

Dallin D. Oaks

Structural Ambiguity in English

An Applied Grammatical Inventory

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Volume I

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Dallin D. Oaks



Continuum International Publishing Group

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First published 2010

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-8470-6415-8 (hardback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Catalog record is available from the Library of Congress.

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Preface

In comparison to its importance for so many language-based studies and applications, structural ambiguity remains remarkably underdescribed. This book is intended to be a useful reference work that illuminates the role of various features of the English language in creating structural ambiguities. To do this, the book uses an inventory approach, proceeding through a consideration of the form and structure classes of the language, some arrangements of modifiers, and other syntactic structures that play a particularly important role in creating structural ambiguities.

Although this book is intended to address an important linguistic topic and provide new insights and useful information to academic linguists and serious students of the language, my hope is that scholars from such related fields as communications, psychology, humor research, editing, advertising, and language pedagogy will also find the information in the book to be accessible and useful. My discussion uses standard linguistics terminology such as *finite vs nonfinite verbs*, *SVOC clausal types*, etc., some of which may be unfamiliar to people from these other fields and disciplines, but I generally try to introduce such terminology when it is first used. In doing so, I hope my linguistic colleagues will understand that my brief explanations of such terminology are intended for the larger audience and not intended to appear patronizing or condescending in any way to those already familiar with such terms.

This book makes three important contributions. First of all, as its title indicates, the book provides an inventory and discussion of how the various features of the English language create structural ambiguity. Rather than merely outline some types of structural ambiguities, the book gets inside the grammar, noting the specific structural behaviors of particular classes and subclasses of words and larger structures. I realize that some linguists will be aware of much of the information that I will present. Still, there is some value in collecting information and bringing it together in

one source. And some of the linguistic observations are likely to be informative even to those quite familiar with the grammatical structure of the language. This book cannot of course explore every minute dimension of structural ambiguity. That would take more space than this two-volume work allows. I have limited myself mainly to the features of those ambiguities that are sufficiently prominent that we can see evidence in the popular culture that they have been noticed, whether by everyday speakers who have stumbled across them by chance or by verbal artists such as comedians and advertisers. My treatment of structural ambiguities would obviously have to be even more detailed if I were to describe every conceivable type and variation as well as all of the necessary semantic and pragmatic features that are relevant to a full understanding of such ambiguities. Although such information may be essential for full descriptive purposes and may ultimately be crucial in a field such as Natural Language Processing, it would go well beyond the scope of what I am attempting to do here.

Second, the book is replete with authentic examples, usually from jokes and advertisements, showing how specific structural features of the language have been used to create structural ambiguities. I suspect that some readers may be more interested in the data I provide than in my accompanying explanations. For those readers, the data can be applied to whatever their research or pedagogical needs might be. For example, a grammar or syntax teacher who is already aware of how a predicate adjective construction using a participial adjective may be easily confused with the passive voice might not be as interested in reading the description of the resemblance of the two structures. But he or she might like to have an example or two of how actual jokes and advertisements have exploited this homonymous structural similarity.

With regard to this second contribution, another potential benefit to be gained from the collection of authentic examples of structural ambiguities is the independent verification, outside the field of linguistics, that such examples can provide about native speaker recognition of particular structural ambiguities. It is one thing for a linguist to argue, based on his or her own linguistic intuitions, that a particular utterance is structurally ambiguous (and some linguists have been criticized for relying too much on their own native-speaker intuitions for the claims that they make about the syntax). But if that linguist can show a humorous word-play formed not by a linguist but rather by a comedian or

advertiser, who very obviously intended to have the target audience see two or more separate structural interpretations, then it becomes an independent verification that a given utterance really is structurally ambiguous, even to people who do not spend a great deal of time consciously thinking about the structure of the language. Indeed, with as much time as I have spent thinking about structural ambiguities and with the heightened awareness that I have acquired with regard to the possible ambiguity of particular structures, I could begin to doubt whether most native speakers would even perceive the double meaning of certain structures. But when I see that a joke or advertisement deliberately exploits that double meaning, then I am reassured that my intuitions about the ambiguous nature of a particular structure are not merely accessible to me and other linguists, but to the larger community of native speakers of the language.

The third contribution of this book is its demonstration of how the kind of structural information in the text may be used to deliberately create structural ambiguities. Not long after I began researching structural ambiguities, I began to believe that the most effective application that native speakers could make of my work was not to recognize and avoid ambiguities but rather to generate them. Although native speakers who read this book could perhaps increase their ability to recognize and avoid structural ambiguities, I think it is quite clear that native speakers are generally able to recognize these ambiguities without conscious grammatical instruction. But forming structural ambiguities and the word-plays that integrate them is another matter altogether. In order to do this, I think it is definitely useful to learn how they are constructed. And significantly enough, some highly lucrative industries reward those who display creativity and resourcefulness in creating the kind of clever word-plays that are often based on structural ambiguities. Consider those activities or products where word-plays are often used, such as comedy writing, advertising, business jingles and slogans, greeting cards, bumper stickers, captions, headlines, etc. The final chapter outlines how one might use the information in the book in a systematic and strategic way to generate structural ambiguities.

Having said what I believe the book's contributions to be, I wish to clarify what this book does not primarily aim to do. This book is not intended as a work in the field of abstract theoretical syntax. In fact, some theoretical syntacticians will likely be put off by some of the terms

and analyses that I will use, though such terms and approaches are compatible with the work that is done in applied linguistics. The book is also not intended to provide a complete or even comprehensive description of the English grammatical system. Its focus is limited to those structures and features that are relevant to structural ambiguity and how they might be deliberately exploited to form structural word-plays. This focus also explains some of the idiosyncratic features of my inventory. For example, for reasons I explain later in the book, I have developed some chapters around nouns and verbs rather than around noun phrases and verb phrases, a departure from what other linguistic descriptions might do as they describe the overall grammar.

I have benefited over the years from the timely support or input of a variety of individuals. I first wish to thank Victor Raskin, who has always believed in the value of this project. I also thank that scholar of structural ambiguities, Norman C. Stageberg. Although my work has headed in a different direction from his and he died some years before I even began to study ambiguity, his work on ambiguity has been very helpful and influential to me. I also thank my colleagues and friends, Paul Baltes, Wendy Baker, Royal Skousen, Mel Thorne, Wesley Pack, Rachel Hansen, and Christina Champenois, who have read portions of my manuscript. Over the years I have also benefited from examples that my students have provided to me. I have tried to note these contributions in the endnotes of the book. In addition to this, I have been assisted in different ways by the following research assistants: Derek Bentley, Jane Clayson, Elaine Amodt, Renee Johnson, Rachel Hansen, Curtis Snyder, Raymond Pai, Caroline Jacobs, and Eimi Priddis. Others providing useful input or help of one kind or another include William Eggington, Diane Strong-Krause, Alan Manning, Lynn Henrichsen, Deryle Lonsdale, Cameron Martin, Heather Armstrong, and Tracy Spackman. I have also benefited from the technical assistance or encouragement of Phyllis Daniel, Lori Ann Spear, Sharon Boyle, and Mel Smith. A research leave provided by Brigham Young University greatly assisted me in being able to finish this book. I am also deeply indebted to the editorial staff at Continuum Publishing, particularly Gurdeep Mattu and Colleen Coalter, and P. Muralidharan and his team at Newgen Imaging Systems. Finally, I thank my wife, Marleen, without whose patience and support, this project would not have been possible.

Part I

Preliminary Considerations

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Chapter 1

Introduction

One of the curious incongruities in our standard English lexicon surrounds the verb *disambiguate*, which has no corresponding word *ambiguate*.¹ I suspect this lexical gap will not continue much longer. A quick computer search online reveals that people are already beginning to use the as-yet-unacceptable form. The current lexical gap likely results from a perspective that most of us have of language as a medium of communication almost exclusively devoted to conveying information. According to this view of language, ambiguity represents a problem, a phenomenon that must be avoided if possible and resolved when it does occur. By this view we wouldn't normally try to "ambiguate" something, at least not when communicating cooperatively with someone.

But as David Crystal and other linguists have pointed out, our language use is not limited to communicating information. In considering the importance of "ludic" or playful language, Crystal explains:

Ludic language has traditionally been a badly neglected subject of linguistic enquiry—at best treated as a topic of marginal interest, at worst never mentioned at all. Yet it should be at the heart of any thinking we do about linguistic issues. (1)

In recent years some linguists, have, in fact, given increased attention to humor. We could note, for example, the work of Raskin, Attardo, Ritchie, Ross, Pepicello and Green, as well as Don and Alleen Nilsen, and others, though more work still remains to be done. Beyond the important descriptive linguistic work that has been done in humor research, I believe we should also examine how linguistic scholarship in this area can be applied toward creating humor. More specifically, we might consider how a conscious knowledge of structural ambiguity (an ambiguity involving how the structures, not just word meanings

should be interpreted) could be useful in generating the kind of clever word-plays found in the humor of comedy writing, greeting cards, bumper stickers, and advertising.

Of course structural word-plays are only involved in a fraction of the humor and advertising that exists. Much of the humor that we see is situationally based or plays off stereotypes and surprising incongruities. But structural ambiguities are an important source for many of the most memorable jingles, slogans, and punchlines. Who isn't intrigued by lines such as Groucho Marx's "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana"? (Tibballs, *Zingers* 245) And consider the enduring success of the jingle for GLAD garbage bags that instructs us, "Don't get mad. Get GLAD." To be sure, advertisers and comedians have gotten by quite well without the benefit of a linguist describing how word-plays occur. But their creativity could certainly be enhanced by powerful tools that could not only generate a great variety of structural word-plays more quickly but also more effectively resolve linguistic barriers that produce syntactically awkward or ill-formed word-plays.

This book is intended to be useful for both descriptive and applied linguistics. It will explore the inventory of grammatical features within the English language that allow structural ambiguities to occur, contextualizing its discussion within a possible application: the deliberate creation of structural word-plays.² In the final part of the book I shall provide a methodology and a list of formulas to show how the grammatical characteristics and strategies identified in the book could be deliberately and systematically applied in generating structural word-plays. That section, however, is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive in its treatment. Even though the formulas will be more thoroughly addressed later in the book, let's now briefly look at an illustration of how the inventory and formulas might be applied.

