

## A Syntactic – Semantic Study of Dangling Modifiers in English

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#### **Abstract:**

Dangling modifier is a problematic phenomenon that could highly leads to confusion and misunderstanding in writing and / or speaking on the part of learners of English. Learners sometimes use modifiers in such an inappropriate way that would make their written or spoken sentence grammatically and semantically unacceptable. This study provides a syntactic and a semantic analyses of dangling modifiers to find out their effect on the grammatical structure and the meaning of the sentences that contain them.

Key words: dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers, syntactic analysis, semantic analysis.

دراسة نحوية-دلالية للواصفات المتراخية قي اللغة الانكليزية م. لميس محيي الدين توفيق قسم اللغة الانكليزية/كلية التربية الاساسية-جامعة الموصل

#### الملخص:

يعد الواصف المتراخي من الظواهر ذات الطابع الاشكالي التي يمكن يشكل كبيران تؤدي الى اللبس و الفهم الخاطيء من قبل متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية . بقوم المتعلمون احبانا باستخدام الواصفات بطريقة خاطئة تجعل الجمل التي يكتبونها او ينطقونها غير صحيحة وغير مقبولة نحويا ودلاليا. تجري هذه الدراسة تحليلات نحوية ودلالية للواصفات المتراخية للوصول الى مدى تأثيرها على التركيب النحوي والدلالي للجمل التي تحتويها.

#### 1- Introduction

A sentence is regarded as being the smallest unit that makes sense in any language. Users of language (speakers and writers), during communicating to each other, produce various types of sentences in order to achieve many purposes, among which expressing their ideas and thoughts. To convey thoughts well and avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation, speakers and/or writers must make sure that the sentences they produce are correct and clear, bearing no ambiguity or confusion from the part of listeners and readers. In English, however, speakers and writers are sometimes doing mistakes when they produce their sentences, and such mistakes may highly affect the thought they intend to give. Among these mistakes is that of dangling modifiers; which is, as its title suggests, concerning with modification, the very important aspect in grammar that is used for giving identification, or clarification, or for making speech more specific and more precise.

In this study, light will be shed on dangling modifiers from syntactic and semantic points of view to identify the effect of this mistake on the structure and meaning of the English sentence.

### 2- The Aims of the Study

This study is an attempt to achieve the following aims:

1- Investigating the meaning of dangling modifiers.

2- Analyzing dangling modifiers syntactically and semantically in order to find out their effects on the grammatical structure and the meaning of the context in which they occur.

### 3- The Hypotheses of the Study

This study texts on the following hypotheses:

- 1- Dangling modifiers are mistakes resulted from misusing of certain types of modifiers.
- 2- The occurrence of dangling modifiers affect the sentence syntactically and semantically as well.

### 4- The Scope of the Study

As far as this study is a theoretical one, it depends in its discussion on linguistic books and resources especially those in the grammar of English. Examples supplied in this study are either taken from those books and resources, or composed by the researcher herself.

### 5- The Problem of the Study

Many users of English, particularly learners, are not aware of the appropriate use of some modifiers, they use them in an arbitrary way following no clear rules, a matter which makes them fall in mistakes and produce incorrect sentences.

## 6- The Significance of the Study

This study is hoped to be helpful for learners of English as a foreign language to be aware of language mistakes, particularly, dangling modifiers; in order to avoid such mistakes and, hence, they could use language more appropriately. This study is also hoped to be useful for the researchers of linguistics, especially in the discipline of syntax.

### 7- Meaning of Dangling Modifiers

Before accounting some definitions of the term of dangling modifiers, it is important to mention that dangling modifiers are so common in the informal contexts of English than in the formal ones.

Many linguists suggest definitions for the term 'dangling modifier'. According to

Kirszner and Mandell (1989:243), a dandling modifier is either a word or a phrase that, in most of times, impossible to describe, limit, or restrict logically any part of the sentence. On the same realm, Hale (2005:1) defines the term as "a word or phrase that modifies a clause in an ambiguous manner, because it can be applied to either the subject or the object of the clause".

Tampubolon's definition is not different of what had been mentioned above. He defines dangling modifier as "a group of words or phrase is not specific, illogically stated in the sentences, so it is not clear that who explain and what explanation is about" (Tampubolon, 2014:15).

