MORE THAN ONE MEANING

Abstract. Words, phrases or sentences are ambiguous if they express more than one meaning. Ambiguity is a very complex problem, and one of the suggestions how to solve the problem is either to use the method of immediate constituents analysis or apply transformational generative approach to language analyses. There are other contemporary approaches that treat the problem of ambiguity, and one of them is the phrase structure grammar. In comprehending ambiguous sentences and phrases, syntax and semantics have an equal status.

Key words: ambiguity, IC analysis, TG approach, phrase structure grammar, sentence, phrase.

Recently there was a title of a short article in one Serbian newspaper such as: *Juda je izdao Hrista zato sto je bio zilot (Judas Betrayed Christ Being a Zilot)*. If we read this title again and again without reading the article we cannot be sure whether *Judas* was *zilot* or the *Christ* himself being a *zilot* was killed by *Judas* (“zilots” broadly speaking, consider themselves the real and the purest members of the Orthodox church and the whole Christianity). Finally, we can conclude that this title, without further explanations, such as reading the whole article, expresses two meanings and because of that it is not quite understandable.

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In English, in order to explain either one of the methods that is used in analyzing language known as IC or a method of immediate constituents analysis or to explain one of the aspects of TG - transformational generative approach – transformations a set of “famous” sentences with more than one meaning such as:

_Flying planes can be dangerous._

or

_John found the boy studying in the library._

or

_It is too hot to eat._

Those examples having more than one meaning represent a very complex problem known as ambiguity. One of the suggestions how to solve the problem was either to use the IC analyses or applying transformational aspects of the TG approach to language analyses. This aspect can also be used to explain other “problems” in language such as simple present vs. simple past pairs in

_John like ( -s –d) Mary._

Or the active vs. passive pairs such as

_John saw Mary._

_Mary was seen by John._

Words, phrases or sentences are ambiguous if they express more than one meaning. The word _light_, for example, can mean _not very heavy_ or _not very dark_. Words like _light, note, bear_ and _over_ are lexically ambiguous. Ambiguity occurs in phrases and sentences such as _light suit_ and _The duchess can’t bear children_. However, phrases and sentences can be ambiguous even if none of their constituents is. The phrase _porcelain egg container_ is structurally ambiguous, as it is the sentence _The police shot the rioters with guns_. Ambiguity can have both lexical and structural basis, as it is represented in a sentence like _I left her behind for you._

Although people are sometimes said to be ambiguous in how they use language, ambiguity is, strictly speaking, a property of linguistic expressions. A word, phrase or sentence is ambiguous if it has _more than one meaning_. Obviously this definition does not say what are those meanings or what it is for an expression to have one (or more than one meaning). For a particular language, this information is provided by grammar, which systematically pairs forms with meanings, ambiguous forms with more than one meaning.

There are two types of ambiguity, _lexical_ and _structural_.

_**Lexical ambiguity**_ is by far the more common. Everyday examples include nouns like _chip, pen_ and _suit_, verbs like _call, draw_ and _run_ and adjectives like _deep,
dry and hard. There are various tests for ambiguity. One possibility is to have two unrelated antonyms, as with hard, which has both soft and easy as opposites. Another is the conjunction reduction test. Consider the sentence The tailor pressed one suit in his shop and one in the municipal court. It is evident that the word suit (not to mention press) is ambiguous. It is provided by the anomaly of the crossed interpretation of the sentence, in which suit is used to refer to an article of clothing and one to a legal action.

**Structural ambiguity** occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure, such as phrases English history teacher, a student of high moral principles and short men and women and sentences The girl hit the boy with a book and Visiting relatives can be boring. These ambiguities are said to be structural because each such phrase can be represented in two structurally different ways, e.g. (English history) teacher and English (history teacher). Consider the structurally ambiguous sentence The chicken is ready to eat, which can be used either to describe a hungry chicken or a broiled chicken. It is not always clear when we have a case of structural ambiguity. Consider, for example, the elliptical sentence John knows a richer man than Trump. It has two meanings – that John knows a man who is richer than Trump and that John knows a man who is richer than any man Trump knows, and is therefore ambiguous. But what about the sentence Mary loves her mother and so does Susan? It can be used to say either that Mary loves Mary’s mother and Susan loves Susan’s mother, or that Mary loves Mary’s mother and Susan loves Mary’s mother. But is it really ambiguous? One might argue that the clause so does Susan is unambiguous and may be read unequivocally as saying in the context that Susan does the same thing Mary does, and although there are two different possibilities for what counts as doing the same thing, these alternatives are not fixed semantically. So the ambiguity is merely apparent and better described as semantic ender determination.

