Sentence Ambiguities：
Thoughts on English Teaching

Tsuneo YAMAGUCHI
(Graduate School of Teacher Training, Yamagata University)

When we are sending or receiving information, it may be best to be as clear as possible. But, because of other functions of language and because of the importance of the relationship factors as well as the content, even our information is not always as clear and precise as we might wish it to be. The fact is that there are numerous sentences which are perfectly grammatical but ambiguous and, oftentimes, meaningless. The problem exists in the attempt at extracting a sentence out of context-dependent text of discourse. "Discourse" on both intrinsic and extrinsic circumstances should be considered in the EFL classroom. The Importance of discourse analysis being the key to resolving ambiguities and misunderstandings is a case in point in this paper.

1 Introduction

It has been suggested that human oral language is the most effective means of communication in existence. Consequently, we have the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, on the one hand, to assert that language works in a grammatical way to control the mind and that without language one cannot think, and a transformational philosophy, on the other, to claim that the grammar of a language should generate "all and only" well-formed sentences of the language.

In spite of these "assurances," we know that language is not a perfect instrument, the reason being that it is more context-dependent that we have been willing to admit.

Indeed, there are numerous sentences which are perfectly grammatical but ambiguous and, oftentimes, meaningless. Ambiguities and misunderstandings are cases in point in this paper. Let me, therefore, allude to some of the linguists in the literature who attempted to elucidate ambiguous sentences.

Consider first the following sentences:

(1) Miss Jones, my secretary, unfortunately is ill.

(2) Flying planes can be dangerous.

(3) Visiting anthropologists can be amusing.

(4) The shooting of the hunters was quite distressing.

For someone who is unaware of the context of the situation in which they were uttered, any of the above examples could be ambiguous: that is, a single structure may express two or more different sets of underlying relationships. In the case of (1), inflection and pause (juncture) influence the meaning. Without knowing the reality this sentence faces, there seems to be several possible interpretations. The listener, then, could take it to mean: (a) "Miss Jones" and "my secretary" are in a positive relation and, therefore, the same person; (b) "Miss Jones" is an addressee to whom the sentence "my secretary is ill" is uttered; (c) "my secretary," on the other hand, is an addressee to whom the sentence "Miss Jones is ill" is uttered. The most probable solution to this ambiguity should be the reference to "tonicity" by placing the tonic in the most usual place while applying the stresses and variety of juncture placement.

By varying the tonicity, ambiguities can be

resolved to a certain extent. However, the meaning intended initially cannot be decoded easily without knowing the context of situation because ambiguity is a decoding problem, not an encoding one.

While the example sentence (1) may have been simple in structure, as far as its ambiguity is concerned, let us see now some of the scholarly arguments dealing with the resolutions of ambiguity regarding the aforementioned (2), (3) and (4).

2 Frank Palmer (1971)

Palmer's approach to the ambiguous sentence (2) is twofold. His consideration of ambiguity is illustrated, first, in terms of *Immediate Constituent* (IC) analysis in which he introduced *labeled bracketing*, and second, of a transformational analysis.

The labeled IC analysis is used not merely to find the constituents, but to differentiate the two possibilities in the example sentence (2) by giving labels to the constituents.

(2) Flying planes can be dangerous.

Possible meanings are: the action of flying planes can be dangerous, and planes which fly can be dangerous. This distinction is established by seeing whether *flying* or *planes* is the subject of the verb by substitution of *is* or *are* for *can be*:

(2-1) Flying planes are dangerous.
(2-2) Flying planes is dangerous.

It becomes clear that in (2-1) *flying* is an adjective and planes a noun, while in (2-2) both *flying* and *planes* are nouns. In short:

adjective (participle) --- noun (planes which fly)
or
noun (gerund) --- noun (to fly planes)

The other resolution proposed is by a transformational analysis. In other words, the differences can be shown in the matrix and the constituent sentence as well as the place of embedding. This whole process works as follows:

On (2-1), we have as kernel sentences,

Planes can be dangerous
and
Planes fly

Then, a transformation is applied,

Planes which fly can be dangerous
and a further transformation to give the required sentence by transforming *which fly* into *flying* and placing it before *planes.*

On (2-2), the kernel sentences will be,
... can be dangerous
and
(someone) flies planes

We transform the second into *flying planes* and insert it in place of NP. The example sentence (3) is exactly the same type.

(3) Visiting anthropologists can be amusing.

What Palmer argues here is that there are ambiguous pairs that differ not only in the IC analysis but also in the labels, and that there are not merely two different deep structures, but also two different surface structures. It is also interesting to note Palmer's statement that no IC type analysis can disambiguate the sentence (4) which has only one surface structure but two deep structures. For this, later being handled by another scholar would be worthy to be kept in mind just for the sake of contrast.

3 Charles Landesman (1972)

The entire book is designed to attempt to deal with this one of Chomsky's most famous examples from various linguistic points of view.

(4) The shooting of the hunters was quite distressing.

As we see, the example sentence (4) is ambiguous both grammatically and semantically for us who are unaware of the context in which it was uttered. The listener could take it to mean either that "the hunters were shot and this was distressing" or that "the hunters were shooting and this was distressing."

