

ANALYSING STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITIES IN A
MALAYSIAN ENGLISH NEWSPAPER: AN X-BAR
THEORY APPROACH

BY

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ABSTRACT

Newspaper is one of the reliable sources for people to get updated with current news and issues. A comprehensive news content is very crucial to avoid misunderstanding among readers in perceiving the message. A good sentence construction plays an important role to ensure the comprehensiveness of the news content to prevent any language issues like structural ambiguity. Structural ambiguity is a language issue that causes a sentence may produce two possible meanings. This leads to a wrong interpretation among readers towards the news they have read. Thus, this study aims to analyze structural ambiguities found in a Malaysian English newspaper by using the X-bar theory approach. It is purposely to demonstrate the use of X-bar theory in breaking down ambiguous sentences into small units, so that two possible interpretations made could be justified. This qualitative content analysis study involved a two-month period of analysis in which New Straits Times (NST) newspaper articles were analyzed from the 1st December 2020 to 31st January 2021. The result showed that the structural ambiguities found in the newspaper articles were majorly caused by the attachment of the Prepositional Phrase (PP). Besides, the phenomenon of the structural ambiguities can be clearly explained by using the X-bar theory approach because X-bar theory illustrated on how two possible meanings of each ambiguous sentence occurred. The constituent of tree diagrams portrayed the phrase attachments that causes the sentences become ambiguous. To add on, one major factor causing structural ambiguities in the news articles was when the phrase attachments function as an adjunct. This concluded that structural ambiguity is one of the language issues that can be found in the selected NST newspaper articles and it should be taken into account as an assurance of a good quality of newspaper article writing.

Keywords: English Malaysian newspaper, structural ambiguity, X-bar theory, Prepositional Phrase (PP)

خلاصة البحث

الجريدة هي أحد المصادر الموثوقة للأشخاص لتحديث الأخبار والقضايا الحالية. ويعد المحتوى الإخباري الشامل أمرًا بالغ الأهمية لتجنب سوء الفهم بين القراء في فهم الرسالة. يلعب بناء الجملة الجيد دورًا مهمًا في ضمان شمولية محتوى الأخبار لمنع أي مشكلات لغوية مثل الغموض الهيكلي. والغموض البنيوي هو مشكلة لغوية تؤدي إلى إنتاج جملة معنيين محتملين. كما يؤدي هذا إلى تفسير خاطئ بين القراء للأخبار التي قرأوها. وبالتالي، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الغموض البنيوي الموجود في إحدى الصحف الماليزية الإنجليزية باستخدام نهج نظرية X-bar. يهدف إلى توضيح استخدام نظرية X-bar في تقسيم الجمل الغامضة إلى وحدات صغيرة، بحيث يمكن تبرير تفسيرين محتملين وكيف يمكن لنهج نظرية X-bar أن يشرح حدوث الغموض الهيكلي في المحدد. مقالات الصحف. تضمنت دراسة تحليل المحتوى النوعي هذه فترة تحليل لمدة شهرين تم فيها تحليل مقالات صحيفة New Straits Times (NST) من 1 ديسمبر 2020 إلى 31 يناير 2021. وأظهرت النتيجة أن الغموض الهيكلي الموجود في مقالات الصحف كان سببًا رئيسًا في عن طريق إرفاق عبارة الجر (PP). إلى جانب ذلك، يمكن تفسير ظاهرة الغموض البنيوي بوضوح باستخدام نهج نظرية شريط X لأن نظرية شريط X أوضحت كيفية حدوث معنيين محتملين لكل جملة غامضة. يصور مكون المخططات الشجرية مرفقات العبارة التي تسبب الغموض في الجمل. للإضافة، كان أحد العوامل الرئيسية التي تسبب الغموض الهيكلي في المقالات الإخبارية عندما تعمل مرفقات العبارة كعنصر مساعد. خلص هذا إلى أن الغموض الهيكلي هو أحد القضايا اللغوية التي يمكن العثور عليها في مقالات صحيفة NST المختارة ويجب أخذه في الاعتبار كضمان لجودة كتابة المقالات الصحفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صحيفة ماليزية إنجليزية، غموض بنيوي، نظرية شريط X، عبارة الجر (PP)