Structural ambiguity can appear in noun phrases. The noun phrase consists of a noun head and its modifiers. We shall examine a number of ambiguous grammatical structures containing pre-nominal or post-nominal modifiers. There are over fifty or these ambiguous structures in the noun phrase, so we shall be able to consider only a sampling. First, however, it has to be emphasized that each of these structures is the habitat of a potential ambiguity. In some cases the structure is an ambiguity whenever the collocation of meaning permits. There are two examples for the structure labeled adjective + noun possessive + noun head:

May I see a woolen ladies’ sweater?
May I see a bulky ladies’ sweater?

The first is clear. The second is ambiguous because the meaning of bulky is compatible with both ladies’ and sweater. In other cases, the ambiguity will occur only under specific grammatical restrictions. As an example, let us look at the noun
The restrictions here are simple. The first two adjoining nouns may have a subject relationship to the verb base of the second noun, as in student complaint (A student complains). Or it may have an object relationship, as in package delivery (Someone delivers packages). When either relationship can be understood in a given instance, as in woman murderer, there is the ambiguity. Examples:

The girl kidnapper has not been heard from.
Its purpose was to help police identification.

Other two-noun ambiguities depend on different restrictions.

I went to the bank seems to be clearly ambiguous, since bank can mean either river bank or the place that deals with money.

The room and the furniture were light cannot be taken to mean that the room was bright and the furniture not heavy.

Flying planes can be dangerous has two possible grammatical structures with the meaning the act of flying planes and planes that are flying.

Ambiguity results whenever a word or a phrase can have more than one distinct and valid meaning. Ambiguity can usually be eliminated through extra information. An example of such ambiguity is:

I promise I'll give you a ring tomorrow.

Although uncommon in American dialects “giving someone a ring” can simply mean calling them on the telephone. But, obviously, the above sentence can also mean giving someone a piece of jewelry worn on the finger. The statement is, therefore, ambiguous.

Nominal Phrase and Ambiguity

Ambiguity can be found in different nominal phrases:

“Any” + noun head

Any in front of a noun-head can be the source of some subtle ambiguities. Let us consider two of them:

They don’t admit any students.

If the primary stress is on any or students, with a fall in pitch to low level and a fading terminal after students, the meaning is They don’t admit students. But if the primary stress is on any, and if students has pitch level 2 followed by a rising terminal, the meaning is that the students are selected and some are admitted.
Noun or adjective + noun head

In spoken English, a secondary stress on the first item signals that it is an adjective. But if the stress pattern is primary third, the first item is a noun. This type of ambiguity has a high frequency, like, for example, conservative club.

Next, there are potentially ambiguous situations consisting of two modifiers before the noun head. Each of these poses the same problem of interpretation: Does the first item modify the second one or the third one?

Possessive of noun or pronoun + noun possessive + noun head

Here the first possessive can modify either the noun possessive or the noun head.

*He looked professional in his chef’s hat.*

Whose hat? His or his chef’s?

Adjective + noun + noun head

This is one of the most productive patterns of all and the ambiguity is often present in both written and spoken English, like fresh flower perfumes.

Adjective + noun possessive + noun head

This is the same as the preceding situation, except that the noun is in the possessive form. It is also quite common – an old professor’s wife, a dull boy’s knife.

Noun + noun possessive + noun head

Like in the three preceding situations, the question here is what the first word modifies – dormitory men’s room, Iowa farmer’s wife.

“More” or “most” + adjective + noun head

*We need more humane officers.*

In speaking, the two meanings in the last example are kept apart by the supra-segmentals. When more modifies humane officers, meaning a greater number of it has secondary stress and considerable length: more + humane officers. But when it modifies only the adjective humane, it has third stress and is noticeably shorter: more humane officers. This structure occurs rather often.