An Illustration of the Inventory Approach and Related Formulas

We'll begin our consideration of the inventory approach and its related formulas by noting that the English language contains tens of thousands of words, many of which have multiple definitions representing different parts of speech. An oft-noted example, *bear*, is a homonym that may

be interpreted as either a noun or a verb. By “homonym” I mean that it shares its spoken and written form with at least one other word that has a very different meaning. If we also consider the homophone *bare* (pronounced the same but spelled differently), we have the additional part of speech of adjective. The language is full of such words.³ The existence of homophonous and homonymous forms associated with different parts of speech does not automatically lead to structural ambiguities. The semantic context and syntactic requirements of an utterance still help determine what kinds of interpretations are possible. From the standpoint of creating a deliberate structural word-play, it is relatively easy to set up a semantic context that would tolerate more than one part-of-speech meaning. The syntactic requirements, however, are not so easily appeased. Let’s take a word like *patient*, which could either mean someone who is receiving medical care (the noun interpretation) or alternatively a description of a calm and tolerant attitude (the adjective meaning). We will take note of its particular homonymous characteristic by referring to it as a “noun/adjective word.” And we can easily imagine integrating the varying semantic possibilities related to the word *patient* into a single situation. For example, a patient who has had to wait a long time in a doctor’s office may, surprisingly enough, still be patient. And we might wish syntactically to encapsulate those two meanings of *patient* into a single ambiguous form. But the syntactic requirements of our language (within which I also intend to include the morphological requirements such as distinctive suffix forms) present an obstacle that often makes it difficult for the two meanings to be embodied within the same structure. Note, for example, that in the common linguistic environment after a form of BE, the noun meaning requires the presence of what linguists call a “determiner” such as *a*, *the*, *my*, etc. Thus if we mean someone who is treated by a doctor, we say something like “He is *a* patient,” “He is *the* patient,” or “He is *my* patient.” On the other hand, if we intend the adjective meaning, then no such determiner is present, and we get instead a description of his personality like “He is patient.” Thus, even though the word *patient* may serve as a noun or adjective, the two separate meanings are signaled by different syntactic markers. Structurally speaking, in these two linguistic environments the two meanings are structurally incompatible.

As we proceed through the inventory described in this book, we discover that there is a construction, “a little” that bridges or subverts the

structural incompatibility between nouns and adjectives (cf. Stageberg, “Structural Ambiguity: Some Sources,” hereafter referred to as “Sources” 559). This is illustrated in the following joke:

Doctor, doctor, I think I’m shrinking.

Well, you’ll just have to be a little patient. (Tibballs, *Humor* 108)

In this joke the structural incompatibility between “being patient” vs “being a patient” has been neutralized because the construction “a little” may be interpreted as consisting of either a determiner and adjective (which modifies the following noun) or as a set adverbial expression meaning something like “somewhat” (which modifies a following adjective). What I have shown here is not merely an isolated case. It represents a substantial vulnerability that can be exploited over and over again with many words like *patient* such as *savage*, *uniform*, *antique*, *brief*, *negative*, etc. that can be nouns or adjectives. Thus with this understanding, whenever we recognize a noun/adjective word, we know at least one strategy or formula for utilizing that word in a structural word-play. Note the sentences below:

He was *a patient* [noun]. He was *patient* [adjective]. → He was a little patient [ambiguous].

He was *a savage*. He was *savage*. → He was a little savage.

It was *a uniform*. It was *uniform*. → It was a little uniform.

The chair was *an antique*. The chair was *antique*. → The chair was a little antique.

It was *a brief*. It was *brief*. → It was a little brief.

The photo was *a negative*. The photo was *negative*. → The photo was a little negative.

The resulting structures after the application of the formula constitute the heart of the word-play. They are the core linguistic element around which the joke or advertisement can be further built. One advertisement used the structure above with the word *savage* (this time combined with a form of the verb *get*) to promote a movie starring the comedian Tim Allen as a man who adopted a boy from the jungle: “On March 7th, Tim Allen gets a little savage.”⁴

This matter of the core structure needs to be explored here briefly. The core word-play is not necessarily the finished form, though it

sometimes can be. There is still often a need for creativity in cleverly fashioning the core structure into something funny. In fact, depending on how the core structure is polished and shaped, it may render a joke or advertisement that will be seen as clever or corny, or as humor directed to young children versus humor directed to an older audience. This is an important point that deserves further illustration. One of the types of structural ambiguity that we will consider later occurs when the passive is mistaken for the predicate adjective construction involving a past participle. This is evident in the children's joke, "Why is it hard for leopards to hide?" "Because they're always spotted" (M. Brown 9). This joke would cause most adults to groan. Yet I can easily show that some humor by professional comedians uses precisely the same type of ambiguity, though it is dressed up differently to appeal to older audiences. The following two jokes do precisely that. The first is by Conan O'Brien, who creates a joke involving the presidential candidate Al Gore (who was known for seeming stiff in his demeanor) and *The Simpsons*, a popular, satirical cartoon show on television:

Al Gore turned down a chance to be on *The Simpsons*. He explained, "I've never been animated and I'm not going to start now." (*That's Funny* 108)

In another joke Tim Allen also uses the same kind of ambiguity:

Electricity can be dangerous. My nephew tried to stick a penny into a plug. Whoever said a penny doesn't go far didn't see him shoot across that floor. I told him he was grounded. (cited in J. Brown, *1,349 Hilarious* 77)

Throughout this book, therefore, when you see a particular joke or advertisement, whether you believe it to be funny or not, remember that its significance goes well beyond the particular joke or advertisement that has been provided. It exemplifies a structural potential, which could be dressed up in different ways, rendering a variety of jokes, each of which will resonate with some kinds of audiences more than with others.

We interrupted our discussion of the inventory approach and what it could reveal about the ambiguity potential for noun/adjective words. So far we have seen that "a little" can provide one powerful tool for creating structural ambiguities with noun/adjective words. But the

noun/adjective words are not reliant on this strategy alone for a structural ambiguity to occur. In the chapter on morphology we discover that the possessive inflection *-s* on nouns allows an immediately following noun to be mistaken for an adjective. This is because the same form used for the possessive suffix that introduces a noun can alternatively be used for a contraction of BE that can introduce an adjective. One of my students shared with me a word-play that illustrates this well: One business displayed a sign that said, “Today’s special.” Under those words it added, “So’s tomorrow.”⁵ This kind of ambiguity between nouns and adjectives works because when a noun is inflected for the possessive, it serves essentially as the determiner, and no other determiner like *a*, *an*, *the*, or *my* is then necessary. The absence of the determiner then allows the adjective possibility to occur as well. Let’s go back to our sample list of noun/adjectives (*patient*, *savage*, *uniform*, *antique*, *brief*, *negative*) and see how this strategy, revealed in the inventory of affixes and contractions, can be productively applied to noun/adjective words:

The doctor’s patient.

The jungle’s savage

The company’s uniform.

The store’s antique

The court’s brief.

The photo’s negative.

Again, these are just the central word-plays from which a clever advertiser or comedian can work in setting up the larger context. For example, we could create a dialogue like the following:

Tom: “Did you know the doctor’s patient in that other room?”

George: “Just in the other room?”

Tom: “Yeah, where else would you expect him to be?”

George: “Huh?”

In the later chapter on premodification, we also learn that noun/adjectives may both serve as a premodifier to a following noun. We often think of only adjectives filling this function. But consider a form like “school tuition.” In this case “school” is serving to modify (describe) a type of tuition. It functions like an adjective while still retaining its

identity as a noun. Whether the premodifier is a noun or adjective, the overall phrase may be introduced by a determiner and still be structurally ambiguous. This is because the determiner is understood to apply to the word being described or modified rather than the modifier. Thus the determiner essentially gives a free pass to the noun/adjective word, refusing to signal its identity. Now let's return to our list of six sample noun/adjective words and see how they can be integrated in an ambiguity when they occur as a premodifier to a following noun:

- A patient representative [the determiner word *A* is connected with *representative*, not *patient*]
- A savage dance
- Some uniform treatment
- An antique store
- The brief concerns
- The negative replacement

All of these can work into a structural ambiguity. In my local area there is a company that cleans uniforms for businesses. One logo they have used is a clever one: "Dedicated to uniform excellence."

We have now seen three strategies or formulas for allowing nouns and adjectives to be mistaken for each other in larger grammatical structures. These strategies are developed from the inventory of structures in our language that are prone to structural ambiguity or that facilitate its construction. The three strategies comprise just a fraction of the so-called noun/adjective formulas. In other words, there are other formulas that allow nouns to be mistaken for adjectives and yet allow for both interpretations to be grammatically sound. At the end of the book I will provide a longer list of the noun/adjective formulas.

But the list of formulas for building structural word-plays is even more extensive than this would seem to imply. For there are also formulas for nouns to be mistaken with verbs, for verbs to be mistaken for adjectives, for nouns to be mistaken for adverbs, etc. The power of the set of formulas is that once we have decided on a given semantic domain, such as football, breakfast cereal, or overcoats, we can begin a very systematic process that quickly yields a good number of word-plays. First we identify some of the domain-specific words, which are then identified for their homonymous or homophonous part-of-speech possibilities.

This identification then immediately leads to the relevant formulas that are available for each type of homonymous or homophonous overlap. The words are then plugged into the appropriate formulas, and we have the working-core structures. As an example, if we were marketing soap, we could brainstorm for a few minutes to identify related words in addition to *soap*, such as *clean*, *cleaner*, *lather*, *smell*, *wash*, *bar*, *oil*, *fragrance*, and *fragrant* or the product name of the specific soap that we wish to sell. Then we could identify the subset of these words that can be homonymous or homophonous, having more than one part of speech, such as *clean* (verb/adjective), *cleaner* (noun/adjective), *soap* (noun/verb), *lather* (noun/verb), *smell* (noun, verb), *bar* (noun/verb), and *oil* (noun, verb). As we consider the dual part-of-speech capabilities of these words such as noun/verb, noun/adjective, and verb/adjective, we will be able to direct the words to their own respective formulas that work to manipulate the grammar into a structural ambiguity. Among the listed homonyms with two or more possible part-of-speech capabilities, we can see the word *cleaner*, which is a noun/adjective word. We'll move forward with that in our discussion here since we have already looked at three formulas for this homonymous category. Using the three formulas that we have identified (and this was only a partial list of the noun/adjective formulas), we could generate the following core word-plays:

Formula One: Get a little cleaner.

A little cleaner for everyone.

More than just a little cleaner.

Formula Two: Everyone's cleaner.

Your home's cleaner.

