

Structural Ambiguity

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ENGL 340

UoB

Syntactic or Structural Ambiguity

a situation in which **a single phrase or sentence** has two (or more) different **underlying structures and interpretations**

- The professor said on Monday he would give an exam.
 - On Monday, the professor said he would give us an exam.
 - The professor said that on Monday he would give us an exam.

- The chicken is ready to eat.



The chicken is cooked and can be eaten.



The chicken is waiting so that it will start eating.

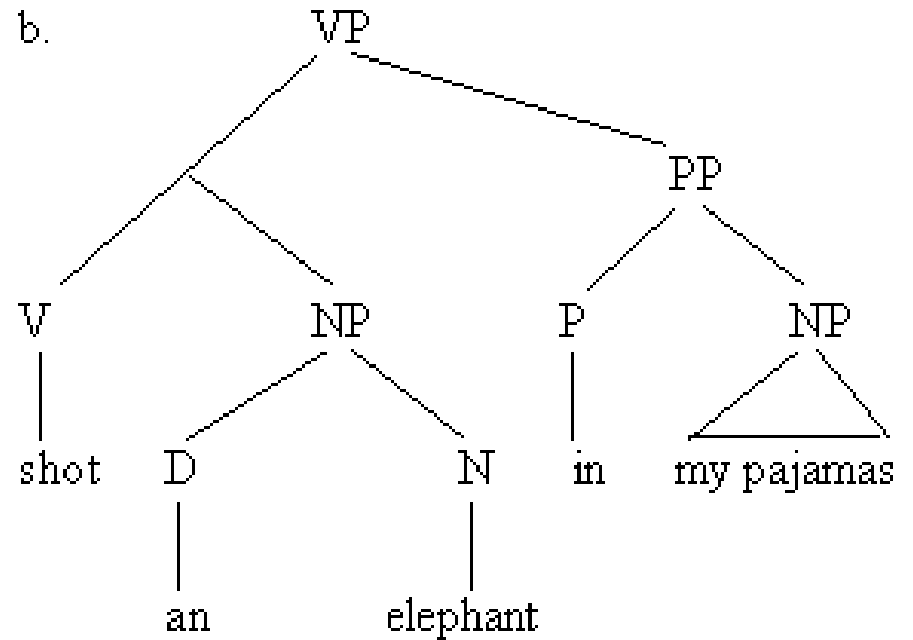
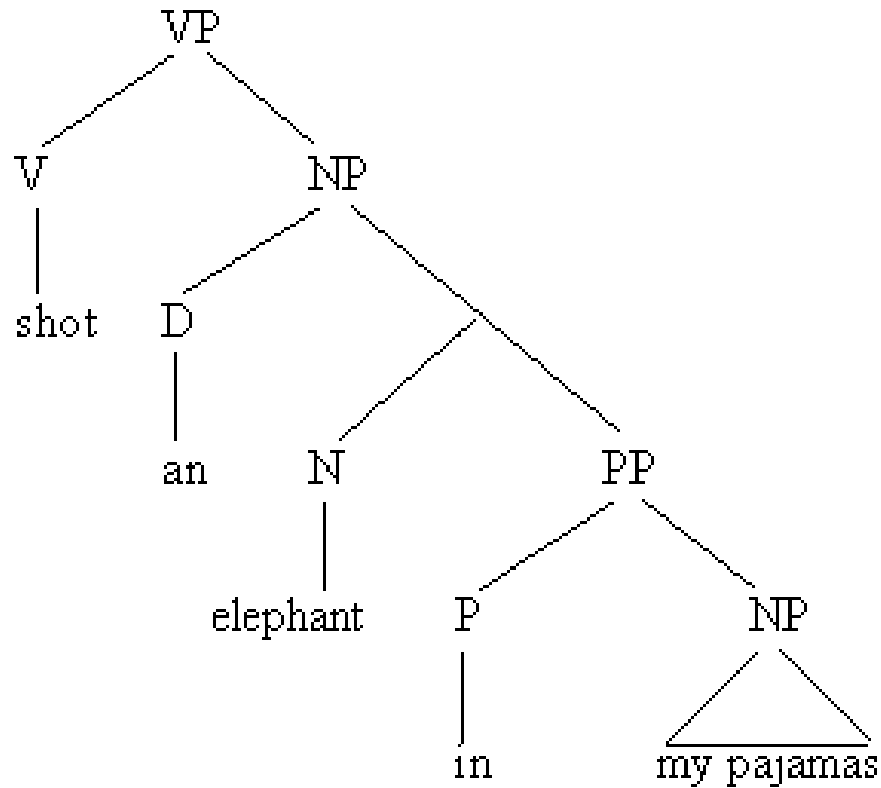
- The burglar threatened the student with the knife.
 - Using a knife, the burglar threatened the student.
 - The burglar threatened a student who was holding the knife.

In News headlines

- *Somali Tied to Militants Held on U.S. Ship for Months.*
 - The Somali who was linked to militants **was** held for months.
 - The Somali was just now linked to militants who **were** held for months.

In Humour and Advertising

- I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I don't know.
 - I shot an elephant while I was wearing my pajamas.
 - I shot an elephant that was in my pajamas.



Humour

- More than one movie has used the comic line "The peasants are revolting."
 - revolting (adj.) disgusting, horrible, horrible
 - Are revolting (present continuous: present verb to be + gerund): to revolt: to repel, to start riot.

advertisements for **Glad garbage bags** states

- "Don't Get Mad. Get Glad."
 - having a linking verb followed by an adjective (to become happy)
 - having a transitive verb followed by a noun direct object (the garbage bags from the Glad company).



Quiz Answers

- They can fish. (3 underlying structures)
 - They have the ability to fish.
 - They are allowed to fish.
 - They put fish in cans.
- I decided where to go on Friday.
 - On Friday, I decided where to go.
 - I know where I will go on Friday.

- You should bring a cake or doughnut and Pepsi.
 - You should bring either a cake or , and also bring Pepsi.
 - You should bring a cake, or you should bring doughnut and Pepsi.
- Old men and women
 - Old men and old women
 - Women and old men
- I saw the door open
 - If open is an adjective: I saw the door and it was open.
 - If open is a verb: I saw the door while it was being opened.

Exercises

.Young men and women

.I saw her duck.

. I'm glad I'm a man, and so is Lola.

. Josh saw a man on the mountain with a telescope.

. A large man's hat