Quirk et al handled the term of dangling modifier in more detailed expression as it has already mentioned in the introduction. They define dangling modifier by stating:

"Dangling modifiers describe, clarify, and give more details and information about an idea or a concept or what is going to be according to intention of the speaker or writer. Danglers are generated as inevitable result as job of a modifier when it does not exist logically to modify what should be modified in the sentence'. (Quirk, et al, 1985:1121).

In an attempt to cover meaning of dangling modifier precisely and in few words, (Demirezen, 2012:143) claims that dangling modifiers can be called as "dangles", "floaters", "hanging modifiers", "floating modifiers". One reason of calling them so, may due to the misplacement of these modifiers within the sentence, and their un-attachment to the right words they modify. Azar (1999: 87) adds that dangling modifier often creates ambiguous conception in readers' minds. This happens when it does not logically modify the aimed word in the sentence.

To sum all up, it could be said that a dangling modifier appears when a modifying word, phrase, or clause is suddenly and inappropriately separated from the word it modifies, or when there is no logical relation between the modifiers and the words they modify.

#### 8- The Syntactic Analysis of Dangling Modifiers:

The syntactic discussion of dangling modifiers will focus basically on the types of dangling modifiers, how to correct dangling modifiers, and the relation between dangling modifiers and what so-called misplaced modifiers.

### **8.1 Types of Dangling Modifiers:**

In this section of the study, we will shed the light on the main types of dangling modifiers. These types are typically classified according to the grammatical constructions in which dangling modifiers may occur.

Clara (1982: 188) states that there are four types of dangling modifiers:

- 1- participial dangling modifiers.
- 2- dangling modifier in prepositional phrases.
- 3- dangling modifier in infinitive phrases.
- 4- dangling modifier in elliptical phrases.

### 8.1.1 Participial Dangling Modifiers:

This type mainly occurs with the unattached participial constructions. Quirk et al (1985: 1121) considered it as an error when the subject of the participial clause is not identical with the subject of the main clause, as in

## 1. Driving to Chicago that night, a sudden thought struck me.

They argued that the implied subject of the participial clause is 'I', which is clearly different from the subject of the main clause,

On the other hand, this type of dangling modifier occurs when the participial clause is followed by a passive verb and the subjects of the two clauses (i.e. the participial clause and the main clause) are not identical (Clara, 1982: 189);

## 2. Changing the oil every 3.000 miles, the car was kept in excellent condition.

It is clear that the subject of the participial clause is not the same as that of the main clause, a case which makes the sentence grammatically unacceptable.

### **8.1.2 Dangling Modifier in Prepositional Phrases:**

A dangling modifier can also appear with a preposition followed a gerund and, again, if the reference of the gerund is not identical with the word that is supposed to be modified by the prepositional phrase, or perhaps that word is not found in the sentence at all. (ibid: 190)

#### 3. After waiting for a while, the order arrived.

In this example, the prepositional phrase (after waiting for a while) is supposed to modify what comes immediately after it, which is represented here by (the order); and it is apparent that the two items are irrelevant.

### **8.1.3 Dangling Modifier in Infinitive Phrases:**

When used as a modifier, the infinitive phrase must be attached to an existing right word, otherwise it will be a dangling modifier.

## 4. To impress the interviewer, punctuality is essential.

(Maimon et al, 2007:630)

The infinitive phrase in this example is dangling because it is attached to, and hence it modifies, the wrong word (punctuality). In other words, when a sentence begins with a subjectless infinitive

phrase, it is expected that the subject of the main sentence will function as the subject of the introductory infinitive phrase. If this does not happen, there will be a dangling infinitive.

### 8.1.4 Dangling Modifier in Elliptical Phrases:

Ellipsis is the omission of certain items in a sentence, that they can be understood or recovered from the context. A dangling modifier may appear in subordinate clauses containing elliptic items, particularly subject an predicate. The subject and the predicate of a clause can be omitted only if they are implied in the context. Dangling elliptical modifier occurs when the omitted subject is not identical with the subject of the main clause. (Waldhorn & Zeiger, 1954: 50)

#### 5. When ten years old, my father had retired from army.

The subordinate clause (when ten years old) contains elliptic subject and predicate, and logically interpreted as (when I was ten years old), but it structurally modifies the subject of the main clause (my father), and thus the sentence will have two irrelevant subjects.

