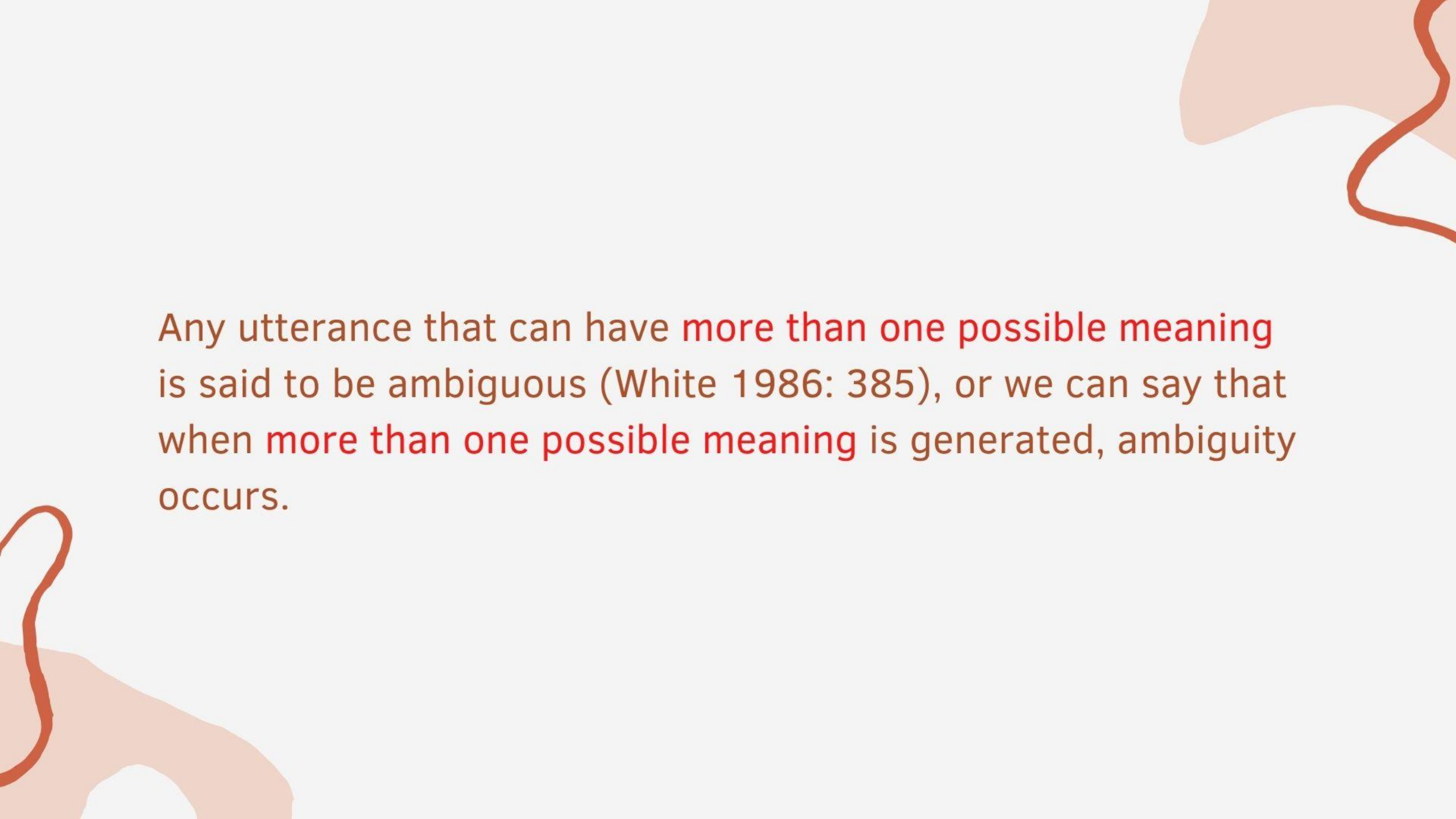


# AMBIGUITY

DR.PATCHARAPHAN SUSAMAWATHANAKUN



Any utterance that can have **more than one possible meaning** is said to be ambiguous (White 1986: 385), or we can say that when **more than one possible meaning** is generated, ambiguity occurs.

Mike told  
Peter more  
than Jim.

### AMBIGUOUS:

Mike told Peter more than Jim.



(1)

### CLEAR:

Mike told Peter more than Mike told Jim.

(Drawing 1)

(Mike told something to both Peter and Jim.)

Mike told  
Peter more  
than Jim.