Formula Three: The cleaner solution

The cleaner approach

Now imagine that we aren't limited to these three formulas but have a list of all noun/adjective formulas, all noun/verb formulas, all verb/adjective formulas, etc. These additional formulas would allow us to go back and construct multiple word-plays for the other words in the list with differing part-of-speech capabilities, as we saw with *soap* (noun/verb) and *clean* (verb/adjective), to name just a couple. It should be evident that such an approach provides great creative power. If nothing

else, we have a considerable headstart over a traditional approach in which people merely brainstorm and hope that something clever occurs to them.

Many people who enjoy creating puns are often unable to reconcile the mutually incompatible syntactic requirements of words belonging to different parts of speech. These punsters end up creating puns that are awkwardly formed with a syntax that conforms to only one of the intended meanings. The English language is so full of homonymous and homophonous forms that virtually anyone who pays even minimal attention can identify more than one possible meaning of a given form and can invoke the two or more meanings, especially if no effort is made to make both meanings conform to the syntax of the language. I could spot someone carrying a bucket and tell them they look “pale,” or I could spot a road sign and tell someone with me that I want to “assign” them to pronounce what is on the sign. For individuals creating such puns, the syntax represents a formidable enemy that they often don’t even try to understand or engage. But the syntax of the language isn’t nearly so difficult and unyielding if we just take the time to learn something about it and to understand it better. And in so doing, we can artfully generate the kinds of word-plays that allow two different syntactic interpretations, both of which are well-formed. Let’s look at just one example of a badly formed pun that could have easily been altered to work structurally by both intended structural interpretations if its creator had just used one of the three formulas that I identified above (and those formulas are just a brief sample of a much longer list of formulas identified at the back of the book). The particular riddle that I will show below was actually constructed by a child, but the structural flaw illustrates the kind of problem that even adult punsters often display:

When is a dog overweight?

When it’s a husky (Bernstein 33–34)

This is a clear case of a riddle that could have benefited from the noun/adjective formula using “a little.” As the current riddle stands, it is syntactically well-formed only by the noun interpretation, and yet the punster wants us to see the adjective meaning as well. Solving the syntactic incompatibility is really quite easy in this case, especially when someone

is aware of the available formula. Using “a little” in the punchline above would have rendered the structurally ambiguous “when it’s a little husky.”

Before leaving this section I should clarify that although many of the formulas that we will see are designed to reconcile incompatible syntactic requirements of the two or more interpretations of a homonym or homophone, some formulas introduce structural word-plays that are designed around other gaps and vulnerabilities in the grammatical system. This book will consider the range of grammatical information needed to capitalize on the vast potentials in the language for structural ambiguity, including, but not limited to, word homonymy or homophony.

Conscious Linguistic Knowledge

Much of the knowledge that native speakers have about their own language remains at an unconscious rather than a conscious level. For example, many native speakers of English would have a hard time explaining the different language contexts that determine whether we use the word *much* versus the word *many*. We use the word *much* to quantify a word like *mud*, but *many* to quantify a word like *table*. The word *mud* does not allow a plural (except in the uncommon situation of discussing different types of mud), whereas *table* can easily be made into a plural. Thus we can say, “I don’t see much mud” and “I don’t see many tables.” But we can’t say, “I don’t see many muds” or “I don’t see much tables.” Somewhere in our minds we have classified *mud* and *table* differently. But that doesn’t change the fact that most of us probably don’t consciously realize that we have done so. If you were to ask a linguist or someone who studies the structure of our language (such as someone who has had to study English as a second language or as a foreign language), you would find that that person is probably consciously aware of these distinctions in word classes and even has terms for some of them. The words like *mud* are often called “noncount” or “mass” nouns, whereas the words like *table* are referred to as “count” nouns. In a situation such as this, a nonnative speaker has to learn consciously what native speakers seem to do quite unconsciously. One of the goals of linguistic study is in fact to describe and make explicit what native speakers know implicitly. And as it relates to our subject at hand,

an explicit awareness of different classes and subclasses in the language, along with their idiosyncratic behaviors, will allow considerable resourcefulness in fashioning creative structural word-plays.

All in Good Humor

My focus in this book on structural ambiguity should not be understood to imply that most humor in general (whether in jokes or advertising) fits into this category. As authors such as Raskin, Attardo, and Ritchie have shown, it certainly does not. But the other kinds of humor do not require the careful attention to grammatical structure in order to reconcile the requirements of competing syntactic forms. It is this latter challenge that occupies our attention in this book.

As part of its discussion, this book contains many examples of humorous word-plays. And I believe that even beyond the sheer illustrative power that the jokes and advertisements provide for the principles discussed in this book, there are some additional good reasons for providing a lot of such word-play data.

First of all, humor data (including the humorous word-plays in advertising) were often important in contributing to my understanding of the structural word-play potentials in the language. Indeed, humor and advertising often exploit particular features within the grammatical system and as they do so, call attention to these features. As I've noted elsewhere:

Indeed, over the years as people have noted trouble spots in the grammatical system of the language, they have developed wordplays around these features. The humor and advertisements built around troublesome linguistic features are easy to spot and, in some cases, may provide ideas about potential ambiguities that might otherwise have escaped the attention of someone who tries independently to discover or imagine such patterns within the language. Thus humor and advertising essentially flag important data for consideration. (Oaks and Lewis 277–78)⁶

An examination of humor and advertising has also provided me with some insights into the productivity of certain kinds of structural

ambiguity. Those kinds that are represented by numerous word-plays are likely indicative of structural ambiguities that are relatively productive.

Another good reason to use examples from humor and advertising in a book about structural ambiguity is that these areas present important authentic data for consideration. Generally speaking, those who have constructed these word-plays or compiled them into joke collections have not done so to make any kind of linguistic argument. Their goals are communicative, primarily to amuse. Linguists have sometimes been criticized for making up sentences, which they use to support their own conclusions. Most of the humorous data here (whether in jokes or advertisements), however, have been independently derived and apparently recognized by the comedians, joke-tellers, and advertisers to be ambiguous.

And finally, another good reason is that jokes, humorous stories, and word-plays are often memorable in ways that a structural description or formula might not be. These humorous examples can serve to remind us of the linguistic facts and principles that they illustrate.

Other Applications

Up to this point, as I have discussed the applications of the study of structural ambiguity, I have focused on how a knowledge of structural ambiguity could help in deliberately generating humorous word-plays. And the book is oriented toward this type of application. But there are other useful applications for the material in this book. As might easily be imagined, the same grammatical inventory that is useful for creating structural ambiguity can alternatively be applied in the opposite direction as an aid in avoiding or at least detecting structural ambiguity.

First, we'll look at how the inventory might be useful to writers and editors. Though I don't believe that studying how structural ambiguity occurs is necessary for a native speaker to detect or remove ambiguity in a text, it is probably true that a conscious understanding of how ambiguity is constructed may increase one's sensitivity in recognizing it more easily and in being more resourceful in considering the variety of available options for revision. One editor colleague of mine has also suggested that a greater awareness of how ambiguity is constructed may

be useful for professional editors as they communicate with their clients. Rather than reporting to a writer that his or her sentence could have more than one interpretation—an observation that some authors apparently don't always accept—an editor could point out how a particular structure produced by their author or client has been shown almost axiomatically to lead to a structural ambiguity.⁷

The study of structural ambiguity also has great relevance and application for work in natural language processing (NLP), which aims at helping computers to replicate human-like abilities with language. Indeed, it has been recognized for some time that ambiguity is a highly problematic area in NLP (cf., for example, Raskin, "Linguistics" 44). If a computer is to be programmed to recognize ambiguity, or perhaps even avoid it, it must be programmed with specific descriptions of the kinds of linguistic structures that are involved in ambiguity. Although this particular book is not specifically directed towards natural language processing, some of the information it contains should be of interest to those working in this area. NLP research is, of course, important to areas such as machine translation and artificial intelligence. And incidentally, one of the areas in artificial intelligence that is getting some important attention is the processing of humor.

Towards a Definition of Structural Ambiguity

It will now be useful to explore in greater detail what I mean by the term "structural ambiguity." An utterance is structurally ambiguous when it can yield more than one syntactic interpretation or when it implies more than one syntactic relationship between constituents within a structure. Norman C. Stageberg, whose earlier work on structural ambiguity types has greatly influenced my own, showed that structural ambiguities may create a confusion about the part of speech, such as whether a particular word is a noun or verb, or a confusion about the grammatical function of a constituent in an utterance—for example, whether something is a direct or indirect object. Structural ambiguities may also involve the scope of modification.⁸ We shall briefly look at an example of each of these. In the sentence "I saw her play," it can be unclear whether the part of speech of *play* is as a noun or verb. In the sentence "She brought the horse meat," it is not clear what the

grammatical function of *horse* is. Is it part of a direct object *horse meat*, meaning that horse meat is what she brought? Or is it an indirect object, meaning that she brought meat to the horse? An ambiguous scope of modification is found in the utterance “an old book seller.” In this latter case we could wonder whether *old* describes or modifies *book seller* or just *book*. In other words, are we speaking of a book seller that is old? Or are we speaking of a seller of old books?

Structural ambiguities may be distinguished from lexical ambiguities in which particular words have a different meaning, but the varying meanings do not necessarily change the structural interpretation of the utterance. Structural ambiguities may, of course, involve a lexical ambiguity, but they are not limited to a lexical ambiguity alone. For example, in the utterance “I saw her play,” the word-play is lexically ambiguous, but it is not limited to a lexical ambiguity since the alternative interpretation about the part of speech requires us to interpret the overall structure of the utterance differently.

The difference between a lexical ambiguity and a structural ambiguity (which, as I have said, can also involve a lexical ambiguity as part of its structural ambiguity) may be illustrated through two humorous texts. First, a lexical ambiguity may be illustrated through the following portion of a comic’s routine: “I bought a box of animal crackers, and it said on it, ‘Do not eat if seal is broken.’ So I opened up the box, and sure enough . . .” (Brian Kiley, as cited in J. Brown, *1,349 Hilarious* 96). In this joke the word *seal* has two different interpretations, but by both interpretations it is a noun and the subject of its clause. If the two interpretations were diagrammed or analyzed, by whatever method, there would be no difference in the two diagrams. Now let us contrast that with a humorous structural ambiguity found in a newspaper headline: “Canada seals deal with creditors” (M. Clark 44).⁹ In the headline, *seals* could be a noun or verb, just as *deal* could be a noun or verb. Notice that while both of the above examples involve a form of *seal*, only the headline creates doubt about the structural interpretation.

