COMPLEX SENTENCES WITH SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY

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The aim of this article is to show the reasons for ambiguities in the complex sentence. Ambiguity means that something is unclear or has several meanings. In the English language there are different approaches to ambiguity. The most famous is the approach of William Empson who says that in a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous. There are several kinds of ambiguity. Both smaller and larger expressions may exhibit ambiguities. Syntactical ambiguity appears when a sentence is difficult for comprehension or can be interpreted in several ways. *Ambiguity in complex sentences can be caused by such factors as grammar errors, omission of the conjunctions, inversion, length of the sentence, pronouns used without a corresponding noun, vagueness, obscurity, officialese.*

Key words: *ambiguity, complex sentence, error, length, omission, woolliness, vagueness, obscurity.*

Scopul acestui articol este de a arăta motivele ambiguităţii în propoziţia complexă. Ambiguitatea înseamnă că ceva este neclar sau are mai multe sensuri. În limba engleză există abordări diferite pentru ambiguitate. Cea mai renumită este abordarea lui William Empson care afirmă că într-un sens suficient de extins orice afirmaţie ar putea fi numită ambiguă. Există mai multe tipuri de ambiguitate. Atît expresile mici sau mari pot prezenta ambiguităţi. Ambiguitate sintactică apare atunci când o propoziţie este dificilă pentru înţelegere sau poate fi interpretată în mai multe moduri. Ambiguitatea în fraze complexe poate fi cauzată de factori cum ar fi erori gramaticale, omiterea a conjuncţiilor, inversiune, inversia, lungimea propoziţiei, utilizarea pronumelor fără un substantiv corespunzător, neclaritatea, obscuritatea.

Cuvinte cheie: *ambiguitate, propoziţie complexe, eroare, lungime, omisiune, aspect lânos, neclaritate, obscuritate, officialese.*

The aim of this article is to show the reasons for syntactical ambiguity in the English language. Language is an organizer of the world into meaningful units and gives form to experience. However, this organizing role of language is the root cause of both the possibility of

meaning and the inevitability of ambiguity. Ambiguity means that something is unclear or has several meanings. Because languages are inevitably smaller than the worlds of experience they describe, words have get more than one meaning.

In the English language there are different approaches to ambiguity. The most famous is the approach of William Empson who says that in a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous. (Empson, 42) He distinguishes between seven types of ambiguity. The first type of ambiguity arises when a detail is effective in several ways at once, e.g. by comparisons with several points of likeness, antithesis, with several points of difference, comparative adjectives, subdued metaphors and extra meanings subdued by rhythm. In second-type ambiguities two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one. The condition for the third-type is that   two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously. In the fourth-type the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author. It occurs when a statement says nothing, by tautology, contradiction of irrelevant statements. The fifth type is a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of a writer. In the sixth-type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations. The seventh-type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind. There are several types of ambiguity. Both smaller and larger expressions may exhibit ambiguities. Inflectional morphemes are ambiguous so often that there is a technical term for the phenomenon: syncretism. For example, suffixing -s (with phonologically conditioned allomorphs) is used in English to mark third-person singular agreement in verbs, plural number on common nouns, and possessive forms of noun phrases. (ibidem: 58)

All natural languages are ambiguous. In the English language the polysemantic character of many lexical units causes this fact. Languages are systems that constantly change. And if ambiguity significantly complicates the task facing the language receiver, languages should evolve so as to reduce ambiguity. But we see that the evolution of the languages does not eliminate ambiguity. Moreover, the more languages develop the more complicated and ambiguous they become. There have been suggestions in the literature that certain attested changes were motivated in part as a way to avoid excessive ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity is extremely common. It appears when there is a conflict between the denotative and the connotative meanings of words. (ibidem: 76) Not only notional words but even function words are often

ambiguous. The uses of to *as a preposition and an infinitive marker have no apparent semantic connection.* For *can be a preposition or a conjunction indicating causation. A number of connectives (e.g.* then, since, while*) are ambiguous between temporal and conditional meanings.* That *can be a determiner, a demonstrative pronoun, or a complementizer.*

Syntactical ambiguity appears when a sentence is difficult for comprehension or can be interpreted in several ways. Ambiguity in complex sentences can be caused by the factors that are discussed below in our article.

Grammatical errors

When we speak about the deviation from some definite rules of organizing a sentence in some languages we speak about a grammatical error. For example, in the English language there is a rule of agreement between the principle parts of a sentence that is between the subject and the predicate. When this rule is violated we can speak about a grammatical error. In the following sentence *We serve anyone if they've got enough money on them* there is an agreement between the subject and the predicate in the principle clause *We serve* but in the subordinate clause there is an error, The indefinite pronoun *anyone* which is the antecedent in the principal clause is used in singular but the pronouns *they* and *them* which in the second subordinate clause substitute the pronoun *anyone* are used in plural.

