Factors Of Structural Ambiguity In English And Arabic: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract

The current research paper is concerned with a contrastive study of structural ambiguity in English and Arabic. It refers to a very important aspect in sentence structure in English with their counterparts in Arabic.

By ambiguity we mean any sentence which cannot be understood meaningfully, or it may have more than one meaning. In this way the hearer or listener does not understand exactly what is meant.

In English language there are several factors that cause structural ambiguity. These are duality of parts of speech, absence of functional words, immediate constituent, surface and deep structure, compound and grammatical words, and the use of pronouns.

Arabic language as English has several factors that cause ambiguity which are the same as in English with few differences. These factors are duality in parts of speech, surface and deep structure, elision of some parts of speech, and the use of pronouns.

A contrastive analysis has been made at the end of the study with a conclusion which contains the points of similarities and differences between the factors of structural ambiguity in the two languages, that

would be of a great benefit to the students of English language as a second language, and those who got interest in contrastive studies.

Key Words:

- Types of ambiguity
- Factors of structural ambiguity in English
- Factors of structural ambiguity in Arabic
- location of ambiguity
- situations of grammatical ambiguity in the language.

Chapter one

Ambiguity in English

1.1   What is Ambiguity?

Ambiguity according to David crystal(1988:15) is the reference to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning and this reference has to do with linguistics. Hartmann and Stork (1976: 11) ambiguity is a construction which admits more than one interpretation. For example " patient medicines are sold by frightening people" the ambiguity arises due to the fact that we cannot tell whether the sense intended is "patient medicines are sold by putting fear into people" or " patient medicines are sold by people who are frightening" .

1.2   Types of Ambiguity

Linguistic theories have identified two types of ambiguity and they are as follows:

1. Syntactic or structural ambiguity: it arises when the role of a word in a sentence is unclear. For example: ***a decent college***

graduate, involves two interpretations. The first *graduate of a decent college* or *decent graduate of a college.*

The adjective **decent** once modifies the first noun, i.e. **the college** or the second noun, i.e. **the graduate**.

2. Lexical or semantic ambiguity: it arises when a word has more than one meaning like: *child's stool is great for use in garden.*

1.3   Factors of Structural Ambiguity In English

1.3.1   Duality of Parts of Speech:

Any sentence in English is an arrangement of words as parts of speech. if the listeners or readers do not know the identity of those parts of speech, they will not understand the message being communicated, for example: *They are encouraging reports.*

The word *encouraging* may be a verb and in this case the sentence would mean : *They are encouraging reports.*

Or it can be an adjectival giving the following meaning:

These reports are encouraging.

1.3.2   The Immediate Constituent:

A sentence or part of a sentence is ambiguous when it carries

more than one meaning. Any sentence in English can be divided into immediate constituents hence forth ICs. Dividing a sentence into ICs does not provide much information though sometimes it is clear. In this way the sentence shows ambiguity i.e. a difference in meaning which results from

difference   in the hierarchical structure of the IC analysis. (palmer, 1984:125) . For example:

The old men and women.

This sentence is ambiguous and the ambiguity is illustrated by paraphrasing it as follows:

1. *The old men and women.*
2. *The old men and the old women.*

In this case the ambiguity occurs because the constituents of a sentence are not clearly shown and the meaning is not clearly signaled. For example:

The people who saw the play frequently praised it.

This sentence cannot be cut into its ICs because it is not clear where to cut before or after *frequently,* so either of the following might be intended:

The people who saw the play / frequently praised it.

The people who saw the play frequently / praised it.

The difficulty is that the adverb *frequently* comes between two verb clusters *saw the   play* and *praised it*, and it could go with either one. (Roberts, 1961:137-139)

Noun clusters also offer possibilities of ambiguity, like:

The girl in the car that had moved.

In this case we cannot say whether the girl or the car that had moved? This is because we cannot tell what are the ICs. They could be either:

The girl / in the car that had moved.

The girl in the car / that had moved.

The difficulty arises because there are a prepositional phrase and a relative clause used to modify a noun headword; the prepositional phrase must come first and the clause second. In this way we have two nouns in front of it, the first noun and the noun which is the object of the preposition, and there should be a signal to tell which noun goes with. (ibid)

1.3.3   The Use of Pronouns

The use of pronouns in sentences may sometimes cause ambiguity specifically the personal pronouns. These pronouns are similar to the proper nouns except in one respect; the pronouns should have antecedents. That is, the pronoun *he* will not occur unless a word like *Sam, the boy, my father* precedes it.