Participle, present or past + noun or noun possessive + noun head

This pattern combines four different possibilities, as shown in growing boy problem.
In the next group of ambiguous pre-nominal situations, there are three modifiers in front of a noun head. Here the chances of ambiguity are increased, and it is not uncommon to find three readings for this general pattern.

**Adjective + noun + noun + noun head**

*New faculty orientation meeting*

What is new here? The faculty, the orientation or the meeting? These are dizzying structures.

**Noun + noun + noun + noun head**

This pattern represents the kind of noun pile-up that is frequent in newspaper headlines and in administration – summer faculty research appointments and college building and bill.

**Adjective + noun + past participle + noun head**

*Solid brass covered bucket*

*Soft wool insulated bag*

The situation often gives us three readings. The second case, for instance, can mean – bag insulated with soft wool, soft bag that is made of wool and is insulated and soft bag insulated with wool.

**Appositive within a series of nouns**

If it is unclear whether or not a word in a series of nouns is an appositive, or which word is the appositive, the series will be ambiguous. Because of these difficulties, the next example has four readings

*At her bedside were her husband, Capt. Horace Brown, a physician, and two nurses.*

In noun phrases, the presence of a coordinating conjunction, usually *and*, between two modifiers or between two noun heads, can cause ambiguity. In the following situation, it is two modifiers connected by *and*:

**Adjective + noun + “and” + noun + noun head**

*Write for free tape recorder and tape catalogue.*

And here are two noun heads joined by *and*:

*Fellow teachers and administrators*

*City streets and highways*
Now we turn to a few of the ambiguities among the post-nominal modifiers. In the English system of modification, it is mainly word-group modifiers that follow the noun head. The types that we shall deal with are these: prepositional phrase, relative clause, participial phrase (present and past), appositive, modified adjective and adverbial. When two such modifiers occur, there is the danger that the second one may refer to something else as well as to the noun head. The first case is a standard arrangement in English, and students frequently run afoul of it:

**Noun head + prepositional phrase + relative clause**

*The life of a movie star that the public sees.*

**Noun head + relative clause + prepositional phrase**

This pattern of modifiers is just the reverse of the normal order, which we saw in the preceding situation, and offers a great likelihood of ambiguity. The possibilities are that the prepositional phrase may modify something in the relative clause, or the noun head, or something preceding the noun head, usually the verb.

*I was talking about the books I had read in the library.*

This could mean *was talking in the library, books in the library or had read in the library.*

**Noun head + prepositional phrase + prepositional phrase**

Here the second prepositional phrase might be thought to modify the object of the preposition in the first phrase instead of the noun head.

*That review of a book by Simpson is very enlightening.*

**Noun head + prepositional phrase + adverbial of time or place**

*The party after the game yesterday*

*The bottle on the table there*

**Noun head + relative clause + appositive**

*The man who shot grandfather, a poacher, was brought to court.*

**Noun head + infinitive phrase + prepositional phrase**

*Attempts to break strikes by Negroes*
Noun head + participial phrase + relative clause

There is also a theater located near the business district which is crowded every night.

With the post-nominals, as was the case with eh pre-nominals, a coordinating conjunction between two noun heads can create confusion.

Noun (head) + “and” + noun head + prepositional phrase

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Noun head in object-of-verb position + present participle + prepositional phrase

The situation can embody an especially delicate ambiguity that can best be approached by example

They found the boy studying in the library.

Noun derived from verb

Mother’s appearance troubled the girl.

The dual meaning of appearance comes from the two classifications of the verb which forms its base appears. One meaning derives from the intransitive verb appear, as in It troubled the girls that mother appeared suddenly. The second meaning derives from the linking verb appear, as in The girl was troubled because mother appeared untidy.

Mass or count noun

Whether a word is interpreted as a mass or count noun often makes only a slight difference in meaning. In

He bought the beer.

There are the meanings of a single beer or beer for the crowd. The difference is a matter of only a few dollars.

“Both”

The word both can be a pre-determiner or a function noun or the first member of a pair of correlative. When its classification is uncertain, there is the ambiguity.

