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Types of Ambiguity

Syntactic and semantic

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Introduction:

Every language is structured at various levels , such as lexical, phonological, syntactic morphological, and discourse levels. Ambiguous information can occur at any given point in a sentence .The term ambiguity is used to describe a word, a phrase or a sentence with a multiple meanings.(Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams . 2007). There are two types of ambiguity syntactic and semantic ambiguities . Syntactic ambiguity is the phenomenon in which the same sequence of words has two or meanings due to different phrase structure analysis . Semantic ambiguity is a word that has more than one meaning. Ambiguity is one of linguistic expressions so,it is not something people should avoid it because has its importance in several fields such as humor and advertising. To catch the reader's attention , headlines in newspapers or magazines tend use syntactic and lexical ambiguity. This paper sets out some of the linguistic ambiguities for both syntactic and lexical provided with examples for each.

Syntactic ambiguity:

Syntactic ambiguity has three names grammatical , structural or syntactic ambiguity . It is the phenomenon in which the same sequence of words has two or meanings that is accounted for by different phrase structure analysis . (p. 2007 , an introduction to language). It is called structural ambiguity because they are a result of a different structures . Some linguists claims that structural or syntactic ambiguity happens because of build up sentences that lack formal signals to clarify their
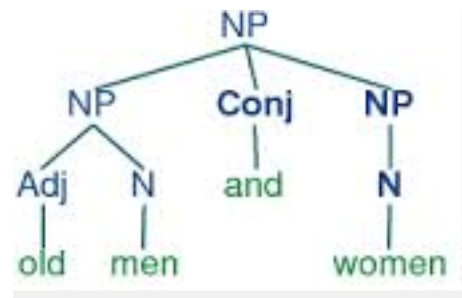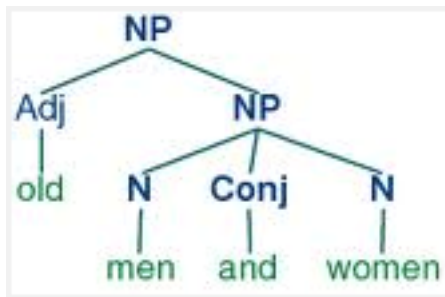
sentence structure (p.251). There are some reasons that lead to structural ambiguity.

