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Linguistic ambiguity of modification

Ambigüedad lingüística de la modificación

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the ambiguity in using modifiers and shows its types. The research contains an analysis of some ambiguous sentences with an explanation of the reasons behind this ambiguity. It presents a theoretical background about modification in general and clarifies different types of ambiguity. It depends on the available grammar sources and the internet to provide enough material. It shows that a modifier is an optional element that depends on the headword. There are two types of modification, also, there are two types of ambiguity. Phrasal verbs can be interpreted in more than one way.

Keywords: Linguistic, ambiguity, modification, grammar.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explica la ambigüedad en el uso de modificadores y muestra sus tipos. La investigación contiene un análisis de algunas frases ambiguas con la explicación de las razones detrás de esta ambigüedad. Presenta un trasfondo teórico sobre la modificación en general y aclara diferentes tipos de ambigüedad. Depende de las fuentes gramaticales disponibles e Internet para proporcionar suficiente material. Muestra que un modificador es un elemento opcional que depende del encabezado. Hay dos tipos de modificaciones, además, hay dos tipos de ambigüedad. Los phrasal verbs se pueden interpretar de más de una forma.

Palabras clave: Lingüística, ambigüedad, modificación, gramática.

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores the ambiguity in using modifiers. It shows its types (structural and lexical). It also contains an analysis of some ambiguous sentences explaining the reason. So, this study is beneficial for researchers and learners in the field of linguistics to avoid any problem in understanding the concept of modification in general and the ambiguity of modification specifically, and many students do not know its types and the reason behind such ambiguity.

This study aims at:

- Explaining modification in general.
- Showing ambiguity of modification.
- Showing types of ambiguity in modification.

This study hypothesizes the following:

- There are two types of ambiguity (Adjective ambiguity and Adverb ambiguity).
- The syntactic structure is behind ambiguous sentences which can be analyzed both (syntactically and semantically).

Definitions of modification

Berry (Berry: 2018) defines a modifier as a "subordinate element in an endocentric structure. It is a word group that affects the meaning of a headword in that it describes, limits, intensifies, and/or adds to the meaning of the head.", e.g.,

1- The blue shirt

'Blue' describes the word 'shirt', it limits by excluding other colors; and it adds to the plain meaning of shirt.

2- Dirty dog

'Dirty' is an adjective that modifies the noun dog.

Another definition of modifier is an optional element in the phrase structure of clause structure. Typically the modifier can be omitted without affecting the grammar of the sentence. e.g.

3- This is a red ball.

The adjective 'red' is a modifier, modifying the noun 'ball'.

4- A small mackerel.

The adjective 'small' modifies the noun 'mackerel'.

Dypedahl & Hasselgård (Dypedahl & Hasselgård: 2018) define the modifier as an element that depends on the head and modifies the way you are to understand what the head refers to. E.g.,

5- His large house.

'His large' modifies the head 'house'.

6- A lot of expensive furniture.

'A lot of expensive' modifies the word 'furniture'.

(Nelson & Greenbaum: 2018) define modifiers as units that are dependent on the main word and can be removed. E.g.,

7- Some long books.

8- Books on astronomy.

The final definition is by (Crystal: 2011) "is a term used in syntax to refer to the structural dependence of one grammatical unit upon another- but with different restriction in the scope of the term being introduced by different approaches." E.g.,

9- Big man.

The word 'big' modifies 'man'.

METHODOLOGY

This study presents a theoretical background of the modification in general. It clarifies the different types of ambiguity by giving adequate examples together with their analysis. The study depends on the available grammar sources and the Internet to provide enough material for the theoretical background and the analysis.

Limits of the study

This study is limited to the study of the ambiguity of modification in English and its types (Adjective ambiguity and Adverb ambiguity) and its types can be analyzed on two levels (syntactically and semantically).

Value of study

The research will be of benefit to these students in the field of linguistics and may help the students of English as a second language to understand this topic.

RESULTS

Types of modifications:

There are two types of modification: adjective modification and adverb modification. "The typical and most characteristic position of an adjective is between a determiner and a noun."

Adjective modifier:

"A word that modifies a noun."

(Liu & Zhan: 2018, pp. 1-6)

10- The small boy saw George with a crazy dog recently.

The word 'small' modifies the noun 'boy' and the word 'crazy' modifies the noun 'dog'.

(Yule: 2020)

Modifiers can be single-word modifiers and word-group modifiers. Single-word modifiers can occur before the noun or after the noun. When the single-word modifiers occur before the noun, they are called 'attributives' because they attribute a quality or characteristic to the noun, for example, the beautiful painting. And when the single-word modifiers occur after the noun, they are called 'predictive', for example, your daughter is pretty.

(Gupta: 2019)

Single-word attributives:

Adjectives are attributive when they premodify nouns, they appear between the determiner and the head of the noun phrase.