While recalling John Lyons' analysis (1968) on this same example, he brings about the "objective interpretation" and "subjective interpretation" of the phrase, saying that the objective interpretation of the above phrase is closely related to passive constructions: *The hunters were shot* (by....). And with a "fully transitive" verb phrases of the form *the V + ing of NP* do not normally admit to a subjective interpretation. They cannot be extended with an objective of NP (*The shooting of the hunters of the deer). Instead, the subjective NP takes the "possessive suffix and the objective NP the preposition 'of'": *The hunter's shooting of the deer*.

In sum, a phrase of the form *the V + ing of NP* is grammatically ambiguous if, and only if, the grammar generates sentences of the form:

    (1) NP_1+ Vtr. + NP_2
    (2) NP_1 + Vintr.

But are they satisfied in the case of the *eating of the apples*? Lyons suggests that this can only be "objectively" interpretable as in *someone eats apples*.

According to Landesman, speakers choose the sentence in order to realize their intentions. Therefore, "sentence-meaning is reducible to speaker's intention" (1972:14). In ambiguity there is not a discrepancy between the speaker's meaning and sentence meaning; rather,

we are in doubt as to which sentence-meaning is the applicable one. This is because sentence-meaning or sentence-use is not conventional in the same way that word-meaning is. In fact, sentence-meaning is a result of the sum total of lexical and syntactical conventions applicable to the sentence, which, thus, causes a pluri-interpretation phenomenon. Thus, "the only way the listener could dispel the ambiguity would be to discover the intention with which the speaker uttered the sentence" (14). This is benignly true. But how? His attempt is focused upon the linguistic actions accompanied when the sentence is spoken or written while responding well to J. L. Austin's classified actions (Austin 1962).

Landesman's idea is that in cases of ambiguity —— where a sentence is susceptible to more than one interpretation ——— each interpretation is fixed by the "grammatical and syntactical" (G-S) structure of the sentence and is not determined by speaker's meaning. It is the sentence's G-S structure and not the aims with which it is spoken that determine or at least circumscribe the act that is performed.

He also asserts that certain forms are of the statement-making variety because they are most often used with the aim of communicating information. And forms specific to that action acquire their meaning through their being means to the attainment of those aims.

While he attempts at removing the ambiguity of the sentence at various theoretical levels, the example sentence "The shooting of...." has not been made clearer, although he approves the fact that contextual factors play a vital role in determining the sentence properly.

4 Others

John Lyons (1968) attempted to discern sentence ambiguities at the grammatical level of description. His point is made clear, because Lyon's reference to sentence ambiguities rests upon his theory that

"ambiguity may be a function then either of constituent-structure or of the distributional classification of the ultimate (and intermediate) constituents" (1968: 213). By resorting to this grammatical analysis, for example, *They can fish* is accounted for by the double classification of both *can* (as a modal auxiliary of a verb): *They can fish*, meaning the people's ability to fish, on the one hand, and meaning to preserve fish by putting in a closed metal container, on the other.

He also touches upon Chomsky's "Flying planes can be dangerous" and "The shooting of the hunters...," but does not specifically comment anything new about the resolution to them. Rather, there seems to be no particular way to disambiguate these sentences, but his is content with the grammatical representation of sentence structures.

George Miller (1973) made an attempt at calling for disuse of some of those ambiguous sentences for the non-English-speaking beginners of English or even English speaking novices who are about to learn it. A sentence like *Mary and John saw the mountains while they were flying to California* does cause confusion or misunderstanding among listeners, and no dictionary tells you that mountains do not fly, since "such knowledge is part of one's conceptual information about the world one lives in, not part of one's lexical knowledge about the meanings of words" (1973: 9). This, I believe, is an important aspect which comprises what discourse is. In other words, "our conceptual knowledge and our systems of beliefs are not really part of our linguistic knowledge, but they play a very important role in the way we understand language in actual use" (Miller 1973: 9).

Like Landesman, Miller here attributes most of our misunderstandings of other people to our failures to understand the speaker's intentions. And to prevent these series of failures, he offers special verbs for clarification as *warn* and *assure*, known as *intentional verbs*. But, in actuality, we know that the social context makes it perfectly clear what speaker's intentions are without the assistance of these intentional verbs, and, more often than not, they are not used except for some emphatic cases. Thus, once ambiguity-bearing sentences are extracted out of context for linguistic use, confusion and misunderstanding can result.

5 Conclusion

Over the several attempts at disambiguating some of the problematic sentences by the aforementioned scholars, their approaches are basically analyses of the sentence. Their total negligence of contextual features or some other implicit factors surrounding each ambiguous sentence is always devoid. In the words of Lyon:

> Many of these phrases are not subject to misinterpretation when they are actually used in sentences, because either the rest of the sentence of the general context in which the language operates makes it certain, or at least very probable, that one interpretation rather than the other is the correct one (1968: 214).

Therefore, the problem exists in the attempt at extracting a sentence out of context-dependent text of discourse. As has been practiced by sociolinguists, "a sentence" level analysis should be given up and "discourse" on both intrinsic and extrinsic circumstances should be studied.

Ambiguous sentences may die hard. They should be taught to the English teachers as an aid to his teaching of English. And the how of teaching sentence ambiguities depends on the class in which it is taught.

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