First reason, is to use pronouns without referring to the reference wither if it is a person or object. For example , Nora called her mother yesterday. They talked for two hours . She said she would be come next month. In this sentence it is not obvious who is going to come next month , the pronoun (she), may refer to Nora or her mother. Another example, I arrived at home and greet my parents . They had been waiting for me for two hours. It is very complicated . It is not clear what 'it ' is referring to in the sentence . So, it must be more illustrated in the sentence.
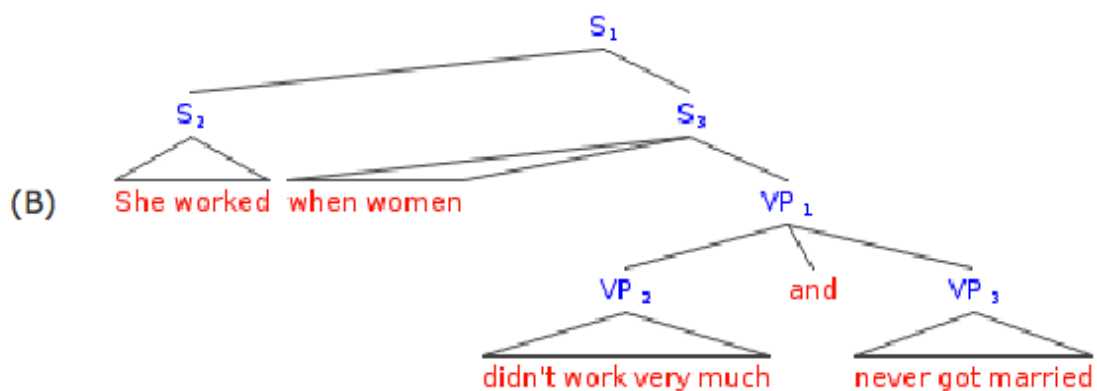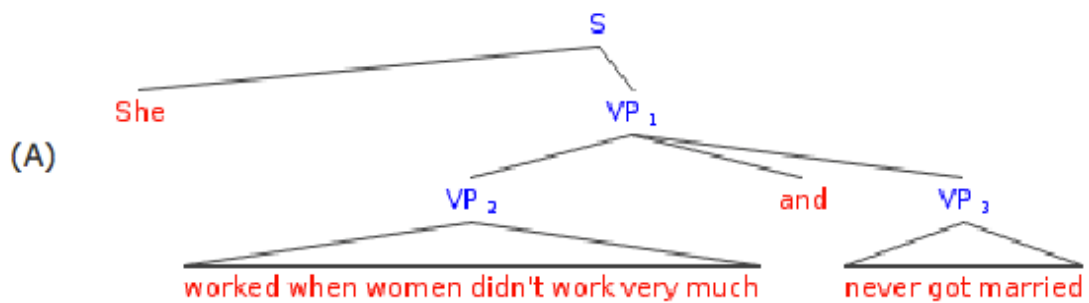
Second reason, is to use coordination structures that links between two or more elements . As what Taha claims, determiners would disambiguate the meaning, can cause confusion between grammatical classes , or, in other words, can result in structural ambiguity.(1994).For example, the doctor examined old men and women at the hospital. The phrase "old men and women" is a structural ambiguity in which whether the old men and old women are examined by the doctor or the old men and women of any age only . The phrase can be group into two ways. First, the [old men] and women. Second , the old [men and women], and they are both correct according to syntax rules. In order to solve this confusing of having more than one meaning, linguists use tree diagrams to represent the heretical organization of words and sentences to illustrate and represent the internal structure of complex words and sentences. So ,the sentence, the doctor examined old men and women at the hospital , can be explain by two diagrams:

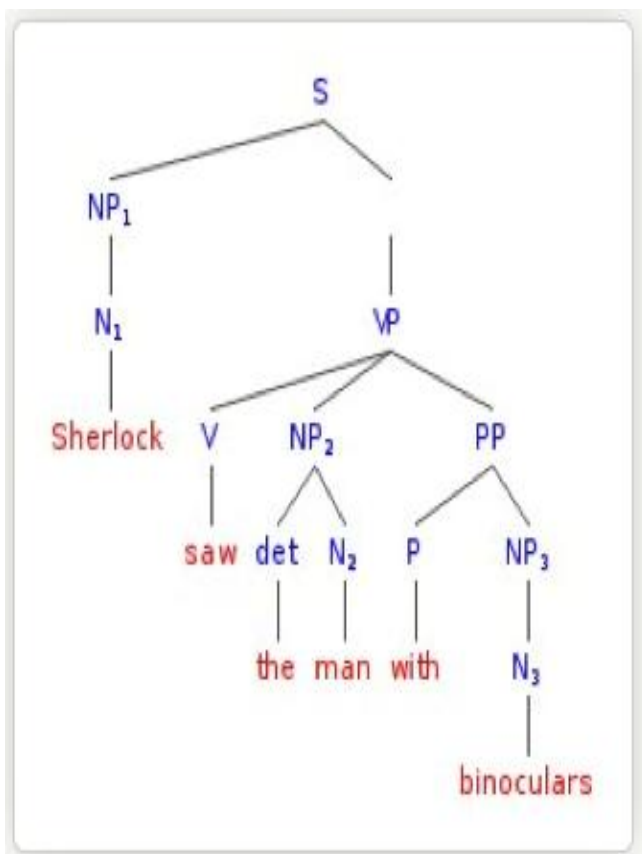a)   b)

