

The Analysis of Ambiguous Structures Through The Structural Ambiguity Concept

MUHAMMAD RAYHAN BUSTAM, S.S.

English Department
Faculty Of Letters
Indonesia University Of Computer

ABSTRACT

This paper is entitled “**The Analysis of Ambiguous Structures Through The Structural Ambiguity Concept**”. The purpose of the paper is to acquire a clear description of structural ambiguity. Structural ambiguity is a kind of ambiguities which occurs when a phrase, clause or sentence can be given two or more different interpretations as a result of the arrangement of words (the structure). The structural ambiguity can arise even though there is no word(s) are ambiguous in the structure. The result of the paper shows that the structural ambiguity can occur in some structures, namely: Noun Phrase, Prepositional Phrase, Relative Clause, Noun Clause, and also the combination of those with conjunction (coordinating).

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a great part in our life. Everybody uses language to communicate with each other. It is also used to express our reaction to certain situation, and to reveal our ideas, thoughts, feelings, or emotions. Horn by (1995:662) says that language is the system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings. Human, as a social creature uses language to build relationship with other through communication; therefore, the communication itself, both written and spoken, is very important in human’s life.

In our daily life, sometimes communication can’t be run well if we don’t state our utterance in clear meaning. It makes the listener or the reader interpret our utterance in different meaning. Actually, to understand a written language is rather difficult than a spoken language because if the listener doesn’t understand what we say, he/she can ask us directly what we mean. On the other hand, if the reader doesn’t understand what we had written in a book, a novel, and the other text media, he/she can’t ask us directly. It makes the reader come to misinterpreting or misunderstanding about the message in the text. This misunderstanding is known as ambiguity.

According to Leech (1981:30) an expression is said to be ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be assigned to it. Furthermore, Rodman and Fromkin (1983:129) also state that a word, a phrase, or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. From the quotations above we can simply conclude that an ambiguity occurs when a word, a phrase, or a sentence has more than one meaning.

The above explanation encourages the writer to conduct a research about the ambiguity, specifically structural ambiguity. The writer will focus on investigating the problem “in what way some structures can be structural ambiguities”. The data are taken

from British National Corpus; specifically the corpus which occur in magazines and newspaper. For further explanation about the content of research and the ambiguity, at the next part, it can be described a brief explanation about them.

Ambiguity

As explained above, an ambiguity occurs when a word, a phrase, or a sentence can be understood or interpreted in more than one meaning, or in another word we can say that an ambiguity occurs because a word, a phrase, or a sentence has an unclear meaning. In addition, Djajasudarma (1999:56) states that a meaning may be unclear because of some reasons, namely: (a) the word or sentence is common (general); for example, the word 'book' has multiple meanings. (b) The word or sentence which is interpreted is not the same as the speaker's/the writer's intention; the interpretation should depend on the context though the context is unclear. (c) The meaning limit connected to language and non-language is not clear; for example, there is no limit to say that someone is clever at something. (d) The use of the word or sentence is not familiar to us.

Beside the reasons above, there are three factors that can cause an ambiguity; the factors are: lexical factor, structural factor, and phonetic structure factor. Moreover, Hurford, et al. (1983:128) state:

"Any ambiguity resulted from the ambiguity of a word is a lexical ambiguity, and a sentence which is ambiguous because its word relates to each other in different way even though none of the individual word are ambiguous is structurally (or grammatically) ambiguous."

Then, Ulmann (1972:156) also states that in spoken language ambiguity can be caused by phonetic structure of sentence.

From the quotations above, we can conclude that there are three types of ambiguity based on the factors which cause it, namely: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, and phonetic structure ambiguity. The explanation about the types of ambiguity will be described at the next part.

Types of Ambiguity

As explained above, ambiguity can be divided into three parts, namely: lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity, and phonetic structure ambiguity. However, in this article the writer will more focus on structural ambiguity, so at the next part the writer will describe only short explanation about lexical and phonetic structure ambiguities, but more brief description at structural ambiguity.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity arises when a single word has more than one meaning. According to Rodman and Fromkin (1983:169), sentences maybe ambiguous because they contain one or more ambiguous word. From that statement, it is clear that lexical ambiguity is an ambiguity resulted from the ambiguity of a word. Let's see the example: *She could not bear children.* This sentence is ambiguous. The source of ambiguity is lexical;

the word *bear* has two different meanings. Thus, the sentence is either about a person who cannot stand children, or about one who cannot give birth to children.

