

Original Research Article

## Ambiguity in Ghanaian Popular Music

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### Article History

Received: 08.05.2025

Accepted: 13.06.2025

Published: 16.06.2025

### Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

### Quick Response Code



**Abstract:** The study aimed at establishing the fact that ambiguity could serve as a communication device; and also the study was to discuss the role of ambiguity in performance of music. The study adopted descriptive and case study approaches of the qualitative research methods. Random and purposive sampling methods were used to sampled Eighty (80) respondents drawn from among Language teachers, Music teachers, Performing artistes as well as Popular music enthusiasts. Interview, questionnaire and observation were the research instruments employed in the study. It was revealed that, the use of ambiguity in music is a communicative phenomenon which seeks to inform, educate and entertain members in society. Besides, the use of ambiguity in music is to attract larger audience to show command over the use of language to create humour and also to give branding to the musicians. It was recommended that, ambiguity should be used to communicate pressing issues going on in Ghanaian society. Poets and musicians should craft their messages well enough in order to expose wrongdoings in Ghanaian society through the use of linguistic devices such as ambiguity and share with the larger audience.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Performer, Popular Music, Language, Communication.

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## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

There are many techniques that performing artistes use to carry their audience along. Some of these could be repetition, alliteration, assonance and ambiguity. All these styles of performance have the roles that they play for both the performer and the audience. Many artistes in Ghana use ambiguity so as to give them unique identity and also to show dexterity in the use of the language. In as much as a composer could intentionally decide to use ambiguity as a style of performance, It could equally be used unknowingly due to observance of rules pertaining to the use of language in music.

In performance of popular music for example, scholars have made it clear to believe that, its performance is flexible in nature as it makes use of improvisation and less formal rules compare to what happens in Art music. Because of the flexible nature of popular music, all sorts of literary devices are employed in its performance either intentionally or unintentionally.

Observation has shown that, many Ghanaian popular musicians play music with ambiguous lyrics.

Example is cited in Ghanaian Popular Musician the Late Ebony and Wendy Shay as asserted by Nkansah and Gyasi (2021). The music of these artistes is exposed to many interpretations by the audience. It is worth noting that, in creative writing, the best person to interpret his or her work is the composer or the performer. This is because; the intention of writing the work lies in the mind of the author.

According to Nkansah and Gyasi (2021), ambiguities are used in songs to add colour to the use of the language as well as to paint a visual picture of an idea that the writer wants to put out. They opine further that, sometimes, the writer could employ ambiguity just for the sake of creating humour. But for whichever reason the writer wants to use the ambiguity, it would communicate with the audience. And since there are not only one group of people in society, the ambiguities in the songs could give the opportunity for all classes of people in society to interpret the creative work in their own words.

No wonder! Popular music is widely accepted by many people in society since its performance is a bit flexible (Ndah 2018). As a result of this phenomenon, all

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kinds of styles are employed so as to attract the attention of the audience.

The researchers are therefore of the conviction that, ambiguity in popular music is not bad since it plays a role of attracting the attention of the audience. An assertion that has been confirmed by Nkansah *et al.*, (2021).

### Statement of Problem

Language could be expressed in many forms to communicate with an audience. Poems and songs are some of verbal means through which messages are communicated to the general public.

Users of language could manipulate the words of a language during communication to show dexterity in the use of the language or to display high sense of maturity in the use of the language.

Ambiguity is one of such language devices that a composer could employ either intentionally or unintentionally to show off in the use of language in communication.

Some scholars conducted study into the use of ambiguity as a language device. Writers such as Nkansah *et al.*, (2021) wrote on ambiguity in songs of some Ghanaian artiste; however, much has not been done on exploring the role of ambiguity in songs of popular musicians in Ghana, and also ambiguity as a language device has not been extensively worked on by many scholars. It is in view of this that this study is done to explore the use of ambiguity as a language / communication device as well as discussing the role of ambiguity in popular music performance in Ghana.

### Objectives of the Study

1. Discuss ambiguity as a language device in composition of music.
2. Explore the roles of ambiguity in performance of popular music in Ghana

### Research Questions

1. To what extent is ambiguity observed as a language / communication device in music composition in Ghana?
2. What are the roles of ambiguity in popular music in Ghana?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Concept of Ambiguity

Ambiguity, according to Oluga (nd) occurs when a message is not easily comprehensible to the audience. He adds that, ambiguity mostly occurs when the message being communicated lacks semantic clarity. He opines that, when the message is not clearly stated, it leads to a phenomenon known as semantic confusion. He therefore advises the communicators to be so clear with

their content whenever they are communicating so as to avoid ambiguity in the interpretation.