Another example is , she worked when women didn't work very much and never got married.(language log,2009, Liberman). The ambiguity happened because of the coordination(and). Whether she worked at the time when women did not work so she never got married as in (a). Or, she worked at the time when women did not work and did not get marry as in (b).
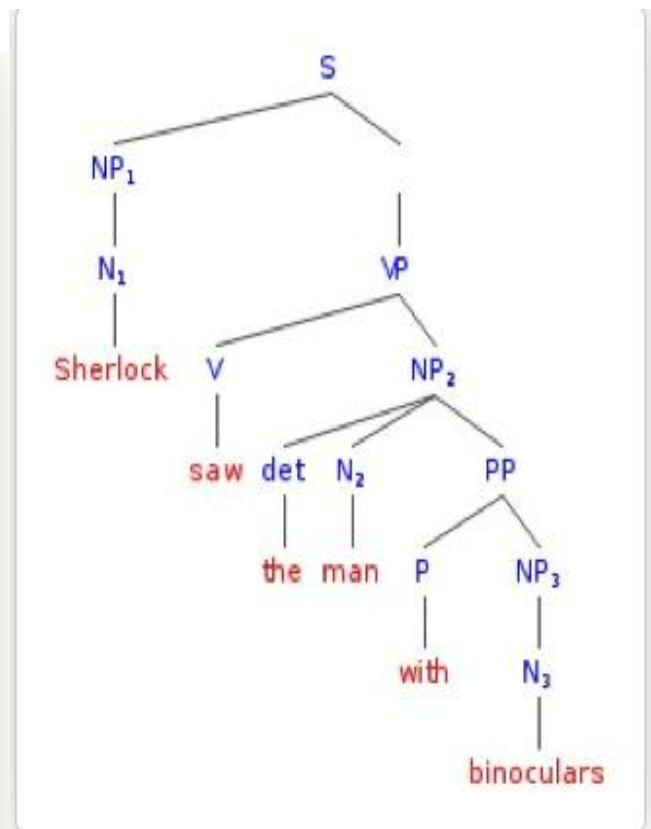
Third reason, is to use prepositions which lead to syntactic ambiguity and this is the most common one. For example, Sherlock saw the man with binoculars. Here, the preposition "with" cause a confusion in which is Sherlock saw a man and he uses binoculars to see or Sherlock saw the man and the man was using the binoculars. The tree diagrams below illustrated the ambiguity.

a)   b)