Difficulties arise when the pronoun has more than one possible antecedents, like:

Sam told his brother that he was not going to get a typewriter for the Christmas.

Here *he* is preceded by two nouns either of which might be the antecedent.

Sam told his brother that he (Sam) was not going to get a typewriter for Christmas.

or

Sam told his brother that he (his brother) was not going to get a typewriter for Christmas. (ibid: 146)

1.3.4   Surface Structure And Deep Structure.

Any sentence when uttered is on the surface structure and this surface structure may hide the presence of two or more deep structures. For example the following sentence may appear to be ambiguous on the surface:

I saw her in the street.

The phrase *in the street* goes with "*I*" in one interpretation and with "*her*" in another. The two interpretations sound the same i.e. one surface structure with two meanings. Consider the following examples:

The chicken is ready to eat.

In one interpretation the **chicken** is the object of *eat*, in another interpretation it is the subject. Therefore the sentence appears on the surface syntactically ambiguous. (Palmer, 1984: 125)

1.3.5   Compound Words and Grammatical Structures

Compound words cannot be separated by insertion of intervening material between the two parts, but the grammatical structures can be divided into two parts. The confusion between the two structures results in a sort of ambiguity.

For example:

1. *She is a sweetheart.*
2. *She has a sweetheart.*

In the first sentence *sweetheart* is indivisible in that nothing can be inserted between *sweet* and *heart*, but in the second sentence we could say: *She has a sweet, kind heart.*

So, sweetheart in the first sentence is a compound word whereas in the second is a grammatical structure.

Another example:

hard ball. And baseball.

Hard ball is a grammatical structure: a modifier plus noun, for we can say:

It is a hard ball.

Baseball is a compound word, and we cannot say:

It is very a baseball. (Huddleston, 1981: 12)

1.3.6   Absence of Determiner

The absence of a determiner which is used before nouns will result in a sort of ambiguity. This type of ambiguity can be found in newspaper headlines. For example:

Union demands increase.

This sentence can be interpreted as follows:

1. *Union demands will increase.*
2. *Union demands an increase.*

In the first sentence the addition of *will* indicates that *increase* is a verb. In the second sentence the addition of *an* indicates that *increase* is a noun.

Another example:

Rule book not absent.

This sentence can be interpreted as follows:

1. *Rule the book not absence*.
2. *The rule book not absent.*

Inserting a determiner before **book** would indicate that **rule** is a verb in the first sentence. Whereas in the second the determiner precedes the noun **rule**, and it acts as a modifier to the noun **book**.

(Stage Berg, 1981: 173)

1.4   Location of Ambiguity

Ambiguity may arise anywhere in the sentence, whether basic or expanded. It may arise in the noun cluster or verb cluster, i.e. either in the subject or the predicate.

Ambiguity in the basic sentence patterns is mainly due to the multiple use of words which is a distinctive feature of English. The same word is used in more than one word class or subclass. For example, *love* and *change* are both nouns and verbs, *hard* and *fast* are both adjectives and adverbs. For example:

College demands change.

In the first reading to the sentence, *College* is a noun as a subject and *demands* is a transitive verb and *change* is a noun as an object. It means the college asked for a change. In the second reading *college* and *demands* are nouns, *college* is a modifier to the *demands* and *change* is an intransitive verb, the sentence means the demands of the college undergo some change (Edger,1965: 223).

1.5   Situations of Grammatical Ambiguity in the Language:

There are several grammatical situations in which ambiguity occurs frequently and under specific grammatical restrictions. These situations are as follows:

1. Verb "-ing" + noun

   For example:

   Patient medicines are sold by frightening people

In this situation the word *frightening* can be read as verb +noun object, i.e. **someone is frightening the people**. Also it can be read as adjectival + noun head, i.e. **the people are frightening**.

2. Verb + prepositional phrase

   He stood drinking in the moonlight.

In one reading we have *drinking in* which two parts can be separated by an object as in *he stood drinking the moonlight in.* In the second reading *drinking* is a separable verb followed by its modifier *in the moonlight .* (Owen, 1967: 239)

3. Verb or adjective.

   Social legislation is the way to better living.

The word *better* can be read as an adjective or a transitive verb.

4. Function noun or determiner.

   We observed another sail.

The word *another* in one reading is a noun followed by the verb *sail*. In the second *another* is a determiner to the noun *sail*.

5. Adverb of place or of direction

They stamped upstairs.

In the first reading *upstairs* is an adverb of place. In the second it is an adverb of direction.

