future; here means more news is anticipated in the future. ‘lies’ could also mean deception (noun), which means that there will be more false news/announcement, etc. in the future

4. Automatic washing machines: “Please remove all your clothes when the light goes out”  
   **Semantic ambiguity:** ‘clothes’ may refer to the clothes that are being washed in the washing machine or the clothes worn by the person who does the laundry.

5. HONG KONG TAILOR: Ladies may have a fit upstairs.  
   **Semantic ambiguity:** ‘fit’ may mean refer to the act of fitting clothes (considering that the sign is from a tailor shop). It may also mean to have a convulsion or an acute attack of epilepsy

6. Safety experts say school bus passengers should be belted.  
   **Lexical ambiguity:** belted has two interpretations: 'hit with a belt' or 'secured with a (seat) belt'

7. Drunk gets nine months in violin case  
   **Lexical ambiguity:** case has two interpretations: 'container' or 'court-case' (lexical ambiguity)

8. The old men and women left the room.  
   **Structural ambiguity:** the adjective ‘old’ can be either modifying ‘men’ only or modifying both ‘men’ and ‘women’

   **Structural ambiguity:** Does ‘invisible’ modify ‘man’ or ‘man’s hat’?

10. He left her in tears.  
    **Structural ambiguity:** ‘in tears’ – Did the man leave the woman who was crying; or was the man crying when he left the woman?
More practice:

1. Bank drive-in window blocked by board
2. Dirty language lab
3. Hospitals are sued by 7 foot doctors
4. Dentist receives plaque
5. Some pieces of Rock Hudson sold at auction
6. Jill likes to wear red hats and gloves
8. Steals clock, faces time
9. I’m glad I’m a man, and so is Lola

Answer Key:

1. Semantic ambiguity: blocked by board: The executive board refused to allow the window or wood was put there to restrict access
2. Structural ambiguity: does dirty modify ‘language’ or ‘lab’?
3. Semantic ambiguity: 7 foot doctors: Seven doctors are suing the hospital or doctors who are 7 foot in height are suing the hospitals
4. Semantic ambiguity: plaque can mean an award or a deposit on teeth
5. Semantic ambiguity: of can mean ‘owned by’ or ‘part of’
6. Structural ambiguity: does red modify ‘hats’ only or both ‘hats and gloves’
7. Semantic ambiguity: make is ambiguous between ‘prepare and ‘constitute’
8. Semantic ambiguity: time can refer to progression measured by clocks or to a period spent in prison
9. Structural ambiguity: can mean "Lola and I are both glad I’m a man", or "I'm glad Lola and I are both men", or "I'm glad I'm a man, and Lola is also a man", or "I'm glad I'm a man, and Lola is also glad to be a man"