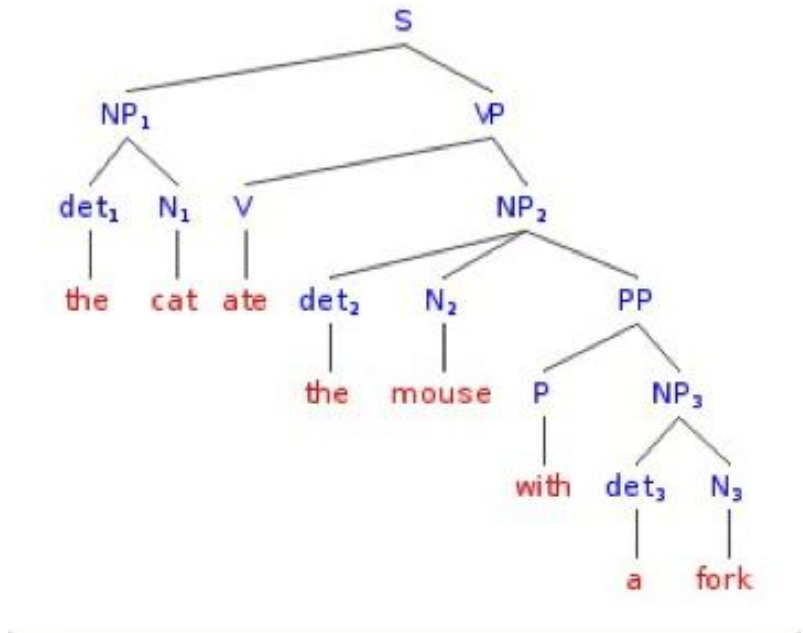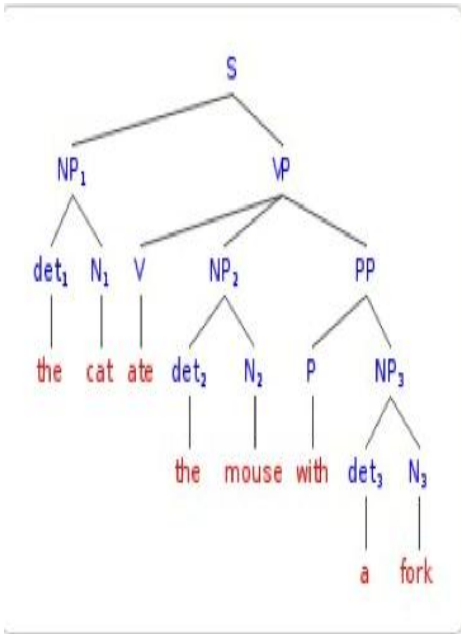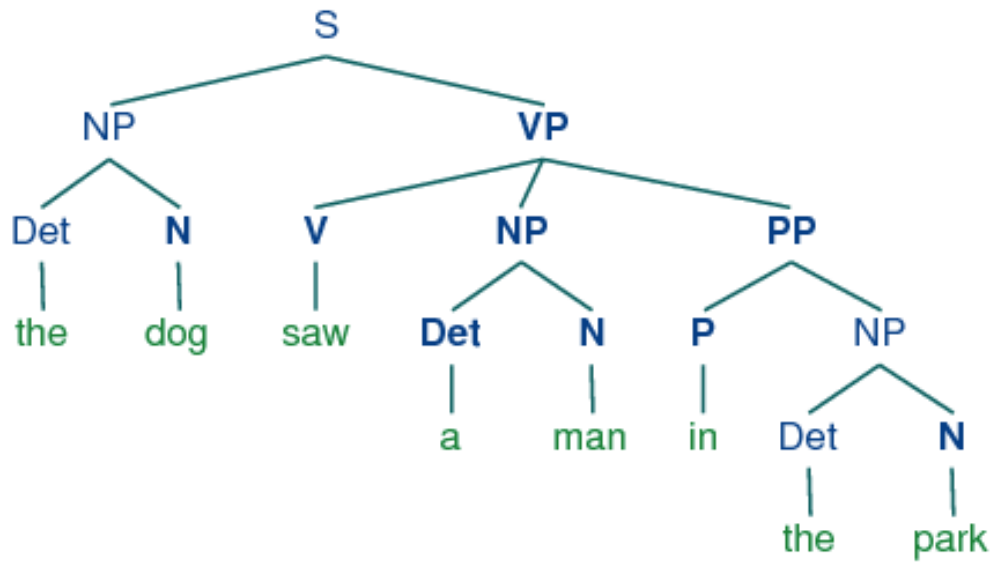Another example, The cat ate the mouse with a fork. Here, this sentence could mean: the cat used the fork to ate the mouse . Or can mean : the cat ate the mouse and the mouse was holding a fork . The tree diagram above illustrate the two meanings .
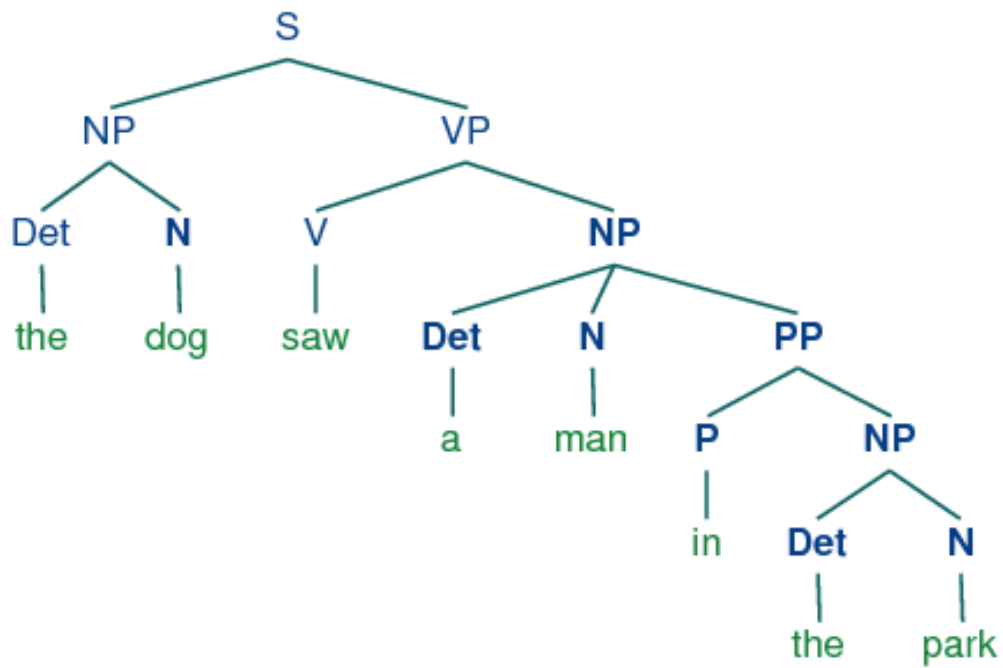
Another example, The dog saw a man in the park. It could mean as in(a) the dog was in the park and saw a man or, the dog saw a man and the man was in the park as in (b).

