

## **LESSON FOURTEEN**

### **Other Sources of Structural Ambiguity**

#### **Confusion of Grammatical Form/Function**

##### **◆ Homorganic Forms**

Homorganic words are a clear source of such confusion. But it would not be a confusion of grammatical form. It would affect the clause as a whole. Since sentence meaning is realized not in the word but in the sentence or clause, ambiguity really does not concern the confusion of class/form in itself, but rather the confusion of grammatical form. Word meanings and the patterns of relationships and role in a sentence determine sentence meaning. Thus, as soon as any of the words changes its class, it affects its role, and the totality of the roles and relationships in the sentence. And since these roles and relationships are so important in sentence meaning, their change or confusion would result in change or confusion in the meaning of the sentence.

For e.g.

**The boys grew fast**

**Fast** can be an **adjective** or an **adverb**

The sentence can be represented as:

Is the clause structure

S                      V                      A (adverb)

	The kids	grew	fast
Or	S	V	C(complement – adjective)
	The kids	grew	fast?

If the interpretation is based on SVA, it means the A just describes the manner of growth- it took a short time for them to grow into maturity etc. if it is SVC, it means the kids became fast. Grew, thus, is used as a linking verb and fast- an adjective complement would refer back to the kids- meaning the kids became fast. The confusion in sum is whether it was the growing which was fast or the kids who became fast.

#### ◆ Object Complements and Direct Objects

Another ambiguity arises in the confusion between **object complements** and **direct objects**. This confusion of grammatical function also brings about confusion between two clause patterns-**SVOO** or **SVOC**-and two possible interpretations:

For e.g.

**Janet, call Eve Mum.**

It means

(Janet)	call	Mum (for)	Eve.
(S)	V	O (direct)	O (indirect)
(Janet)	call	Eve (with the name)	Mum.
(S)	V	O	C

In the **SVOO** structure, **Mum** and **Eve** refer to different entities. **Eve** only benefits from the calling of **Mum**. In the **SVOC**, on the other hand, **Eve** is the same person called or to be called **Mum**.

◆ **Appositives and Complements**

A further confusion may arise whether to consider a noun phrase as appositive or as object complement – giving confusion between the SVO and SVOC clause patterns:

For e.g.

**Cecilia called Doreen her cousin**

If we consider her cousin as noun in appositive, the structure is:

<b>Cecilia</b>	<b>called</b>	<b>Doreen (her cousin)</b>
<b>S</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>O</b>

Appositives help their nouns-(**heads**) to perform grammatical or syntactic roles. They don't constitute independent clause elements. The interpretation here is

**Cecilia called Doreen who is her cousin**

If we consider it as an **SVOC** pattern, then the interpretation is

**Cecilia called Doreen using the vocative, her cousin**

◆ **Confusion of Grammatical Form**

For e.g. We can have a sentence like this:

**Flying aeroplanes can be dangerous**

The confusion occurs because we are not sure whether to consider **flying aeroplanes (aeroplanes that fly)** as an ordinary noun phrase (**Adj. + noun**) or as a gerundial clause **flying aeroplanes (the act of flying aeroplanes-pilot) (verb + object)**. If the interpretation is that it is an ordinary noun phrase, we will have:

<b>Flying</b>	<b>aeroplanes</b>
(Adjective)	(noun)

Then the noun-head-aeroplanes, is most important and the skeletal meaning is that aeroplanes (the flying ones) can be dangerous. On the other hand, if it is taken to be a gerund, we will have:

Flying	aeroplanes
Verb	object (noun)

Then engaging in the act of flying (not boarding, riding, washing nor watching) aeroplanes is dangerous. So is it flying, or is it the aeroplanes which can be dangerous?

The ambiguity would have been prevented if a conjugable form (BE) and not the modal CAN were used as in:

**Flying aeroplanes is dangerous.**

And the ambiguity would not arise.

◆ **Elliptical constructions**

Elliptical constructions are not incomplete. They are held to be complete in the deep structure, only that some aspects which are considered redundant are taken away in the surface realization. We construct meaning (or rather the full meaning) of the elliptical constructions by retrieving all these ellipted elements. But we need to be sure about what to bring back into the interpretation of the construction. When in interpreting elliptical construction we are confused as to what has been ellipted, or what is to be retrieved, ambiguity arises. This is because the retrieval of one thing or another would result in different interpretations of the construction.

For e.g., in the case of

**Tall boys and girls**

We were confused as to whether there has been ellipsis or not. If there has been, then we interpret it as

**Tall boys and tall girls**

Another example of an elliptical sentence can be:

**I bought and ate oranges and Kwesi pineapples.**

Are we to retrieve ‘bought and ate’, only ‘bought’ or only ‘ate’? Thus, “Kwesi pineapples can be interpreted as

and Kwesi **bought** and ate pineapples

and Kwesi **bought** pineapples

and Kwesi **ate** pineapples.

The problem of ambiguity with elliptical constructions may also involve where to put what has been retrieved.

For e.g.

**My competitors are not my enemies but my friends**

This can be interpreted in two ways, depending on what we are retrieving and where we are placing it:

- ❖ **My competitors are not my enemies, but my friends are my enemies.**
- ❖ **My competitors are not my enemies, but (they) are my friends.**

Another example can be this famous statement of the British newspaper editor that goes like this:

**The law is not an ass but the House of Lords**

This is interpreted in two different ways depending on what we consider as the ellipited elements, and where we would place them as we interpret the sentence:

**The law is not an ass but the House of Lords (is)**

Or

**The law is not an ass but (it is) the House of Lords.**

◆ **Confusion of Intonation and punctuation**

Intonation, stress and punctuation in themselves do not carry any specific meaning, but they direct how a sentence should be read and interpreted. Our concern is on a situation where in writing/reading, one form of intonation or the other is perceived. In writing,

**I drove him home.**

Could be ambiguous – except we are bailed out by the context. This is because the placement of sentence stress on different words, as in the bolded words below, will result in different interpretations:

**I** drove him home. (not any other person but me)

I **drove** him home. (not carry, nor pull, nor fly him home)

I drove **him** home. (him not any other person home)

I drove him **home**. (not to the park, stadium nor market, but home)

Which of the interpretations are we to take and which ones are to leave?

Ambiguity as arising from punctuation occurs generally with sign or notice writing where punctuation is usually discouraged. One is, thus, expected to interpret a notice with one's own perceived punctuation. It is important to observe that the confusion of punctuation generates ambiguity not by the punctuation itself. On the other hand, each

placement of punctuation is associated with some corresponding syntactic roles and relationships, which as we know is indispensable in the interpretation of the sentence. The sentence below on a signboard:

**Stop men at work**

May be punctuated by the reader as

**(a) STOP, MEN AT WORK.**

**(b) STOP MEN AT WORK.**

(A) will be taking as a full imperative form with the clause structure

S	V	O
<del>You</del>	stop	men (at work).

**i.e. stop the men who are at work**

(A) is further ambiguous. Is 'men at work' to be considered the subject as in 'Rise up, O men of God' in which the men of God are to rise up; or is it considered as an adverbial clause of circumstance which provides the circumstances within which the order STOP is given? – 'STOP, for there are men at work'?

So (a) alone means:

- ❖ **You men at work, stop**
- ❖ **Stop, for there are men at work.**

What about

**Reduce speed children crossing?**

Is it to be interpreted as:

- ❖ **Reduce speed for children crossing?**
- ❖ **Reduce speed, you children crossing?**