As part of my consideration of structural ambiguity, I am also including lexical ambiguities involving different subcategories of the same lexical class when those subcategories correspond to different syntactic behavior. A word like *cake* may be a count noun or a noncount noun, depending on the environment. The difference in the two subclasses often corresponds to syntactic differences in the way that determiners

(like *a* or *an*) or plurals are used with the word. As an indefinite count noun, *cake* requires the article *a* when it is singular, and a plural marker *-s* when it is plural. As an indefinite noncount noun, *cake* doesn't take an article, and since it can never occur as a plural, it doesn't take the plural marker either. If I say, "I want a cake," the noun *cake* is count. If I say, "I want cake," the noun is noncount. But here once again is a situation where *a little* can bridge an incompatibility, this time between count and noncount nouns rather than between count nouns and adjectives. Thus if I say, "I want a little cake," I have set up another structural ambiguity.

I will also be considering ambiguities to be structural when they involve lexical differences involving a structure class of words, that is, one of the closed classes. The difference between open and closed classes deserves a little elaboration here. Open classes are those classes that freely tolerate the addition of new vocabulary into the language. These include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and to some extent, adverbs.¹⁰ These classes contain words loaded with semantic information and are sometimes referred to as the "content classes." If you think about the kinds of words that have entered the language most recently, you will notice that nearly all of these have entered the open classes. Structure or closed classes, on the other hand, are highly resistant to adding new vocabulary. These classes, which are primarily involved with functional notions in the language, include pronouns, prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, and auxiliary verbs.

Now let us look at an example illustrating why a lexical difference in the meaning of a word belonging to a structure class should be considered a structural ambiguity. The preposition *by* (a member of a structure class) may be interpreted in two different ways in a sentence like "The fire was built by John." The preposition *by* may introduce a locative sense ("The fire was built near John") or an agentive sense ("John built the fire"). These differences in interpretation have structural implications, since only one of these interpretations may be expressed with the active sentence "John built the fire." In a similar way, the preposition *of* can relate to agentive (roughly corresponding to subject) as well as patient (roughly corresponding to direct object) roles—semantic relationships that are syntactically different when they are paraphrased. When I use Chomsky's famous phrase, "the shooting of the hunters" (*Syntactic* 88), the use of the preposition *of* makes it unclear whether the hunters are doing the shooting or whether they are being shot. The two

meanings correspond to the two different syntactic forms “the hunters shoot somebody” or “somebody shoots the hunters.” The syntactic differences necessitated by a paraphrase of the different lexical meanings of the prepositions *by* and *of* argue for the view that the different lexical meanings of a structure class can also be structural in nature.

I will also consider structures that can be alternatively interpreted as literal or fixed expressions to be structurally ambiguous. These would include an expression like the much discussed idiom “kick the bucket” in which the literal meaning refers to kicking a pail, while the idiomatic meaning refers to dying. It seems to me that these should be considered structural ambiguities, since they are alternatively either an utterance with discrete constituent identities that can be broken up and rearranged, or a single indivisible unit. Thus, although the literal interpretation of “He kicked the bucket,” just like nearly any other sentence containing a transitive verb, allows us to make the utterance passive (“The bucket was kicked by him”) or to insert modifiers (“He kicked the large bucket”), the idiomatic interpretation, corresponding to the meaning of dying, allows us no such freedom. If we intend to say that someone died, we cannot say, “The bucket was kicked by him.” Nor can we say, “He kicked the large bucket.”¹¹

Items Not Considered To Be Structurally Ambiguous

I now wish to briefly mention some items that will not be considered to be structurally ambiguous and thus will not generally be addressed in this book. These include vagueness, garden path sentences, focus ambiguities, metalinguistic ambiguities, and consecutively altered constructions.

Vagueness

We’ll first begin with a consideration of vagueness. When something is vague, its meaning is not sufficiently specific. This is a different matter from ambiguity, which presents more than one interpretation, each of which may be very specific. Of course, those people who engage in evasive language can use either kind of utterance, but there is a difference. Nationally syndicated columnist, William Safire, points out in one of his columns that when President Clinton was asked about the missing e-mails that had been hidden by his staff, Clinton responded: “I believe

that was known years ago.” As Safire points out, “Sure, he knew and Ruff [his attorney] knew. But no grand jury or congressional committee was told” (“Get to bottom of ‘e-mail gap,’” *Deseret News*, March 31, 2000: A15). Clinton’s statement was vague. On the other hand, when President George Bush senior made a campaign promise of “No new taxes” and then later went back on that promise, one television comedian humorously pointed out that we should have realized that his promise had actually been an ambiguity, for we can’t know whether what he said orally was “No new taxes” or “Know new taxes.”

Garden path sentences

This book will also not explore garden path sentences such as “The horse raced past the barn fell.” Garden path sentences get their name from the fact that they metaphorically lead people down a “garden path” in their interpretation, until those people realize at some point within the sentence that the interpretation that they have been applying simply cannot work syntactically, and they must go back and reprocess the sentence or utterance from the beginning. Garden path sentences do not allow more than one structural interpretation when taken in their entirety, even though the initial parts of their sentences do. Such sentence types will therefore not be considered structural ambiguities.

Related to the garden path sentence are those sentences in which a pause appears to be a terminal one, signaling the end of the sentence, but it is in fact only a momentary one before a subsequent constituent or constituents are provided that entirely recast the nature of the sentence and force a new structural interpretation. Consider, for example, a sentence like “Last night my neighbor cooked his dog . . . some meat.” We might initially be startled as it is nearly inconceivable that someone, at least in American society, would cook his or her dog, but when the final noun phrase is added, we realize that the structure of the sentence is not Subject + Verb + Direct Object, but rather Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object. The latter sentence type makes the dog the beneficiary of the cooking rather than its hapless victim.

Focus ambiguities

Except as noted a little later, I also won’t address those ambiguities in which there is more than one possible focus since these aren’t actually

structurally ambiguous, even as they take us by surprise when we discover that their emphasis is on a different part of the sentence than we have expected. Focus ambiguities are common devices in humor. For example, Steve Allen identified a shift in focus as a humor strategy he used: “Another wordplay device I sometimes employ—almost automatically—involves *discarding the obvious key word* in a sentence or question and giving an answer that might be perfectly reasonable if the concentration were on another word” (Allen, *How* 34). We can see this sort of thing in the following dialogues:

[From the television series, M*A*S*H]

Frank Burns: “Why do people take an instant dislike to me?”

“Trapper” John McIntyre: “It saves time, Frank.” (as reported in Tibballs, *Zingers* 253)

Why are you always scratching yourself?

Nobody else knows where I itch! (Meade n.p.)

The one environment in which focus ambiguities will be addressed is when they occur as part of a confusion surrounding the scope of negation, that is, when it is unclear about how much of an accompanying utterance a word like *not* or *never* is understood to apply. We can see this in the following one-liner that reportedly appeared in a book review that Dorothy Parker wrote about a novel by Benito Mussolini: “This is not a book that should be tossed lightly aside. It should be hurled with great force” (as cited in Price 4). Scope ambiguities will be explored in a later chapter.

Metalinguistic ambiguities

Metalinguistic ambiguities will also be omitted from consideration. Metalinguistic ambiguities are those ambiguities in which at least one of the interpretations of an utterance directly involves the form of the utterance itself. One chain of jewelry stores, Kay Jewelers, advertises “Every kiss begins with Kay.” In an oral environment, the homophonous forms *K* and *Kay* allow the interpretation of Kay jewelry as the catalyst behind every kiss, or, alternatively, an interpretation that tells us that the

word *kiss* begins with the letter *K* every time. Another example of a metalinguistic ambiguity occurs in the following humorous exchange:

“Say you love me. Say it! Say it! For heaven’s sake, say it!”

“It!” (Copeland and Copeland 395)

Consecutively altered constructions

Finally, I generally won’t try to deal with what I will call “consecutively altered constructions,” where a series is begun in which one structure is followed by another that looks just like it but is in fact syntactically different. These are not ambiguities because there is not more than one interpretation for a given structure, though word-play is certainly occurring. One of my favorite examples of this is the advertisement by the Bayer Corporation: “You Get Older. You Get Smarter. You Get Bayer” (*Reader’s Digest* April 1995: 41). Note that the first two clauses in this three-clause advertisement utilize the linking verb *get*, while the third clause uses a transitive verb *get*. In addition, the form *-er* in this example is a comparative suffix in the first two clauses containing *older* and *smarter*, but it has no such meaning with *Bayer* in the third clause. The final clause “You Get Bayer” is not structurally ambiguous, but it looks and sounds so much like the two preceding clauses that it almost creates the impression of ambiguity. The comedian Bob Hope also used a similar strategy in his quip about his advancing age. He begins with the use of *feel* as a linking verb and then follows it with a statement that uses it as a transitive verb: “I don’t feel old. I don’t feel anything until noon. Then it’s time for my nap” (as cited in J. Brown, *Squeaky* 11). Another example of a consecutively altered construction is evident in the following remark: “Some women are blond on their mother’s side, some on their father’s side, but she’s blond on the peroxide” (Safian 88).

Despite the fact that I do not consider vagueness, garden path sentences, focus ambiguities, metalinguistic ambiguities, or consecutively altered constructions to be structural ambiguities, I believe structural ambiguities to be much more common than might generally be acknowledged. In fact, as this book will show, the potential for structural ambiguities in our language is substantial and, when consciously understood, can be utilized to great advantage.