### AMBIGUOUS:

Mike told Peter more than Jim.




(2)

### CLEAR:

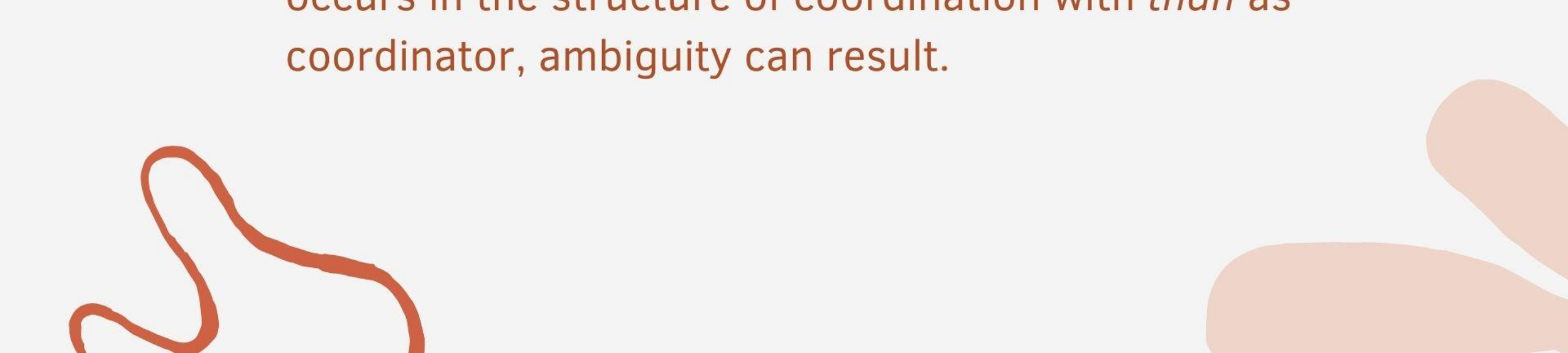
Mike told Peter more than Jim told Peter.

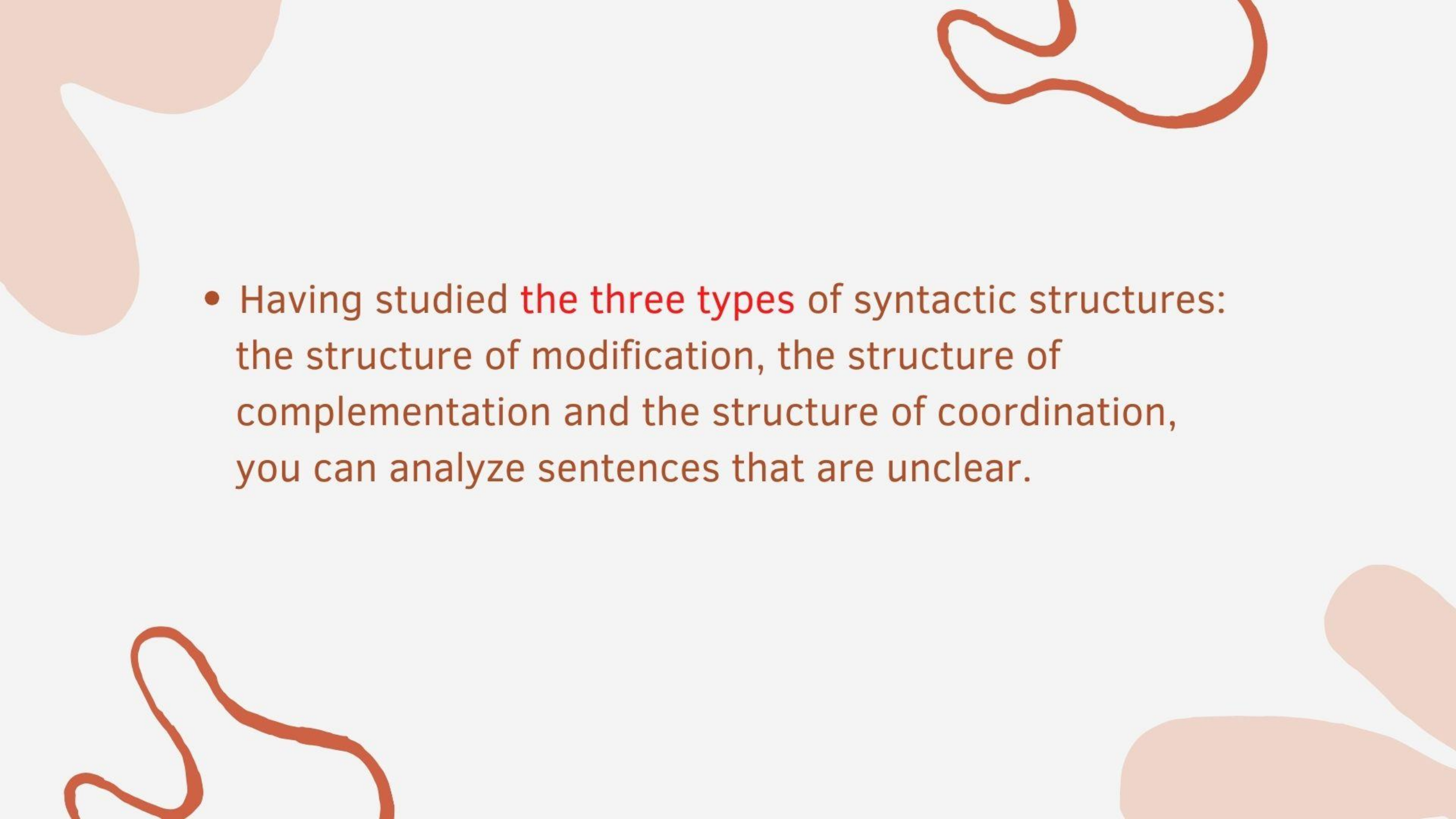
(Drawing 2)

