

## An Analysis of Ambiguities Found in Newspaper Headlines

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The meaningful features of linguistic signaling are of two kinds: the lexical forms and the grammatical forms. We have learned that an English sentence is not a group of words as such, but a structure made up of form classes or parts-of-speech. In "The Structure of English", Fries gives us a description of the patterns of devices which signal meaning, in terms of the selection of these form classes or parts-of-speech, and the formal arrangements in which they occur.

As we examine the structures of the sentences of living speech and those of writing, we find that the structural meaning of a sentence is ambiguous unless certain form classes have their characteristic markers.

Newspaper headlines are very frequently ambiguous in structure or in structural meaning. Following are some such headlines taken from *The Japan Times* and the *Daily Michigan* at hand, and an attempt at trying to pin-point their sources of ambiguity. The headlines collected were not sufficient to make any definite groups of classification according to the nature of ambiguity, as was first intended, so one example of each different kind or class of ambiguity has been set forth as a rudiment to further study.

### 1. Close Vote Marks Key State Races.

1(a) Close Vote Marks the Key State Races.

1(b) Close Vote Marks Key the State Races.

The above headline is ambiguous as it stands. Here, there are two words which may possibly serve as a verb. If a definite marker of a noun, *the*, is put before Key as in 1(a), there is no doubt as to the meaning. Again, if the

same marker is put before State, we have 1(b), where there is no ambiguity but quite another meaning. 1(a) seems to be the intended meaning in the newspaper.

2. Lane Hall Center for Religious Activity.

2(a) Lane Hall is Center for Religious Activity.

2(b) Lane Hall Center is for Religious Activity.

The above is ambiguous as to whether it means 2(a) where Lane Hall is the subject or 2(b) which would make Lane Hall Center the complete subject. In headlines of newspapers, the use of a capital letter for the first letter of each word leaves no distinction between personal and common nouns, thus giving rise to an ambiguity that could otherwise be avoided. Another possible interpretation is;

2(c) Lane Hall, a Center for Religious Activity.

The inserted comma in this expression serves to mark it as a descriptive modification structure. The comma here is a graphic device operating as a structural signal which in an utterance would be expressed by such features as intonation, pause and stress.

3. Science and Medicine Divided Over the Significance of Smoking as Cause of Cancer.

3(a) Science and Medicine is Divided Over the Significance of Smoking  
as Cause of Cancer.

3(b) Science and Medicine are Divided Over the Significance of Smoking  
as Cause of Cancer.

Here, the question is whether the subject Science and Medicine are dealt with as two different things or as one. We wonder if the division came between Science and Medicine or if it occurred within the two. The insertion of the singular and the plural forms of the verb 'to be', which correlate with the subject, makes clear the meaning. The following article in the newspaper showed the headline to mean 3(a).

## 4. Student Government; Plenty to Worry About.

4(a) Student Government has Plenty to Worry About.

4(b) Student Government is Plenty to Worry About.

The semi-colon which has been used in the headline above does not help to make clear the structural meaning of the sentence. We do not know whether the latter half of the sentence is object or predicate adjective or whether they are two unrelated utterances. A clear marker such as the insertion of *has* in 4(a) would prevent a possible interpretation of 4(b).

## 5. Reverend Malony Named Bishop at Louisville.

5(a) Reverend Malony was Named Bishop at Louisville.

5(b) Reverend Malony Named the Bishop at Louisville.

This is a case where the ambiguity lies in whether the subject is the performer of the action or whether it signals that which is identified. This ambiguity would not have occurred if the noun following the verb should have been of a different kind (not having the same referent as the noun in the subject). A clear marker such as *is* applied in 5(b) or the insertion of the verb 'to be' as in 5(a) would resolve the ambiguity. 5(a) is most probable.

## 6. Activities to Suit All Available.

6(a) Activities to Suit All are Available.

6(b) Activities, to Suit All Available.

6(c) Activities to Suit — All Available.

The adjective *Available* may be a modifier either of the subject or of the object which directly precedes it. Ambiguity may be avoided by inserting *are* as in 6(a), or by the use of a comma as in 6(b) which would set off the modifier of the subject. 6(c) is another interpretation.

## 7-1. Ike Outlines New Plan For Defence.

## 7-2. S.R.A. to Sponsor Carol Sing on Library Steps.

In such as the above, there seems no way to resolve the ambiguity, if there is any doubt, except by considering the immediate constituents of the structure.

Of course, most of the foregoing ambiguities can also be explained and resolved in terms of immediate constituents.

The two possibilities of dividing the immediate constituents are:

7-1(a) Ike Outlines New Plan | For Defence.

7-1(b) Ike Outlines | New Plan For Defence.

7-2(a) S. R. A. to Sponsor Carol Sing | on Library Steps.

7-2(b) S. R. A. to Sponsor | Carol Sing on Library Steps.

In speech, intonation may be used to clarify the ambiguity in such sentences as the above and serve to emphasize possible means of structural grouping and division of immediate constituents, and thus provide against false groupings. In written form, a comma placed after the last word of the first constituent would indicate a short pause there and possibly serve as a marker. We see though that such graphic signals of punctuation used as substitutes for those features of speech lacking in written work can only act in a limited way as structural signals in written material. A comma to indicate each pause, when an utterance is put into writing, would certainly lead to confusion.

8-1. Color Hits High Note in Design.

8-2. City Council Votes on New Personel.

The words *Hits* and *Votes* may be taken as nouns as well as verbs of the third person singular. Therefore, in

8-1(a) Color *Hits*, (High Note in Design).

8-2(a) City Council *Votes*, (on New Personel).

the phrase in parentheses may be taken either as the object of the verb or as modifier of the noun. In written form, a comma placed after the underlined words would tend to set them off as nouns. We see here that the grouping of the modification is not merely a matter of position. In 8-1, the singular form of High Note in the latter word group correlates with the singular form of Color, thus making a stronger tie there and strengthening the interpretation of *Hits* as the verb. There is no such distinctive feature in 8-2.

Among the ambiguous headlines collected, there were some that seemed to involve a lexical problem. Following are a few for an example.

—Dr. Merritt Quits As A.E.C. Expert.

(a) Dr. Merritt quits his position of being an A.E.C. expert.

(b) Dr. Merritt quits his position after having become an A.E.C. Expert.

—Eisenhower Holds Action Needed Now.

(a) Eisenhower claims that action is needed now.

(b) Eisenhower holds back the action which is needed now.

—Yule Pageant Held Over Extra Day.

(a) The Yule Pageant was held an extra day.

(b) The Yule Pageant was held back an extra day.

The ambiguities seem to lie in the words *As*, *Holds* and *Held Over*, making either one of two interpretations possible. In all three cases, the following articles showed the first meanings (a), to be the ones intended by the writers.

In the description of the form and arrangements that constitute various sets of structural signals, as given by Fries, particular structures may be pointed out in which structural ambiguities commonly appear. The structural ambiguity of a sentence is not just a vague matter. It is possible to state specifically the precise features of the signals that are not present or which overlap. The places where such ambiguities are likely to occur, and commonly do appear, and the nature of the distinctive features involved, may be made clear by a sound description of the structural signals of English sentences. Such a descriptive analysis as given in "The Structure of English" can prove to be the means through which users of the English language become aware of the common sources of structural ambiguity, and the formal devices presented therein, a means for resolving them.

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