Organization of this Book

This book has been organized into six parts. Part I, comprising Chapters 1 through 5, provides preliminary information that is important to understanding what follows through the rest of the book. In Chapter 1 we have looked at a definition of structural ambiguity as well as an introduction to the inventory approach that is used throughout the book. We have also briefly seen a few examples of how grammatical behaviors identified in the inventory can be integrated into formulas for deliberately generating structural ambiguities (the more complete list of formulas is found near the end of the book). Chapter 2 explores pragmatic issues that influence our ability to perceive some utterances as structurally ambiguous. By pragmatics, we of course refer to larger contextual issues, such as our assessment of the overall setting, the speaker's or writer's characteristics, the age of the text, the difference between spoken and written texts, etc. Chapter 3 examines the phonology, that is, the sound system of the language, and how this phonology contributes to our perception of structural ambiguities. In this chapter we learn, for example, why "Jamaica" is able to be interpreted as the entirely different structure "Did you make her?" Chapter 4 looks at auxiliary verbs and clause types and how these can be involved in competing interpretations. This is illustrated in the ambiguous clause "The peasants are revolting" (Kess and Hoppe 14). Whether we interpret *are* as an auxiliary or a main verb will influence whether we interpret *revolting* as a verb or adjective, which in turn also helps determine our interpretation of the overall structure of the clause type as either an SV (Subject + Verb) or an SVC (Subject + Verb + Subject Complement) clause type. Chapter 5 looks at morphological considerations, including affixes (prefixes and suffixes), contractions, and some morphological processes. It is in this chapter that we see how the morphology of the language has some of its own vulnerabilities as suffixes and contractions such as *-s*, *'s*, *-ing*, *'d*, and *-er* may be used ambiguously. This chapter also looks at the role of such morphological processes as clipping, by which a word form is altered, resulting in some new possibilities for confusion. For example, is *lab* a reduced form of *laboratory* or *Labrador*?

Part II takes us into the heart of the inventory with its examination of the form classes in the language, including a close examination of the

grammatical vulnerabilities of specific subclasses within some of our parts of speech. This close investigation begins in Chapters 6 through 8 with an examination of specific subclasses of nouns and verbs and then continues in Chapter 9 with adjectives and adverbs. In these chapters we can see that general classifications like “noun” or “verb” are not sufficient to a structural consideration of how members of these classes may best be utilized in forming structural ambiguities. We see, for example, that a verb like GET (the capitalization indicates that we are considering the verb in all its various forms), aside from its semantic meanings, may be involved structurally in many more clause types than a verb like DIE and how this feature sets up ambiguities involving competing clausal interpretations.

Part III consists of the structure classes of the language. Chapter 10 (pronouns), 11 (prepositions), and 12 (conjunctions) continue the inventory as they explore the vulnerabilities for structural ambiguity among these structures or closed classes. You will recall that when a member of a structure class has two or more possible lexical interpretations in a given context, the ambiguity will be considered a structural ambiguity.

Part IV, comprising Chapters 13 (prenominal modification) and 14 (other modification and scope ambiguities), explores ambiguities created by modifiers such as determiners, clauses, prepositional phrases, etc. Some of the ambiguities involving these modifiers still relate to differences in the interpretation of a part of speech of a particular constituent. But many instead relate to the scope or attachment of a modifier. An example of this latter type of confusion would be Groucho Marx’s famous line: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got into my pyjamas I’ll never know” (Tibballs, *Zingers* 273). In this example, we recognize “in my pyjamas” as a prepositional phrase serving as a postmodifier. But we can’t tell whether it modifies (describes) the verb *shot* or the noun *elephant*.

Part V looks at some miscellaneous contributions to structural ambiguity. Some of these don’t easily fit into the previous sections but are important in their own right. Chapter 15 examines the role of ellipsis in structural ambiguity. Ellipsis commonly occurs in our language as we leave out syntactic elements that can usually be reconstructed in our interpretations. Normally this causes no confusion. When we say something like “John wants to eat,” it is clear that *John* is

not only the subject of *wants* but also of the verb *to eat* in the embedded clause. But ellipsis can cause confusion as in a question like “The lamb is ready to eat” (cf. Quirk et al. 1929), where we can’t be sure whether the lamb is the subject or instead the object of the embedded clause. Chapter 16 looks at questions and indirect reported speech. In this chapter we explore a number of important issues. One of these concerns the way these structures create confusion about the boundary of a particular constituent, as they affect the movement, or in some cases nonmovement, of verb auxiliaries (and in some cases the main verb) in relation to the subject of the clause. This issue in fact is crucial to the word-play involved in the famous Abbott and Costello routine, “Who’s on First?” Chapter 17 examines fixed expressions. This will include an examination not only of the role of larger idiomatic expressions and exclamations in structural ambiguities but also the role of multiword verbs.

Part VI, the final part, contains Chapter 18, which provides a methodology and points toward formulas that generate structural ambiguities by integrating and exploiting many of the language features that I have identified throughout the inventory of the book. In preparing the final chapter I have considered the needs of someone wishing to generate a humorous word-play whether for advertising, greeting cards, or comedy and tried to anticipate what kind of procedural approach would be most useful. Although someone could skip all of the preceding chapters and go right to the formulas, I don’t believe that most will appreciate the significance of the formulas or understand how to apply them as effectively without reading the preceding chapters.

Chapter 2

Pragmatics and Structural Ambiguity

Pragmatic Factors Shaping Interpretations of Structural Ambiguity

It is well known that context usually disambiguates an utterance that could otherwise be ambiguous. Thus, although we may have a little fun looking at how an isolated utterance might be ambiguous, when such an utterance is found in a larger context, its intended meaning is usually quite clear. Given this fact, many individuals may be inclined to dismiss the importance of understanding how structural ambiguity is formed since the examples they have seen in linguistic literature have usually been isolated sentences or phrases devoid of an immediate context.

But it is important to remember that although context serves to disambiguate so much of what could be potentially ambiguous in the normal everyday kinds of communication of facts, ideas, and opinions (what linguists might call “bona-fide communication”), the role of context in disambiguating particular utterances is seriously reduced or mitigated in humor, a pervasive variety of non-bona-fide communication. When we enter the realm of humor, it simply isn’t true that context generally disambiguates an utterance. Indeed, as Raskin has argued, humor is based on the possible interpretation of more than one semantic script in a given situation (Raskin, *Semantic* 99). Indeed, contexts can be deliberately contrived or deliberately limited to such an extent that more than one interpretation becomes possible. Of course most humor doesn’t rely on structural ambiguities, but as I have previously indicated, structural ambiguities are at the heart of some of the most memorable and intriguing examples.

But even bona-fide communication sometimes startles us with its susceptibility to ambiguity. Some of the examples I have collected are

genuine accounts from people who have experienced confusion in real life with a structurally ambiguous form.

The larger contextual factors that shape our interpretations of a text or utterance are frequently referred to in linguistics with the term “pragmatics,” which includes but is not limited to such considerations as the medium of communication and the identity and location of the speaker. Although these larger factors frequently serve to clarify the intended meaning, they may sometimes contribute to ambiguity as they help us see an additional possibility for interpretation. As this chapter proceeds, it is important to remember that our consideration of pragmatics is limited to structural ambiguities and not just ambiguities or humor in general.

A complete overview of pragmatics would be much more than I could realistically address in this chapter, even if I limited myself to its role in structural ambiguity. I do hope, however, to identify some major contextual considerations that affect the structural interpretations we apply to certain utterances. The pragmatic issue of deixis will be discussed in the later chapter on pronouns, since it is so integrally connected with that grammatical category.

World knowledge and assumptions about speaker intent

One important consideration in relation to structural ambiguity concerns how our world knowledge shapes whether we even perceive a structural ambiguity when one is potentially present. As an illustration of the importance of pragmatic world knowledge considerations and how they can influence our interpretation of not only the semantic meaning of words but even our assumptions about the grammatical structure of an utterance, consider the following situation: A man comes home and asks whether there is any food left and is told, “No, everybody’s eaten.”¹² Most of us would likely interpret the structure “everybody’s eaten” as a contracted form of “everybody has eaten.” Now, instead, if I had begun by telling you that the man who came home was a cannibal, you would then perceive an ambiguity you might never have considered otherwise. In addition to the possible present perfect interpretation “everybody has eaten,” you now also consider the possible passive interpretation “everybody is eaten.” It is widely understood that context clarifies most structures that could otherwise be ambiguous.

But it is well worth noting that this example illustrates that sometimes more contextual information can actually enhance rather than limit the potential for structural ambiguity. And those who create word-plays for humor and advertising often deliberately manipulate the context in order to allow such ambiguities to occur.

Linguists have noted that an understanding of communication requires that we look at not only the structure of an utterance but also the function that that utterance has in discourse, in other words, the “speech act” that is being conveyed. To use a common example among linguists, if I say to someone “Can you pass the salt?” I am performing a speech act that involves issuing a directive rather than asking a question. I certainly wouldn’t expect the person to merely answer the question, “yes,” but rather to pass the salt. How someone interprets the speech act of an utterance will rely on a number of factors that I won’t try to identify thoroughly here since that would go beyond the scope of my discussion. But among other things it relies on assumptions about the identity, role, and assumed intentions of the speaker or writer. An ambiguous speech act by itself does not in my opinion qualify as a structural ambiguity. But sometimes the differing speech act interpretations do relate to entirely different structural interpretations. Most of the time we can figure out the intended speech act behind a particular utterance, but every once in a while, confusion can result. And humor can be developed around improbable but possible speech act interpretations for a given situation. Consider the two jokes below:

The army installed a computer. As a demonstration, an officer fed in the question: “How far is it from these barracks to the coast?”

“Seven hundred,” replied the computer.

The officer fed in another question. “Seven hundred what?”

The computer printed out its answer. “Seven hundred, sir!” (Tibballs, *Humor* 85)

I sent a package the other day. On it I wrote: PICTURES—DO NOT BEND. Two days later they arrived with a note that said, “They certainly do!” (Berle 398)

In the first joke, our knowledge and expectations about how army officers expect to be addressed makes the follow-up question structurally ambiguous. Such an ambiguity regarding the intended query involving

what would probably not be ambiguous in another setting. In this case the officer is seeking additional information, but the computer has interpreted the interrogative *what* to be a demand for a rephrased answer showing greater respect for the officer's rank, by supplying the appropriate military term of address. In the second joke there is an ambiguity about whether the writing on the envelope is making a statement or issuing a directive. Ellipsis plays a role in the ambiguity, since rather than the imperative command that it appears to be, "Do Not Bend" could instead be a part of a larger structure such as the simple declarative sentence "These pictures do not bend."

Medium (spoken vs written)

Let's now consider the different potentials that written versus spoken discourse present for ambiguity. Some things that are ambiguous in writing would never pose a problem for interpretation in speech since speech relies so heavily on features such as stress, intonation, and pauses. Thus Stageberg's example of "fresh strawberry ice cream" ("Some Structural Ambiguities" 480), although ambiguous in print, would not pose a problem in speech since the stress pattern and pausing is a little different for each interpretation. Similarly, a written dialogue between two speakers can cause problems for interpretation if we don't know the intonation pattern that accompanied it. If speaker A says, "We're going to eat in Chicago" and speaker B says, "Where?" we really need to have heard the intonation to know what the second speaker was really asking. If he said *Where* with rising intonation, then we would expect speaker A to repeat "Chicago." Falling intonation would signal a request for more specific information about the location of the dinner such as the name of the restaurant (Stageberg and Oaks 61, 402).