Mcdonald *et al.*, (2004) share that; music is equally a universal language that communicates with the writer and the listener or the audience. They opine that, music thrives in social and political contexts. They therefore explains that, when the listener interprets music with his or her own lenses depending on the context in which the music is done, then that results to an ambiguity where the listener has to decode the music by how he / she understand it.

Gillion (1990) explains that, ambiguity occurs when one interprets a message in different ways either connotatively, denotatively and cognitively. He therefore summarizes that, an expression becomes ambiguous when many meanings could be attributed to it or an expression becomes an ambiguous when it can accommodate more than one structural analysis.

According to Wasaw *et al.*, (nd), an expression is ambiguous if it has two or more distinct denotation. It could therefore be deduced from the authorities above that, ambiguity occurs when an expression has the tendency of giving many meaning to the receiver or the listener.

### Linguistic Devices in Performing Arts

Many techniques are available for the Performing artiste to use to link up with his or her audience. According to Ndah (2022), one of the linguistic features that could be employed on stage is repetition. He opines that repetition on stage could be for emphasis. He adds that if there is a special message that the performer wants the audience to assimilate, repetition is a technique used to drum home that message whilst on stage. He therefore cautions that, when there is performance in a form of singing or spoken words, repetitive verses or lines should be perform to depict the effect of repetition to fully portray the emphatic effects.

According to Macauley and Eman (2020), among the people of Nigeria, performers resort to linguistic devices to keep their audience glue to their seats. They explain some of the devices as language fragments; which they describes as clauses that are hung or are independent to communicate complete though. They state that this is one of the devices that is used by especially the comedian to entertain their audience.

They add further that code switching could be equally employed to communicate with the audience on stage. An assertion that confirms that of Amuah and Wuaku (2021). They identify another device as language alternation. This they refer to as mixing of languages within the same discourse. They equally identify Nigeria pidgin language as another device that is used by performers on stage to educate and entertain the audience.

**Ambiguity as a Communication Device in Music**

Ambiguity could expose an expression to many interpretations; but for musicians, music is an act which is full of creativity. So it could be intentionally or unintentionally employed in performance of music.

Nkansah and Gyasi (2021) share that, writers use ambiguity in their creative works for the reasons best known to them. They cite an example of some Ghanaian popular musicians as Ebony reigns and Wendy Shay whose music was produced by Ruff town records and they discuss that, they exposed many of their songs for the listeners to interpret individually. They opine that, those ambiguities were left in their works to attract audience to their works.

They opine further that, the style in which one decides to write depends on him or her. So for the two artistes that were studied, it was their style to use ambiguity to woo their audience.

Oluga (nd) also explains that, writers sometimes want to expose some hidden issues in society and therefore employ the ambiguity as a device to bring out those secrets in humorous manner.

**Roles of Ambiguity in Popular Music in Ghana**

What is regarded as a taboo and cannot be verbally expressed is easily expressed in songs. This assertion is according to Brewu (2009). The statement is meant to explain that, for a musician, there is no limitation to what could be verbally expressed on stage. This could equally mean that, music performance could use many varied means to express his or her thoughts on stage; and ambiguity is no exception.

According to Nkansah *et al.*, (2021), ambiguity could be used as a compositional device to put a message across euphemistically. They opine that, ambiguity as a device could equally be employed to create a sense of humour. They share further that, ambiguity could be used in performing arts to ridicule wrongdoings in society. They gave an example of how highlife music was used by the Convention People Party by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana during the struggle for independence. These authorities further state that, the ultimate purpose of ambiguity in the performing arts is to attract the attention of the listeners; and as well, it serves as a style of performance. As well, the use of ambiguity in songs and other performing arts shows how the authors have command over the use of the language.

Pantadosia *et al.*, (2012) states that, ambiguity allows for effective comprehension when when speakers

and listeners have different prior distributions on meaning. They share that, ambiguity gives a sense of reasoning as the listeners have to reason to interpret an expression in many understandings. They continue that, ambiguity allows for efficient use of linguistic units to be preferentially re- used.