Both the boys and George joined the Peace Corps.
With both as a pre-determiner there were three who joined - George and both the boys. But with both as a correlative of and, the number who joined is indefinite – both George and the boys. The next example shows both in another combination of meanings:

_They were both excited and happy._

_Both_ as a function noun produces the reading _Both were excited and happy_. But it may also be a correlative - …_both excited and happy_.

**GENITIVE – SUBJECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE**

When a genitive, the –’s, the of type, or the pronominal form modifies a noun of action, it is notionally the subject or object of the verbal base of the noun. The genitive noun is usually human. For instance, in _The boy’s jump saved his life_, _boy_ is felt as the subject of _jump_. But in _The police provided for Richard’s protection_, _Richard_ is the object of verbal base _protect_. In cases where the reader cannot tell whether the genitive is subjective or objective, the structure is ambiguous

_Few names are mentioned in discussions of students._

_Ambiguity_ is not the same as _vagueness_, which simply means that a statement or a word has not been explained or defined precisely enough. Vagueness occurs through the use of words which are relative, for example _warm_ or _cool_, which can mean different things to different people and in different situations.

Although ambiguity is fundamentally a property of linguistic expressions, people are also said to be ambiguous on occasion in how they use language. This can occur even when their words are unambiguous, their words do not make what they mean uniquely determinable. Strictly speaking, however, ambiguity is a semantic phenomenon, involving linguistic meaning rather than speaker’s meaning. _Pragmatic ambiguity_ is an oxymoron. Generally when one uses ambiguous words or sentences, one does not consciously entertain their unintended meanings, although there is psycholinguistic evidence that when one hears ambiguous words one momentarily accesses and then rules out their irrelevant senses. When people use ambiguous language, generally their ambiguity is not intended. Occasionally, however, ambiguity is deliberate, as with an utterance of _I’d like to see more of you_ when intention is taken in more than one way in the very same context of utterance.

**How to Solve the Problem of Ambiguity**

Beside IC and TG mentioned above, there are other contemporary approaches that treat the problem of ambiguity. One is the phrase structure grammar.
The term phrase structure grammar is the term for grammar as defined by phrase structure rules, i.e. rewrite rules of the type. Some authors, however, reserve the term for more restricted grammars: context-sensitive grammar, or context-free grammar. In a broader sense, phrase structure grammar is also known as constituency grammar. The defining trait of phrase structure grammar is thus its adherence to the constituency relation, as opposed to the dependency relation of dependency grammars.

Phrase-structure rules are a way to describe a given language’s syntax and are closely associated with the early stages of Transformational Grammar. They are used to break down a natural language sentence into its constituent parts (also known as syntactic categories) namely phrasal categories and lexical categories.

A grammar that uses phrase structure rules is a type of phrase structure grammar – except in computer science, where it is known as just grammar, usually context-free. Phrase structure rules as they are commonly employed, operate according to the constituency relation and a grammar that employs phrase structure rules is therefore a constituency grammar and as such, it stands in contrast to dependency grammar, which is based on the dependency relation.

Phrase structure rules are rewrite rules that generate phrase structure(s). These have the general form (i), where X is the name of the phrase and Y Z W defines its structure. Y, Z and W are either phrases, and therefore must themselves occur to the left of the arrow in rules of this type, or non-phrasal (terminal) categories (such as Noun, Verb or Determiner).

There are two major varieties of syntactic analyses: a phrase structure and a dependency representation. In general, a phrase structure representation may be found a more suitable one for languages with rather fixed word order patterns and clear constituency structures. Dependency representations, in contrast, may be found more adequate for languages which allow greater freedom of word order and in which linearization is controlled more by pragmatic than by syntactic factors. This is the case in Finnish (and the Slavic languages, some of which, such as Czech and Polish, may be expected to have increased association with the EU in the future). Less obviously, some Romance languages (Italian and Spanish) may also benefit from a dependency representation. However, this does not mean that languages such as English should be annotated using a phrase structure representation or, vice versa, that for languages with greater freedom of word order, dependency should be used. Indeed, dependency structures have been successfully applied to English using the English Constraint Grammar.

In order to represent the syntactic structure of a language in a simplified, condensed way, phrase structure grammar deal with two or the more interesting aspects of natural language syntax: ambiguity and recursion.
The English sentence *Susan saw the dragon in the cave* is ambiguous and there are at least two ways to interpret its meaning. One is that *the speaker is in the cave*, while in the second *the dragon is in the cave, but the speaker is not*.