(Quirk: 2007)

According to (Gupta: 2019) attributive adjectives can be grouped as follows:

A- Relationship: -er

(Former, latter, outer, upper...etc.)

11- Lets buy tickets for the upper circle.

B- Intensifying:

(Mere, very, utter, outright...etc.)

(Dixon: 2005)

12- The very man (for the job).

C- Limiting:

(Join, lone, only, main, sole...etc.)

13- Ton is an only child and the sole heir.

D- Noun – related:

(Chemical, coastal, earthen, solar... etc.)

14- An earthen pot.

E- Alternative past participle:

(Drunken, sunken...etc.)

15- A sunken garden.

F- Miscellaneous:

(Indoor, outdoor, inside, outside, downtown...etc.)

16- And an indoor/outdoor swimming pool.

(Quirk: 2007) say that attributive adjective can be grouped as follows:

A- Intensifying adjectives:

- Emphasizers are attributive only:

17- A certain (sure) winner.

Amplifiers, when they are non- inherent:

18- A complete fool.

The fool is complete.

B- Limiter adjectives:

19- The main reason.

C- Related to adverbials:

- Other adjectives that are attributive only can be related to adverbials.

These non- inherent adjectives include:

20- My former friend~ formerly my friend.

- If adjectives premodify agentive nouns, the latter suggests as well as the relationship to the verb base:

21- A hard work ~ a worker who works hard.

D- Denominal adjectives:

Some adjectives derived from nouns are attributive only:

22- Criminal law~ law concerning crime.

(Quirk: 2007)

Single-word predicative

Adjectives are predicative when they occur after the noun. For example:

23- The book is nice.

'Nice' modifies the noun 'book'.

Predicative adjectives can be grouped as follows:

A- a-serious:

(Alive- alone- asleep- afraid...etc)

24- I am afraid that John may get drunk again.

(Dixon: 2005)

B- Health adjective:

(Faint- fine- ill- well...etc)

25- I am just fine.

(Sadler & Spencer: 2017, pp. 206-236)

C- Adjectives and past participles with usually obligatory complementation.

(Answerable (to/ for) – bound (to+ infinitive/ for) – conductive (to)...etc)

26- I am not answerable to you.

D- Adjective preposition:

27- The tall young man in the yellow jacket is my cousin.

The noun (man) is modified by two pre-noun adjectives, the tall young and the post-noun adjectival prepositional phrase, in the yellow jacket. Together they all make up the noun phrase the tall young man in the yellow jacket.

E- Adjective to-infinitive:

28- The food was 'delicious' to eat.

F- Adjective + noun clause:

29- I am sure (that) you'll understand.

G- Adjective + wh-word + to-infinitive:

30- We are uncertain/ not sure how/ when/ where to go.

(Gupta: 2019)

Adverb modifier

An adverb modifier is a word or phrase that is used to modify another part of a sentence typically an adverb or adjective. When used properly, these modifiers provide additional information about an action or some part of a sentence and answer a question about it. In the sentence 'He crossed the bridge quickly', the word 'quickly' is an adverbial modifier. The modifier in the example answers the question: 'how did he cross the bridge?'

Types of Adverbs

According to Gupta, there are seven types of adverbs: adverbs of manner, adverbs of place, and adverbs of time, focusing (or limiting), intensifying, sentence adverb, and connectors.

(Gupta: 2019)

1- Adverb of manner: adverb of manner provide information on how someone does something.

31- John has answered their questions cleverly.

The word 'cleverly' has a pure manner interpretation (the way John answered their questions was clever)

32- The police searched the room carefully, but the small room less so.

(Quirk: 2007)

2- Adverb of place: tells us about the time of the action or where the action occurred/ occurs/ will occur, e.g., (here, there, near, somewhere, outside...etc)

33- The bank is between the cinema and the café.

34- The car is in front of the bank.

(Coe et al.: 2020)

3- Adverb of time: time normally goes after place.

35- Tom walks to work every morning.

36- I am going to Paris on Monday.

It is possible to put time at the beginning of the sentence.

37- Every morning Tom walks to work.

38- On Monday I am going to Paris.

4- Focusing (or limiting) adverbs

Focusing adverbs point to the part of a sentence, the meaning conveyed often depends upon their position. It is best to replace them in front of and next to the word or words modified by them. For example (also, only, just...etc.)

39- Only John helped me to buy the house.

5- Intensifying adverbs

Intensifying adverbs can intensify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Most of these adverbs occupy mid-position, and the end position is often possible, such as: (, completely, badly, carefully, deeply...etc.)

40- It was small, badly painted, and dirty.

6- Sentence modifiers (sentence adverbs)

A sentence modifier is an adverbial that modifies, as its head, all the rest of the sentence. for example:

41- Naturally, he behaved at the party.

