Structural Ambiguity for English Teachers

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Among the areas of applied linguistics that can be serviceable to English teachers, structural ambiguity is one that has been only recently investigated and that seems to be little used by classroom teachers. It is this area that I propose to discuss now. At first, we must sort out a few basic terms.

Ambiguity, as we all know, means double or multiple meaning, and it is customary to distinguish two kinds—lexical and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity comes into being when two or more of the meanings of a word are applicable in a given situation. I heard a vivid example two weeks ago in a coffee-room exchange between two English professors. Professor A entered the room and said to B:

1. I hear you had a good time with my wife.

Professor B looked startled and presumably did some high-speed thinking. But Professor A looked friendly, and in a few seconds B relaxed as he realized that A had used with to mean "in company with" and not "by means of." This was lexical ambiguity.

The second kind, structural ambiguity, stems from some aspect of English grammar, often from the arrangement of words and structures or from the classification of words. Let me offer one illustration of each. It is arrangement that causes the double meaning in this sentence:

2. Guevara says many of the things that Mao Tse-Tung said in much less digestible form.

And classification accounts for the structural ambiguity in the next sentence, taken from administration prose:

3. We have mimeographed drafts of the guidelines.

Here have mimeographed can be classified as auxiliary + main verb, or as main verb (have = "possess") + adjectival participle. Each structure has its own meaning.

In English syntax there are many grammatical situations that are potentially ambiguous. My own inventory of these, gathered casually for more than a decade, numbers about 150, and I know it is incomplete because new types are still turning up. Not all of these would be useful to a composition teacher. Some types, for instance, are relatively rare, like this one:
4. He made her a good spouse.

Other ambiguous situations may be trivial in that the difference between two meanings is unimportant. Consider, for example, this case:

5. Are you saving more than you did last year?

This is a genuine structural ambiguity because *more* may be classified as an adverbial meaning "to a greater extent" or a nominal meaning "a greater amount." Yet there is no misunderstanding of the sentence, and I suspect that no composition teacher would mark "Amb" in the margin.

There remain, however, a sizable number of grammatical situations in which ambiguity occurs frequently; and if the teacher of composition is acquainted with these, he is in a position to obviate some of the ambiguities in student writing that might otherwise muddy the meaning.

The grammatical situations which follow are a sampling of those which a composition teacher should know. But before listing them I must make two qualifications. First, we are dealing with ambiguity in the written language only, and some of the illustrations you will hear are clear in the spoken language. Secondly, each situation is potentially, not necessarily, ambiguous. Sometimes the ambiguity can occur only under specific grammatical restrictions. At other times the meanings of the words or the enclosing context will forestall ambiguity. Now let us look at a few situations.

**Situation 1: "-ing" verb + noun**

This situation represents six different grammatical structures, which I will not pause to list, and there are seven ways in which an *-ing* verb + noun can be ambiguous. Here are a few examples:

6. Patent medicines are sold by frightening people.

In this sentence, *frightening people* can be read as a verb + noun object (i.e., Someone is frightening the people), or as adjectival + noun head (i.e., The people are frightening).

7. They are canning peas.

Here *canning peas* can be interpreted as a compound noun (i.e., peas for canning), or as a verb + noun object (i.e., They can peas). In spoken English the voice separates the two meanings.

8. Mr. Carlson, is my son trying? Yes, madam, very.

Here we have still another conflict of structures. *Trying* can be an intransitive verb or an adjectival.
9. My job was keeping him alive.

In this case *keeping* can be read as the verb (i.e., My job kept him alive), or as a verbal within the subjective complement *keeping him alive*.

In view of such possibilities in the *-ing* verb + noun situation, it seems sensible to suggest that students be warned to examine with care any *-ing* verb + noun they happen to write and that they be given an exercise in detecting and rewriting such ambiguities.

Situation 2: *Separable verb, or verb + prepositional phrase*

10. MacLeish stood drinking in the moonlight.

In this sentence one reading gives us a separable verb *drinking in*, whose two parts can be separated by the object, thus: “MacLeish stood drinking the moonlight in”—that is, absorbing the moonlight. The second reading has *drinking* as the verb, followed by its modifier, *in the moonlight*. With this particular sentence, the latter reading has a much higher degree of probability. In the next illustration the passive presents a variation of the same situation:

11. The thesis was passed on.

Let us first turn this passive form into the active. The separable verb is seen in these sentences: “The committee passed the thesis on” and “The committee passed the thesis.” In both sentences the committee passed the thesis to someone else. These sentences, in the passive, read “The thesis was passed on.” Now, back to the active form of the sentence—same words but with a structural interpretation of verb + prepositional phrase: “The committee passed on the thesis.” Here the verb is *passed*, not *passed on*, and it means “decided.” The passive form of this is “The thesis was passed on.” Thus we see that the two meanings are kept apart in speech by the position of the primary stress, but the written sentence, lacking any indication of stress, is ambiguous.