Ferguson and Bell (2008) opine as well that, ambiguity serves as a strategy to bring out creativity in music. They collaborate that, once an expression has been coded or exposed to two or more interpretations, it shows how language could be used creatively to communicate with the audience.

Deducing from the assertions of the authorities above, it could be inferred that, ambiguity as a compositional and performance device serves as an expression either idiomatic or figuratively showing how good language could be effectively used to communicate to attract the attention of the audience.

**Compositional Devices in Music**

Before a musician writes or performs a musical piece, there are many of devices which the composers could use intentionally to communicate their thoughts. Ndah (2017) states that, some of such devices are repetition, rhythmic imitation, sequence and modulation. He opines that, all these elements help to attract the attention of the audience. In addition, he explains, the devices help to embellish the language and also to bring in creativity in music. He further shares that, a music that is much loaded with many compositional devices certainly appeals to the senses of the audience than the one without any decoration.

It can therefore be said on authority that, when composers use any compositional devices such as ambiguity, the aim is to attract the attention of the audience as well as to show command of the language.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted qualitative as a paradigm. However, mixed methods approach was used to present holistic findings. Descriptive technique was as well used to discuss the findings of the study.

**Population of the Study**

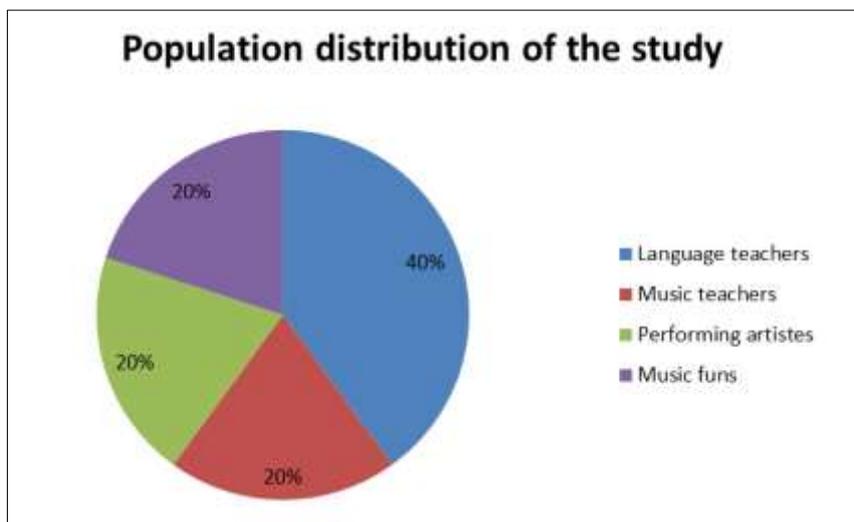
The target population consisted of some English and Ghanaian language teachers, Music teachers, some popular music artistes and some music fans in Ghana. The breakdown of the population is seen on table below:

**Table 1: Population distribution of the study**

Target Category	Accessible Category
Language teachers	32
Music teachers	16
Performing artistes	16

Music enthusiasts	16
<b>Total Population for the study</b>	<b>80</b>

The representation above could equally be view in a pictorial form below:



**Sampling Technique**

Music teachers were sampled at random from across all the sixteen regions in Ghana; sampling one respondent from each of the regions bringing the total respondents in this category to 16.

Sixteen (16) English and Ghanaian Language teachers were as well sampled at random from all the 16 regions of Ghana.

Sixteen (16) popular music artistes were also sampled using purposive sampling technique from across all the 16 regions in the country; picking one artiste from each region.

Some music lovers who are so enthusiastic in popular music were equally sampled purposively. Sixteen (16) in all from all the sixteen regions in Ghana, bringing the total number of the population for the study to Eighty (80).

**Research Tools**

Interview, Questionnaire as well as observation were used to collect data for the study. Music teachers as well as Language teachers responded to a questionnaire containing both close and open ended items. The performing artistes and the music enthusiasts were however interviewed with the help of an interview guide.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Scientist (SPSS) computer software,

whilst the responses from the interview were coded, transcribed and manually tallied and conclusions drawn.

The observation of the researchers from perspectives of music and language were also brought to fore and judgment passed accordingly.