## 8.2 Techniques to Correct Dangling Modifiers:

How to correct a dangling modifier is highly related to its type, i.e. it is easy to correct a dangling modifier when it is recognized where it occurs. However, the following technique are suggested to correct dangling modifiers:

1- Identifying the "appropriate and logical" subject of the main clause, then making sure that it is identical with the implied subject in the modifying clause.

#### 6. Looking out from the window, the distant hill can be seen.

The subject of the main clause is clearly (the distant hill), but if one asks 'who is looking out from the window?' the answer, for sure will not be 'the distant hill'. Thus an appropriate and logical subject is needed here, and the sentence might be revised into

- -Looking out from the window, we can see the distant hill.
- **2-** Placing the modifying phrase in a position that makes it closely attached to the word it modifies.
  - 7. Rusty but still usable, I found this jar in the store.

Since the modifying phrase (rusty but still usable) logically modifies the word (jar), it must be placed close to that word,

- -I found this rusty but still usable jar in the store.
- **3-** Changing the dangling phrase into an introductory finite clause, as follows:
- 8. Not preparing well for the exam, it was difficult for him to pass.
- -Because he did not prepare well for the exam, it was difficult for him to pass.
- **4-** Combining the phrase with the clause to make a complete sentence, as in the following example:

### 9. To make her lesson interesting, colored pictures are used.

#### -She makes her lesson interesting by using colored pictures.

**5-** Recovering the elliptic subject and predicate: some dangling modifiers cannot be corrected by any of the previous techniques; if the modified word does not exist in the sentence, the modifying phrase will stay modifying the wrong word or no word at all. (Quirk et al, 1972: 724)

### 10. While having a rest, a fire alarm rang.

### -While having a rest, there was a fire alarm.

The appropriate technique to correct the dangling modifier in this sentence is by recovering the elliptic subject and predicate

### -While we were having a rest, a fire alarm rang.

In general, techniques of correcting dangling modifiers vary from one another according to the type of the dangling modifiers themselves — as it has been mentioned at the beginning of this section of the study; while one technique seems to be beneficial for one type it would be useless for another. Sentences containing dangling modifiers must be analyzed carefully in order to determine the appropriate technique for them.

### 8.3 Dangling Modifiers and Misplaced Modifiers:

A dangling modifier is a phrase that comes at the beginning of a sentence and dangles there because it does not have a clear subject or refers wrongly to the subject of main clause. Misplaced modifier, on the other hand, is phrase (or a clause) that placed wrongly in the sentence and, as a result, modifies the wrong word (Carillo, 2003: 70)

# 11. I waited half an hour while it was raining heavily this morning in that little café.

Structurally the phrase (in that little café) seems to modify the verb (raining),but logically it must modify the verb (waited), i.e. this phrase is meant to tell where the speaker waited half an hour, not where it was raining heavily. In this sense, this phrase is considered as being a misplaced modifier.

Misplaced modifiers can be found in different forms. Carol (1994:95) classifies forms of misplaced modifiers as follows:

#### 1- Single word:

Single word modifiers, mainly certain types of adverbs, can take wrong position in the sentence. Such adverb are: almost, barely, even, hardly, just, merely, nearly, only, simply, etc.

## 12. Only Sara drinks tea, she doesn't drink coffee.

The first part of the sentence tells that no one but Sara drinks tea, but as the sentence continues to tell (she doesn't drink coffee) it could immediately be understood that the modified word must be (tea) not (Sara), and that the word (only) is placed wrongly in the sentence.

#### 2- Phrase:

This is highly occurs among prepositional phrases used as modifiers. If such phrases are misplaced in the sentence, they will result in confusion.

#### 13. She gave some milk to her son in a plastic cup.

The prepositional phrase (in a plastic cup) is clearly misplaced for it must modify the word (milk) not (her son).

#### 3- Clause:

The most common clause types that can be misplaced in the sentence are relative clauses, non-finite participial clauses, and adverbial clauses.

#### a- Relative clauses

# 14. She put her gloves on her hands which she bought from London.

The relative clause (which she bought from London) must come directly after the phrase (her gloves) because it is the appropriate and logical phrase to be modified by that clause.

## b- Non-finite participial clauses

## 15. A man stopped me coming from the other side of the street.

The participial clause is normally modifying the word (man), therefore it must be placed after this word.

