

Syntactic Ambiguity in News Headlines: A Linguistic Analysis of Structural Ambiguity and Its Interpretative Effects

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic phenomenon of syntactic ambiguity in English-language news headlines, focusing on how structural features affect reader interpretation. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of selected headlines from Dawn, a prominent Pakistani newspaper, the research identifies various types of structural ambiguities including prepositional phrase attachment, reduced relative clauses, compound noun stacks, and coordination ambiguity. Through syntactic parsing and psycholinguistic models such as garden-path theory, the study reveals how headline brevity and grammatical compression frequently lead to misinterpretation. These ambiguities, often arising from omitted function words and noun stacking, pose significant risks to comprehension, especially in digital media contexts where headlines are consumed in isolation. The findings underscore the ethical implications of such ambiguity in journalism, where misleading interpretations can shape public discourse and trust. This research contributes to a broader understanding of the cognitive and communicative dynamics at the intersection of language structure and media representation.

Keywords: *syntactic ambiguity, structural ambiguity, news headlines, garden-path sentences, psycholinguistics, media language, headline interpretation, discourse analysis, ambiguity in journalism, Dawn newspaper*

Introduction

Language is a remarkably flexible tool, and its power lies in its capacity for subtlety, nuance, and multiplicity of meaning. Among the various phenomena that contribute to the complexity of language, syntactic ambiguity stands out as a key area of interest in linguistic studies. It occurs when a sentence or phrase allows for more than one syntactic interpretation, often without the need for any change in the wording itself (Radford, 2009). In everyday communication, speakers and listeners rely on shared context to resolve ambiguity. However, in written text, especially in compact formats such as news headlines, this context is often minimal or absent, making syntactic ambiguity a potent source of interpretative variance.

News headlines, by design, are brief, attention-grabbing, and often stripped of function words or detailed context for the sake of space and immediacy. This brevity, while effective in drawing readers in, can lead to structural ambiguity that invites multiple interpretations (Barkema, 2008). For example, a headline such as "*Miners Refuse to Work After Death*" might ambiguously suggest that the miners died, when the intended meaning is that they stopped working after someone else's death. Such ambiguities may arise from omitted conjunctions, misplaced modifiers, or noun phrase attachment issues common strategies used to economize language in headlines.

The syntactic structures of English are particularly prone to certain types of ambiguity, such as garden-path sentences and attachment ambiguities, where prepositional phrases or relative clauses can logically attach to more than one part of the sentence (Frazier & Rayner, 1982). When such structures appear in headlines, they can mislead the reader, resulting in initial misinterpretation followed by a revaluation of the intended meaning. This cognitive dissonance has implications not only for linguistic comprehension but also for the ethical responsibilities of journalistic practice.

Furthermore, in an era of fast information consumption, where headlines are often read in isolation on social media feeds, notifications, or news aggregators, the consequences of misinterpretation become even more significant. Readers may not always click through to read the full article, meaning their understanding is shaped entirely by the potentially ambiguous headline. In some cases, this can lead to misinformation, biased perception, or distorted emotional reactions. The ambiguity might be unintentional, but at times, it is deliberately employed as a rhetorical device to provoke curiosity or sensationalize content (Clark & Gerrig, 1990).

Thus, this study seeks to analyze the presence and function of syntactic ambiguity in news headlines, with a particular focus on its structural forms and the interpretative effects it has on readers. Through a linguistic lens, it will explore how such ambiguities are constructed and how they influence comprehension, both at a syntactic and a pragmatic level. By identifying common patterns and assessing their cognitive and communicative impact, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of language use in media and its intersection with public discourse.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and categorize different types of syntactic ambiguities present in English-language news headlines.
2. To analyse the interpretative effects of these ambiguities on readers' understanding and perception of the headlines.

Research Questions

1. What are the common structural patterns that lead to syntactic ambiguity in news headlines?
2. How does syntactic ambiguity influence the reader's interpretation and comprehension of news headlines?

Literature Review

The study of syntactic ambiguity, particularly in the context of journalistic discourse, has attracted considerable scholarly attention in the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology, and media studies. This chapter explores existing research on syntactic ambiguity, its structural forms, cognitive effects, and its implications in media language, especially in news headlines.

Understanding Syntactic Ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity, also known as structural ambiguity, occurs when a sentence can be parsed in more than one way due to its grammatical structure. According to Radford (2009), ambiguity arises not from vocabulary but from the hierarchical arrangement of phrases, often involving issues like attachment, coordination, or ellipsis. For example, a headline like "*Kids Make Nutritious Snacks*" can be interpreted as children creating healthy food or children being the snacks, highlighting the interpretative risks of poor syntactic design.