Phrase structure grammars can solve ambiguity by assigning more than one structure to a given string. Below are phrase structure rules that would be applied.

\[
\begin{align*}
S & \rightarrow \text{NP VP} \\
\text{NP} & \rightarrow \text{Det N} \quad \text{Det} \rightarrow \text{the} \\
\text{NP} & \rightarrow \text{NP PP} \quad \text{N} \rightarrow \text{cave} \\
\text{NP} & \rightarrow \text{Pro} \quad \text{N} \rightarrow \text{dragon} \\
\text{VP} & \rightarrow \text{V NP PP} \quad \text{P} \rightarrow \text{in} \\
\text{VP} & \rightarrow \text{V NP} \quad \text{NP} \rightarrow \text{Susan} \\
\text{PP} & \rightarrow \text{P NP} \quad \text{V} \rightarrow \text{saw}
\end{align*}
\]

Note that the grammar in the above sets of rules contains two rules with the category VP on the left. This means that there are two structures that this grammar can categorize as being VP-type. This is where ambiguity will be captured.

To see this in action, consider the phrase structures. In one case, the phrase structure rule \( \text{V} \rightarrow \text{V NP PP} \) is used. In this case, the PP constituent is a top-level sub-constituent of the VP because it is describing where the V constituent saw it happened (in the cave).

However, there is also the \( \text{V} \rightarrow \text{V NP} \) rule, where the NP is the direct object to the verb. Here, the NP contains the PP, the role of which is to describe something about the NP (that is in the cave).

The phrase structure rules here describe the two ambiguous readings by assigning different structures for the VP. It is important to note that the previously described grammar is capable of capturing both reading of the ambiguous sentence.

The problem of *recursion* can be solved by using phrase structure rules as well as previous rules by these simple additions, essentially composed of two new prepositions.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{P} & \rightarrow \text{over} \\
\text{P} & \rightarrow \text{with} \\
\text{N} & \rightarrow \text{hill} \\
\text{N} & \rightarrow \text{telescope}
\end{align*}
\]

Two new nouns allow the grammar to form the recursive embedding illustrated in the following examples:

*Susan saw the dragon in the cave.*

*Susan saw the dragon in the cave over the hill.*
Susan saw the dragon in the cave over the hill with the telescope.

Recursion should be the problem of another article.

**How to Solve The Problem of Ambiguity in Sentences**

Ambiguity stands for the possibility of the linguistic units (lexical units, phrases, clauses and sentences) that can be expressed in the way in which these units have more than one meaning or more than one function. This possibility in the linguistic and syntactic units occurs as a consequence of the fact that the number of notions which the linguistic and syntactic units are supposed to cover is high. In order to perform the syntactic functions in an endless number of sentences, lexical units have more than one meaning. The same applies to phrases and clauses. As far as sentences are concerned, there are two options:

1. A sentence can limit its potential of meanings of the sentence constituents to only one meaning – *I walked along the bank yesterday.* (the river bank)
2. A sentence can have more than one meaning

   *The bank is the scene of the crime.* (the river bank and the bank where people get money)

The second option offers an ambiguous sentence. Therefore, the term ambiguity also applies to the ambiguity of sentences. Two conditions must be fulfilled: semantic and syntactic. The sentence *He touched the patient with cold hands* is ambiguous because:

1. The semantic content of the prepositional phrase *with cold hands* refers both to the verb *touched* and the noun phrase *the patient*
2. The same prepositional phrase functions both as a modifier of the verb *touched* and as a modifier of the noun phrase *the patient*.

In *The Interpretation of a Syntactic Ambiguity in English* (1979), Radmila Djordjevic states that although ambiguity is a totally normal and natural phenomenon, it is usually viewed as “a defective function of signs, as an enemy, an uncertainty, a logical of grammatical disorder.”

**Sentences and Ambiguity**

There are different patterns of ambiguous sentences.