#### c- Adverbial clauses

#### 16. Andrew met his friend when he was at market.

This sentence sounds confusing because it is not clear who was at the market, Andrew or his friend. The sentence would be made clearer if it is re-written in such a way as

#### -When Andrew was at the market, he met his friend.

Generally speaking, as dangling modifier is an error because of its reference: it refers to a wrong word, or no word in the sentence, misplaced modifier is an error because of its placement within the sentence. Thus the correction of misplaced modifiers is much easier than that of the dangling modifiers: once the right word to be modified is identified, the right position of the modifier is determined.

#### 9. Semantic Analysis of Dangling Modifiers:

As it is known, syntax and semantics go together when anyone intends to produce any written or spoken sentence. A sentence could be acceptable only when it is both syntactically and semantically correct. For example, a sentence like "The child sits in a cup" seems grammatically correct but one cannot accept it because it conveys an illogical idea, and unless the reader/listener has certain knowledge about what the writer/speaker exactly means he will immediately consider it incorrect.

Concerning dangling modifiers, it has been mentioned in this study that they are seen as a grammatical error and, as a result, they will lead to some problems in the meaning of whole sentences they occur in. The most prominent semantic problem resulted from the occurrence of dangling modifiers is ambiguity; a sentence containing a dangling modifier is always ambiguous. The ambiguity of dangling modifiers emerges from their wrong reference, an introductory subjectless modifying phrase/clause refers cataphorically to the subject of the main clause; and it will dangle if it refers to an inappropriate word. What follows is a semantic

analysis of the examples mentioned in the discussion of the types of dangling modifiers.

### 1- Participial dangling modifiers

- Driving to Chicago that night, a sudden thought struck me.

The participial phrase in sentence is a modifying one, and it seems that it modifies the subject of the main clause. In this sense, the sentence could be misinterpreted as that "a sudden thought was driving to Chicago", while the real agent must be a person; normally the narrator himself.

### 2- Dangling prepositional phrases

- After waiting for a while, the order arrived.

The writer/speaker of this sentences incorrectly used a modifying prepositional phrase in a way that made the reader/hearer confused with the idea of "the order being waiting for a while". This is a common mistake in using prepositional phrases as modifiers, which results in ambiguity.

## **3- Dangling infinitive phrases**

- To impress the interviewer, punctuality is essential.

The reader of this sentence will feel it ambiguous when he asks "who should impress the interviewer?", because the answer is, surely, not "punctuality". It has been mentioned that in a sentence beginning with a modifying subjectless infinitive phrase, the subject of the main clause will act as the subject of the infinitive phrase, otherwise, this phrase will dangle.

### 4- Dangling elliptical phrases/clauses

#### - When ten years old, my father had retired from army.

It has been mentioned in the syntactic analysis of this example that the subordinate clause (when ten years old) seems structurally modifying (my father) since they are placed close to each other within the sentence. Semantically speaking, this placement makes the sentence illogical and confusing, and its reader may wonder (how could a man retire from army at the age of ten?). This is another type of mistakes in using modifiers that lead to ambiguity and confusion.

In general, the occurrence of dangling modifiers in sentences affects not only the grammatical structure of these sentences, but it also affects the whole meaning of the context.

#### 10. Conclusions:

Modifiers, especially those in a form of phrases and clauses, are very important grammatical constructions that must receive careful treatment when using them. Wrong use of such modifiers makes them dangle in the sentence and, as a result, makes the sentence unacceptable. Dangling modifiers happen when the users (speakers or writers) of English don't care about, or are not aware of, the right use of modifiers: where to put them in a sentence and, most importantly, to which word they must be intended to refer.

However, the study has tackled with dangling modifiers syntactically and semantically. The syntactic discussion suggests that four types of modifiers may mostly dangle if they are misused, they are: participial phrases, prepositional phrases, infinitive phrases, and elliptical phases or clauses. One must be careful when

using such constructions as modifiers, for any fault in their placement and reference will make them dangle, and then result in incorrect sentences.

On the other hand, the semantic discussion reveals that sentences containing dangling modifiers are either ambiguous or convey illogical concepts. As dangling modifiers are resulted from a mistake in the grammatical structure of a context, they, at the same time, result in a mistake in the meaning of that context. In other words, dangling modifiers make sentences unacceptable both syntactically and semantically.

To avoid falling in such a mistake, it might be useful to suggest that users of English, especially learners, must pay serious attention to using modifiers correctly, teachers also must give much importance to the topic helping their students master it by supplying them with a flow of explanation reinforced by good amount of examples.

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