**RESULTS FROM DATA**

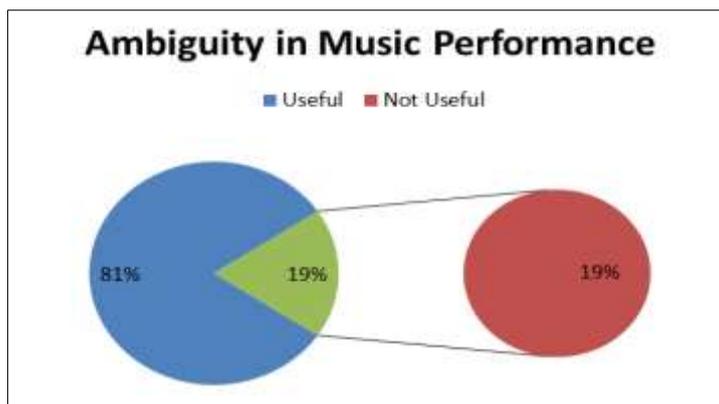
The total population for the study stood at 80 respondents; drawn from five (5) target population category.

**Responses from the Language Category are Herein Discussed:**

16 teachers representing all the regions in Ghana were sampled for this category. They responded to nine (items) on the questionnaire. Asked whether music performance is relevant in Ghanaian society, all of them (100 %) unanimously agreed that music forms part of Ghanaian culture.

On whether the choice of words in music influence society, 11 of them representing 68 % answered YES; whilst the remaining 31 % answered NO.

In responding to whether the use of ambiguity is useful in performance of music, 13 of them thus 81 % responded that, it is useful while the rest of the respondents (18 %) answered in negative. This is graphically represented on pie chart below:



In stating some of the use of ambiguity in music, 50 % of them mention that, it is use to embellish the language, it is used to create fun and it is also used to attract the attention of the audience. The remaining also stated that, the use of ambiguity is to linguistically polish some of the words that are considered taboos in

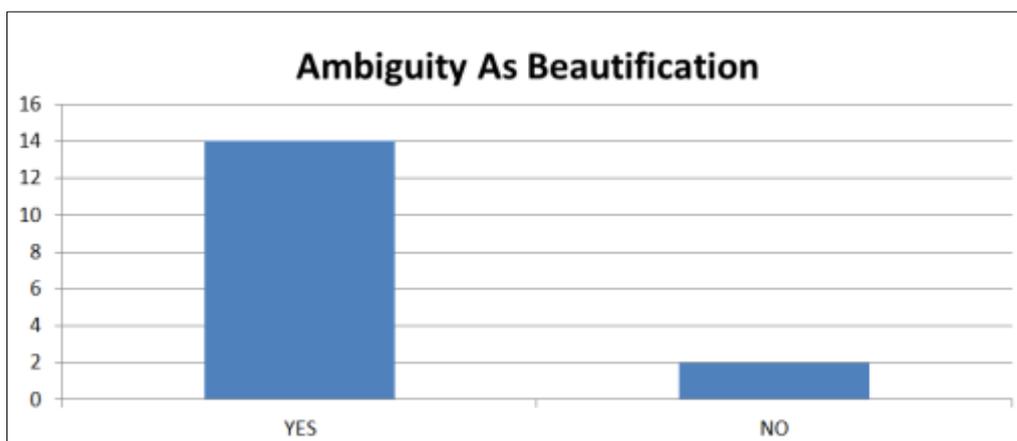
Ghanaian and also ambiguity is used to give brand to some musicians.

They were asked whether the use of ambiguity in music communicates a message, 15 of them representing 93 % agreed to YES, and the rest of the 6 % responded to NO. This response is as well represented on a pie chart below:



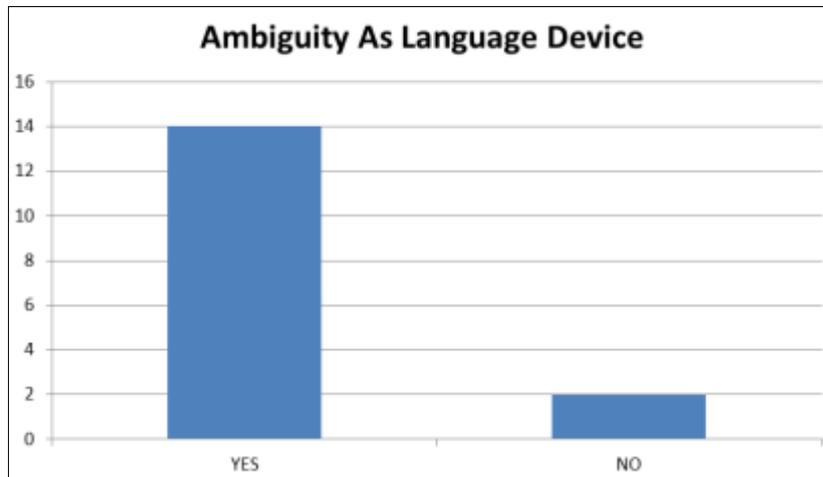
On whether the use of ambiguity adds beauty to the style of performance of songs, 14 of the respondents (87 %) responded to YES while the rest (18 %) answered