Carnie (2013) identifies two major types of syntactic ambiguity: global and local ambiguity. Global ambiguity refers to cases where multiple interpretations remain unresolved without additional context, while local ambiguity causes initial misinterpretation that is resolved later

in the sentence. News headlines, with their limited word count and absence of surrounding context, often exhibit both.

Syntactic Ambiguity in Headlines

In journalistic writing, the drive for brevity and immediacy often encourages elliptical constructions, nominalizations, and deletion of auxiliary verbs, all of which can increase the risk of ambiguity (Reah, 2002). Bell (1991) asserts that the “headlines” style characterized by compressed grammar and loaded noun phrases prioritizes impact over clarity, thus creating fertile ground for structural ambiguity.

Barkema (2008) highlights how the omission of conjunctions and prepositions in headlines often results in syntactic constructions that are open to multiple interpretations. These ambiguities are not always accidental; some editors exploit them as stylistic devices to intrigue readers. However, this practice also runs the risk of misleading the audience or distorting the intended message.

Cognitive Processing of Ambiguity

From a psycholinguistic perspective, ambiguous sentences engage readers in a more demanding cognitive process. Frazier and Rayner (1982) studied eye movement patterns and found that readers initially commit to a single syntactic structure and then backtrack when the sentence does not fit their expectations, a process known as “garden-path” parsing. This cognitive dissonance is particularly relevant in headlines, where misinterpretation can occur quickly and influence immediate judgments.

Gibson and Pearlmutter (1998) further explain that syntactic complexity and ambiguity impose a cognitive load on working memory, which affects comprehension speed and accuracy. In the context of digital media, where readers skim rather than scrutinize, such complexity can result in persistent misinterpretation.

Ambiguity and Media Ethics

The ethical dimension of syntactic ambiguity in headlines has also been a point of scholarly debate. Cotter (2010) argues that while stylistic ambiguity can enhance engagement, it also poses ethical concerns when it leads to misrepresentation or sensationalism. In today’s fast-paced digital news cycle, headlines are often the only part of a story that readers consume. Consequently, ambiguous headlines may disproportionately shape public understanding or fuel misinformation.

According to van Dijk (1988), media discourse is never neutral; it reflects ideological positioning. Structural ambiguity, whether intentional or not, can contribute to narrative framing by subtly altering how readers assign agency or causality in a news event.

Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework used to examine syntactic ambiguity in English-language news headlines, with a focused analysis of headlines drawn exclusively from *Dawn*, a leading English-language newspaper in Pakistan. The methodology has been revised to reflect the updated scope of the study, which now concentrates on a smaller, more targeted dataset to allow for in-depth linguistic analysis.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, rooted in linguistic and syntactic analysis. This design is appropriate for exploring complex language patterns such as structural ambiguity, where understanding context, structure, and meaning is critical. The approach is also exploratory, as it seeks to identify and interpret forms of syntactic ambiguity within a localized media context.

By focusing on one prominent newspaper, the study aims to analyze headline construction in a consistent editorial and cultural environment. This localized scope allows for richer

contextual interpretation while still addressing broader questions about media language and reader comprehension.

Data Source

The sole data source for this study is the *Dawn* newspaper, one of the most widely read and respected English-language newspapers in Pakistan. It is known for its formal style, institutional tone, and widespread influence in shaping public discourse.

Dawn was chosen because of:

- Its established reputation and editorial consistency,
- Its readership across various demographics in Pakistan,
- Its prominence in both print and digital news consumption.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was employed to collect a set of 10 headlines that exhibit syntactic ambiguity. The sample was chosen based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and alignment with the research objectives.

Inclusion Criteria for Headlines

1. **Publication Source:** Only headlines from the *Dawn* newspaper were selected.
2. **Time Frame:** Headlines published between **January 2025 and April 2025**.
3. **Content Form:** Only main headlines (no subheadings or image captions).
4. **Linguistic Feature:** Each headline must demonstrate at least one clear instance of syntactic (structural) ambiguity.
5. **Accessibility:** Headlines must be publicly available through *Dawn*'s official website or digital archive.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection involved manually browsing *Dawn*'s online archives and daily e-papers. For each selected headline, the following data points were documented:

- The exact wording of the headline,
- Date of publication,
- Section or category (e.g., National, Politics, World, Editorial),
- Observed ambiguity type,
- A brief description of its possible interpretations.

Analytical Framework

To analyze the syntactic ambiguity in the selected headlines, a combination of linguistic tools was used:

1. **Syntactic Parsing:**
Headlines were broken down into phrase structure trees to identify points of grammatical ambiguity, using principles from generative grammar.
2. **Ambiguity Categorization:**
Each headline was categorised according to the type of syntactic ambiguity it exhibits, such as:
 - Prepositional phrase attachment,
 - Reduced relative clauses,
 - Noun-noun compound ambiguity,
 - Coordination ambiguity.
3. **Interpretation Analysis:**
The likely interpretive paths taken by readers were explored using psycholinguistic theories such as the garden-path model, highlighting where and how misinterpretation might occur.