In the following sentence some extra words in the subordinate clause do not help to understand the sentence: *For me it's what I think that's important, but I don't mean that in an arrogant way.* It is quite clear that in the subject subordinate clause there is one more subordinate clause *what I think that's important* and in this clause the word *that* is not needed it only complicates the comprehension of a clause.

Dual meaning of conjunction 'that'

We signaled the guide that we could not hear. (http://www.nytimes.com/)

This example shows the dual role of the word 'that' denoting both a relative clause and a complementary clause. In relative clause the word 'that' is related to the *guide*. It is the '*guide whom we cannot hear*' because he speaks too quietly. In complementary clause the word 'that' is the complement and it means that we cannot hear because of any reason, and not because the guide speaks quietly.

Pronouns used without a corresponding noun

No one will refuse to pay less tax, but if they think that by this means they will bribe the electors to vote for them in large numbers, they are likely to be disappointed.(http://www.nytimes.com/)

In this sentence the syntactical ambiguity concerns the use of pronouns 'they' and 'them'. There is no evidence of the appearance of these pronouns in the preceding clause.

Length of the sentence

The length of a sentence is a very important factor in the comprehension of a complex sentence. We express our thoughts not by words but by sentences. We have one sentence to express one thought and two sentences to express two thoughts. You can work one sentence into another in place of a noun or adjective or adverb: it then becomes a clause and the other sentence as a complex sentence. You can also work more ideas into a sentence by putting in more phrases or words. (Flesh, 32)

Sentence length is measured in words because they are the easiest units to count. The shorter the sentence the easier it reads. Rudolf Fresh presents a table of an average sentence length in words. Very easy – 8 words or less; easy – 11; fairly easy -14; standard – 17; fairly difficult – 21; difficult – 25; very difficult -29 or more. (ibidem: 38)

*Mr. Gates was impressed enough to fly in and announce that this network would become the chief testbed of Microsoft's efforts to merge the television and the PC, allowing users to gain access to broadcast-quality movies, PC games and pay-per-use software from the network nearly as quickly as from their own hard drives. (*http://www.nytimes.com/)

The above sentence is taken from the American press and it is difficult for comprehension because of its length. It far exceeds the average length of a sentence. It consists of 54 words.

It would be easier to read if this sentence was divided into several shorter ones: *Mr Gates was impressed enough to fly in. He announced that this network would become the chief testbed of Microsoft's efforts to merge the television and the PC. It allows users to gain access to broadcast-quality movies, PC games and pay-per-use software from the network nearly as quickly as from their own hard drives. (*http://www.nytimes.com/)

In the transformed text we see that the first sentence is the easiest to read because it consists of only 8 words. The second sentence consists of 20 words and is of a standard length. The third sentence consists of 26 words and is fairly difficult to read.

Omission of conjunctions in a subordinate clause

*Mary's mother thinks she is brilliant. (*http://www.nytimes.com/)

The structure of this sentence is ambiguous. This means that it can have different ways of interpreting and understanding this sentence. When a syntactic ambiguity occurs it doesn't mean that words in this sentence may be ambiguous. It is the order and the meaning that make a sentence ambiguous. The conjunction is omitted in this sentence and moreover it can be interpreted differently as if *she* refers to Mary's mother, or *she* refers to Mary.

*Jane told the students she would give a test on Tuesday. (*http://www.nytimes.com/)

The structure of this sentence is ambiguous which allows preserving more than on paraphrasing of this example. The first one, with the structure like: Jane told the students 'she would give a test on Tuesday'. The second one with the structure like: Jane told the students 'she would give a test' on Tuesday. In order to avoid ambiguity it is necessary to look at the context or give detailed information on the subject.