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Language Studies

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DECLARATION

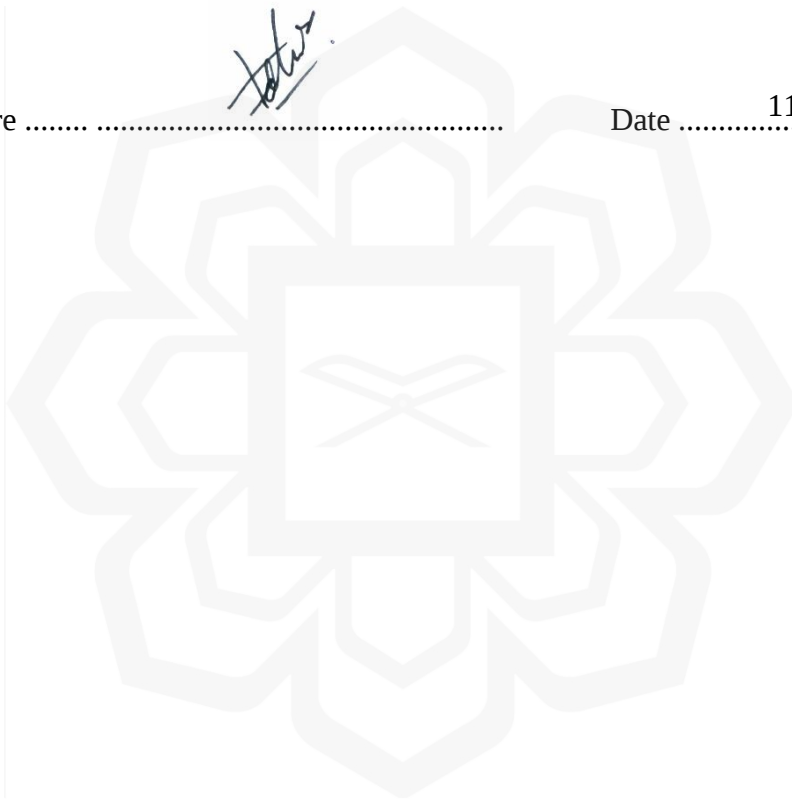
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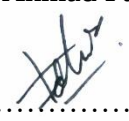
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In the name of Allah,

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the overview of the whole study. It consists of several subtopics; background of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, research questions, research objectives and scope of the study.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Newspaper is one of the most reliable sources for individuals to find any information or updates regarding national or global issues. It is one of the traditional media that provides the main source of information since the early and middle of the 20th century (Hisham, 2019). According to Nelson (1998), the first newspaper was published in 1609 in Germany. This proves that newspaper has been together with humans ever since, thus it is regarded as one of the trustful sources for mankind although some might argue that mass media are good in twisting a story in order to make their stories believable to target readers. Morgan (2018) claimed that mass media would purposely attempt to spread false information or sow doubt in people's minds.

In spite of being the most reliable source of information to mankind, there are still flaws that can be discovered from newspapers in the aspect of their content or writing style. Some journalists tend to switch or twist stories they write to make them newsworthy and interesting enough to be published, including using ambiguous sentences to confuse the readers and at the same time to back them up if some arguments about the content arise. Olusanya (2017) found out that ambiguity is a linguistic tool for a journalist to draw any attention from audiences and also mislead them deliberately in

understanding the news. Usually, ambiguous sentences are clearly found in news headlines since they are the first element that catches readers' attention to read the news. Kuiken et. al (2017) mentioned that a news headline functions to attract and provoke readers to read the article. Not only headlines are deliberately written in ambiguous sentences, but their contents as well. Therefore, it can be seen that readers tend to come up with their own interpretations towards the news they have read which leads to the different opinions and stances towards the issue.

In fact, this news can probably be misleading in some way. In the study of syntax, or in layman's terms, a study of sentence structure; this kind of sentence is known as structural ambiguity. According to Leech (1981, p.30), "an expression can be said as ambiguous when more than one interpretation can be assigned to it". A structurally ambiguous utterance can have more than one syntactic interpretation and imply more syntactic relationships within a sentence structure between its constituents (Oak, 2010). It is important to note that structural ambiguity is distinctive to lexical ambiguity. A lexical ambiguity yields more than one interpretation that only involves that single particular word which may create various meanings from the whole sentence. "One way to think about it is that an ambiguous word has more than one possible meaning and that the appropriate meaning is quite obvious, given a context" (Denham & Lobeck, 2013, p.307). Based on the definitions given, it is clear that lexical ambiguity can be interpreted appropriately based on the context. Here are some examples to illustrate further the concept of ambiguity, "*I will go to the **bank** to withdraw some money*", the word '*bank*' may indicate two possible meanings either river bank or the bank that provide financial services. So, the word '*bank*' can arouse ambiguity in the sentence and this is regarded as lexical ambiguity. However, from the context of the sentence itself, one can assume that the word '*bank*' refers to the place that provides financial