It is not always the case that speech is clearer than the written word. Sometimes our speech yields ambiguities that a written form would have clarified—at least if the person writing the form is competent in the various conventions of written speech. Thus while there may be no discernible spoken difference in "We saw the actor's play" and "We saw the actors play," (Oaks, "Historical" 64) or between "super salad" and "soup or salad" (when "or" is unstressed in its pronunciation and thus uttered like "er"), the written form clarifies the intended meaning. *The New Yorker* (May 7, 1990: 101) once called attention to the confusion

a Ricks College reporter displayed in a published interview in the school newspaper, *The Scroll*: “Hafen is an enthusiastic reader and claims ‘Lame is Rob’ by Victor Hugo as her favorite book.”¹³ The student reporter, whose interview appears to have been conducted orally, did not realize that the book that Hafen had referred to was *Les Misérables*.¹⁴ The confusion is understandable, particularly if the student reporter was not familiar with Hugo’s work. Many of the structural ambiguities that I will discuss in this book will only be ambiguous in either print or writing.

Discourse type and register

Our expectations about particular conventions associated with varying text types can also shape the way we interpret the syntax of an utterance and can lead to ambiguity. We’ll begin by considering what is sometimes referred to as “telegraphic language.” The term “telegraphic language” grows out of the older technology, which required a person to pay for each word used in an encoded message that was sent across telegraph or cable lines. But this term is also applied now to the language found in a variety of text types such as headlines, classified advertisements, signs, captions, application forms, and even crossword puzzles. These text types omit words for different reasons. In the case of classified advertisements, the primary concern is money, just as it was in the case of telegrams. But in text types such as newspaper headlines, application forms, signs, and captions, problems with spacing also seem to be a concern in addition to any monetary issues that may or may not be present.

We all recognize that newspaper headlines and certain kinds of signage routinely drop grammatical markers, such as auxiliary verbs (or even linking verbs) like *is*, *are*, *were*, and determiners such as *a*, *an*, *the*, *his*, *her*, etc. They might also rely more heavily than regular prose does on the ellipsis or omission of grammatical items that are syntactically (or semantically) recoverable.¹⁵ For example, if I see a caption under a picture of a car that says “a great deal,” I understand that what is intended is something like “This car is a great deal.”

But the use of telegraphic language can lead to structural ambiguity in several major ways. First of all, sometimes we can’t be sure where an omitted word would have fit into an existing structure. It is reported that someone sent a telegram to the actor Cary Grant, which asked,

“HOW OLD CARY GRANT?” Cary Grant responded, “Old Cary Grant fine. How you?” (Shalit 47).

At other times, though this is probably more rare, we may not know which specific form has been omitted. Note how the following classified advertisement, which actually appeared in a local newspaper in my area, relies on the omission of the seemingly unimportant determiner in front of “husband.” But depending on whether we assume that the omitted determiner is *your* or *a*, makes all the difference in the world. The perplexing ambiguity remains until a subsequent pronoun *him* in a following sentence clarifies the intended meaning:

Pregnant? Need Husband Quick? Get Him a Pager at Special Maternity Rates.

When we finally encounter the pronoun *him*, as well as the noun *pager*, which clarifies the meaning of “quick,” we then realize that the advertisement is asking about whether a married woman needs to reach her husband quickly.

The other major contribution of telegraphic language to structural ambiguity occurs as we aren't sure whether a grammatical element has even been omitted. This is illustrated in the following headline that reportedly occurred: “Miss West Virginia Is Hit With Rotary Club” (Esar 264). Note that if an indefinite article were present before “hit,” the ambiguity would not be possible. But my point here is not simply that newspaper headlines and other text types employing telegraphic language are ambiguous. My point is rather that because we know that certain grammatical markers *can* be omitted in particular text types, the absence of such markers in a given text can leave us wondering whether their absence was a result of a conventional omission (signaling one interpretation) or was never a part of the original utterance anyway (signaling another interpretation). In other words, the awareness of the possibility that grammatical markers have been omitted causes many structures that should on their face value be unambiguous to become structurally ambiguous as we consider possible syntactic tendencies associated with particular text types and registers. In the same way, the following alleged newspaper headlines or bulletins are also ambiguous as we can wonder whether an auxiliary verb form of BE, which is routinely omitted in newspaper headlines, is actually an intended part

of each headline's meaning: "Police Found Safe Under Blanket" (Tibballs, *Humor* 442) and "Nine volunteers put in new church furnace" (B. Phillips, *All-New* 164). Thus our pragmatic expectations have a lot to do with whether something is perceived as structurally ambiguous.

As indicated earlier, newspaper headlines and classified advertisements aren't the only text types employing telegraphic speech, as the following examples will illustrate:

Then there was the motorist who hired an attorney after his car was towed. He claimed there was nothing wrong with leaving his automobile beside a sign that read, "Fine for parking. . . ." (Rovin, *500 Great* 38)

[From a sign outside a dance hall]: "The management reserves the right to exclude any lady they think proper." (Nilsen, "Teaching" 35)

Insurance salesman to customer: "You've filled in this application all right except for one thing, Mr. Perkins—where it asks the relationship of Mrs. Perkins to yourself, you should have put down 'wife,' not 'strained.'" (*Reader's Digest Treasury* 112)

The employment clerk, checking over the applicant's papers, was amazed to note the figures 107 and 111 in the spaces reserved for "Age of Father, if living" and "Age of Mother, if living."

"Are your parents that old?" asked the surprised clerk.

"Nope," was the answer, "but they would be if living." (*Reader's Digest Treasury* 111)

Our recognition of the type of text that is involved not only shapes our expectations about the presence or absence of functional words like articles and auxiliary verbs but can even cast doubt about such an important constituent as a direct object. Quirk et al. show that the language of instructions, as in recipes and labels on products, removes the direct object of transitive verbs (23). One comedienne, Roseanne, plays off this in one of her routines:

You get a lot of tension. You get a lot of headaches. I do what it says on the aspirin bottle: Take two and keep away from children. (*That's Funny* 78)

In this joke, the ambiguity resides in our ability to interpret the verb “keep away” as both an intransitive verb, as its syntactic appearance with no direct object makes it seem to be, and as a transitive verb that has omitted the direct object through the common convention associated with labels, the object in this case being “aspirin.” Such an omission of the direct object can also occur in other telegraphic speech. For example, in his joke book, Braude provides an example of a mistake from a classified advertisement: “Secretary wants job; no bad habits; willing to learn” (2). Even though the verb *learn* on the surface appears to be intransitive since it is not accompanied by a direct object, the common convention of omitting the direct object in telegraphic speech allows us to consider the possibility that *habits* is the implied direct object of the verb. Chiaro reports another humorous story in which the convention of signage to omit direct objects also plays a role in a confusion that people had: “Trimmets treacle puddings have caused several people to be taken to hospital with badly scalded feet. It seems that the instructions read: ‘Open tin and stand in boiling water for twenty minutes’” (41). Another book reports the following bizarre sign that was displayed in an office: “Staff should empty the tea-pot and then stand upside down on the tea tray” (Tibballs, *Humor* 440). Again, the possibility of leaving out the direct object “tea-pot” has allowed the structure to be ambiguous, though our world knowledge would suggest that the tea-pot, though unexpressed, is still probably intended.

We should remember that other text or discourse types will also have their own conventions and practices that could lead to confusion, whether we look at email language or the language of conversational dialogues. Oral conversations differ from prose not only through supersegmental features of stress and intonation, but also in the kinds of information that can undergo ellipsis. And ellipsis is a huge contributor to structural ambiguity, as we shall see in Chapter 15.

Now we’ll briefly look at the related issue of register levels, or situationally determined language varieties that exist within a single dialect. The selection of an appropriate register depends on a number of factors, which can include the formality of the situation, the status of participants in the discourse, their relationship with one another, and the attitude that they may have toward one another or the situation at hand. Thus let us consider how pronoun interpretation can vary according to some of the factors we have mentioned here. When a queen says,

“We are not amused,” the pronoun is understood, because of her royal status, to be the first person singular “I.” When a doctor enters a room and addresses his patient with “How are we doing today,” it is understood to be a second person singular (and perhaps patronizing use of) “you.” Similarly, when one spouse asks the other when “we” are going to fix the leak in the sink, what is intended is a second person singular “you” but motivated by different pragmatic concerns such as not offending by giving a directive that is too explicit. And incidentally, beyond register issues, when my child asks if “we” can go outside and have a popsicle, it is clear to me that he is using the pronoun as a plural. But as his father I assume that he is using an exclusive rather than inclusive sense of the pronoun. In other words, though we may be standing next to each other, he is asking about whether he and one or more of his friends may have a popsicle. I am not included in the group he is referring to. In contrast, when one colleague asks another when “we” are going to get a paycheck, it is understood to be a plural inclusive *we*. With regard to register, we can consider the following joke by Milton Berle:

The nurse smiled and asked me, “How do we feel today?”
 I took a cue from her and touched our knee. So she slapped our face!
 (Berle 332)

In all of this we must remember that the type of text doesn’t just influence the kinds of structural ambiguities that can occur but also relates to the relative frequencies of the ambiguity types. For example, some kinds of structural ambiguities will be more common in headlines than prose and others, such as postmodification ambiguities, may be more common in law, with its long sentences, than in shorter types of texts like those found on billboards.

Poetry and songs

Songs and poetry sometimes introduce structural confusion because of their very nature. In these art forms, word orders are often inverted to fit melody lines, rhyme schemes, or metrical patterns. Syntactic confusion can result as we have to decide which of two or more possible word orders is intended. Sometimes it can even occur that we see only one structural possibility—the unintended one. Numerous Protestant children have

grown up wondering why they were singing about a cross-eyed bear named “Gladly,” and later discovered that the hymn they were singing was actually “Gladly the cross I’d bear.” In this hymn the adverb *gladly* has been moved to the front of the sentence from its more typical location after the verb. The noun phrase “the cross,” which is the direct object, occurs ahead of the verb rather than occupying the slot after the verb, where a direct object would normally occur. It is understandable how a child could be confused by such changes in word order, particularly in the absence of an accessible written text.

