

FLST08-09 Linguistic Foundations

Exercise of week 1 of Linguistic Foundations (31.10.2008)

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the quality or state of being ambiguous. When a sentence is ambiguous, it has two or more possible meanings. There are two types of ambiguity in a sentence : lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs when a sentence contains a word or words that has or have more than one meaning. For example, the sentence *Jane broke the glasses* is ambiguous because the word *glasses* may be interpreted as *drinking vessels made of glass* or *a pair of lenses in a frame that rest on the nose and ears*. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, occurs because a part of the sentence is interpreted as having either different structures or the same structure but with different groups of components. For example, the subject of the sentence *Flying planes can be dangerous*, which is *flying planes*, may be a structure of modification consisting of the head *planes* and the modifier *flying*, or a structure of complementation consisting of the verbal element *flying* and the direct object *planes*. In another example, the predicate of the sentence *We talked about the party last night*, which is a structure of modification, has two possible groups of components: the head *talk about the party* and the modifier *last night*, or the head *talk* and the modifier *about the party last night*.

Exercise 1 Lexical Ambiguity (19 points)

Study each of the following ambiguous sentences carefully and underline the word or words that make(s) the sentence ambiguous. Then, in the blank provided, give two possible meanings in complete sentences for each.

1. Mary thinks the present is nice.
2. She is standing near the bank.
3. An old friend of mine teaches at that school.
4. Children may feed animals.
5. It must be a new record.
6. The lamb is too hot to eat.

7. He looked over the old fence.

8. The man looked backward.

9. Do you have the key ?

10. The German teachers visited the British Museum yesterday.

11. Ralph took my picture.

12. The student must know the answer.

13. She cannot bear children.

14. We will give you a ring tonight.

15. Jim took me to the court.

16. We were late but the coach was late too.

17. I don't like the case.

18. Because of the cold, I had to put on a warm coat.

19. This poor man has got himself into debt.

Exercise 2 Structural Ambiguity. (20 points)

A. Study each of the following ambiguous sentences carefully. Then, in the blank provided, give two possible meanings for each.

1. I'm taking a course in modern English grammar.

2. Enough rest and exercise will help you recover.

3. She can give more possible conclusions.

4. I like ice-cream and cake.

5. The hostess greeted the girl with a smile.
6. He stood watching the fireworks in the backyard.
7. We need more experienced drivers to drive the buses.
8. The club will open to members only from Monday to Thursday.
9. He left her in tears.
10. At the rehearsal she sang, danced, and tumbled very expertly.
11. I repaired the car and returned the following day.
12. What John disliked was being ignored by everyone.
13. They fed her dog biscuits.

14. Mary likes me more than Susan.

15. Tall boys and girls are needed to participate in the activities.

16. Henry washed the car in the garage.

17. We gave the library books.

18. They considered those problems.

19. Visiting relatives can be a bore.

20. The people who saw the movie frequently praised it.

B. Explain the cause of ambiguity in each of the following sentences. (10 points)

1. We bought her pearl necklaces last month.

2. The protesters demanded more specific answers.
3. Bob met Alice at the party and Vicki in the lobby.
4. John told Jim that Sue would come to see him.
5. The girl who sat with Jane sometimes played the piano.
6. Suda is a very faithful and dependable clerk.
7. Mother has baked potatoes for dinner.
8. My uncle likes walking and bathing dogs.
9. Jane paints pictures and sings well.
10. They are discouraging students.