services due to the Infinitive Phrase '*to withdraw some money*' which explains the reason why '*I will go to the bank*'. Meanwhile, the sentence "*I am meeting a girl in a room*" explains structural ambiguity because of the Prepositional Phrase (PP) '*in a room*' can either explain a '*girl*' in a room or a place where '*I*' meet '*a girl*'. That makes lexical and structural ambiguities distinctive to one another. Nonetheless, in order to find out the most accurate interpretations of ambiguous sentences, syntactic analysis is the method to break down sentences into some possible interpretation by using a proper method suggested by previous scholars.

The development of the digital global era has shifted traditional mass media into the digital version. Newspaper, TV and even radio now have their own online platform to be accessed. In the US, 90% of daily newspapers have been using online platforms to issue their news articles and most of them own websites to reach new markets (Rajendran & Thesinghraj, 2014). The emergence of online news makes it easy for humans to read without even the need to go out and buy a physical newspaper. Furthermore, the version of online newspaper is still the same as the physical one which is called as e-paper. "Electronic paper (e-paper) could turn into a major newspaper publishing channel due to its ability to display content in a paper like manner" (Leckner & Appelgren, 2007, p.25). Nonetheless, the content of the news still plays important role in delivering a message to readers. Regardless of online or offline platform, the fact that newspaper content may mislead readers is undeniable. Ecker et. al (2014) strictly claimed that a news article can be misleading even the false information portrayed in the news content is unnoticeable.

New Straits Times is among the Malaysian English newspapers available in the market. According to New Straits Times Press (NSTP), it is one of the leading English newspapers in Malaysia that has been established in the market for many years ago.

Since it has become the main English newspaper among Malaysians, the syntactic analysis of structural ambiguities was carried out based on the content analysis research design of this newspaper to ensure the familiarity of the data in Malaysian context. This study is crucial as it discovered the issue of structural ambiguities in Malaysian English newspaper contents writing.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Structural ambiguities can lead the readers to misinterpret the news they have read. Oluga (2010) stated that “Ambiguity can therefore be a hindrance to effective communication just because of the semantic confusion that arises from the susceptibility of an ambiguous expression to double or multiple semantic interpretations” (p.38). Even though ambiguous sentences are meant to be more than a single interpretation, but to have insignificant interpretations may cause misunderstanding among the readers regarding the intended message trying to be conveyed. “The journalists sometimes use ambiguity in presenting the news. This often creates different interpretation from people who read it” (Puspitasari, Beratha & Wandia, 2019, p.20). Khawalda and Al-Saidat (2012) ran their research on English structural ambiguity interpretations among Arab learners and the result mentioned that the majority of students had difficulty in breaking the intended meanings of the ambiguous sentences. This shows poor reading skills by the readers because they cannot process the complexity of ambiguous sentences due to the lack of syntactic knowledge (Pang, 2008).

This also can lead to an argument among social media users when each one of them has a different understanding regarding an issue. They continue to misinterpret the issue resulting in confusion to other readers as well albeit indirectly. Social media users are comprised of people with numerous life backgrounds who can be

professionals, students, labour workers; hence, they obviously possess distinctive thoughts, opinions, and perspectives towards the topic. Social media is an online platform that allows the interaction between groups or individuals in which they produce, share, and sometimes exchange ideas, images, videos and many more over the internet in virtual communities (Akram & Kumar, 2017). For instance, political matters had become the main target of newspapers readers to search for firm reasons to blame any political parties they less prefer. Though this study focused on illustrating accurate sentence interpretations rather than the intended meaning from an ambiguous sentence, it is believed that it can create awareness for readers to be well justified before throwing out their opinions on the Net.

Furthermore, having wrong interpretations toward certain news may result into unhealthy reaction like cyber bullying, especially if the news is being viral without any concerns upon the actual message tried to be delivered. Edwards et. al (2017) reported that the aftermath of misunderstanding leads to arguments among individuals. A major problem of understanding headlines usually comes from its interpretations and meaning (Sevida, 2015).