Ulmann (1977:158) also concludes that ambiguity arises due to lexical factors below:

- (a) The same word may have two or more different meanings. This situation has been known since Brealis a polysemy. The Noun *board*, for example, may mean 'a *think plank*', 'a *tablet*', 'food served at the *table*' and various other things. Normally, only one of these will fit into a given context.
- (b) Two or more different words may be identical in sounds that known as homonymy. For example: the word *seal* can be defined as 'name of an animal' and 'piece of wax fixed on a letter'. Needless to say, words which sound alike but are spelled differently ('root – route', 'site – sight – cite') must also regarded as homonyms.

Phonetic Structure Ambiguity

Ulmann (1972:156) states that in spoken language, ambiguity can be resulted by phonetic structure of sentence. Actually, it happens because the acoustic units of a related utterance is a shift and not in a word as a single unit. That thing makes possible meaning occur in different interpretation even though the words are different. For example:

- a) 'The sun's rays meet' and 'the sons raise meet'.
- b) 'A near' and 'an ear'.

Structural Ambiguity

Structural ambiguity is also referred to as *syntactic* ambiguity or *grammatical* ambiguity. Structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase, clause or sentence can be given two or more different interpretations as a result of the arrangement of words or lexical units. Rodman and Fromkin (1983:172) state that structural ambiguity is the structure of sentence that permits more than one interpretation rather than the words in the sentence. In addition, Hurford, et. al. (1983:128) state:

"A sentence which is ambiguous because its word related to each other in different ways, even though none of the individual word are ambiguous, is structurally (or grammatically) ambiguous."

Based on the quotations above, it's clear that structural ambiguity is a kind of ambiguity which arises because a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure. Here, the individual words form the sentence are unambiguous but their combination can be interpreted in two or more different ways. To get more clear description, let's see the example below:

'Daniel met tall boys and girls'

The adjective *tall* may be taken to refer either to both *boys* and *girls* or only the former (*boys*).

DISCUSSION

As explained before, structural ambiguity occurs because there is a structure (arrangement of words) which has two or more different interpretations. The structural ambiguity quite often occurs in written text. There are some structures which commonly become the trigger of the ambiguity. The clear description about the structures will be explained as follows:

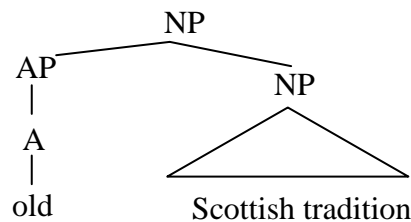
a. Noun Phrase: Adjective + Noun + Noun Head

In this structure, there are two modifiers in a Noun Phrase; they are Adjective and Noun. The analysis of structural ambiguity from this structure will be described as follows:

- Charles, spurning old Scottish tradition, opted for a royal cover-up.(BNC: The Daily Mirror. London: Mirror Group Newspapers, 1985-1994)

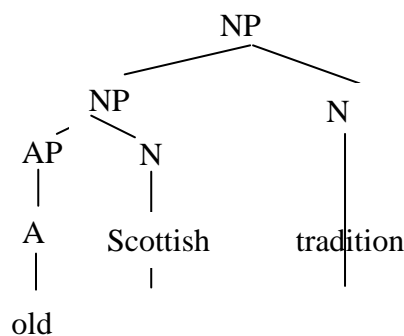
The structural ambiguity from this structure occurs in the Noun Phrase structure *old Scottish tradition*. There are two interpretations about the structure, namely:

- 1) The adjective, *old*, modifies the nominal constituent *Scottish tradition*. Then, the Noun, *Scottish*, modifies the Noun Head, *tradition*. Here, the Noun Phrase means the tradition of Scottish is old. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