NO. This response is further illustrated on histogram below:



On whether ambiguity should be treated as a communication or language device, 14 of them translating into 87 % responded to YES. While the

remaining 18 % went for No as an answer. These responses are also represented graphically below:



As to whether the use of ambiguity attracts an audience, 15 of the respondents (93 %) stated YES while the rest stated NO.

Asked whether they would advocate for the use of ambiguity in music, 50 % of the respondents answered to YES, while 30 % chose NO; with 20 % abstaining from that item.

**Music Teachers Views are Equally Expressed Below:**

Sixteen (16) of them were sampled from all the 16 regions of Ghana. They responded to the same items that the language teachers responded to:

On the relevance of music to Ghanaian society, they unanimously stated that music permeates everyday life activities of Ghanaian and therefore society cannot do without music.

On whether the choice of words in music influence society, 15 of them representing 93 % stated that, YES, they do influence society while the rest of the respondents stated NO; with the explanation that, it is not only the words but non- verbal forms such as dance, movement and gestures as well send out meaning hence influence society.

Asked whether the use of ambiguity is useful in performance of music, 14 of this category (87 %) agreed that ambiguities are literary devices that could be employed in the composition and performance of music. The remaining 12.5 % disagree that ambiguity could mislead the audience.

On the use of ambiguity in music performance, 12 out of the respondents in this category (75 %) stated that, it is use to create humour, it is used to add creativity and to express euphemism. The rest (25 %) also shared that, ambiguity is used to satirize wrongdoing in society;

it is used to express good use of language, and also used to attract the attention of the audience.

As to whether ambiguity communicates a message to the audience, 13 of them thus 81 % answered YES whilst 3 of them representing 18.7 % answered NO, with the explanation that, since the meanings are more than one, it could lead the audience into confusion.

On whether ambiguity adds colour to music performance, 81 % again responded to YES, and 18 % stated NO.

Whether ambiguity could be regarded as communication device, 93 % agreed to YES while the remaining thought otherwise.

“Does the use of ambiguity attract audience “?”  
15 out of the respondents in this category again responded to YES, and the rest 12.5 % answered to NO.

As to whether they would advocate for the use of ambiguity in songs, 11 of them (68 %) responded to YES whilst the rest 5 thus (31 %) responded to NO.

**Interview Results from the 16 Performing Artistes**

Views of the Performing artistes are equally discussed below:

All of them unanimously stated that, music is very relevant to Ghanaian society. They gave some of the reasons as that, in all life cycle events of Ghanaian, music is involved. And also during worship, music is highly needed.

On what style they employ in their music, 10 of them (62 %) stated that, they use rhyming schemes, repetitions, spoken words. Others as well stated that, they use proverbs, satire and ambiguities.

All the artistes agreed that, choice of words in their music is very necessary. They cited some of the reasons as the words communicate directly with the audience. In addition, the choice give unique identity to the performer and also the words help to bring out creativity in the music.

On why ambiguity should be accepted as a performance device, 11 of them stated that, it adds to creativity, it creates sense of humour and draws the attention of the audience. The remaining respondents also identified that, it carves a niche for the performer, it shows good command of the language, it helps to freely bring out such words that are considered taboos in society.

As to whether they would advocate for the use of ambiguity in music performance always, 7 of them (43 %) stated NO, whilst the rest (56 %) responded YES.

It could therefore be deduced that, a sizeable of the population are comfortable with the use of ambiguities in the performance of music in Ghana.

#### **Responses of the Popular Music Funs**

Sixteen popular music lovers (funs) also responded to the questionnaire and their opinion are expressed as follows:

On their thoughts on the relevance of music to Ghanaian society, they have all agreed that, music is very much relevant to the life of every Ghanaian.

In reacting to whether the choice of words in music influence society, 10 of them (62 %) agreed that, Yes, the words have much influence on society. The remaining 37 % answered No, with the explanation that musical influence on society do not necessary depend on the words but the sounds and the tone colour of the music.