4. Discourse Consideration:

Headlines were examined in terms of their potential pragmatic effects, how they may shape perception, trigger misinterpretation, or generate curiosity in digital and print formats.

Ethical Considerations

The headlines analyzed in this study were publicly published and accessed through *Dawn*'s official online platforms. No alterations were made to the original content. Proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources were maintained throughout the study. Since the data are in the public domain, no formal ethical clearance was necessary.

Limitations

- The study is limited to a small, localized dataset from one publication, which may not capture the full range of syntactic ambiguity in international news media.
- Reader interpretation was inferred from linguistic models, not from reader surveys or direct feedback.
- The relatively short time frame (January-April 2025) may not represent seasonal or editorial variations across the year.

Discussion and Analysis

This chapter examines the syntactic ambiguity present in selected headlines from *Dawn* newspaper, published between January and April 2025. Each headline is analyzed for its grammatical structure, type of ambiguity, and potential interpretative effects. The focus is on how ambiguity emerges from the syntactic construction and how it influences initial reader understanding

Headline 1: "Police Nab Doctor Wanted for Assault in Hospital"

Type of Ambiguity: Prepositional Phrase Attachment

Date: January 4, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline is structurally ambiguous due to the placement of the prepositional phrase "in hospital." It can grammatically attach to two different parts of the sentence:

- It could describe where the assault took place (i.e., "*assault in hospital*").
- Or, it could describe where the doctor was arrested (i.e., "*nab doctor in hospital*").

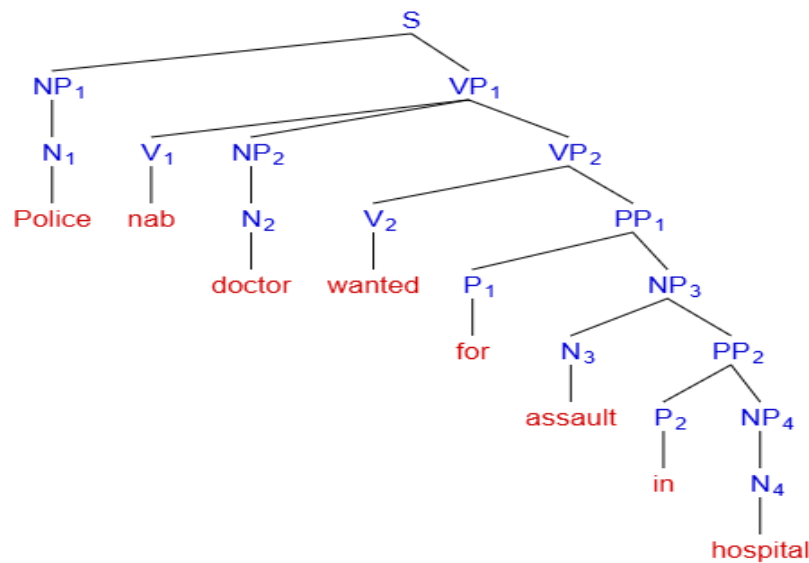
This results in two competing syntactic structures and interpretations, which we'll explore through labeled tree diagrams.

Interpretation 1:

The doctor is wanted for an assault that occurred in the hospital.

Here, the phrase "in hospital" attaches to the noun "assault."

Tree Structure:



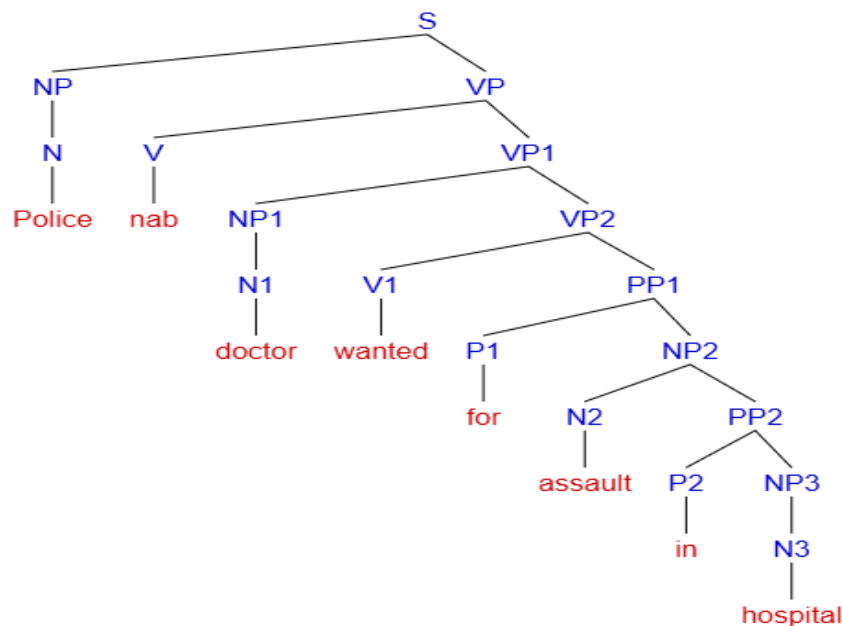
In this reading, the ambiguity creates a picture of the assault happening inside a hospital facility, which may cause readers to initially question hospital safety or context of violence.