- 2) The adjective, *old*, modifies the Noun *Scottish*. Then, the Noun Phrase, *oldScottish*, modifies the Noun Head, *tradition*. Here, the Noun Phrase *oldScottish tradition* means the tradition which belongs to old Scottish. The diagram is:

- 3)



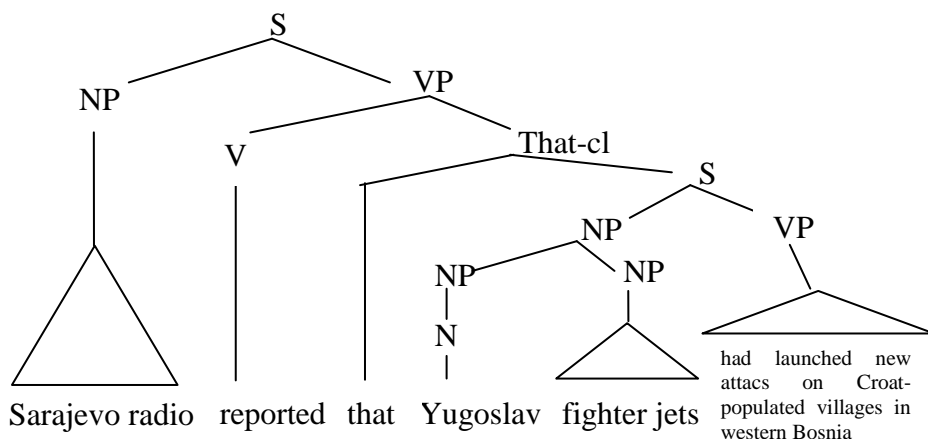
b. Noun Phrase: Noun + Noun + Noun Head

In this structure, the modifiers in a Noun Phrase are Noun and Noun. The analysis of structural ambiguity from this structure will be described as follows:

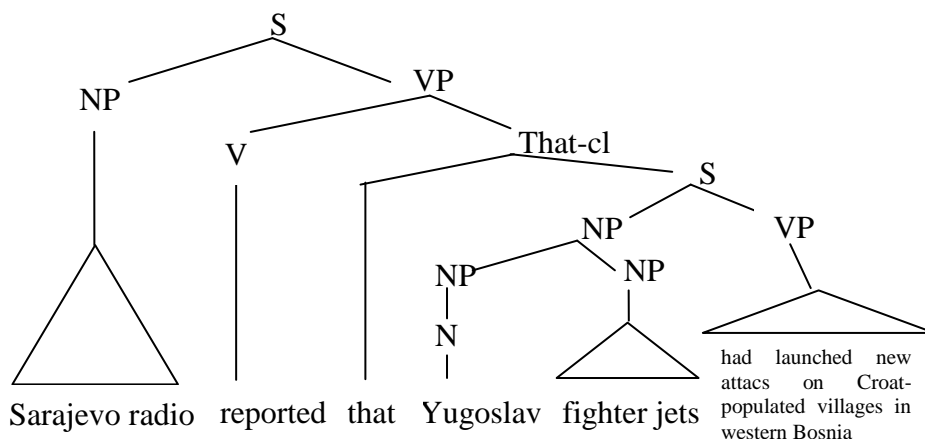
- Sarajevo Radio reported that Yugoslav fighter jets had launched new attacks on Croat-populated villages in western Bosnia. (BNC: Daily Telegraph, elect. edn. of 19920413, 1985-1994)

There are two interpretations from the structure above.

- 1) The Noun, *Yugoslav*, modifies the nominal constituent *fighter jets*. Then, the Noun, *fighter*, modifies the Noun Head, *jets*. Here, the Noun Phrase means the jets that are specialized for fighter and the jets belong to Yugoslav. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



- 2) The Noun, *Yugoslav*, modifies the Noun *fighter*. Then, the Noun Phrase, *Yugoslav fighter jets*, modifies the Noun Head, *jets*. Here, the Noun Phrase *Yugoslav fighter jets* means the jets that belong to the fighters of Yugoslav. The diagram is:



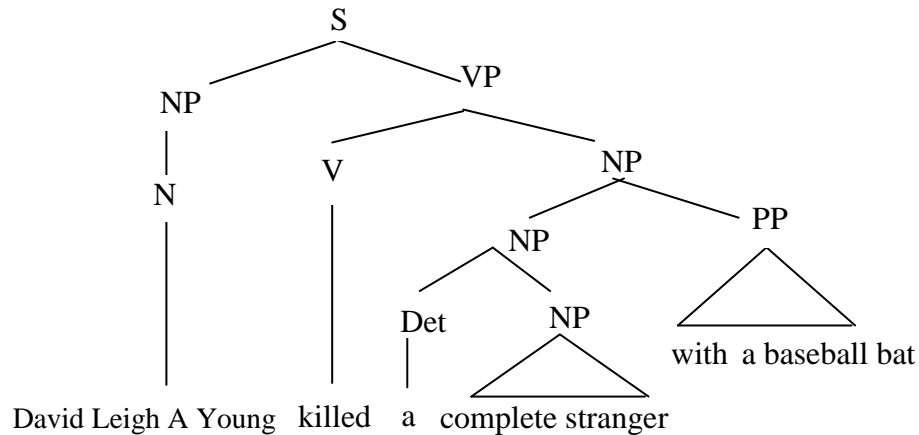
c. Prepositional Phrase

In this structure, prepositional phrase can have two interpretations. The analysis of structural ambiguity from this structure will be described as follows:

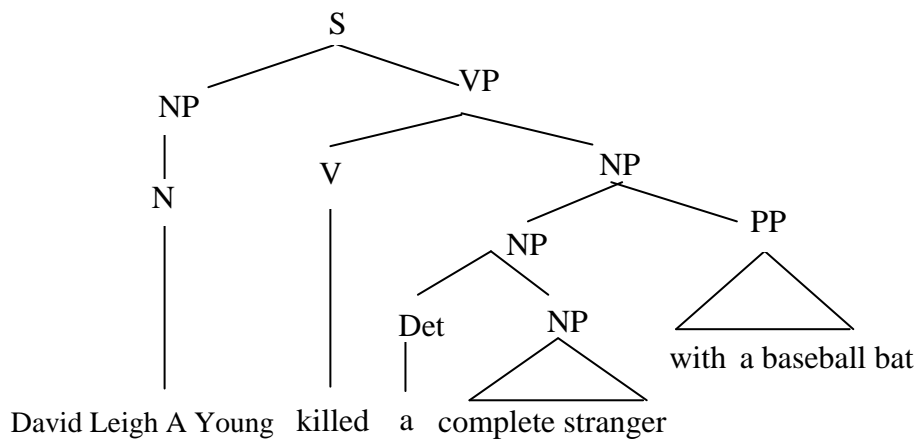
- David Leigh A Young killed a complete stranger with a baseball bat. (BNC: The Daily Mirror. London: Mirror Group Newspapers, 1985-1994)

There are two interpretations from the sentence above.

- 1) The Prepositional Phrase, *with a baseball bat*, modifies the nominal constituent *a complete stranger* (Noun Phrase). Here, the Noun Phrase *a complete stranger with a baseball bat* means the complete stranger who brings a baseball bat with him/her. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



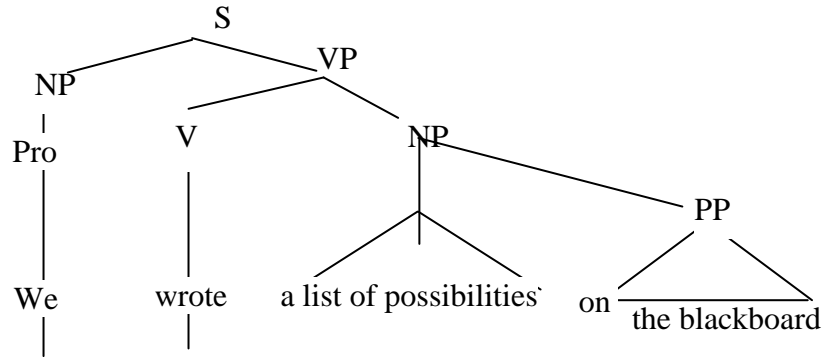
- 2) The Prepositional Phrase, *with a baseball bat*, takes function as an adverbial. This will happen because the Prepositional Phrase is adjoined to the Verb Phrase. Here, the meaning is David Leigh A Young uses a baseball bat to kill the complete stranger. The diagram is:



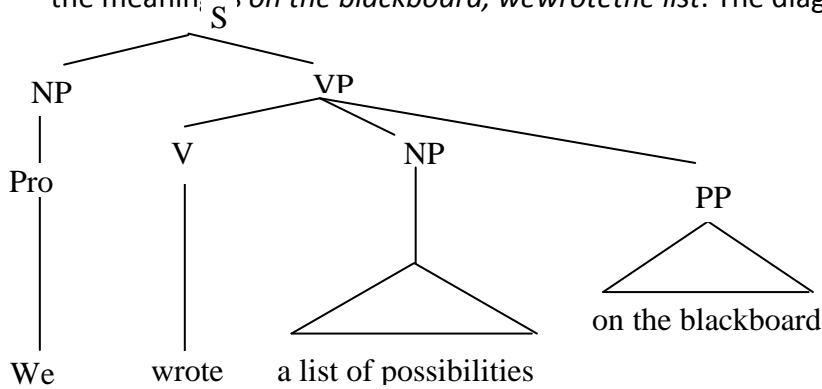
- We wrote a list of possibilities on the blackboard. (BNC: Curricula for diversity in education. Swann, W; Booth, T; Masterton, M; Potts, P. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1992)

There are two interpretations from the sentence above.

- 1) The Prepositional Phrase, *on the blackboard*, modifies the nominal constituent *a list of possibilities* (Noun Phrase). Here, the sentence means *we wrote the list of possibilities which had been written on the blackboard*. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



2) The Prepositional Phrase, *on the blackboard*, takes function as an adverbial. This happens because the Prepositional Phrase is adjoined to the Verb Phrase. Here, the meaning is *on the blackboard, we wrote the list*. The diagram is:



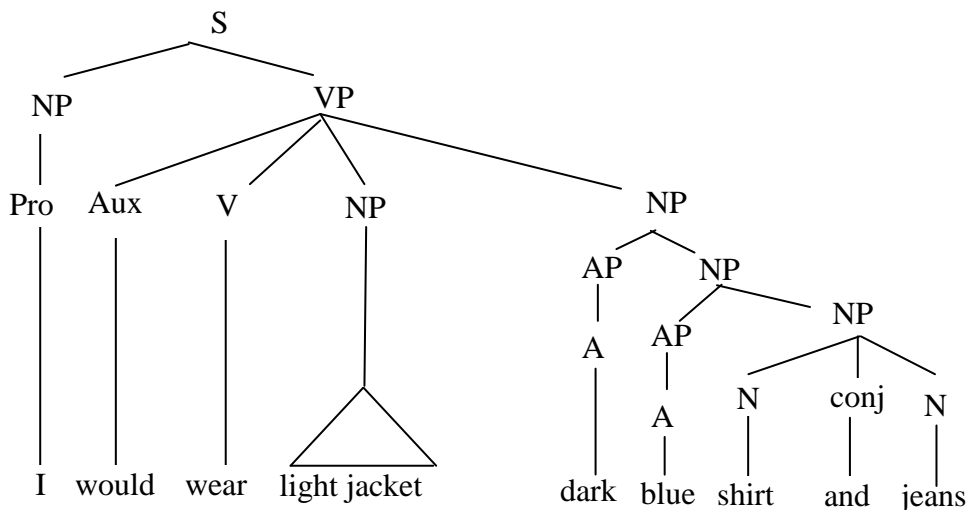
d. Conjunction: Coordinating

In this structure, coordinating conjunction can have two interpretations. The analysis of structural ambiguity from this structure will be described as follows:

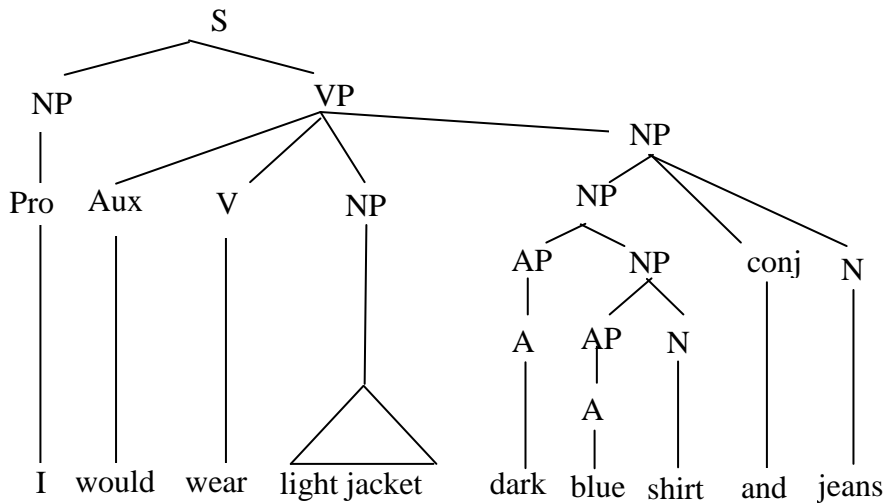
➤ I would wear light jacket, dark blue shirt and jeans. (BNC: [Daily Telegraph, elect. edn. of 19920415]. London: The Daily Telegraph plc, 1992)

There are two interpretations about the structure above.

1) The coordinating conjunction *and* gives structural ambiguity for this sentence. The sentence can be meant by both shirt and jeans that have dark blue color. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



2) The second interpretation is only shirt which has dark blue color. The diagram is:



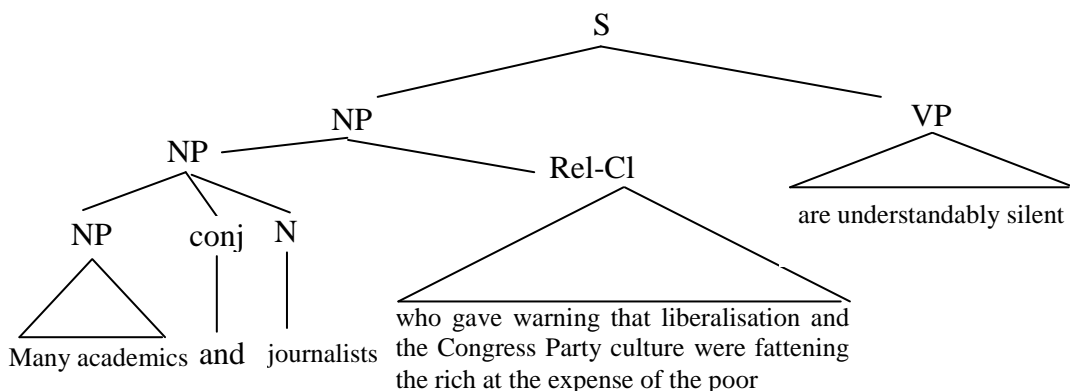
e. Relative Clause: The Combination

In this structure, some relative clauses can have two or more interpretations if they are combined with conjunction. The analysis of structural ambiguity from this structure will be described as follows:

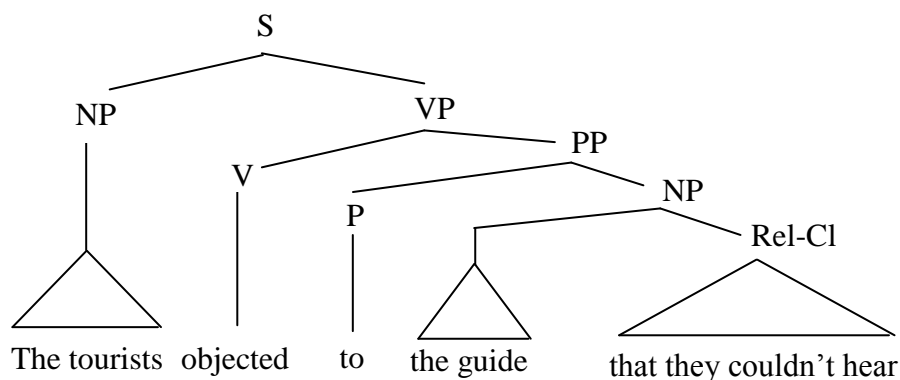
- Many academics and journalists who gave warning that liberalisation and the Congress Party culture were fattening the rich at the expense of the poor are understandably silent. (BNC: The Economist, 1985-1994)

There are two interpretations about the sentence above.