'Naturally' modifies the words 'he behaved at the party', but, "he behaved naturally at the party". The word 'naturally' modifies the verb 'behaved'.

(Berry: 2018)

Sentence modifiers have seven structures:

a- Single-word adverbial:

42- Luckily, I know how to swim.

b- Clause adverbials:

43- Since the door was closed, we climbed in the back window.

c- Prepositional phrase:

44- In fact, the contract is invalid.

d- Absolute structure:

45- The guest has departed, we resumed the normal household routine.

e- Infinitive phrase:

46- To keep dry in a tent, you should provide with a fly.

f- Participle phrase:

47- Considering the circumstances, he was lucky to escape alive.

g- Relative in- ever:

48- Wherever she is, I will find her.

7- Connecters:

Connecters signal a meaningful connection between sentence (and sometimes clauses), such as (first- second- finally- for example- by the way- although...etc.)

49- Although he eats a lot, I am very thin.

(Gupta: 2019)

DISCUSSION

Definitions of ambiguity

(Nelson & Greenbaum: 2018) define ambiguity "In the everyday uses of the spoken language and most writing, ambiguity is a fault to be avoided because it may cause confusion or misunderstanding".

For example:

10- The tall woman on the committee that I met with yesterday.

The sentence has two meanings: Who did I meet with yesterday? (The woman or the committee).

Another definition of ambiguity is "the possibility of interpreting an expression in two or more distinct ways".

Types of Ambiguity

There are two types of ambiguity: adjective ambiguity and adverb ambiguity.

Adjective ambiguity

"The subject of a clause with a participle in it (i.e. without a subject of a clause of its own) must be the same as the main clause".

For example:

11- Coming round the corner, a tree lay across the path.

In this sentence, the participial phrase "coming round the corner" grammatically modifies "tree" and therefore the sentence seems (a tree came round the corner). This is the mistake of the misplaced participle. The sentence can be corrected by necessary pronoun immediately following the participial phrase:

Coming round the corner, we saw that a tree lay across our path.
(Zheng: 2017, pp. 29-44)

"-ed –participle"

It is a form of a verb that is used in a sentence to modify a noun, noun phrase, verb, or verb phrase, and thus plays a role similar to that of an adjective or adverb. It is one of the types of non-finite verb forms. Sometimes, "-ed – participle" occurs at the beginning or the end of the sentence, and is usually attached to the subject of the main clause as in "walking down the street (clause), the man (subject) saw the beautiful trees (object). However, when the subject is missing or the clause attaches itself to another object in a sentence, the clause seems "an ambiguous clause".

12- Dressed in white robes, we thought the visitors looked like priests in some strong ceremony.
(Quirk: 2007)

Adverb ambiguity

It is noticed that the sentence:

13- The dog bites the man in the bathroom.

Ambiguities of this sort may be called ambiguities of bracketing since the ambiguity rests on whether "in the bathroom" is a constituent of NP or is an adverb of place.

Phrasal Verbs

A phrasal verb consists of a verb plus a particle, sometimes the phrasal verbs can be interpreted in more than one way. e.g.,

54- He looked up the street.

On one interpretation, the verb phrase is analyzed as V + PP. This is the interpretation on which he would be looking up the street to see who was coming, for example. On the other hand, it to be analyzed as a phrasal verb with the noun phrase functioning as a direct object. According to this interpretation, "he would be trying to locate the street in a street atlas".

(Burton-Roberts: 2016)

A verb may belong to more than one class. For example:

55- He suggested that she went.

Is ambiguous: if suggested is a factual verb, she went is a factual report, whereas if it is a volitional verb, she went is a suggested action.

Verb phrase containing auxiliaries that have more than one meaning, e.g.: Shall, will, and can:

56- Johan cannot do it. Active

It cannot be done (by Johan). Passive

In the active sentence, "can" would normally be interpreted as expressing ability, whereas in the passive sentence it is interpreted as expressing possibility.

With dynamic verbs, we can distinguish between "actional" passive and "statal" passive.

57- The house is already sold.

Someone has already sold the house.

A sentence such as "They were married" is ambiguous between an actional interpretation (They were married in a church yesterday) and statal interpretation (They were married when I last heard about them).

(Quirk: 2007)

CONCLUSION

In this study, it is concluded that:

1-The modifier is an optional element in the sentence.

- 2-Modifier depends on the headword.
- 3-There are two types of modification: (Adjective modification and adverb modification).
- 4-The case of ambiguity is due to syntactic and semantic.
- 5-There are two types of ambiguity: adjective ambiguity (-ing, -ed, and participle) and adverb ambiguity (the placement of adverb in the sentence).
- 6-Phrasal verbs can be interpreted in more than one way.

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