Interpretation 2:

The doctor was nabbed in the hospital, and is wanted for an assault.

Here, "in hospital" attaches directly to the main verb "nab."

Tree Structure:



This reading implies the doctor was caught inside a hospital, possibly while on duty or being treated, which shifts the interpretive focus to the location of arrest.

Discussion:

This prepositional phrase attachment ambiguity is a classic example of how journalistic headlines can cause garden-path parsing, where readers initially misinterpret the structure and must backtrack once the sentence doesn't align with expectations.

In fast-paced news consumption, such ambiguity can lead to misunderstanding of events, locations, or blame, especially if the reader never opens the full article. In headlines related to crime or health, such confusion can be particularly damaging to public perception.

Headline 2: “Man Found Hanging Judge Sentenced to Life”

Type of Ambiguity: Reduced Relative Clause

Date: January 16, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline exhibits reduced relative clause ambiguity, where essential grammatical elements such as relative pronouns ("who was") are omitted. As a result, the reader may initially interpret "hanging judge" as a unit, implying a man was caught performing the act of hanging a judge, rather than understanding it as two separate clauses: a man was found hanging, and a judge was sentenced to life.

This misinterpretation arises from garden-path parsing, where readers first assume a more immediate or active structure before revising their interpretation upon reaching the end of the sentence.

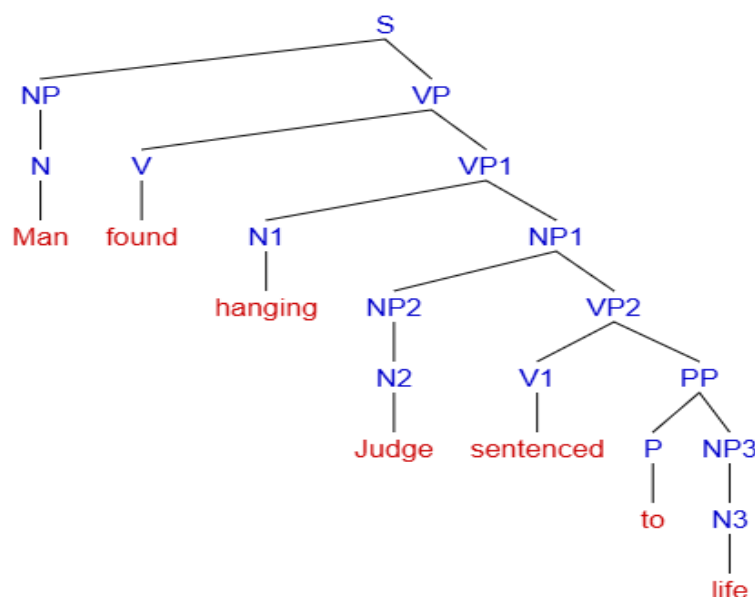
Interpretation 1 (Initial Misreading):

The man was found hanging the judge, and was sentenced to life.

Here, the structure wrongly suggests that the man was found while committing the act of hanging a judge, as if "hanging judge" is a verb-object phrase.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below illustrates this parsing “hanging judge” as one NP)



This interpretation falsely assigns agency of the hanging to the man and assumes the judge was the victim of the hanging.

