



AMBIGUITY

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Structural Ambiguity

Ambiguity in the Structure of Coordination

Ambiguity in the structure of coordination can be identified in many ways as in the following circumstances:





1. It may occur when **and** is a coordinator in a structure of coordination. This is because a structure of coordination with **and** can be either combinatory or segregatory:

- I ate strawberries and cake yesterday.
(ambiguous)

1.1 coordination as combinatory

If the coordination **strawberries and cake** is combinatory, the whole structure is a combined unit. To make the sentence clearly understood, **together with** must be used instead.

- I ate strawberries together with cake yesterday.

1.2 coordination as segregatory.

If the coordination **strawberries and cake** is segregatory, the whole structure is not a combined unit. To make the sentence unambiguous, it may be rewritten as two separate sentences:

- **I ate strawberries yesterday. I ate cake yesterday.**
(The two activities didn't occur at exactly the same time or place.)

2. It may occur when a premodifier is interpreted as modifying only the first or all the conjoins:

- She likes sweet apples and biscuits.

(ambiguous)

2.1 a premodifier modifying only the first conjoin

If the premodifier **sweet** modifies only the first conjoin **apples**, ambiguity can be avoided by switching the conjoins as follows:

- **She likes biscuits and sweet apples.**

(unambiguous)

2.2 a premodifier modifying all the conjoins

If the premodifier **sweet** modifies both conjoins, another premodifier may be added to help clarify the meaning:

- She likes sweet apples and sweet biscuits.

(unambiguous)

3. It may occur when a postmodifier can be understood as modifying only the last conjoin or all the conjoins:

**- Mr. Smith is talking to a boy and a girl
with red hair. (ambiguous)**



3.1 a postmodifier modifying only the last conjoin

It the postmodifier **with red hair** modifies only the last conjoin, the sentence may be rewritten by switching the two conjoins to make it clearly understood:

- Mr. Smith is talking to a girl with red hair and a boy. (unambiguous)



3.2 a postmodifier modifying all the conjoins

If the postmodifier **with red hair** modifies both conjoins **a boy** and **a girl**, another postmodifier for the first conjoin may be added to make the sentence unambiguous:

- **Mr. Smith is talking to a boy with red hair and a girl with red hair. (unambiguous)**



4. It may occur when two verbs or verb phrases joined by and in the structure of coordination are followed by a noun or noun phrase which can be interpreted as direct object (DO) of only the last conjoin or both conjoins:

**- Martha loves teaching and tending small children.
(ambiguous)**

4.1 noun or noun phrases as direct object of the last conjoin.

If the noun phrase **small children** is the direct object of the last conjoin **tending**, the sentence may be made clear by switching the two conjoins:

**- Martha loves tending small children and teaching.
(unambiguous)**

In the above interpretation, **teaching** is an intransitive verb.



4.2 noun or noun phrase as direct object of both conjoins

If the noun phrase **small children** is the direct object of **teaching** and **tending**, this noun phrase must be added after the first conjoin **teaching** to make the meaning clear:

- Martha loves teaching small children and tending small children. (unambiguous)

In this interpretation, **teaching** is a transitive verb.

5. It may occur when the same structure of coordination has both coordinators **and** and **or**, one of which may be the main coordinator:

- Bob and Mike or Paul will go to Malaysia this weekend. (ambiguous)

5.1 **and** as main coordinator

If **and** is the main coordinator, this example may be rewritten as two separate sentences to make the meaning clear:

- Bob will go to Malaysia this weekend. And either Mike or Paul will go to Malaysia this weekend.

5.2 **or** as main coordinator

If **or** is the main coordinator, the ambiguous sentence can be made clearly understood as follows:

- Bob and Mike will go to Malaysia this weekend. Or Paul will go to Malaysia this weekend.

6. It may occur when the sentence with **than** has an ellipsis. In that case, the word after **than** can be interpreted as either the subject or the direct object of the sentence in which there is an ellipsis. For example:

**- Carol hates Mary more than Susan.
(ambiguous)**

6.1 the word after **than** as subject

If **Susan** functions as subject,
the unambiguous sentence which has no
ellipsis is:

- **Carol hates Mary more than Susan
hates Mary.** Subject

6.2 the word after **than** as direct object

The following unambiguous sentence in which **Susan** functions as direct object has no ellipsis:

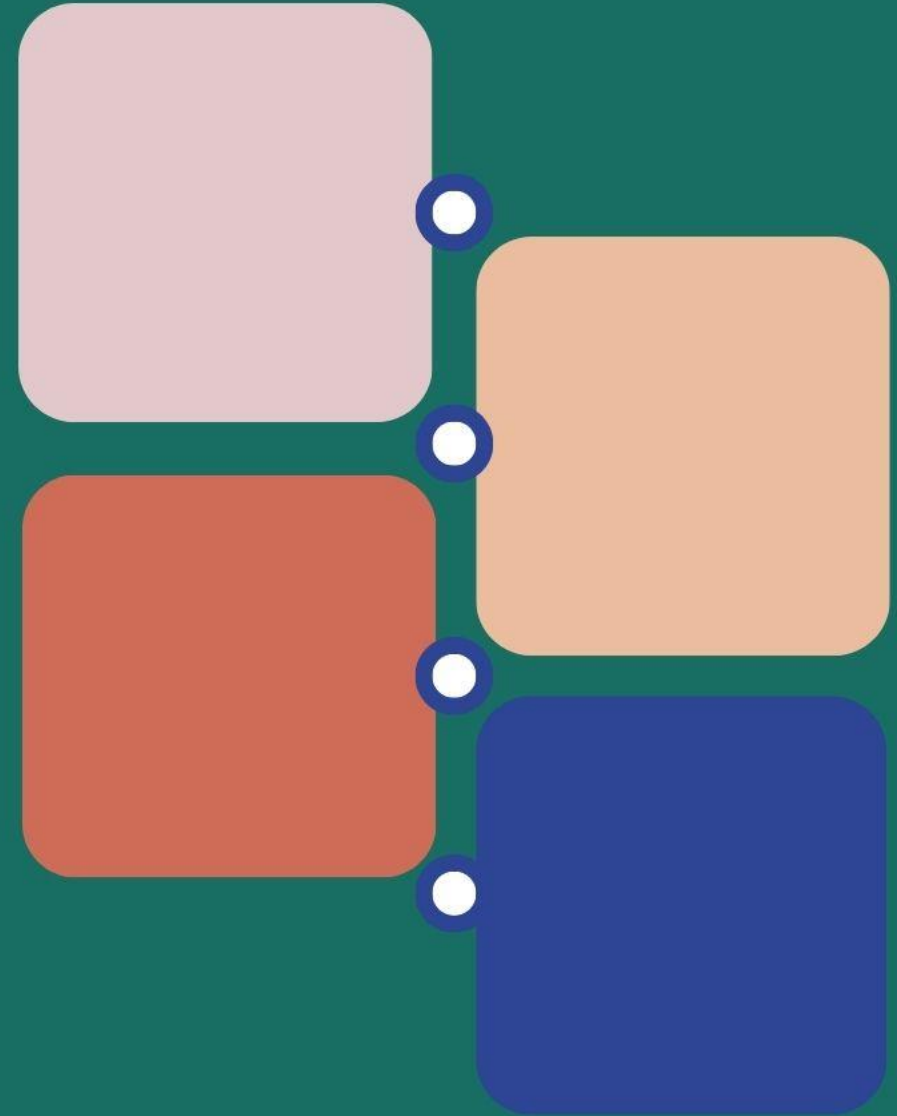
- **Carol hates Mary more than Carol hates Susan.**
direct object

7. It may occur when a plural noun which functions as head is modified by a structure of coordination:

M **H**

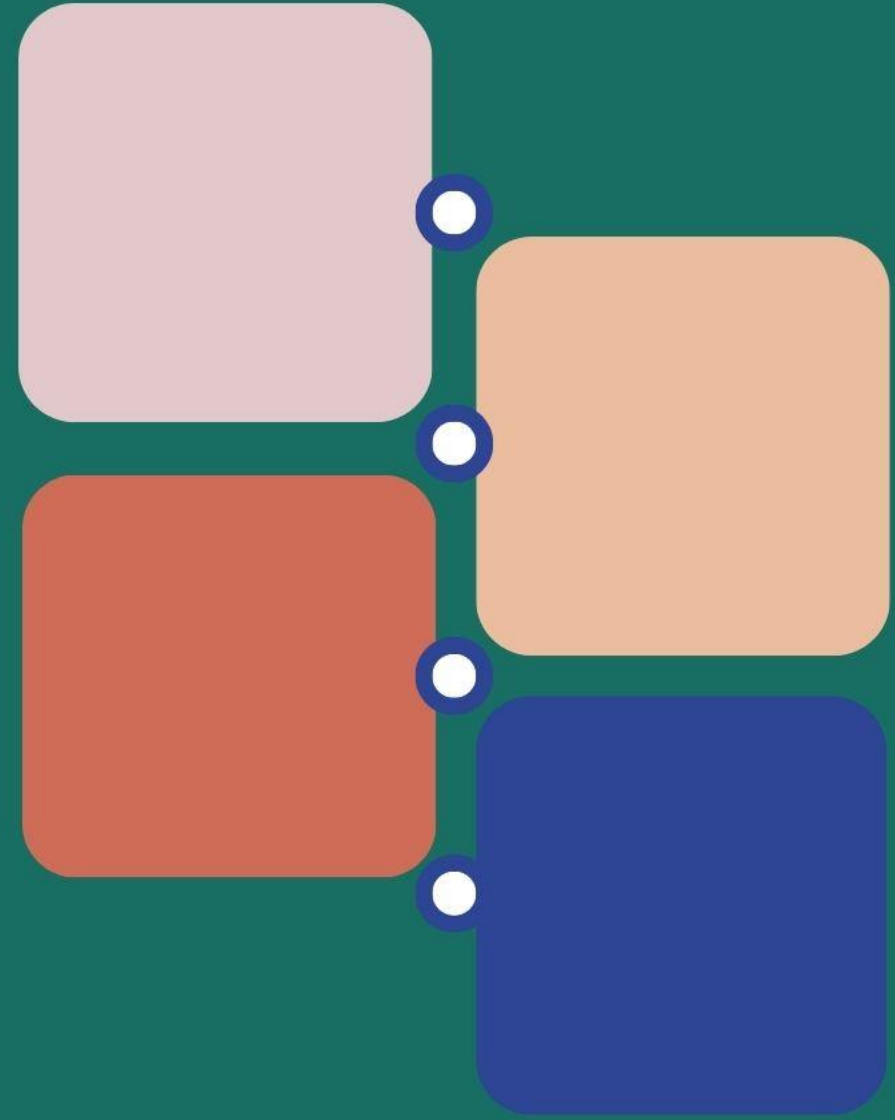
- **Mother bought red and white blouses.**

red and white = structure of coordination



The plural noun **blouses** is modified by the structure of coordination **red** and **white**. Thus, the whole noun phrase **red** and **white blouses** can be understood as:

1. red blouses and white blouses
2. a red blouse and a white blouse
3. red blouses and a white blouse
4. a red blouse and white blouses
5. two-colored blouses (red and white)





REFERENCE

Jotikasthira, P. (2014). Introduction to the English Language: System and Structure. Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