**PATTERN V – C – V – N – ADV**

The pattern of the sentences from this group is characterized by the structure of coordination. All the possible meanings of the sentences from this group are de-
duced from the structure of coordination that these sentences possess. The ambigu-
ity of the sentences belonging to the sixth group of the ambiguous sentences comes
from the potential of the adverbial to modify either the verb or all the verbs in the
structure of coordination. The best way to see this ambiguity is through the follow-
ing examples:

*He cursed the cat and grumbled all morning.*

He cursed the cat all morning and he grumbled all morning – He cursed the
cat and then grumbled all morning.

The noun phrase *all morning* functions as an adverb of time and modifies
both the verbs *cursed* and *grumbled* in the first case, or just the verb *grumbled* in
the second one.

*He told the story and laughed with gusto.*

He told the story with gusto and laughed with gusto – He told the story and
then laughed with gusto.

In this sentence, there is the prepositional phrase *with gusto* functioning as
an adverb of manner. This sentence has two meanings because the prepositional
phrase *with gusto* modifies both the verb *told* and the verb *laughed* in the first case,
and only the verb *laughed* in the second.

**PATTERN V – N – V – ADV**

This pattern is the same as the one of V-N-V-ADV pattern. It can be illus-
trated with the example

*They saw the girl who disappeared in the store.*

The prepositional phrase *in the store* functions as an adverb of place. It can
modify the verb *saw* as well as the verb phrase *disappeared*. Here are some addi-
tional examples.

*He read the book his friend had given him last month.*

He read the book last month – His friend gave him the book last month.

This sentence contains the noun phrase *last month* which functions as an ad-
verb of time. The ambiguity lies in the modification of this adverb, that is the ad-
verb either modifies the verb *read* or the verb phrase *had given*.

*I met a guy who works as a news reporter in France.*

I met him in France – The guy works in France.

Here there is a prepositional phrase in France that functions as an adverb of
place. It modifies the verb *met* in the first case, and the verb *works* in the second
case.
PATTERN V – N – N

Norman C. Stageberg classified these sentences in his An Introductory English Grammar as belonging to patterns N1TRVN2, N1TRVN2N3 and N1TRVN2N2. Although the pattern is the same, the functions performed by the sentence constituents are not the same. Here are some examples of the sentences belonging to this group of ambiguous sentences:

They fed her the dog biscuits.

She was fed with the dog biscuits – pattern N1TRVN2
Her dog was fed with biscuits – pattern N1TRVN2N3

Both interpretations of this sentence belong to pattern N1TRVN2N3. The ambiguity can be explained in the following way: in the first case, the pronoun her is seen as one constituent performing the function of the indirect object and the noun phrase dog biscuits as the other constituent performing the function of the direct object. In the second case, the noun phrase her dog is viewed as one constituent performing the function of the indirect object and the noun biscuits is another constituent functioning as the direct object. Here are some more examples for the sentences from this group:

I will get her socks.

I will get her socks for her - pattern N1TRVN2N3
The socks belong to her - pattern N1TRVN2

When pronoun her and noun socks are observed as separate constituent, then they perform functions of the indirect and direct object. When noun phrase her socks is observed as one constituent, then it performs the function of the direct object.

The man gave the library books.

The library books were given - pattern N1TRVN2
The man gave the books to the library - pattern N1TRVN2N3

The previous analysis applies to this sentence as well.

She found him a pig.

She found a pig for him - pattern N1TRVN2N3
She compares him to a pig - pattern N1TRVN2N2

Two possible meanings of this sentence result from whether pronoun him and noun pig are observed as two different constituents or whether they are in relation to each other. In the first case, the pronoun him functions as the indirect object and the noun pig as the direct object. In the second case, the pronoun him function
as the direct object and the noun pig as the objective compliment since it completes the direct object.

PATTERN V – N – ADV

This group contains ambiguous sentences with the V-N-ADV pattern. These sentences are ambiguous because of the adverbial, that is, the adverb which either modifies the verb or the object in the sentence. The next few sentences are clear examples of the second group of the ambiguous sentences:

You should wear your skirts longer.

Your skirts should be longer – You should wear skirts longer.

In the first interpretation, the adverb longer modifies the object skirts. In the second interpretation, it is the verb wear that is being modified.

He hit the man with a stick.

The man had the stick – He had the stick.

