

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

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.
 - a. Mary thinks the gift is nice.
 - b. Mary thinks the present time is nice.
2. She is standing near the bank.
 - a. She is standing near the bank of the river.
 - b. She is standing near $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the bank where people deposit and withdraw money.} \\ \text{the bank building.} \end{array} \right\}$
3. An old friend of mine teaches at that school.
 - a. A friend of mine (whom) I have known for a long time teaches at that school.
 - b. A friend of mine who is $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{old} \\ \text{not young} \end{array} \right\}$ teaches at that school.
4. Children may feed animals.
 - a. It is possible for children to feed animals.
 - b. Children have permission to feed animals.
5. It must be a new record.
 - a. It must be a new written or printed account of facts or events.
 - b. It must be a new gramophone $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{record.} \\ \text{disc.} \end{array} \right\}$
 - c. It must be the best performance of a particular feat.

6. The lamb is too hot to eat.
- a. The living lamb is too hot to eat.
 - b. The lamb meat too hot to eat.
7. He looked over the old fence.
- a. He looked beyond the old fence.
 - b. He examined the old fence.
8. The man looked backward.
- a. The man looked back into the past.
 - b. The man looked toward the back.
9. Do you have the key ?
- a. Do you have the key to the room? (the car, etc.)
 - b. Do you have the key to the problem?
10. The German teachers visited the British Museum yesterday.
- a. The teachers of German visited the British Museum yesterday.
 - b. The teachers { who are Germans } visited the British Museum yesterday.
 { whose nationality is German }
12. Ralph took my picture.
- a. Ralph photographed me.
 - b. Ralph { borrowed my picture without permission. }
 { stole my picture. }
13. The student must know the answer.
- a. It is necessary that the student know the answer.
 - b. It is { concluded } that the student knows the answer.
 { deduced }
14. She cannot bear children.
- a. She cannot { stand } children.
 { endure }
 - b. She cannot give birth to children.
15. We will give you a ring tonight.
- a. We will give you a telephone call tonight.
 - b. We will give you { a circle worn on the finger } tonight.
 { a diamond ring }

16. Jim took me to the court.
- Jim took me to the $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{place where trials or other law cases are held.} \\ \text{law court.} \end{array} \right\}$
 - Jim took me to the $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{space marked out for tennis games.} \\ \text{tennis court.} \end{array} \right\}$
17. We were late but the coach was late too.
- We were late but the bus was late too.
 - We were late but the person who trains sportsmen and women was late too.
18. I don't like the case.
- I don't like the situation or actual state of affairs.
 - I don't like the large box in which goods can be stored or moved.
19. Because of the cold, I had to put on a warm coat.
- Because of the cold weather, I had to put on a warm coat.
 - Because I had the flu, I had to put on a warm coat.
20. This poor man has got himself into debt.
- This man who has very little money has got himself into debt.
 - This $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{man who is unlucky} \\ \text{unlucky man} \end{array} \right\}$ has got himself into debt.

Exercise 2 Structural Ambiguity.

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

- I'm taking a course in modern English grammar.
 - I'm taking a course in grammar of modern English.
 - I'm taking a course in modern grammar of English.
- Enough rest and exercise will help you recover.
 - Enough rest and enough exercise will help you recover.
 - Exercise and enough rest will help you recover.
- She can give more possible conclusions.
 - She can give $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{more conclusions which are possible.} \\ \text{more of the possible conclusions.} \end{array} \right\}$
 - She can give conclusions which are more possible.
- I like ice-cream and cake.
 - I like ice-cream and I like cake too.
 - I like ice-cream together with cake.

5. The hostess greeted the girl with a smile.
 - a. The hostess greeted the girl who smiled.
 - b. With a smile, the hostess greeted the girl.

6. He stood watching the fireworks in the backyard.
 - a. In the backyard, he stood watching the fireworks.
 - b. He stood watching the fireworks which $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{took place} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$ in the backyard.

7. We need more experienced drivers to drive the buses.
 - a. We need $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{more of the experienced drivers} \\ \text{more drivers who are experienced} \end{array} \right\}$ to drive the buses.
 - b. We need drivers who are more experienced to drive the buses.

8. The club will open to members only from Monday to Thursday.
 - a. The club will open to only members from Monday to Thursday.
 - b. The club will open to members from only Monday to Thursday.

9. He left her in tears.
 - a. In tears he left her. /He left her while he was in tears.
 - b. He left her while she was in tears.

10. At the rehearsal she sang, danced, and tumbled very expertly.
 - a. At the rehearsal she sang very expertly, danced very expertly, and tumbled very expertly.
 - b. At the rehearsal she tumbled very expertly, sang and dance.