Inversion in Conditional Clauses

Finite adverbial clauses of condition are introduced chiefly by the subordinators *if* (positive condition) and *unless* (negative condition). Conditional clauses can show real and unreal conditions. A real condition leaves unresolved the question of the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the condition, and hence also the truth of the proposition expressed by the main clause. In an unreal condition, on the other hand, it is clearly expected that the condition will not be fulfilled. Conditional clauses (especially unreal) may have subject-operator inversion without a conjunction. In this case a sentence is ambiguous and difficult for comprehension. The main difficulty lies in the fact that the conjunction is omitted. *David Hare's play "Plenty" opened to poor notices and would have lasted a fortnight **had he not been in a position to "nurse" it**. (*http://www.nytimes.com/) *Turkey's prime minister, who has been a hawk on foreign policy issues, argued that **were it not for external interference**, Turkey's so-called Kurdish problem could "easily" be solved by planned economic and educational improvements.(* http://www.nytimes.com/)

Emphasis

"Emphasis" means making one part of a sentence more important than it would normally be. There are several different ways of showing emphasis in English. In speech, the most important is by changes in pronunciation. In writing- particularly when we write down speech- this

kind of emphasis can be shown by using capital letters, or by underlining (in handwriting and typing) , or by using italics or fat type (in printing).Special emphasis is often put on auxiliary verbs. Emphasis can also be shown by using special words, such as "really, certainly, definitely. Different parts of a sentence can be given more importance by using special grammatical constructions. Part of a sentence can be moved to the front (especially in informal speech). Expressions containing the word "no" often come at the beginning of sentences for emphasis. In narrative and descriptive writing, it is common to begin sentences with adverbial expressions like "On a hill; In the valley; Round the corner...."*Here* and *there* can be put at the beginning of a sentence for emphasis. Repetition also comes for this purpose. *But never, never, could he have anticipated that evening, some months after the birth of their child.(* http://www.nytimes.com/) *However, not for the word would he be different from the others. (* http://www.nytimes.com/)

Woolliness

Many people, either from ignorance or from carelessness, are far from being precise in thought and expression - they mean not, but blunder round about a meaning...' (Jespersen, 274)

The dictionary meaning of the word 'Woolly' is lacking in definiteness or incisiveness; 'muzzy'; (of the mind [style], etc.) confused and hazy.

Woolliness is that fault of style which consists in writing around a subject instead of on it; of making approximations serve as exactitudes; of resting content with intention as opposed to performance; of forgetting that whereas a haziness may mean something to the perpetrator, it usually means nothing (or an ambiguity) to the reader or the listener. The ideal at which a writer should aim - admittedly it is impossible of attainment - is that he writes so   clearly, so precisely, so unambiguously, that his words can bear only one meaning to all averagely intelligent readers that possess an average knowledge of the language used. (Partridge, 396)

After Governor Baldridge watched the lion perform, he was taken to Main Street and fed twenty-five pounds of red meat in front of the Fox Theater. (http://www.nytimes.com/)

This is clearly ambiguous sentence. One may be confused in understanding this sentence. Whether it was the governor who fed twenty-five pounds of red meat or it was the lion. It can be paraphrased in the following ways: … *Governor Baldridge was taken to the Main Street and fed twenty-five pounds of red meat in front of the Fox Theater.* And *the lion*

189

was taken to Main Street and fed twenty-five pounds of red meat in front of the Fox Theater.

*Dr. Benjamin Porter visited the school yesterday and lectured on "Destructive Pests", a large number were present. (*http://www.nytimes.com/)

This is an ambiguous sentence. Its context may be understood and paraphrased in different ways. So were there the destructive pests presented at the lecture or these were the people who came to the lecture of Dr. Porter? It may confuse the interpreters and the listeners of these sentences. In order to avoid ambiguity, one must give explanations to the readers and listeners.

The following sentences also are ambiguous because they can be comprehended in different ways. *I know a man with a dog who has fleas.* It is unclear - ambiguous - whether it is the man or the dog that has fleas. It is the syntax not the meaning of the words which is unclear. To clarify the meaning or meanings of an ambiguous sentence we can gloss the meaning (express it in a different form of words) or use grammatical terminology to explain the functions of the words and the structure of the sentence.

*I will bring my bike tomorrow if it looks nice in the morning. (*http://www.nytimes.com/) This is undoubtedly syntactically ambiguous sentence. The structure of it allows us to see more than one meaning. We way suppose that the person will bring his/her bike tomorrow if it (bike) looks nice in the morning. Or maybe this person was talking about the weather outside? In order to avoid this ambiguity we should give detailed information.

*Sue adores men who love women who don't smoke. (*http://www.nytimes.com/) The structure of this sentence creates ambiguity. The structural ambiguity in this case gives possibility to find different ways of understanding the sentence. Does Sue adore men who love nonsmoking women? Or Sue adores nonsmoking men who love women? In order to find the correct interpretation of this sentence, we should look at the context that this example is taken from.

You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists and writers are buried daily except Thursday. (http://www.nytimes.com/). This sentence is obviously ambiguous. It has two meanings. The first one may seem confusing. It says that famous Russian and Soviet composers are buried daily except Thursday. The other one tells us that we are welcome to visit the cemetery daily except

Thursday. So in the first option the head of the phrase is word 'writers'. But in the second variant the head is 'you'.