(Both Mike and Jim told something to Peter.)



The sentence *Mike told Peter more than Jim.* is structurally ambiguous.

- Jim can be interpreted as either the subject (Drawing 2) or the direct object (Drawing 1). Therefore, when ellipsis occurs in the structure of coordination with *than* as coordinator, ambiguity can result.
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- Having studied **the three types** of syntactic structures: the structure of modification, the structure of complementation and the structure of coordination, you can analyze sentences that are unclear.

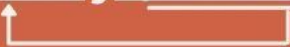
# Structural Ambiguity

- Ambiguity in the Structure of Modification •

Ambiguity involving the structure of modification includes:

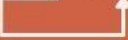
1. an *of* - phrase

- The story / of the boy made the children laugh.



2. an unclear pronoun reference:

- Jane asked Carol to talk to her/son.



3. a word in *-ing* form modifying a noun:

- Mike is pointing at the / dancing girl.



4. a word in *-ed* form modifying a noun:

- They just talk to the / concerned patient.



5. a modifier of various types: nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases that modify more than one head. Of all these, adverbs are the most common modifiers that have various positions.

### 5.1 positions of adverbs

5.1.1 standing between two nouns or noun phrases:

Nancy gave Martha only a dozen eggs.

A diagram illustrating the scope of the adverb 'only'. The sentence is 'Nancy gave Martha only a dozen eggs.' The words 'Martha' and 'a dozen eggs' are underlined. A horizontal line with two upward-pointing arrows is drawn below the underlines, starting under 'Martha' and ending under 'a dozen eggs', indicating that the adverb 'only' applies to both nouns.

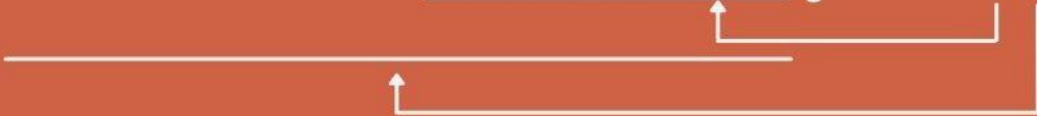
5.1.2 standing between two verbs or verb phrases:

The insecticides that are used often kill birds.



5.1.3 appearing finally:

Jim told me about the accident yesterday.



## 5.2 positions of nouns

### 5.2.1 preceding the nouns being modified:

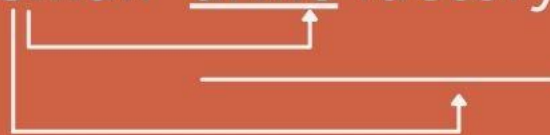
Paul is a Chicago girl hunter.



## 5.3 positions of adjectives

### 5.3.1 preceding the nouns being modified:

Mr. Harrison owns a small arms factory.



## 5.4 positions of adjective phrases

### 5.4.1 standing finally:

George, a physics major, wants to study at  
MIT, famous and uncompromising.

## 5.5 positions of prepositional phrases:

### 5.5.1 finally where two cases are involved

Students train to become teachers in colleges.

# REFERENCE

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