Apart from syntactic ambiguity, ambiguity in communication can also be caused by other factor such as lexical ambiguity. However, lexical ambiguity is not as complex as structural ambiguity because the meaning of a word can be predicted based on its context. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, cannot be resolved based on context. Only the writer knows the intended meaning of a sentence constructed. “Our knowledge of the language will not tell us which interpretation was actually intended on any given occasion” (Al-Janaby & Abed, 2011, p. 3). However, we can actually analyse syntactically ambiguous sentences by parsing them into small pieces of syntactical units and this requires in-depth knowledge of syntax. This can help us to justify whether our

interpretations are logical or not. Hence, this research analysed the structural ambiguities found in the selected newspaper from a syntax perspective by using X-bar theory approach.

Saputra (2018), Khalifa (2018), Taufiqoh (2017), and Hafiz (2017) researches focused on structural ambiguities in news headlines. News headlines are usually written in incomplete sentence structure, thus their explanations about the structural ambiguities does not seem to cover the whole sentence structure and lack in-depth elaboration. This research has filled the gap from the previous studies which based their data mostly on news headlines. Therefore, ambiguous sentences from selected news contents are the data to be analysed in this study, so that the analysis of a complete sentence structure of structural ambiguity can be done. It gave a better picture to readers regarding the notion of structural ambiguity topic. There were some studies conducted on structural ambiguity using other approaches, for example, Puspitasari, Beratha, and Wandia (2019) who used labelling and bracketing approaches by Yule (2014) in analysing ambiguous sentences found in The Jakarta Post Daily Newspaper. Wakhidah (2018) used a descriptive analysis approach by describing the possible meanings of structural ambiguities found in English workbooks. Thus, this study attempted to fill the gap by using the X-Bar Theory as an approach to analyse structural ambiguities in newspaper content instead of news headlines.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study discovered structural ambiguities found in the selected newspaper, New Straits Times, through syntactic analysis and it benefits both authors and readers significantly including from the pedagogical perspective. Firstly, this study may help to enhance readers' language skills. It is beneficial for the readers to get familiar with

syntactic analysis method as it will expose them to an effective method of breaking down ambiguous sentence structures to ensure that they gain accurate interpretations from the structural ambiguities. Although there are numerous methods of parsing sentences like bracketing, garden path, and traditional grammar, readers may have distinctive interpretations of meaning based on their general understanding of the English language; knowing the detailed explanation of interpretations made is crucial to assure their comprehension is on track and justified. Syntactic awareness is one of the important aspects of reading skills when a reader can use grammatical clues to understand sentences and texts (Teixeira et. al, 2016).

Apart from that, this study would become a preface to readers towards the importance of language studies which is essential for their reading skills. Non-linguistics background individuals may not be familiar with the syntax concept in general, hence conducting research that implements the syntactic theoretical approach would allow them to go in-depth on how syntactic analysis can help them in obtaining a good quality of reading comprehension. Morvay (2012) claimed that poor reading comprehension is due to insufficient syntactic abilities among readers.

Besides, the findings may give a huge overview for journalists to pay more attention to their news report writing because their writing style may affect the readers' beliefs. They can consider the results as a matter to improve their news-writing skills. It is crucial for journalists to be creative and informative when writing a news, thus they should master the good writing skills in order to produce a good quality of news. Merina (2017) stated that "As a journalist, ability in creating an interesting news is one of a part that must be mastered because the quality of news can be seen through the way of journalist convey the information" (p. 63).

Another significance of the study is also to increase the number of syntactic analysis of structural ambiguities research since there are still less in the number of references discussing this topic. Since most of the ambiguity researches are explained from the semantic perspective, this study focused specifically on the syntactic view. It is also important to be noted that the majority of past researches that have been found are not associated with any data from English newspapers in Malaysia. Thus, this research became a pioneer for future researchers to conduct more studies regarding structural ambiguities in Malaysian English newspapers.

It is crucial to acknowledge that exploratory researches of structural ambiguity topics are also beneficial especially for pedagogical purposes. They give a good exposure for both teachers and learners to get to know the approach of the X-Bar Theory as a linguistic tool to acquire better proficiency in English language grammar. Torres (1994) reported in his study that the students considered the use of X-Bar Theory as a good tool for them to learn English language grammar. Hence, the study can also contribute to the development of our education system (language education) such as for the school syllabus enhancement by considering this topic to be included under English subject. Penner (2017) did an interesting research on syntactic analysis preference by Filipinos towards ambiguous sentences which depicted the acceptance of students in learning syntactic analysis. On top of that, this study alert linguistics students on the importance of acknowledging the syntactic analysis approach and how to use it in a practical way rather than only theoretical.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to explore the topic of the structural ambiguities in the newspaper through the syntactic analysis. The research will be conducted based on the following research questions:

1. What are the types of phrase attachments that lead to the structural ambiguities?
2. How can the structural ambiguities found in the New Straits Times newspaper articles be explained using X-Bar Theory?