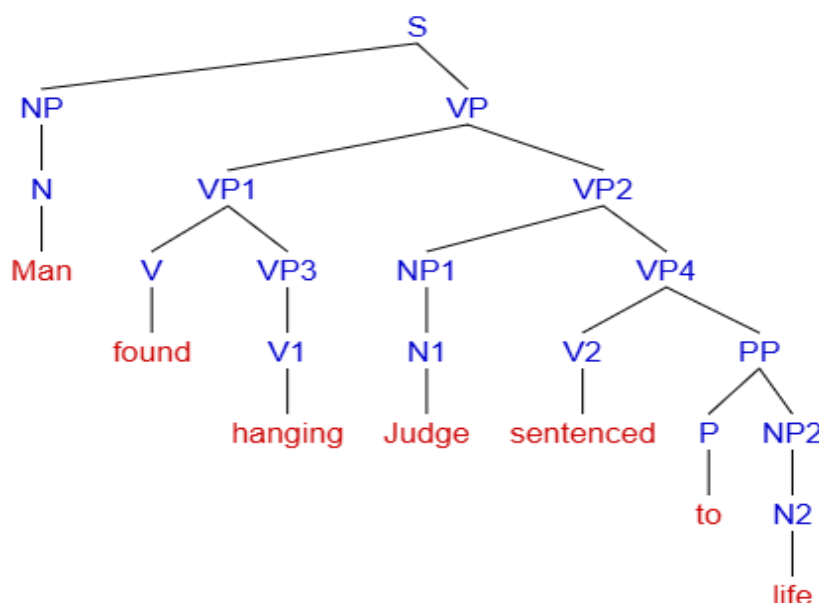
Interpretation 2 (Intended Meaning):

A man was found hanging (i.e., deceased), and the judge was sentenced to life.

Here, "found hanging" is understood as a reduced relative clause modifying "man," and the second clause, "judge sentenced to life", is treated as an independent or coordinated clause.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below illustrates correct parsing, separating “found hanging” from “judge sentenced”)



Discussion:

This headline highlights how structural compression in journalistic writing can lead to severe misinterpretation. The omission of function words like “who was” or punctuation such as commas creates a garden-path structure that misleads the reader.

The phrase “found hanging judge” evokes a sudden and dramatic (but incorrect) image of criminal action. In reality, the two parts refer to separate events: a man found deceased, and a judge receiving a sentence.

In sensitive cases involving death and the judiciary, clarity is especially critical to avoid emotional misdirection or reputational harm. Such ambiguity, while unintentional, can compromise reader trust and journalistic responsibility.

Headline 3: “Minister Tells Officials to Suspend Teachers Using Mobile Phones”

Type of Ambiguity: Attachment Ambiguity

Date: February 5, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline is ambiguous due to the phrase “using mobile phones”, which can syntactically attach to two different noun phrases:

1. “**teachers**” suggesting teachers are the ones using mobile phones.
2. “**officials**” -- suggesting officials are using phones while executing the suspension.

Without punctuation or clearer structure, both interpretations are grammatically possible, leading to a moment of confusion about who is using mobile phones.

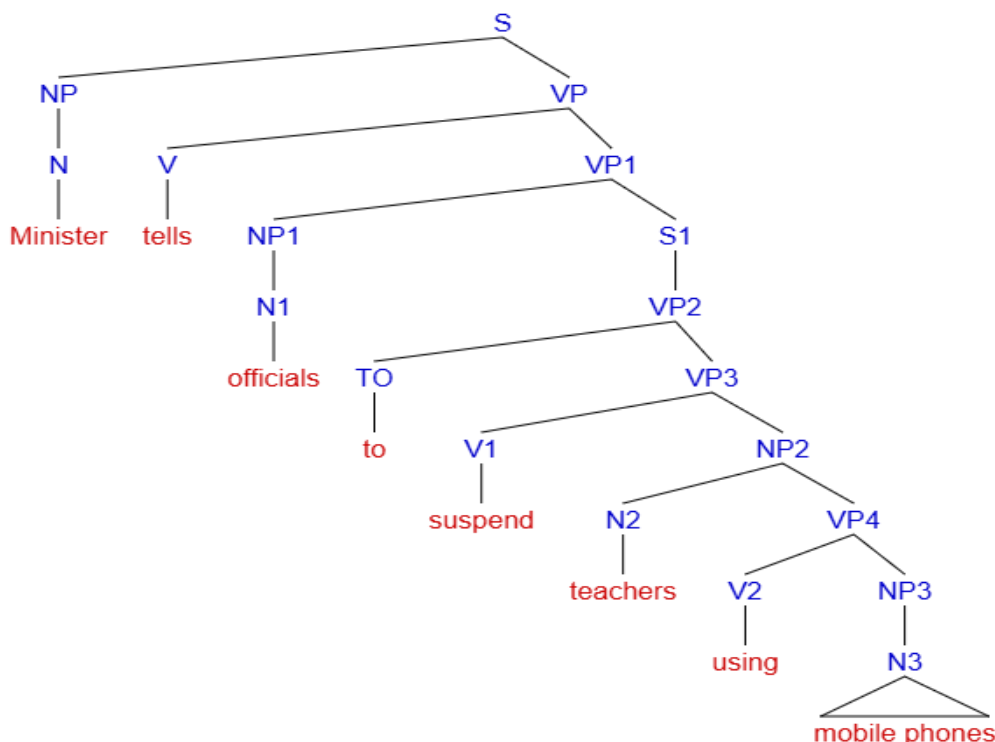
Interpretation 1 (Intended Meaning):

The Minister instructed officials to suspend those teachers who are using mobile phones.