In response to whether the use of ambiguity is useful in performance of music, 11 of them representing 68 % answered to YES, while 31 % responded to NO.

On the use of ambiguity in songs, 10 respondents thus 62 % expressed that, ambiguity helps to add beauty to the music; it helps to make the music popular in society. The rest of the population in this category equally stated that, ambiguity creates humour in music, it shows how dexterity a performer is over the use of language in music, and also, it helps to re package such words that are considered taboo in their natural usage in society.

On whether the use of ambiguity in songs communicates a message, 15 of them thus 93 % agreed to YES, 6 % of them also believe that, ambiguity do not send out any message but rather ends up misleading society.

Ninety three (93 %) as well believe that, ambiguity adds beauty to the style of performance whilst the rest of the population thought that ambiguity in songs are just brought in to cause linguistic error and confusion.

The same 93 % agreed that ambiguities are linguistic and communicative devices that musicians use to attract the attention of the audience. The remaining respondents maintain that, ambiguities are used by musicians to fool society.

It could therefore be said that, majority of the respondents in this category believe that, ambiguity in music is a style to bring in creativity, humour, as well as to attract the attention of audience.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

The study revealed that, the use of ambiguity in performance of music is relevant; this is because it is used as a language or communication device to re package certain words in society which other words are regarded as taboo and for that matter could not be openly expressed.

It came out that, the use of ambiguity in popular music performance helps to add creativity to the music. Since music making is a creative phenomenon, writers and performers bring in ambiguities to add to the creative effects of music.

Furthermore, the use of the ambiguity in music is done to attract the audience. Once a creative piece is exposed to many interpretations; it becomes an object of attraction.

The study made it clear that, ambiguity is used to package certain words in society that by culture and convention are tagged as forbidden hence should not be verbally expressed. Once such words are crafted under the umbrella of ambiguity, they could be easily expressed without fear. (This assertion has confirmed the study of Brewu 2009).

Furthermore, ambiguity is used to identify a particular artiste. Many performing artistes associate with ambiguity and other style of performance which they sign on to as a brand.

Ambiguity is used to add to variation in performance. Once there are such variations, the music reaches out to a larger audience.

The study made it clear that, the use of ambiguity in songs help to create awareness of certain things or issues that go on in society.

Ambiguity as well helps society or the audience to internalize some themes that arise from their socio cultural settings. The use of ambiguity in music helps to

create humour; and also arouse sense of joy which is good for emotional development of members in society.

The study equally revealed that, the use of ambiguity in performing arts helps to express the good use of language in society. It came out that, language could be expressed idiomatically, figuratively, proverbially and any other forms; and when language is used in those forms, it shows how effective language has been used.

Ambiguity is as well used as a device to create sense of uncertainty and surprise among the listeners.

The findings of the study have therefore confirmed the assertion of earlier authorities cited in this study such as Oluga (nd), Nkansah and Gyasi (2021), Ferguson and Bell (2008) who shared that the use of ambiguity in songs serves as a linguistic device that is used to embellish the use of language and also that ambiguity in music helps to create humour among the audience, helps to bring out creativity in music as well as help to create awareness of issues that go on in society.

## CONCLUSION

The paper proved ambiguity as a communicative device that music composers or performers could use to educate, inform and entertain society.

Ambiguity could be used in music to arouse sense of humour. In addition, it could be employed to show dexterity over the use of language.

Ambiguity as a device could be also used to give unique identity to music performers. The device could be used as well in songs to re package some words that are forbidden to be pronounce verbally in Ghanaian society.

Also, ambiguity could be used in music to attract a larger audience since the words in the music could create suspense and uncertainties.

## Recommendations

1. Ambiguity as a linguistic device should be employed by popular musicians to communicate the pressing issues going on in Ghanaian Society.
2. Poets should be encouraged to craft wrongdoings in Ghanaian societies through the

use of ambiguity and share with the larger audience.

3. Language and music teachers should properly teach students how to properly use ambiguity as a compositional as well as communicative device.
4. Literature in English language teachers should explore creative and innovative ways through which ambiguity should taught in schools so that students could find better ways it could be used to disseminate information in Ghanaian societies.

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**Cite This Article:** Selorm Divine Ndah, Faith Mawunyo Adom, Jessica Amoah, Bright Essel (2025). Ambiguity in Ghanaian Popular Music. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 8(6), 191-198.

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