The prepositional phrase with a stick functions as an adverb and in the first case modifies the direct object the man, while in the second case it modifies the verb hit.

She washed the chair on the porch.

The chair was on the porch – She washed it on the porch.

Again there is the same situation as in the previous sentence. The prepositional phrase on the porch functions as an adverb of place and modifies the noun chair in the first case, or the verb wash in the second case.

They stood watching the fireworks in the garden.

The fireworks were in the garden – They were in the garden.

In this sentence there are constituents performing the same functions as the ones in the previous sentence.

She greeted the guy with a smile.

The guy was smiling – She was smiling.

This sentence is the same as the second example. There is the prepositional phrase with a smile modifying either the noun phrase the guy or the pronoun she.
PATTERN V – N – V – ADV

The important thing about this group of sentences is that the ambiguity comes from the potential of the adverbial to modify the finite verb form (the main verb) in sentences. The potential can also be seen in those sentences containing the infinitive form of the verb, in which the adverbial modifies the infinitive. Postmodification is a characteristic of this type of ambiguous sentences as well.

*She told her husband to leave this evening.*

Her husband had to leave this evening – *She told him this evening.*

This sentence is a perfect example, as there is the adverbial *this evening* modifying the infinitive and the verb *told* in the interpretations above.

More examples:

*They saw the girl who had disappeared in the store.*

The girl had disappeared in the store – *The girl was seen in the store.*

Prepositional phrase *in the store* functions as an adverbial and modifies either the verb *disappear* or the verb *saw*. Ambiguity is achieved through this modification.

*I asked her mother to call at ten o’clock.*

I expected her call at ten – *It was ten when I asked her to call.*

There is the prepositional phrase *at ten o’clock* functioning as an adverb of time. In the first case, this adverb modifies infinitive *to call*, whereas in the second case it modifies verb *ask*.

PATTERN V – N – PP – PP

Ambiguity of sentences belonging to this group is shown either when the second prepositional phrase in the sentence modifies the object of the preposition or it modifies the verb. The best way to understand this is to take a look at the following examples:

*She prepared the girl for the exam in June.*

She prepared the girl in June – *The exam was in June.*

In this sentence there are two prepositional phrases – *for the exam* and *in June*. In the first interpretation, prepositional phrase *in June* modifies the object of preposition *the exam*. In the second interpretation, prepositional phrase *in June* modifies the verb *prepared.*
They were arguing about exam terms at the end of the first semester.

They were arguing at the end of semester – The exams were at the end of semester.

Here again there are two prepositional phrases – about exam terms and at the end of the first semester. In the first interpretation the prepositional phrase at the end of the first semester modifies the object of preposition exam terms. In the second interpretation the prepositional phrase at the end of the first semester modifies the verb arguing.

As it has already been mentioned, the syntactic ambiguity can be seen in those ambiguous sentences in which semantic and syntactic features play an important role. These semantic and syntactic features are responsible for achieving the ambiguity. The syntactic features make a sentence potentially ambiguous, while semantic features are a condition which, if existing, initiates the realization of ambiguity and the sentence has more than one meaning in a particular syntactic structure.

In comprehending ambiguous sentences, syntax and semantics have an equal status. They are of equal importance when disambiguating the ambiguous sentences. Also, the meaning of the constituents in ambiguous sentences is more important than their functions. The question that remains is: which component is more powerful – syntactic or semantic?

Generally speaking, ambiguity is one of the important characteristics of language. It appears whenever more than one meaning is represented. It can be found in words, phrases and sentences. It is structural and lexical and therefore can be solved by using different methods such as IC, TG or a phrase structure and dependency representation and their rules. Further descriptions of the issue should be done in future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Резиме

Речи, фразе или реченице могу бити двосмислене уколико изражавају више од једног значења. Амбивитет је веома сложен проблем и може се решити употребом метода анализе непосредних конституената или применом трансформационог генеративног приступа анализи језика. Постоје и други савремени приступи који се баве проблемом двосмислености, а један од њих је граматика структуре синтагме. Синтакса и семантика имају jednak статус када је у питању разумевање двосмислених реченица и фраза.

Кључне речи: амбивитет, анализа непосредних конситуената, трансформационо-генеративни приступ, реч, реченица, синтагма.