Here, “using mobile phones” modifies “teachers,” making it clear that the teachers’ phone use is the reason for the disciplinary action.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows "using mobile phones" attached to "teachers")



This is the intended meaning, where the act of using mobile phones by teachers is the cause for suspension.

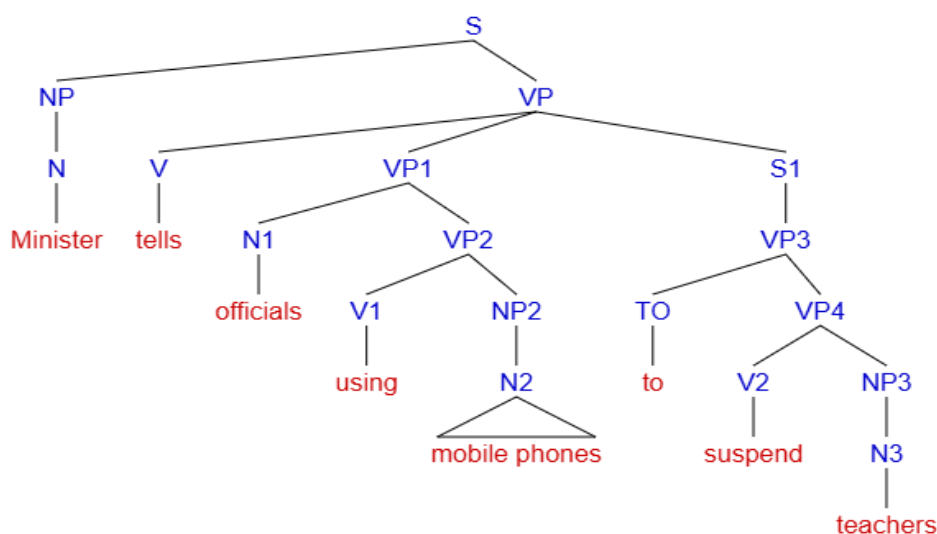
Interpretation 2 (Misreading):

The Minister told officials (who are using mobile phones) to suspend teachers.

Here, "using mobile phones" modifies "officials", creating the impression that the officials are the ones distracted or inappropriate, while still being assigned the task of suspension.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows "using mobile phones" attached to "officials")



This misreading shift responsibility and intent, leading the reader to assume that the officials' behaviour is under scrutiny, which distorts the headline's actual purpose.

Discussion:

This example is a classic case of attachment ambiguity, where a modifier can syntactically link to more than one plausible noun. In headlines, such ambiguities are common due to compressed structure and omitted relative clauses or punctuation.

Here, the difference in interpretation affects role assignment and blame, which can mislead the reader about who is being disciplined and why.

In an educational or disciplinary context, such misinterpretations may harm credibility or cause public confusion regarding school administration or government directives.

Headline 4: “Dawn Report Highlights Child Marriage Bill Debate Chaos”

Type of Ambiguity: Compound Noun Ambiguity

Date: March 2, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline is syntactically ambiguous because of a long noun stack with no connecting prepositions or punctuation. The sequence “Child Marriage Bill Debate Chaos” consists of five consecutive nouns, and it is unclear how they are grouped or related.

The ambiguity arises from the lack of syntactic clues to indicate:

- What the chaos is about,
- Whether it occurred during a debate,
- Whether it refers to the bill or broader social disorder.

This is a typical case of compound noun ambiguity, which is common in journalistic writing due to compression and headline economy.