Age of the text

Our awareness of the age of a text also shapes our interpretation of a text, allowing us to see potential meanings that would likely not occur to us if the text were from a different time. Many speakers are aware that a number of words have changed their meanings through time, resulting in some possibilities for lexical confusion. But in a limited number of circumstances, some structural confusion is also possible. Note the potential ambiguity in Acts 18.21 of the King James Translation of the Bible: “. . . but I will return again unto you, if God will.” If this passage were from a modern translation, we would expect “if God will” to be elliptical for “will return,” but its appearance in an earlier text helps us to recognize *will* as a main verb meaning “desire” (that I return).

Of course it is also possible that some speakers, because of their ignorance of older forms of English may see only one meaning—the wrong one. When they see the Shakespearean use of “methinks,” they may interpret this as an unusual way of saying “I think” (“me” as subject) rather than its real meaning growing out of the very different syntactically structured “It seems to me” (“me” as an object). And in another example, one religious hymn about the Lord’s crucifixion on Calvary’s hill contains the words “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall . . .” (*Hymns* 194). Some who are unfamiliar with an old meaning of *without* that was once more common than it now is believe the words are saying that Jerusalem had no city wall. In fact, Jerusalem did have a city wall. The preposition “without” is saying that the crucifixion occurred *outside* a city wall. To someone who is familiar with both meanings of *without* and unaware that Jerusalem had a city wall, this hymn could be ambiguous.

Assessment of speaker or writer competence

Our assessment of the speaker's or writer's ability with the language is another important factor in our interpretation of an utterance. We might wonder about the extent to which an individual that we are listening to or whose words we are reading has mastered the language or prescriptive conventions of the language. When we read a foreign translation in English or read the words of a nonnative speaker who is struggling to express something in English, we may see alternative interpretations to what is being expressed, interpretations that we would never consider as possibilities when hearing a native speaker. In this regard we might recall some of the Confucius jokes that were once very popular. This type of joke presented a funny saying whose ambiguity sometimes depended on a violation of standard grammar for one of the interpretations. But the syntactically ill-formed interpretation still seemed plausible because, after all, Confucius wouldn't be expected to be a competent speaker of standard English. Consider the two statements below, which are, of course falsely, attributed to the philosopher:

Man who put head in fruit drink get punch in nose. (Tibballs, *Humor* 470)

Man who want pretty nurse must be patient. (Tibballs, *Humor* 470)

In the first saying, the ambiguity relies on *punch* being able to be interpreted not only as the beverage but also as a forceful blow to the nose. But in normal standard speech, this latter noun interpretation would require a preceding determiner like *a*. We suspend this requirement, however, and still allow for the possible noun interpretation because of our expectations about the speech of nonnative speakers, which frequently lacks determiners where we would normally expect them. A similar linguistic situation occurs in the second statement, with the grammatical problem centering on the word *patient*. Whereas in the first example our assumptions about the speaker competence caused us to overlook the incompatibility in determiner usage between *punch* as a count noun and *punch* as a noncount noun, in the second example the incompatibility is between *patient* as a count noun and *patient* as an adjective.

Assumptions about speaker competence can also be an issue when listening to a native speaker who obviously struggles with some sort of impediment. Consider the following story:

An alert copyreader on a newspaper couldn't believe it when he read a reporter's account of the theft of 2025 pigs. That's a lot of pigs, he thought, and called the farmer to check the copy. "Is it true that you lost 2025 pigs?" he asked. "Yeth," lisped the farmer. "Thanks," returned the copyreader, and corrected the story to read "two sows and 25 pigs." (Esar 213)

In the case of prescribed forms of standard English, if we knew that a person scrupulously followed some of the prescriptive forms of the language, we might be more sure of how a given utterance was to be interpreted. One of my colleagues once brought to my attention an example of a mistake in an article on the website of a professional news organization. In the article the author had not used commas very effectively to convey the intended meaning. In fact, if I assumed that commas were a guide to the intended interpretation, I would have been misled completely as to the author's intent. The sentence in question was "The priest said the local district attorney's office was notified only recently."¹⁶ One would think from the punctuation that the sentence is telling us something that the priest said. In fact, it is clear from the surrounding context that the local district attorney's office said that the priest was notified recently. In other words, the sentence should have been punctuated as "The priest, said the local district attorney's office, was notified only recently." Some people have the opinion that some structural interpretations are simply not possible because punctuation prevents their meaning, but in some situations, our assessment of the competence of the writer surely figures into our consideration of possible interpretations, or at least it should. Of course our notions of speaker (or writer) competence must take into account that their utterances may be affected at times by fatigue, lack of attention, time constraints, nervousness, etc.

Conclusion

In this chapter as we have discussed pragmatics, we have focused primarily on some general pragmatic factors that relate to our ability to

perceive particular structural ambiguities. It would also logically follow that a general awareness of such pragmatic features may be useful to keep in mind when deliberately forming structural ambiguities. We might, for example, benefit from recognizing the different potentials for ambiguity between written versus spoken utterances or between prose and newspaper headlines. But the interface between pragmatics and structural ambiguity may be even more directly and deliberately designed. Indeed, some specific grammatical structures that are easily fashioned into structural ambiguities are directly connected to the nature of the pragmatic context. Just a few quick examples here should suffice. First of all, in some communicative settings where one speaker needs to request information from another, it will be natural to form a question. As we shall see in Chapter 16, questions have an impressive array of forms and behaviors that lend themselves well to the creation of structural ambiguity. If a particular context involves the notion of conceding some point, this could lead us to use the subordinating conjunction *since*, which can be ambiguous between its notions of concession versus time. If a particular context involves the notion of permission or obligation, this naturally leads to the use of modal verbs, which among other things, help to mask number. And if a particular setting requires a description of a person or item, this opens up possibilities for modification ambiguities.

These examples show that our approach to deliberately creating structural ambiguity through a close consideration of the grammar can begin not only through a consideration of homonymous forms from the lexical categories like nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (such as with the words *patient* and *novel* that we saw in the preceding chapter) that grow out of a particular set of associations, but also through some pragmatically based notions that are more directly tied to the functional classes like conjunctions, prepositions, determiners, etc. or to the need for modifiers. Both the lexically based and the notionally based starting points are useful and interface with pragmatic considerations. And both sets should be consulted in any thorough attempt to generate a robust range of ambiguities relevant to a particular person, product, idea, or setting. In the final chapter, where I outline a methodology that consists of formulas and strategies for creating structural ambiguities, I have divided the lexically based and more notionally based formulas and strategies into two separate tracks.

Chapter 3

Phonological Influences on Structural Ambiguity

In this chapter, we will look at phonetic characteristics and common phonological features and processes within the English language, including some processes or features that are distinctive to specific dialects, and consider their role in structural ambiguity. It is appropriate to consider such information early in our discussion of structural ambiguity because so many structural ambiguities must be considered not only in relation to the differences between spoken and written utterances but also with regard to how we interpret some of the sound patterns that we hear. I will not devote much attention to the role of supersegmentals (or as some linguists represent the term, “suprasegmentals”) such as pause, stress, and intonation in facilitating structural ambiguities. For a discussion of their role, as well as some very good examples, please see Stageberg’s article, “Structural Ambiguity and the Suprasegmentals” (hereafter referred to by its shortened title, “Suprasegmentals”).

I must emphasize at the outset that just because there is a difference in how the sounds of an utterance are interpreted does not make such interpretations relevant to our consideration of structural ambiguity. Sometimes the phonological differences make no structural difference. For example, we might begin by considering the homophones “tale” and “tail.” In the sentences “I considered the tale” and “I considered the tail” we certainly have differing meanings, but these meanings do not involve differing structural interpretations. Both sentences involve a count noun serving as a direct object. Contrast those two sentences with the next two examples in which the homophones *eight* and *ate* are involved in very different structures:

He had a wife and eight children.

He had a wife and ate children.

In one of these sentences the word directly preceding *children* is a quantifier, whereas in the other it is a transitive verb. Thus the difference in the two meanings is not merely lexical but also structural. As this chapter proceeds, the reader must always keep in mind that the described phonological issues are relevant to our discussion only insofar as they also contribute to differing structural interpretations.

Some General Phonological Issues Related to Structural Ambiguity

We shall now consider some important issues of sound related to structural ambiguities. First of all, as we noted in the preceding chapter, there are many spoken ambiguities that would never be ambiguous in print. This is not just because of the possibility of word homophony as with the homophones *blue* and *blew*, which because they are not homonyms would therefore be unambiguous in writing. It also occurs because of larger structures that are homophonous such as “attacks on city buses” versus “a tax on city buses” (example from Bowen, 153, 259, as cited in Celce-Murcia et al. 240–41). This is not to say that there aren’t some phonological features that help to distinguish the varying interpretations. Many expressions that would be ambiguous in print are not ambiguous in speech because we can clarify them through supersegmental features such as intonation, pause, and stress. Still, even when these supersegmental features are present, their role in clarifying meaning can be neutralized when listeners allow themselves to mitigate these cues. For example, when we know we are observing comic performances, we suspend our judgments, perhaps in much the same way that there is a “willing suspension of disbelief” when attending a play or reading literature. We may be able to distinguish the phonological differences between two possible pronunciations, but we allow ourselves to believe that what we have heard is sufficiently similar that we judge it to be the same. And of course, sometimes there is a genuine phonological ambiguity that confronts a listener in an oral context that provides no salient supersegmental cues for disambiguation.

Second, it must not be assumed that possible interpretations relying on departures from a so-called prototypical form are somehow illegitimate. Each individual speaker often has more than one pronunciation

that is applied to a given word or string of words. If I pronounce a word in isolation (sometimes referred to as its “citation” form), it may have a very different pronunciation from the word when it occurs within a larger phrase or sentence. For example, if I pronounced the indefinite article “a” in isolation, I might likely pronounce it as /e/ (roughly equivalent to the vowel sound in *bait*, at least for most American English speakers). But in a sentence such as “I bought a car,” it is more likely to be pronounced as the schwa vowel /ə/ (like the first vowel in the word *afar*). Similarly, whether I hear the word “family” pronounced as three syllables or just two (missing the internal vowel), it is the same word. It would be a narrow view of language to ignore a transparent interpretation of an utterance because a particular word didn’t perfectly match its citation form, even as it fit a common pronunciation that it is given in a particular dialect, or when combined with other words, or when occurring within rapid speech. And just what determines the so-called correct citation form anyway? With the relatively greater prestige given to writing than to speech, it is easy for some to assume that speech should correspond to spelling. The folly behind this kind of assumption becomes apparent when we look at words like “island” or “debt.” Even the most avid prescriptivist would not insist on the /s/ and /b/ in these words. Their absence in the pronunciation is not sloppy speech. Nor is it sloppy speech to follow regular phonological rules that exist within the phonology of English, such as the pronunciation of unstressed vowels as the schwa vowel /ə/. In fact, to avoid such alterations to words as they are placed in different linguistic environments might make our speech sound stilted and unnatural (cf. Ladefoged 109–10). But the result of all this is that we often have two different pronunciations that can represent the same word or sequence of words. And the existence of two, rather than one pronunciation, increases the chances that the particular utterance could be homophonous with still another construction.