6. **Then** is an adverb of time or result.

He is not going home then.

In the first reading *then* is an adverb of time i.e. he is not going home at a specific time. In the second reading *then* is an adverb of result, i.e. there is something to happen that made him not going home. (Gleason,1966: 236)

7. Noun +noun head

Ambiguity would occur it two nouns come together. For example:

Student hero.
It might mean that *the student who is a hero* or *hero of student*.

8. Adjective + noun + noun head
For example:
New patient counselor
It can mean either *"a new counselor of patients"* or *"a counselor of new patients".*

9. Predeterminer + noun + noun head
For example:
Double job pay
It is either a *pay for a double job* or *a double pay for a job*.

10. Noun head + prepositional phrase + participial phrase

For example:

There was a spotted dog in the group barking at the race.

11.Noun head + infinitive phrase + prepositional phrase

For example:

Attempt to break strike by workers (ibid).

Chapter Two

Ambiguity in Arabic

2.1 Structural Ambiguity in Arabic

In Arabic language the sentence is composed of a subject and a predicate each of which has its importance inside the sentence and it cannot be meaningful without each.

Still, there are several cases in which the subject or the predicate and even the verb is omitted. Sometimes, one of them precedes the other with an indication to it. Many other cases that result in structural ambiguity.

2.2 Factors that Cause Structural Ambiguity in Arabic

Arabic language has different factors that cause this ambiguity.

Below are mentioned those factors:

2.2.1 Elision

All speakers tend to contract their speech as much properly as

they can. That's why they are omitting many words and letting only those carrying the main idea they want to convey. Even though, elision happens with repeated forms, it takes place for a specific reason. This reason belongs to a general meaning of the sentence and this appears on the surface structure of it. Still, the sentence carries an accepted meaning to the receiver besides its original character which it has before the elision.

Elision cannot happen unless the parts of the sentence are enough to convey the meaning required. In addition, the omitted forms from a sentence should be clear to the receiver, and their positions also should be easy to predict from the main structure of the sentence.

2.2.1.1 Types of Elision

1. **Elision of the subject:** the subject in many sentences found in the language specifically the language of the Holly Quran is omitted from its sentence leaving a nominative predicate, for example: " فَهُم صُمّ بُكْم عُمْيُ" these words "صُمُ بُكمُ عُمْيُ لا يَرْجِعون" are several predicates to one subject which is "هم". It is omitted from the sentence. In addition, in " قُولوا حِطّة " the subject here omitted which is " مَسألتنا حطة ", and in " إنها بقرةٌ لا ذلولٌ تُثيرُ الأرضَ" the subject is "هي". (الاخفش: 156).

2. **Elision Of The Predicate:** several sentences in Arabic language can be found without a predicate with only a nominative subject. Also in the Holy Quran, there are verses which are found without a predicate. for instance:
   " فَاتقوا النارَ التي وَقودُها الناسُ والحجارةُ" which means
   "الناس وقودها والحجارة وقودها" i.e. the omitted predicate is "وقودها".
   "وَوَصّى بها ابراهيمُ بنيهِ ويعقوبُ" in which the predicate

"يعقوب وصى بنيه " is omitted. (الدر المصون: 248)

3. **Elision Of The Verb:** there are many cases in Arabic language where verbs are omitted but are keeping the nominative subject. Some of these cases can be seen inside the Holy Quran as:

"ثمَ تَولِيتم من بعدِ ذلكَ فلولا فضلُ اللهِ ورحمتهُ" the verb **" ثبت "** is omitted because it came after **"ولا"** so it is **"لولا ثبت فضل الله"**.

"الحق من ربك فلا تكونن من الممترين" the verb **"جاء"** is omitted, so it is **"جاء الحق من ربك"**. (Ibid: 289)

2.3 Absence of Functional Words:

Sometimes one can find sentences that have the pronoun omitted which results in ambiguity. For example: **"ومما رزقناهم ينفقون"** the omitted pronoun is **"الهاء"**, and in **"بما كانوا يكذبون"** the pronoun is **"إياه"** to be **"يكذبونه"**. (الدر المصون: 95)

There are some examples in Arabic in which the prepositions are omitted and cause ambiguity. In the Holy Quran we can find several verses that have such case, as in **"وعلى ابْصَارهِم غِشَاوَة ولهُمْ عذابُ عَظيمُ"** it could be **"وعلى ابصارهم بغِشاوة "** also in **"ويَمُدُهُم في طُغْيانِهم يَعْمَهُونَ"** it could be **"يمدُ لهُم"**. (النحاس: 150)