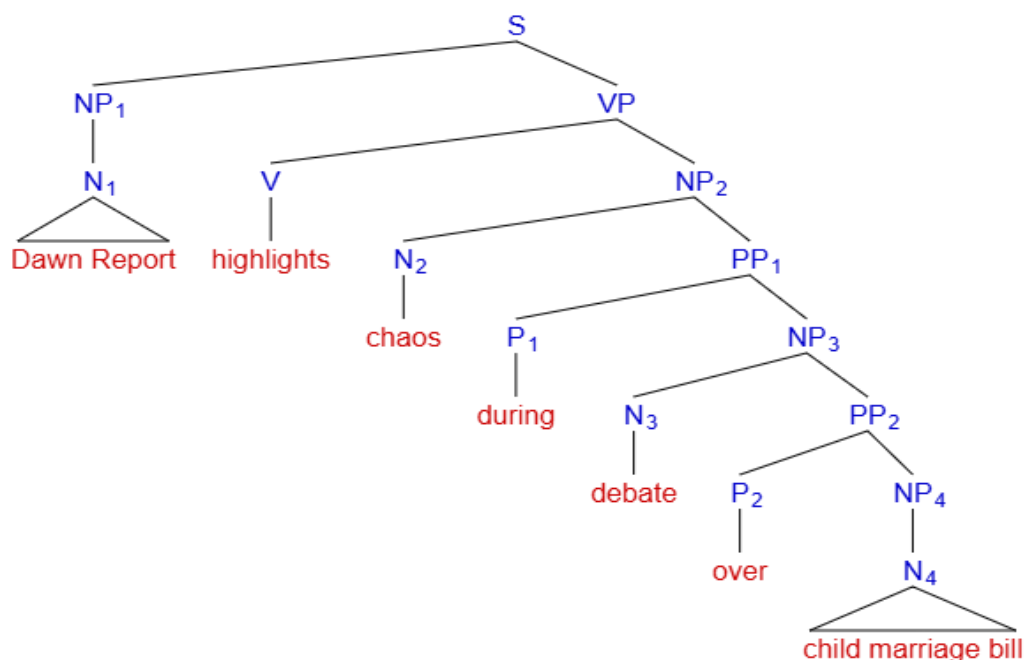
Interpretation 1 (Intended Meaning):

The Dawn report highlights the chaos that occurred during the debate over the child marriage bill.

Here, the noun phrases are hierarchically structured, with “chaos” as the head noun modified by a prepositional phrase “during the debate over the child marriage bill.”

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows clear nesting of modifiers and PP attachment)



This reading makes it clear that the chaos occurred as a result of the debate on a legislative issue.

Interpretation 2 (*Ambiguous Reading*):

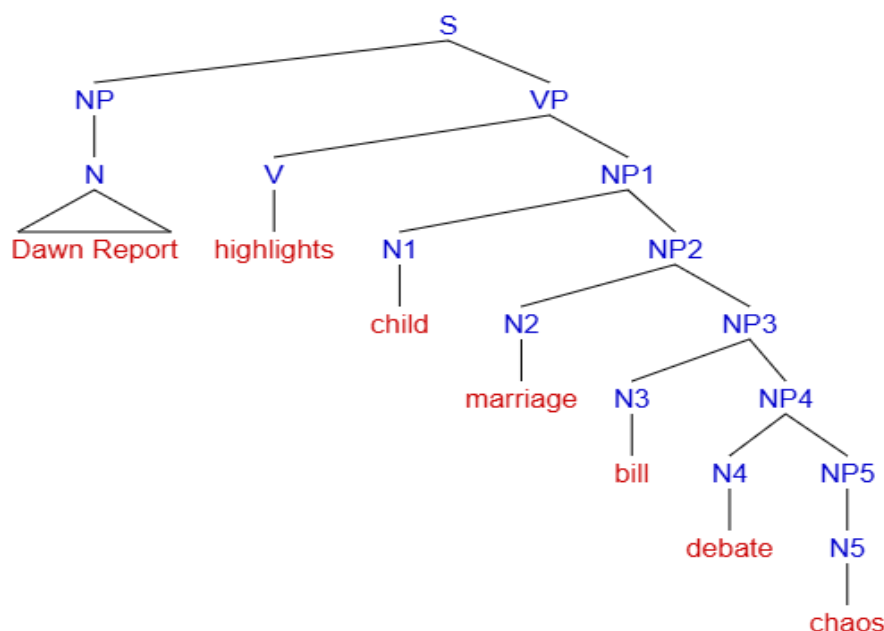
The phrase “Child Marriage Bill Debate Chaos” is a flat, stacked noun compound.

Readers may interpret this phrase in several ways:

- A chaotic bill debate on child marriage,
- A bill responding to the child marriage debate chaos,
- Or even chaos about a child marriage bill debate that itself was controversial.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows flat stacking with unclear noun-noun relationships)



This reading reflects confusion about which nouns modify which, and what the actual event or report is referring to.

Discussion:

Noun stacks like these are often grammatically correct but semantically overloaded, especially in headlines where brevity is prioritized. Without prepositions like “on,” “about,” or “during,” or even a simple comma, the semantic roles are left ambiguous.

Such ambiguity can slow reader comprehension or lead to initial misinterpretation, especially in politically or socially sensitive topics like child marriage legislation. The syntactic confusion undermines the clarity of what the Dawn report is actually covering is it chaos in parliament? A societal reaction? The content of the bill?

Headline 5: “Protesters Clash with Rangers Guarding Government Building”

Type of Ambiguity: Prepositional Phrase Attachment / Role Assignment

Date: April 3, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

The headline creates structural ambiguity through the phrase “guarding government building.” It's unclear whether this phrase is modifying:

- “**Rangers**” (i.e., the Rangers are guarding the building), or
- “**Protesters**” (i.e., the Protesters are guarding the building, which seems less likely but grammatically possible).

