

## **LESSON THIRTEEN**

### **STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY**

Structural ambiguity is also referred to as *syntactic* ambiguity or **grammatical** ambiguity.

Structural or syntactic ambiguity, occurs when a phrase, clause or sentence can be given two or more different interpretations as a result of the arrangement of words or lexical units. It is useful to recognize that syntactic ambiguity does not result from just the ordering of the words in the ambiguous structure. Rather, it results from the multiplicity or confusion of grammatical roles and relationships. By role, we are referring to grammatical functions such as **subject, object complement, object complement, indirect object, adjunct, and modifier.**

When we identify the role of the structure concerned, it is important also to identify the various relationships that exist in the structure. For instance, we need to know what preposition or verb, a noun is related to. Similarly, we must establish the particular noun which a modifier actually modifies. Consideration of the question of relationship also makes us realize that in spite of the shuffling of units, one word may be related not to that nearest to it but to another elsewhere.

For e.g.

#### **Mangoes Adah stole**

We know that '**mangoes**' is not related to **Jessie** as perhaps a modifier but related to **buys** as its object.

Also, **always** is not related to the subject **we**, but to the verb **travel** to which it functions as adverb of frequency

### **Always we travel**

To determine relationship and roles, we divide a phrase, clause or sentence up into its various grammatical parts, and we assemble the words (semantically) according to where they place. For instance, we divide a clause up into **subject; object, complement, verb as applicable, or into subject and predicate**. Again, we see the **object, subject or complement** which is a noun phrase into its modifier and head, as applicable. Ordering is usually a clue to such arrangements and how a structure is constituted. However, inversion, topicalisation, and insertion etc can each disturb the ordinary fluidity we associate with the ordering of words in a sentences, clause or phrase.

Before we discuss the different realizations of structural ambiguity, we need to state that whereas ambiguity as a semantic theory is applicable to all languages, the nature of the way in which lexical and structural ambiguity is realized is peculiar to each language. Thus, what structurally would be ambiguous in one language would not be ambiguous in one languages would not be in another. Our discussions below are based on syntactic ambiguity as they occur in English with a few illustrations in other languages.

## **SOURCES OF STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY**

### **Ambiguity through modification.**

#### **➤ Span of modification**

Ambiguity may arise in the noun phrase because there is confusion about the span of the application of a modifier. This occurs when we have compound nouns. The confusion is whether the adjective affects both or only one, and it occurs when the modifier comes before the two nouns:

**Joana met tall boys and girls**

Are we talking about **boys** and **girls** who are tall or **only** boys who are tall – with the height of the girls not specified? The ambiguity results in the two possible interpretations as indicated above:

**Joana met boys and girls who are tall.**

This statement is also ambiguous. It can then be interpreted as

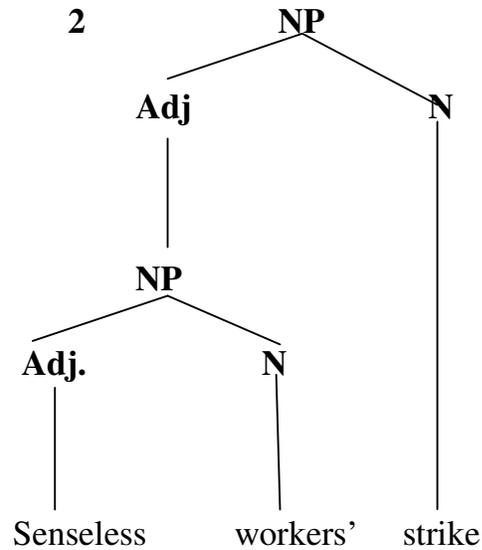
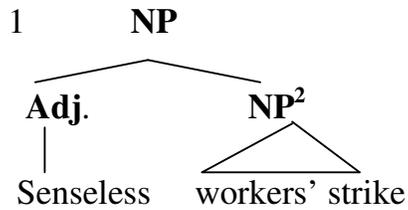
- **Joana met both boys and girls are tall**
- **Joana met only girls are tall?**

➤ **Confusion of Head (Intrinsic & Possessive)**

Here, we are looking at an ambiguity that occurs as a result of the confusion of the head itself –that is where one of it must be selected. It occurs where there are two modifiers – one an **intrinsic adjective**, and the other a **possessive adjective**. The question is whether the adjective modifies this possessive or the noun-head which the possessive modifies:

Ata pulled out the **senseless workers' strike**.