Third, we must consider the matter of phonemic interpretation. Some individual sounds (phones) that are produced are perceived as the same, even though they are actually different. In linguistics we speak of these as being “allophones” of the same phoneme. Phonemes are a meaning-distinguishing sound in a language. The phoneme itself is a mental abstraction. Individual sounds (phones) belong to one phoneme or another. For example, as English speakers, when we hear the /l/ sound in *lit* and *well*, we may not notice that two different phones are actually involved: [l] and [ɫ], respectively (cf. Stageberg and Oaks 13).

If we pronounce these words and pay close attention, we can hear that they actually use a different /l/ sound. But we perceive them as belonging to the same mental abstraction of /l/, that is, the same phoneme. Whether we use one sound or the other makes no difference in meaning because they are essentially different manifestations of the same abstraction. In other words, as we say in linguistics, they are allophones of the same phoneme.

Some pronunciations are not universally employed within the English-speaking community but are still sufficiently common that we are aware of them and interpret particular phones as belonging to a specific phoneme in one person's dialect, even as those sounds may not be part of that same phoneme in our own dialect. Sometimes the difference signals an imperfect acquisition of the phonology by a specific speaker, either because of age, physical disability, or nonnative background. In this regard we might think of the cartoon character, Elmer Fudd, whose speech approximates the speech of small children. When we hear him say "wabbit" instead of "rabbit," we understand that for him, [w] is probably an allophone of /r/.¹⁷ At other times the difference is common within a particular native-speaking English community that has a variety commonly considered nonstandard. Consider, for example, the use of /d/ for /ð/ ("th") in the speech of some speakers from New York City. In any event, we compensate for such speakers as we listen to them, constructing a working phonology for those speakers. Thus we realize that some speakers may differ from others in the use of a particular phone for a specific phoneme. For me, [l] and [ɫ] are allophones of /l/. Some speakers with an Asian language background may use other variations. What is important is the ability for speakers to anticipate the indented phonemes behind individual phonetic manifestations. Insofar as the possible phonemic sounds behind the individual phones can result in two separate meanings, we have some phonological ambiguity, and insofar as these separate interpretations invoke separate syntactic analyses, we also have a structural ambiguity.

Word Boundary Confusions

One important factor that contributes to structural ambiguity, particularly in oral contexts, relates to questions about just where a word boundary is. Confusion over word boundaries can be quite inadvertent.

Some of us at an earlier time in life when first hearing a term like “euthanasia” were probably confused and assumed that what was being said was “Youth in Asia.” Lederer, in fact, provides an example from someone who mistakenly wrote this form in an essay (*Bride* 137). We have also previously noted the college student reporter who mistakenly wrote “Lame is Rob” for *Les Miserables*. But word boundary confusions are not always inadvertent. One of my favorite business names is *PetSmart*. The double meaning intended by such a business name for its store that sells pets and pet products and services is pretty self-evident. And as might be expected, the potential for confusion in word boundaries has been exploited in less benign ways. We might note the widely publicized case of the Florida woman suing a restaurant where she had previously been a waitress, because they had deliberately misled her about a prize she had been working to obtain. The management of the restaurant had indicated that the most successful waitress for beer sales at each local restaurant in the larger chain in that area would have her name put into a drawing for a new Toyota. After winning the competition at her own restaurant and having her name selected from the area drawing, the waitress was taken blindfolded into a parking lot where she expected to receive her new car. Instead, after having the blindfold removed, she was given a Yoda doll. Yoda, as many will recall, is a character from the Star Wars series. Thus in one sense, she had received a Toy Yoda. She wasn’t amused and filed a lawsuit (*Deseret News*, July 29, 2001: A2).

Word boundary confusion commonly involves the indefinite articles *a* and *an* that precede nouns. It can be unclear whether the vowel sound *a* (often pronounced with the schwa vowel /ə/) is an indefinite article *a* (or the first part of the indefinite article *an*) or whether it is part of an adjective or noun in the noun phrase (or even an adverbial in the verb phrase). This confusion is assisted by the fact that, in English phrases and sentences, the articles are normally unaccented, a stress pattern that can easily be confused with the beginning of a noun that contains its primary stress on a noninitial syllable. This potential for confusion of word boundaries hasn’t escaped the notice of a comedy writer like Melvin Helitzer, who refers to these, and other words with similar potential for word boundary confusion, as “splits.” He comments about splits involving articles and their following words: “The most common category of splits are words that begin with the letter ‘a’ (such as

alone, around, abreast, abroad, apparent, apiece, and ahead)” (68). Let’s begin by looking at an old Abbott and Costello routine:

Costello: But, Abbott, I haven’t got that much money.

Man: Oh, I wish my wife was here—she’d get you a loan!

Costello: Get me alone? Who wants to be alone with your wife! I don’t even wanna be alone with *you*!

Abbott: No, no, Costello—he means his wife will get you a loan in the bank!

Costello: Alone in the bank? What does she wanna do, waltz through the vaults? (Gaver and Stanley 133)

But this kind of ambiguity is broad and productive in its potential use as a consideration of the following word-plays will show:

You can’t marry a miss if you marry a widow. (*Choice Dialect* 162)

A chorus girl never worries about getting ahead because she doesn’t need one. (Margolin 26)

He was a widower, getting along in years, and no longer handsome. “You are the fifth girl I have proposed to without avail,” he said.

“Well,” said the young woman, “maybe you’ll have better luck if you wear one.” (Allen, *Private* 158)

What did the endive say at the finish line?

“I’m a-head of lettuce!” (Mathews and Robinson n.p.)

Why can’t a woman ask her brother for help?

Because he can’t be a brother and assist her too. (*Prairie* 64)

Then there was the young college transvestite who decided to spend his junior year a broad. (Rovin, *1001 Great* 330)

Additional word boundary confusions involving articles can occur when the nasal consonant “n” is present either as part of the indefinite article (*an*) or as the initial consonant of a word following the indefinite article. A nasal beginning a word can be mistakenly attached to the previous indefinite article, or a nasal ending the indefinite article can be mistakenly attached to the beginning of the following word. The noun *apron* was originally *napron*, but as people spoke of “a napron” it

was eventually perceived as “an apron.” A similar development has occurred with the noun *adder* (“serpent”), with an opposite direction of influence on the word *nickname* (cf. Stageberg and Oaks 72, 405, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Even Shakespeare apparently played off this potential for confusion. In his play the *Comedy of Errors*, he has one character play off the name *Nell* and the measurement “an ell” (See Act III, scene 2, lines 109–11, and accompanying footnote in *The Riverside Shakespeare*). The continued possibility for ambiguity with these types of forms is still exploited in humor as the following joke and advertisement illustrate:

Vulcan: “I hear Cupid almost got you last week.”

Mercury: “Yes; I had an arrow escape.” (Moulton 153)

Have an Ice Day. (Billboard advertisement for a hockey team. The advertisement shows a smiley face icon that’s been struck with a hockey puck.) (2001 *Obie Awards* 15)¹⁸

Although word boundary confusions involving indefinite articles are probably the single most common environment for structural ambiguity with regard to word boundary confusions, there are many other situations in which this can occur. The variety of words with which this can occur is striking. I provide a variety of illustrations below:

A man walked up to the delivery window at the post office, where a new clerk was sorting mail. “Any mail for Mike Howe?” the man asked. The clerk ignored him, and the man repeated the question in a louder voice. Without looking up, the clerk replied, “No, none for your cow, and none for your horse either!” (Spector 167)

Frosh One: “I hear you got thrown out of school for calling the dean a fish.”

Frosh Two: “I didn’t call him a fish. I just said, ‘That’s our dean,’ real fast.” (Copeland and Copeland 374)

If you want to make money, crush a five dollar bill, open it up again and you will find it in creases [increases]. (*Stupid* 176)

A famous teacher of literature was sick. He received a get-well card which began, “Dear ill literate . . .” (Rothman 117)

It's claimed that fishermen are never generous.

It's because of their business—it makes them sell fish (selfish).
(Rothman 30)

Mom: Did you enjoy Tim's birthday party? Was there plenty to eat?

Jim: Yes, Mom, I had lemon cake, chocolate cake, cherry cake, ginger cake, fruit cake—then I had stomachache. (*Stupid* 196)

There was a man who entered a pun contest. He sent in ten different puns, in the hope that at least one of the puns would win. Unfortunately, no pun in ten did. (*Prairie* 29)

Throughout this chapter, as we consider a number of different phonetic environments involved in structural ambiguities, it should be noted that many of these ambiguities also rely on word boundary confusions.

Sounds with Shared Articulatory Features

Some sounds are so close in articulation that they are perceived as much the same. Consider, for example, a word pair such as *rice* and *rise*. These words do not rhyme, yet they sound more alike than what a random substitution of one consonant for another would provide. Rhyming can of course render some clever word-plays of its own. I like the reported strategy of one doctor's office: "A Park Avenue doctor's overdue bills now bear a sticker reading, 'Long time no fee'" (Cerf, *Bumper* 2: 433). But the sounds /s/ and /f/ in the above word-play do not share the same kind of similarity that /s/ and /z/ do. The final sounds /s/ and /z/ share two of three main articulatory features. For a better understanding of the relationship that consonants have to each other, at least in their production, let's briefly examine the articulation of English consonant phonemes.

Consonants involve an obstruction of the airstream that we push from our lungs as we speak. Sometimes the obstruction is partial, and sometimes it is temporarily complete, followed by a sudden release. These impediments to the airstream occur in different locations in our mouth, known as "places of articulation." My intent here is not to get as technical as a phonetics textbook might, but to briefly list some places of articulation along with the sounds produced in these places. We will