*Customers who consider our waitresses uncivil ought to see the manager. (*http://www.nytimes.com/) This sentence is undoubtedly ambiguous. Its structure allows interpreting at least two different meanings. The first meaning would sound as: 'Customers who consider our waitresses uncivil ought to see the manager and talk about it with him'. The next possible way to interpret the sentence is that the manager is also uncivil, maybe more than the waitresses and customers ought to see it and compare. Anyway, it is very important to find the best solution and look at the context.

Vagueness

*A table in the centre was littered with English magazines and newspapers. (*http://www.nytimes.com/) The structure of this sentence is ambiguous. It may be understood in more than one way. This ambiguity is said to be syntactical because such phrase can be represented in two structurally different ways. Whether these are magazines and newspapers written in English language or they are of English origin, published in England.

The Queen praised President McAleese's work in "building bridges" and applauded all those who have taken part in the peace process.(http://www.nytimes.com/)

This sentence is ambiguous. It has ambiguous phrase *building bridges*. This phrase has two meanings. Whether the Queen praised president for building bridges in its primary meaning – constructing a structure that spans and provides a passage over a road, railway, river, or some other obstacle, or she meant that president established good relations with Britain. This is a contextual ambiguity. The only way we can avoid making errors of this type is by adjusting our point of view and playing "what-ifs" in head when reading the text.

Obscurity

Real and offensive obscurity comes merely of inadequate thought embodied in inadequate language', declared Swinburne in 1870. On the other hand, as a certain grammarian has said, 'In contemplating the way in which our sentences will be understood, we are allowed to remember, that we do not write for idiots.' Sometimes obscurity arises from the desire to be brief. *Don't let worry kill you - let the church help. I'm glad I'm a man, and so is Lola. (*http://www.nytimes.com). These sentences are ambiguous. The second sentence may have three interpretations. It can mean "Lola and I are

191

both glad I'm a man", or "I'm glad Lola and I are both men", or the intended "I'm glad I'm a man, and Lola is also a man". In order to find clear and right meaning it is necessary to look at the context. (ibidem: 398)

Officialese

Officialese or bureaucratese is a derogatory term for language that sounds official. It is the "language of officialdom". Officialese is characterized by a preference for wordy, long sentences; a preference for complex words, code words or buzzwords over simple, traditional ones; a preference for vagueness over directness and a preference for passive over active voice (some of those elements may, however, vary between different times and languages. The history of officialese can be traced to the history of officialdom, as far back as the eldest human civilizations and their surviving official writings.

Officialese is meant to impress the listener (or reader) and increase the authority (more than the social status) of the user, making him or her appear more professional. The officialese also allows the user to remain vague. It can be used to make oneself understood to insiders while being hard to decipher by those unfamiliar with the jargon and subtexts used. Its use is known to put off members of the general public and reduce their interest in the material presented. Officialese has been criticized as making one's speech or prose "stilted, convoluted, and sometimes even indecipherable" and simply as the "cancer of language". It is thus more pejoratively classified as one of the types of gobbledygook. Its use can also result in unintended humorous incidents, and has been often satirized.

Several similar concepts to officialese exist, including *genteelism*, *commercialese*, *academese* and *journalese*. The existence of officialese has been recognized by a number of organizations, which have made attempts to curtail its use. (ibidem: 390)

During the first quarter this year all remaining outstanding cumulative convertible preferred shares of the company were either converted into common stock or redeemed. (ibidem: 397)

In this sentence there are some words and structures which characterize the official speech and which are difficult for comprehension by an ordinary person. These phrases are *the first quarter, outstanding cumulative convertible preferred shares, common stock, redeemed.*

*The Secretary of State was said to have demanded written ground rules laying out foreign policy. (*http://www.nytimes.com/).

In this sentence the difficulty and ambiguity arise from the phrase *written ground rules.*

Conclusions:

- Ambiguity means that something is unclear or has several meanings. Because languages are inevitably smaller than the worlds of experience they describe, words have get more than one meaning.

- There are different types of ambiguity. Syntactical ambiguity means that a sentence can be unclear or interpreted in several ways.

- Ambiguity in the complex sentences can be caused by grammar errors, inversion in the sentence, length of the sentence, omission of the conjunctions, woolliness, **d**ual meaning of conjunction 'that', pronouns used without a corresponding noun, the omission of conjunctions in a subordinate clause, vagueness, obscurity, officialese.

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