2.4 Surface and Deep Structure:

It is well-known, that each tense has its own structure and meaning and does not share with other tenses. But sometimes the tenses share the same structure on the surface and become in between two meanings. As a result structural ambiguity occurs. (Lyons: 223-224)

For example: the verb **"قال"** in **"قالَ محمد في المسجد"** may be interpreted as one of the tenses of **"قول"** or it came from **"قيلولة"**, so it

can be a subject and an object. Another example taken from the holy

Quran"ولا تُضارَّ والدةُ بولدها" the verb "تُضارِر" can be in active voice and it

might mean " تُضارِر" the wife should not bother her husband with

requests, and it can be in a passive voice and it might mean "تُضارَر" the

husband should not blame his wife for spending much on her child

which requires the husband to supply his wife and child, with

everything.(الشوكاني: 169)

2.5 Use of Pronouns:

The usage of pronoun in a sentence or in any text should have a

reference to which it belongs. This reference is an antecedent to that

pronoun which explains the identity of it and its role inside the text or the

sentence. Sometimes it happens that to one pronoun there are two

antecedences or references. In this case ambiguity occurs to give two

interpretations to one single sentence, as for example:

"أكرمَ زيدُ عمراً فأكرمته"

The connected pronoun "الهاء" in "أكرمته" can be related to either

"زيد" for being generous with "عمر" or related to "عمر" for being "زيد"

generous with him.(الغزالي: 274)

2.6 Adjective Reference:

Whenever an adjective occurs it should have a reference which

 it modifies. It always precedes the noun which can be either the subject or the object in a sentence. Ambiguity occurs when more than one adjective is being mentioned in a sentence with only one antecedent. In this case, either one adjective is being related to the antecedent or all adjectives are so. For example:

"**زيد طبيب اديب ماهر**" the description "**ماهر**" can be related to all what have mentioned before, so "**زيد**" can be "**ماهر**" skilful in being both "**طبيب**" **a doctor** and "**اديب**" **a writer**. The adjective can be related to either "**طبيب**" or "**اديب**" and in this way, "**زيد**" would be either skilful in being a doctor or in being a writer. (السبكي :209)

2.7 Duality in Parts of Speech:

Several cases can be found in Arabic language which a part of

speech might use double usage inside a sentence, like "**فيه هدىً للمتقين**" in which case "**هدىً**" is considered either an adverb of manner or a predicate though it is a noun in structure. Moreover, in

"**شهر رمضان الذي أنزل فيه القرآن هدىً للناس**" , the word "**هدىً**" is considered as a noun and considered as an adjective to describe the month, or even is considered as an adverb of manner.(ابي حيان, 40/2)

3. Contrastive Analysis:

3.1 Preliminary: This section of the study is specified for making

a contrastive analysis to the factors of structural ambiguity in English with their counterparts in Arabic.

Each factor that causes structural ambiguity in English may or may not have an equivalent in Arabic, but the majority of them do.

In English, the first factor is the duality in parts of speech which leads to a real confusion to the reader and even the hearer, as for example the word *encouraging*, in *These are encouraging reports*. It may be a main verb or a modifier to the noun *reports*. Semantically, the hearer would be in confusion whether *encouraging* is an action done by someone or a property used to characterize an object. In Arabic, the same happens as in " **شهر** **رمضان الذي أنزل فيه القرآن هدىً للناس** where the word *"هدىً"* here is an adjective or an adverb of manner though it is a noun.

Elision plays a great part in raising structural ambiguity in texts. According to English language, elision of some parts of speech is the main reason behind ambiguity, especially elision of functional words like determiners as in **Union demands increase** in which case, *demands* as a noun and *increase* as a verb or as a transitive verb and *increase* as an object.

In Arabic language, elision takes place not only with functional words but also with form words. For example" **صمُ بكمُ عميُ فهم لا يرجعون**" many predicates belongs to one subject which is **"هم"** is omitted from the sentence. Moreover, elision of predicate like " **اتقوا النار التي وقودها الناس** **والحجارة"** the word **"وقودها"** is omitted.

the "الحق من ربك فلا تكونن من الممترين" The verb can be omitted as in the omitted verb is "جاء". All what have been omitted from the sentences can be understood from the text itself. In addition, functional words are omitted as in "ومما رزقناهم ينفقون" , the pronoun "إياه" is being omitted but can be anticipated from the text.