The next five situations show classificational ambiguities. Many English words are in several part-of-speech classes or subclasses. The word *better*, for instance, may on different occasions be in the noun, verb, adjective, or adverb class. When a reader is unsure of the class or subclass of a word in a given context, he is usually faced with an ambiguity.

Situation 3: *Verb or adjective*

12. Social legislation is the way to better living.

Situation 4: *Function noun or determiner*

13. We observed another sail.
Here we note that when another changes its class, the following word, sail, also changes.

Situation 5: Adverb of place or of direction

14. They stamped upstairs.
15. The children ran outside.

Situation 6: “Then”—adverb of time or of result

16. I'm not going home then.

Situation 7: “Simply”—adverb or qualifier

When simply is an adverb meaning “in a simple way,” it may appear before or after the -ed participle, as in “The room was arranged simply,” or “The room was simply arranged.” But when it is a qualifier meaning “actually” or “really,” it must appear before the -ed participle, as in “The room was simply destroyed beyond recognition.” Thus because simply may have two meanings in the pre-participle position, an ambiguity is possible, as in

17. The fort was simply demolished.

In a sentence like this, there is a strong analogical pull toward the qualifier reading because in similar sentences simply occurs only as a qualifier before adjectives, e.g., “The room was simply magnificent.”

Now we shall turn from classificational ambiguities to ambiguities of arrangement, as seen in the noun phrase. First, a few prenominals.

Situation 8: Noun + noun head

The relationships between two adjoining nouns are many and varied. When the noun + noun head expresses more than one relationship in a given instance, the expression will be ambiguous. For instance,

18. student hero

can mean “student who is a hero” or “hero of students.” Likewise, in

19. What is the clause object of that sentence?

the meaning can be “the object in a clause” or “the clause which is the object.”

Situation 9: Adjective + noun + noun head

20. new patient counselor
This can mean “a counselor of new patients” or “a new counselor of patients.” Another instance is seen in the next sentence:

21. Republicans in Congress want to set up a permanent crime commission. One thing Congress has is permanent crimes—the Rayburn Building, for instance.

Situation 10: Predeterminer + noun + noun head

22. double job pay

Is this pay for a double job or double pay for a job?

The foregoing ambiguous situations among the prenominals are simple, each containing only one or two modifiers. But when three modifiers precede the noun head, the possibilities really get interesting, and the number of ambiguous situations increases greatly. We do not have time to explore these now. However, here are two examples which will illustrate the possibilities for you:

23. dark brown sugar bowl
24. good-sized ladies garment store

Let us now turn our attention to the modifiers after the noun. These are word-groups of seven different kinds, and, when two of them are used after the noun head, there is frequently the likelihood of a double entendre. A few illustrations here will have to suffice for all the possibilities.

Situation 11: Noun head + prepositional phrase + participial phrase

25. There was a spotted dog in the group barking at the speeding car.
26. Roessler, a Bavarian of good family already disillusioned with Nazism, settled in Lucerne.

Situation 12: Noun head + participial phrase + prepositional phrase

27. The children watching the fireworks in the back yard were elated.

Situation 13: Noun head + prepositional phrase + appositive

28. The married daughter of Brigid O'Toole, a slovenly woman, had untidy housekeeping habits.

Situation 14: Noun head + infinitive phrase + prepositional phrase

29. attempt to break strike by Negroes
At this point I have not even mentioned the predicate ambiguities, both complemental and adverbial. But perhaps enough material has been presented to support two points I wish to make: (1) There are many types of structural ambiguity, and these can be accurately described in grammatical terms; (2) Those types which occur most frequently should be taught to the prospective English teacher as an aid to his teaching of composition.

These points raise two questions: Where should structural ambiguity be taught and how should it be taught?

As to the where, there are two courses in which the subject might be introduced, the advanced composition course and the grammar course required in most teacher-training curricula. Perhaps the latter is the better choice, especially since composition teachers are less likely to be acquainted with the phonological details needed for the explanation of many ambiguities.

The how of teaching structural ambiguity depends on the course in which it is taught. In the grammar course the different types can be fitted neatly into the study of structures and forms as these are presented. In the composition course, two procedures would be efficacious. First, ambiguities can be explained to the class as they occur in student writing. Second, a series of graduated exercises can be used as a preventive measure against the occurrence of ambiguity. I could present you with such a series, but we do not have time for them now.

In conclusion, let me leave you with a final and irrelevant ambiguity to work on. It is the legend on a street sign which reads:

30. No parking on both sides.