It is the **workers** who are **senseless** or is it the **strike** (worker's strike) which is **senseless?** These can be done on tree diagrams as:



These different interpretations can be derived from the construction, and as such render the construction ambiguous.

Other examples include:

**Beautiful girls' hostels**

- Whether it is the **girls'** or **hostels** which are **beautiful**

**Beautiful hostels for girls**

Or

**Hostels for beautiful girls**

➤ **Adjective and Noun-Adjectival**

Sometimes we see some constructions and think they are not ambiguous because of the understanding we carry even before we encounter.

However, such constructions are actually ambiguous.

For e.g.

- New English Textbook

- Practical English Course
- Modern Physical Lessons.

Here also, the confusion of head is apparent, unless it is taken for granted:

- it is a *Textbook* on the *New English* (new - modern, contemporary English as against Old, or Middle English)

Or

- It is an English *Textbook* which is new i.e. written with current style or to suit current style or to suit current changes and trends?

Again, does **Practical English Course** refer to

- a practical course in English (i.e. a course with accessible, practice-oriented presentation style – practical course)

or

- an English Course which is practical – written to suit the practical-uses of the language – practical English?

The ambiguity results from two possibilities of compound nouns –

**Practical English** or **English Course** – as seen in the tree diagrams

below:

One of these – **Practical English** - is performing adjectival or modifier function, whilst **English Course** is a compound noun – head.

➤ **confusion Head (Prepositional Phrase & Relative Clause)**

When a noun phrase is made up of a noun- head, a prepositional phrase and relative clause, we sometimes become confused as to whether

the relative clause modifies the noun-head or the head of the noun phrase of the prepositional phrase. Take for example:

The **secretary** of the president who sacked the typist.

noun-head    prep. Phrase            relative clause

Was it the **secretary** who sacked the typist, or was it the **president**?

➤ **Misplaced Modification**

Misplaced modification comes in three forms.

❖ **Dangling modifiers**

A modifier is said to be dangling when it is attached to the wrong noun/head.

The ambiguity occurs between the following:

- the meaning as it appears from the syntactic arrangement (which might be an absurdity)
- the meaning as we think is normal but is not realized by the sentence:

For e.g.

**Dormenyo saw a monkey driving to Accra.**

This structure, with the modifier driving to Accra means syntactically, the monkey was **driving** to Accra. This is based on the principle of proximity, since a monkey is the closest noun to the modifier. The rule states: ‘**a modifier attaches itself to the noun which is closest to it**’ on the other hand, **a monkey driving is absurd**. We can then say that it is **Dormenyo who was driving to Accra** and not the monkey. But

assuming some monkeys have been taught to drive, what do we say? The ambiguity as seen above is the confusion between the sentence meanings and the practical meanings.

When the modifier is applicable to the two nouns easily as below, the ambiguity becomes more serious:

For e.g.

**We gave a table to a boy with painted legs**

Whose legs were painted? The boy's or the table's. Each of them is possible. Syntactically or according to the way the words are arranged, it is the boy's. But on the issue of frequency of occurrence, it is the table's. The confusion between syntactic and plausible interpretations renders the expression ambiguous.

#### ❖ **Misplaced Restrictors**

Misplaced restrictors bring semantic confusion because they are between the subject and the predication and can be seen as modifying in any of the two syntactic regions. Usually in speech, stress and intonation are used to specific meaning and to forestall ambiguity:

For e.g.

**Mends only washes on holidays**

If **only** modifies **Mends** (it will be a determiner), and the meaning will be

**Only Mends washes on holidays.**

On the other hand, **only** will be an **adverb**-a downtoner-if it operates as part of the predication, and the sentence will mean

**Mends does nothing apart from washing on holidays.**

Still looking at the flippancy of the **adverb**, we can say **only** perhaps modifies **holidays**, and thus gives the meaning

**Mends washes on holidays only.**

### **Squint Modifiers**

Squint modifiers are usually adverbs of time, frequency and manner (e.g. ‘tomorrow’, ‘occasionally’, ‘always’, and ‘slowly’). They are placed between two verbs in the examples:

For e.g.

**Teachers who goof occasionally apologise.**

Do we mean

(a) **teachers goof occasionally,**

or

(b) **That they apologise occasionally?**

- ❖ If it is (a), then the sentence as a whole means it is teachers who goof occasionally who apologise, and perhaps not those who goof frequently.
- ❖ If it is (b), it means teachers goof-perhaps often, but they apologise only occasionally.