Absence of antecedent to the pronoun in a sentence causes ambiguity in both languages English and Arabic. In English this happens with personal pronouns only as in:

Tom told his brother that he will not buy a new typewriter.

The second pronoun may be related to Tom or his brother. The same happens with Arabic, but it includes all types of pronouns, as in:

زيد اكرمَ زيدُ عمر فأكرمته here "الهاء" **is a** pronoun which may belong to either عمر **or**.

Deep structure and surface structure play a vital role in structural ambiguity in sentences in both languages English and Arabic.

In English, the surface structure of some sentences might mean something and the deep structure might mean another. For example:

the chickens are ready to eat. The prepositional phrase may belong to the subject in the active voice but in the passive it might mean **chickens are ready to be eaten,** in this way the prepositional phrase belongs to absent subject and **chickens** would be the object.

In Arabic, as in"لا تُضار والدة بولدها" it might mean in the surface structure the wife should not bother her husband by requests for her child.

While in the deep structure it might mean a passive voice, the husband should not blame his wife for spending much on her child.

The immediate constituent In English plays a good role in the presence of ambiguity. This takes place in sentences like **Old men and women**, in which it can be separated as **old man and old women.** The adjective **old** may belong to men or women. In this way ambiguity arises. This factor does not have an equivalent in Arabic, but there is what is called adjective referent. If a sentence has many adjectives modifying one antecedent, ambiguity arises in. For example: "**زيد طبيب أديب ماهر**", the adjective "**ماهر**" may be related to "**أديب**" or "**طبيب**".

Finally, there are many compounds words in English that cause ambiguity as they may be confused with grammatical structures like:

She is a sweetheart.

She has a sweetheart.

In the first sentence *sweetheart* is a compound word and cannot be separated, whereas the second sentence can be inserted with additional forms. For example: **She has a kind sweet heart**. This factor has no equivalent in Arabic.

4. Conclusion:

According to what have been mentioned in the contrastive analysis about the factors of structural ambiguity in both languages English and Arabic, the research has come up with the following conclusions:

4.2 Points of Similarities:

There is a great similarity in many factors behind structural ambiguity between the two languages under study.

1. Elision of some parts of speech takes place in both languages the English and Arabic, though functional words are being omitted only in English.
2. Duality in function of parts of speech happens in the two languages which causes ambiguity.
3. In the two languages under study, the absence of the pronoun referent results in ambiguity.
4. In both languages English and Arabic, difference of deep and surface structure causes ambiguity.

4.2   Points of Differences:

English differs from Arabic in few additional factors that cause structural ambiguity in which they have no counterpart in Arabic. They are as follows:

1. Immediate constituent plays an important role in English sentences which results in ambiguity.
2. Compound words that may be confused with grammatical structures result in ambiguity in English.

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عناصر الغموض التركيبي في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية : دراسة مقارنة

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المستخلص

الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على سيد المرسلين محمد الأمين وبعد. تتناول هذه الدراسة إحدى المسائل المهمة في مجال تركيب الجملة في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية دراسة مقارنة وهي عناصر الغموض التركيبي. هناك العديد من العناصر في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية التي تسبب في غموض تركيب الجملة فيهما، ويروم هذا البحث على بيانها ليستفيد منها طلاب اللغة الانكليزية على وجه الأخص.

نقصد بالغموض التركيبي هو كل ما تعذر فهم معناه بشكل جَلِي أو أشار إلى العديد من المعاني وكان السبب في ذلك تركيب الجمل. وفي اللغة الانكليزية العديد من العناصر التي تؤدي الى غموض الجمل مثل تعدد وظائف التراكيب، حذف بعض التراكيب الوظيفية، عدم وجود اسم يشار إليه بالضمير، التقطيع التركيبي للجمل، ووجود تراكيب مركبة في الجمل يحتار بها القارئ بينها وبين التراكيب المزدوجة الممكن فصلها.

بجانب هذا توجد عناصر مماثلة في اللغة العربية وتعمل بالمثل على غموض وعدم وضوح معنى الجمل. منها : حذف أجزاء من الجملة، تعدد وظيفة احد تراكيب الجملة، عدم وجود اسم تعود إليه الصفة، عدم وجود اسم يشير إليه الضمير، والاختلاف ما بين المعنى السطحي للجمل والمعنى الحقيقي.

أظهرت هذه الدراسة مواضع التشابه والاختلاف مابين اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية في حقل الغموض التركيبي وخرجت بالنتائج التي قد تكون ذات فائدة كبيرة تعود على متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية والمتخصصين فيها.