

Exercise Sheet Ambiguity

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Task 1: The following words have more than one meaning.

1. Provide definitions for two of the meanings of the words.
2. For each meaning, give a clear example sentence.

- a. run
- b. bank
- c. must
- d. bright
- e. old

Lexical ambiguity:

We speak of lexical ambiguity if and only if

Task 2: Find the ambiguity:

Example: *Pat likes English poems and novels.*

Reading 1: Pat likes poems in English and novels.

Reading 2: Pat likes English poems and English novels.

- a. The police stopped the man with a gun.
 - b. Chris answered the question wisely.
- c. They decided on the boat.
 - d. Who did Alex want to leave?

Structural ambiguity:

A sentence is structurally ambiguous if and only if the ambiguity is related to

Task 3: Continue the following sentence:

- (i) The judge denied the prisoner's request because he ...

Who is the referent of *he* in your continuation?

Construct a continuation that makes another referent more plausible.

Referential ambiguity:

A sentence is referentially ambiguous if and only if the ambiguity is caused by

Task 4: Ambiguity of numbers:

1. What is the most natural interpretation of the number *three* in the following sentences?
 - a. There were three candles on Amy's birthday cake.
 - b. Families with three children can get a family ticket for the zoo.
 - c. You may take three cookies for desert.
2. Construct example sentence with numbers and determine which of the readings is most prominent.
3. Try to construct an example sentence that is ambiguous between two readings and provide disambiguating continuations.

Task 5: Ambiguity with negation

Negation often triggers ambiguity. In the following sentences:

1. Find the ambiguity and provide unambiguous paraphrases.
2. For each reading, try to find a context that makes this reading more plausible than the other.

Example: *Pat may not read the paper.*

Readings:

Reading 1: Pat is not allowed to read the paper.

Reading 2: Possibly, Pat will not read the paper.

Contexts:

for reading 1: *I have written a paper on linguistics. I will show it to Alex and Chris, but Pat may not read the paper.*

for reading 2: *It is important that all students read the paper, but my experience tells me that Pat may not read the paper.*

- a. Everything that glitters is not gold.
- b. You must wear no tie at the party.
- c. Alex didn't buy many books.
- d. Did Chris and Kim not marry last year?

Task 6: Ambiguity of unexpressed material.

The following sentences contain unexpressed parts, which cause ambiguity.

1. Which element marks that there is something missing?
2. State the possible options for filling these slots.

Example: *Pat kissed his wife, and so did Sam.*

Relevant element: *so did* marks the missing material.

Possible interpretation: ,

Reading 1: and Sam kissed Pat's wife

Reading 2: and Sam kissed his own wife

- a. Chris thought that Alex went home and Pat did too.
- b. Alex loves her dog and Chris does, too.
- c. I think that Chris said that Alex called but I don't know when.
- d. I am a big fan of Elvis Presley. Also Robbie Williams.