a.

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                          S
             ┌────────────┴──────────────┐
            NP                           VP
          ┌──┴──┐           ┌────────────┼──────────────┐
         Det    N           V           NP              PP
          │     │           │         ┌──┴──┐         ┌──┴──┐
         the   dog         saw       Det    N         P     NP
                                      │     │         │   ┌──┴──┐
                                      a    man        in Det    N
                                                         │      │
                                                        the    park
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b.

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                          S
             ┌────────────┴──────────┐
            NP                       VP
          ┌──┴──┐           ┌─────────┴──────┐
         Det    N           V               NP
          │     │           │      ┌─────────┼──────────┐
         the   dog         saw    Det    N             PP
                                   │     │           ┌──┴──┐
                                   a    man          P     NP
                                                     │    ┌─┴──┐
                                                     in  Det   N
                                                         │     │
                                                        the   park
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Moreover, some newspapers use ambiguity to catch the reader's attention. For example, the

headline" county officials to talk rubbish" Taha et. Al (1994). The ambiguity here is due to the

omission of the preposition(about), and the sentence is "country officials to talk about rubbish", and the meaning of the headline is "country officials are scheduled to talk about issues concerning garbage disposal.

Never the less, There are syntactic ambiguities in Arabic language and Holy Qur'an is full of them. For example, (يابني آدم خذوا زينتكم عند كل مسجد وكلوا واشربوا ولا تسرفوا انه لايحب المسرفين) . Ebrahim Davoudi Sharifabad claimed that The word Masjid is ambiguous. It may refer to the time or place of prayer. The three made translations are very different. Yusuf Ali has rendered Masjid to the time and place of prayer. Pickthal translated Masjid as the place of worship, while Shakir̈'s translation of the word Masjid is the time of prayer. The different translation by Mohsin Khan and Al-Hilali is so clear that they have rendered this part based on their own interpretations. Masjid is rendered to the Kabah at the time of Tawaf or circumlocution.(p.8 , Sharifabad, Mahadi ,Kenevisi .2012)

Semantic Ambiguity:

Semantic ambiguity refers to difference in meaning .(Krovets , Croft,L ambiguity and information retrieval, p.4 ,) There are two types of semantic ambiguity. Some words sound and written the same but they are not identical in meaning, it means whether they are two words (homonyms), or one word used in two different ways (polysemy).