- 1) The relative clause *who gave warning... are understandably silent* gives structural ambiguity for this sentence because it can possibly modify both *Many academics and journalists*. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



- 2) The second interpretation is only *journalists* that are modified. The diagram is:



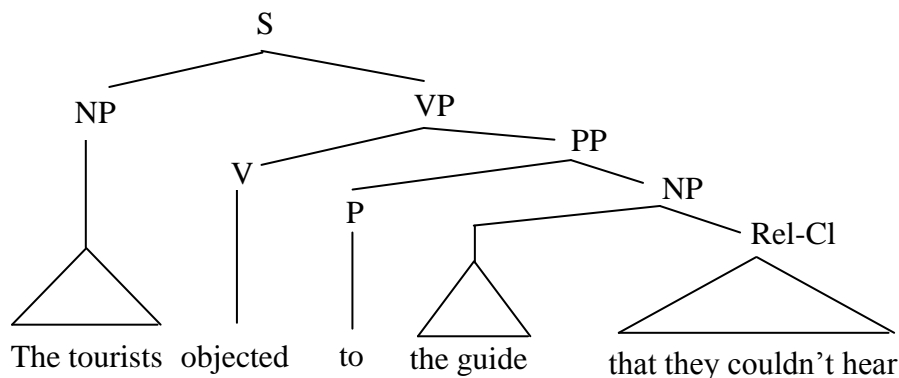
f. Relative Clause Vs.Noun Clause

In this ambiguity, the structure can be interpreted as a relative clause modifying a Noun Phrase or a Noun Clause complement. The example of structural ambiguity from this structure is:

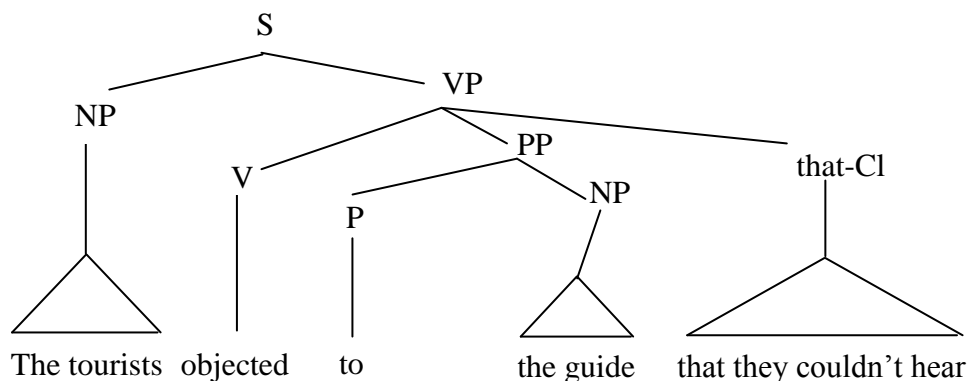
- The tourists objected to the guide that they couldn't hear. (The Structure of Modern English: A Linguistic Introduction, 2000)

There are two interpretations about the sentence above.

- 1) The relative clause *that they couldn't hear* modifies the Noun Phrase *the guide*. The structure will be diagrammed as follows:



- 2) The second interpretation is the clause *that they couldn't hear* becomes the complement of Noun Clause from the Verb *objected*. The interpretation of the sentence can be '*The tourists objected something (that they couldn't hear) to the guide*'. The diagram is:



CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, we can conclude that the structural ambiguity can occur in some structures, namely: Noun Phrase, Prepositional Phrase, Relative Clause, Noun Clause, and also the combination of those with conjunction (coordinating).

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