



Ambiguity : Worksheet

Class Activity with Worksheet (Source:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity/#OtheInteCase>)

For the students:

In *Metaphysics* $\Gamma 2$, Aristotle observed that some words can imply different things. He is interested in the case of 'being,' and he uses the example of health to show how 'being' can be ambiguous:

There are many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be', but all that 'is' is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to 'be' by a mere ambiguity. Everything which is healthy is related to health, one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it produces it, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it. (*Metaphysics* $\Gamma 2$)

Characteristic of Aristotle, this passage is difficult to understand, but the gist is this: A word in a sentence may give the sentence a different meaning depending on what it applied to. So, for example, 'healthy' ordinarily applies to things like people and plants, describing things that can be in good health. But it can also describe things that affect the health of a being that can be in good health. Working out is 'healthy' in this way. It is not in good health itself, but it enables you to be. Your weight may be 'healthy' neither because it can *be* in good health nor because it *affects* your health, but because it *signals* your state of health. All these uses of 'healthy' have different meanings.

Directions: Think of another word that, like 'healthy,' means different things in at least three different contexts. For each context, write a sentence demonstrating what that word means in that context. Then, for each sentence, think of a word that can replace the original word and more precisely convey the meaning of the sentence.

For the teacher:

Once students have done the above, have them pair up with a partner to do the following, in turns:

1. Share the word they have come up with and the different meanings it could have.
2. Share the word they have come up with to replace it in each context.



3. Discuss with their partner whether they think the replacement is more or less ambiguous than the original, come to an agreement, and defend their answer in a short explanation.
4. Have each pair share with the class what they came up with and allow other students to agree or disagree, explaining their reasoning for either response.