First, homonym which means two or more words that have the same sound or spell but the meaning is different.(Vocabulary.com,2013). For example, as cited in Nordquist, 2013,
 In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland , 'Mine is a long and sad *tale*' said the Mouse, turning to

Alice, and sighing. 'It is a long *tail*, certainly,' said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail; 'but why do you call it sad? (Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Another example, bat is homophone it has two meanings , the flying mammal or instruments for hitting baseball
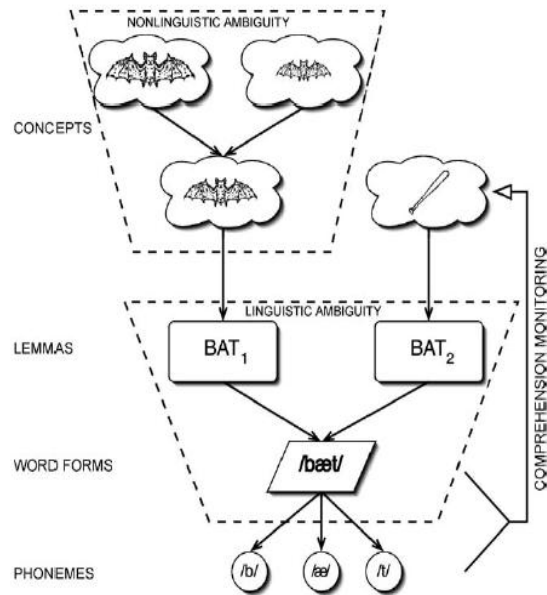

Fig. 1. The representation of nonlinguistic- and linguistic-ambiguity within the processing stages of word production.

Second ,polysemy means a word that is used to express different meanings . The difference between the meanings can be obvious or subtle.(Homnomy and Polysemy, p.1). For example, the word bear it has to meanings. First meaning is stand or tolerate and the other meaning is to give birth. Also, the word man has three different meanings . First, the human species. Second, males of the human species . Third, adult males of the human species(Wikipedia).

Furthermore , jokes especially verbal ones are relying on lexical more than syntactic ambiguous jokes. For example, the " men recommended more clubs for wives" (Mihalcea ,Strapparava. Words, Meanings and Emotions). The word "club" has two meanings. First, an association dedicated to a particular interest or activity "oxford dictionary. The second meaning, a heavy usually tapering staff especially of wood wielded as a weapon . To make a humorous response that wives should be beaten. Another semantic ambiguity is that found in newspapers is "actor sent to jail for not finishing a sentence"(Implicit Relevance Feedback and Syntactic Structure, Weng, Owens,2010) . The humor here is actor went to jail because he did not finish a word . But the other meaning of sentence is one formally pronounced by a court or judge in a criminal proceeding and specifying the punishment to be inflected upon the convicted person. Moreover, the sentence Iraqi head seeks Arms is semantic ambiguous (**2008 - Linglish.net)**. the words "head" and "arms" can either refer to the body organs , or "leader" and "weapons" respectively. Therefore one can either interpret the sentence by their face values (body parts), or even as a combination of the two.

In Arabic language there are plenty of semantic ambiguities. For example, the word بيت could mean the house or the verse . Also the sentence اعطيني اذنيك has two meanings. Whether , give me your ears or listen carefully to me. many new Arabic newspapers headlines use figurative language devices especially in sport sections to attract the reader's attention. For example, the expression (الهلال اطفأ الشعله) . It has two meaning. The figurative meaning is Alhilal blow out the flame .The real meaning is Alhilal club won a match against Alshulah club . Finally, in order to figure the exact meaning of the word and avoid semantic ambiguity, a reader should know which field he or she is reading on , and the purpose of the writer or author.

In conclusion, ambiguity is to have multiple meanings. There are two types of ambiguity, semantic and syntactic. Syntactic ambiguity deals with structure while semantic ambiguity deals with words. Both of them are linguistic expressions so they used in advertisements and jokes.

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