**Amphibologia**

Amphibologia is a figure of speech describing an ambiguity of expression where a word, phrase, or sentence can convey two or more meanings or interpretations, all of which are true. The meanings do not contradict each other, but layer one truth upon another, bringing a poetic richness to the biblical message.

Amphibologia is a transliteration of the ancient Greek word which is made up of three parts: *amphi* (“on both sides”), *bolos* (“a throw”), and *logos* (“a word”). Thus, amphibologia is a word, phrase, or sentence that is thrown to both sides.

When a word has two or more meanings in the original language, Bible translators must decide which meaning to bring out or emphasize in their translation. This dilemma is one of the many reasons that Bible versions differ. A Hebrew or Greek speaker, reading or listening in his or her native language, would instinctively recognize the amphibology, but a person without knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, reading an English translation, only sees one part of the picture and does not detect a double meaning, which usually has to be communicated in a commentary entry. There are many examples of amphibologia in the Bible. Here are some examples:

1. Genesis has the record of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2:25 says: “They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” Then, Genesis 3:1 says, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any animal of the field Yahweh God had made.” The word “naked” and the word “crafty” are the same word in the original Hebrew, and the Hebrew root word carries both meanings. In the uses in Genesis 2:26 and 3:1 the two different meanings—“naked” and “crafty”—are easily recognized and separated, but in Genesis 3:7 and 3:10 the Hebrew text combines both meanings because Adam and Eve recognized they were both “naked” and “crafty.”
2. The Hebrew word “satisfied” is *saba* (#07646 שָׂבַע) in Prov. 14:14, “The one who is disloyal in *his* heart will be satisfied from his *own* ways, but the good man *will be satisfied* from his deeds.” *Saba* refers to eating or drinking enough to be satisfied. However, it also has the negative meaning of eating to the point of being overfull and then getting sick or getting to the point that the food is revolting, and in that sense, it is used metaphorically for being repaid for what one has done. The context determines which meaning *saba* has, but in Proverbs 14:14, both meanings apply (also see commentary on Prov. 1:31).
3. Amphibologia often occurs in prophecies. Many prophecies have a fulfillment at the time the prophecy was spoken and a later fulfillment as well. Hosea 11:1 is a good example: “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.” Here in Hosea, the prophecy is referring to Israel’s exodus “out of Egypt.” However, this scripture was also fulfilled when Jesus’ parents took him “out of Egypt” and back to Nazareth (cf. Matt. 2:15). Both meanings are true and the figure of speech adds great richness to the text.
4. Ephesians 6:17 says, “and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Here, “the sword of the Spirit” has both the force of a genitive of possession, i.e., that it is “the Spirit’s sword” not our sword, and also the force of a genitive of origin, i.e., “the sword given to us by the Spirit,” to use in our present lives.
5. In Numbers 25:1, the children of Israel “began to prostitute themselves with the daughters of Moab.” In this context, “prostitute themselves” involves both physical prostitution, having sex with the women, and also spiritual prostitution because the Moabite women pulled the Israelites into the worship of their pagan gods.
6. The Greek verb *epechō* (#1907 ἐπέχω) in Philippians 2:16 means either “to hold forth” or “to hold fast.” God shows us with amphibologia that we shine to others when we hold fast to the truth, and we shine to others when we hold forth the truth.
7. Colossians 3:14 says, “And above all these things *put on* love, which is the bond of completeness.” The Greek word *sundesmos* (“bond”) that unites is also the bond that leads to completeness.

To see more uses of and commentary about figures of speech used in the Bible, use the [REV search tool](http://revisedenglishversion.com/search), and articles on figures of speech can also be found at: [stfi.org/tag/figures/](https://stfi.org/tag/figures/).

[For amphibologia, see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979. Originally published by Eyre and Spottiswoode: London, 1898), 804-06.]