11. I repaired the car and returned the following day.
 - a. I repaired the car and the following day I returned.
 - b. The following day I repaired the car and returned.

12. What John disliked was being ignored by everyone.
 - a. John disliked being ignored by everyone.
 - b. Everybody was ignoring $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{what} \\ \text{the thing} \end{array} \right\}$ John disliked.

13. They fed her dog biscuits.
 - a. They fed dog biscuits to her.
 - b. They fed biscuits to her dog.

14. Mary likes me more than Susan.
 - a. Mary likes me more than she likes Susan.
 - b. Mary likes me more than Susan likes me.

15. Tall boys and girls are needed to participate in the activities.
 - a. Tall boys and tall girls are needed to participate in the activities.
 - b. Girls and tall boys are needed to participate in the activities.
16. Henry washed the car in the garage.
 - a. In the garage, Henry washed the car.
 - b. Henry washed the car which was in the garage.
17. We gave the library books.
 - a. We gave books to the library.
 - b. The library books were given by us.
18. They considered those problems.
 - a. Those problems were considered by them.
 - b. $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{They considered those to be problems.} \\ \text{Those were considered problems by them.} \end{array} \right\}$
19. Visiting relatives can be a bore.
 - a. To visit relatives can be a bore.
 - b. Relatives who visit us can be a bore.
20. The people who saw the movie frequently praised it.
 - a. The people who frequently saw the movie praised it.
 - b. The people who saw the movie praised it frequently.

B. Explain the cause of ambiguity in each of the following sentences.

1. We bought her pearl necklaces last month.
 The verb 'bought' which functions as verbal element may be either a monotransitive verb or a ditransitive verb. If it is a monotransitive verb, it is followed by the direct object 'her pearl necklaces', but if it is a ditransitive verb, it is followed by the indirect object 'her' and the direct object 'pearl necklaces' or ['her' can be either a possessive modifying 'pearl necklaces' or a pronoun functioning as indirect object.]
2. The protesters demanded more specific answers.
 The word 'more' can be either an intensifier modifying the adjective 'specific' or a quantifier modifying the noun phrase 'specific answers'.
 or [The $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{noun phrase} \\ \text{direct object} \end{array} \right\}$ 'more specific answers' is a structure of modification which consists of the head 'answers' and the modifier 'more specific', or the head 'specific answers' and the modifier 'more'.]

3. Bob met Alice at the party and Vicki in the lobby.
 Because of the ellipsis in the second conjoin, 'Vicki' can function as either subject or direct object in this conjoin. This conjoin may come from either 'Vicki met Alice in the lobby' or 'Bob met Vicki in the lobby'.

4. John told Jim that Sue would come to see him.
 The pronoun 'him' may refer to either 'John' or 'Jim'

5. The girl who sat with Jane sometimes played the piano.
 The adverb 'sometimes' can modify either the preceding verb phrase 'sat with Jane' or the following verb phrase 'played the piano'.

6. Suda is a very faithful and dependable clerk.
 The intensifier 'very' can modify only the adjective 'faithful' or both the adjectives 'faithful' and 'dependable'.

7. Mother has baked potatoes for dinner.
 The word 'has' can be either an auxiliary or a monotransitive verb. If it is an auxiliary, the finite verb phrase 'has baked' functions as verbal element followed by the direct object 'potatoes'. However, if it is a monotransitive verb, the finite verb 'has' functions as verbal element followed by the direct object 'baked potatoes'.



8. My uncle likes walking and bathing dogs.
 The direct object 'walking and bathing' dogs may be either a structure of coordination consisting of the two conjoins 'walking' and 'bathing dogs', or a structure of complementation having 'walking and bathing' as verbal element and 'dogs' as direct object. This is because the verb 'walk' can be either an intransitive verb or a monotransitive verb.

9. Jane paints pictures and sings well.
 The predicate 'paints pictures and sings well' may be either a structure of modification consisting of the head 'paints pictures and sings' and the modifier 'well', or a structure of coordination consisting of the two conjoins 'paints pictures' and 'sings well'. This is because we don't know whether there is an ellipsis of the adverb 'well' in the first conjoin or not.
 or ['well' can modify only 'sings' or both 'sings' and 'paints picture'.]

10. They are discouraging students.
 The word 'are' can be either an auxiliary or a linking verb. If it is an auxiliary, it functions as the helping verb in the finite verb phrase 'are discouraging' which functions as verbal element of the direct object 'students'. However, if it is a linking verb, it is a finite verb which functions as verbal element of the subjective complement 'discouraging students'.