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify the types of phrase attachments that lead to the structural ambiguities.
2. To explain the structural ambiguities found in New Straits Times newspaper articles by using the X-Bar Theory approach.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study covered the issue of structural ambiguity in newspaper articles from the syntax perspective. In other words, the study specifically explained on how the sentences can be ambiguous by applying X-Bar theory approach. From the semantic perspective, two possible meanings that could be interpreted from the ambiguous sentences were well enough to portray the structural ambiguities. However, there must be an in-depth explanation regarding that matter which is not the main focus of this study. Hence, generally, this study highlighted the operation of structural ambiguities

found in the selected newspapers articles based on the X-Bar theory approach which tree diagrams were illustrated to explain the structural ambiguities.

1.7 SUMMARY

This thesis consists of five chapters, the first chapter covers several sub-topics such as the background of the study, statement of the problem, the significance of the study, the scope of the study, research objectives and also research questions. The second chapter comprises the literature review which emphasises on definitions of the concepts used, theoretical frameworks as well as some previous studies related to this research. The third chapter illustrates the methods and procedures that have been used in carrying out this research such as the research design, data analysis, research approach, and others. The presentation of data and findings are discussed in the fourth chapter, where further explanations including a thorough discussion of the data collected have been elaborated. Lastly, the final chapter concludes the overall study, research implications, limitations as well as the recommendations for future researchers.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter comprises the idea of this research based on general terminologies related to the study. Theoretical frameworks involved in the study have been explained to show how it was conducted from theoretical perspectives. The previous studies are mentioned too as references for this research.

2.2 GENERATIVE GRAMMAR

Grammar is one of the most vital elements in language study. Plenty of grammar theories have been introduced by grammarians and linguistics scholars such as Traditional Grammar, Functional Grammar, Transformational Grammar, and many more. One of the common grammatical theories that have been used by researchers to conduct studies related to the structure of a language is Generative Grammar. Noam Chomsky first introduced generative Grammar in the 1950s, which explained that sentences are generated subconsciously through the programmed process that occurs in our mind. “In generative grammar, the means for modelling these procedures is through a set of formal grammatical rules” (Carnie, 2012, p.5). In other words, Generative Grammar may refer to the descriptive process of grammatical action is taking out into detailed explanation without strict constraint to the prescriptive rules like what has been taught in school. It illustrates how a sentence is structured, reasons for the grammatical errors found in a sentence, and a clear picture of a specific explanation of grammatical orders in a sentence. Chomsky (1965) explained that “It attempts to characterise in the

most neutral possible terms the knowledge of the language that provides the basis for actual use of language by a speaker-hearer” (p.9).

Generative Grammar Theory claims a lot about the scientific findings in the matter of how a human being constructs sentences. A major claim made by cognitive scientists regarding this theory is in the misconception issue of language learning (Carnie, 2012). Cognitive scientists have come out with the conclusion that we produce sentences in our speech subconsciously. The natural process that takes place in our brain, that enables us to produce a complete sentence without even knowing why we include a subject at the beginning of a sentence or object at the end of a sentence, is considered as subconscious knowledge, which is called acquiring. In contrast, conscious knowledge, like the formula of Mathematics (addition and subtraction), the process of photosynthesis, and others, can only be gained through a formal learning process. The theory of Universal Grammar (UG) claims that “children are born with the capacity to represent structures using the same categories and phrase structure as adults. None of this has to be learned” (Thornton, 2016, p. 6). Hence, it is important to differentiate these processes to get a better notion of sentence structuring knowledge. The X-bar Theory can be categorised under Generative Grammar. It plays an integral part in the theory (Jacobsen, 1993) because it helps to describe the internal structures of each phrase in a sentence.

There are two ways to understand the notion of grammatical rules in a language which are prescriptive and descriptive grammars. Carnie (2012) stated that prescriptive grammar explains how one should speak, or in other words, it refers to the rules of grammar that have been taught in school by teachers and set by their own standards, which are obligatory to be followed. For instance, parts of speech contained in the English language like noun, verb, adjective, and adverb; each has specific regulations