This is a case of attachment ambiguity that also affects agent-role assignment, a critical aspect when reporting confrontations involving state forces and civilians.

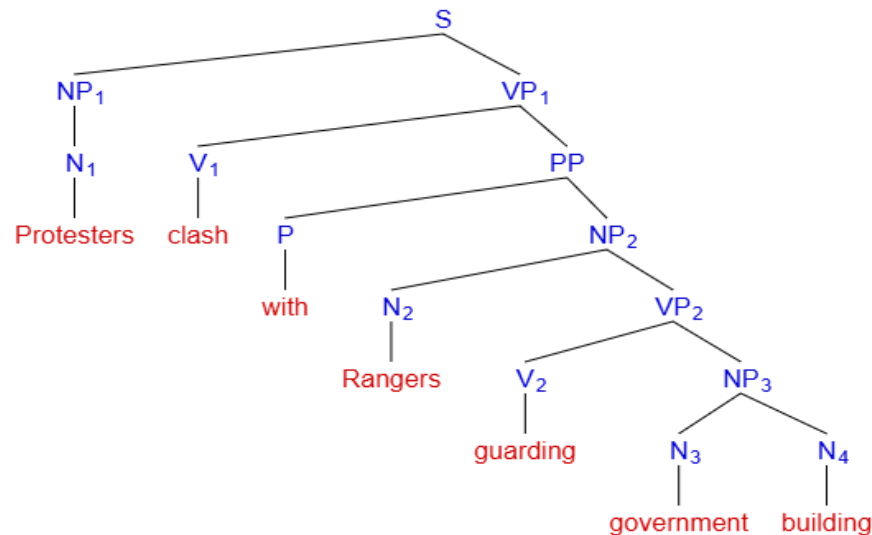
Interpretation 1 (*Intended Meaning*):

Protesters clashed with Rangers, who were guarding the government building.

Here, “guarding government building” is a reduced relative clause modifying “Rangers.” The Rangers are performing the guarding action.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “guarding” attached to “Rangers”)



This structure properly aligns with the typical security scenario, where law enforcement is defending a location and civilians are protesting.

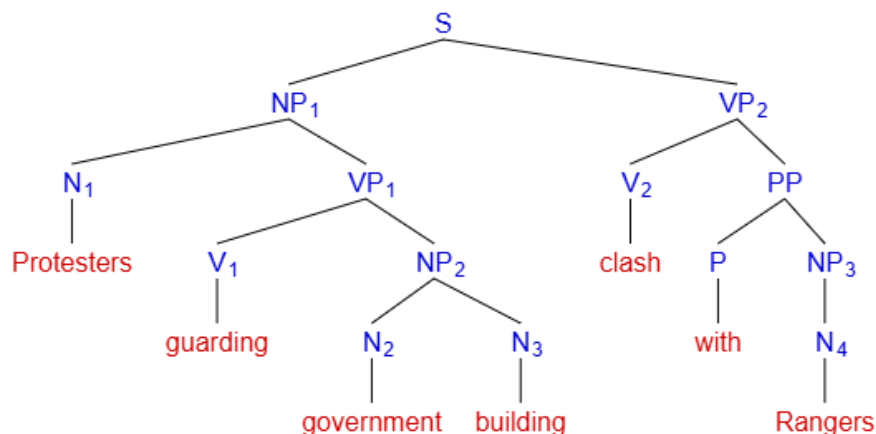
Interpretation 2 (Misreading):

Protesters, who are guarding the government building, clashed with the Rangers.

Here, “guarding government building” is misattached to “Protesters.” This implies that the protesters are the ones protecting the site, an unlikely but grammatically valid interpretation.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “guarding” attached to “Protesters”)



This interpretation changes the perceived role and intent of the groups involved, leading to potential misunderstanding about who was defending what.

Discussion:

Ambiguity in agency and role assignment is especially problematic in conflict reporting. Readers may misinterpret who initiated or resisted violence, which can skew public opinion and undermine journalistic objectivity. This headline relies on structural compression and omits clarifying elements (e.g., commas, relative pronouns like "who were"), which makes

such ambiguity possible. Given the sensitivity of stories involving civil unrest and law enforcement, clarity is crucial to avoid distorting reader perception or inflaming tensions.

Headline 6: “Court Hears Petition Filed Against Former IG’s Transfer Order”

Type of Ambiguity: Noun Phrase Attachment / Prepositional Phrase Ambiguity

Date: February 18, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

The ambiguity in this headline stems from the prepositional phrase “against former IG’s transfer order.” It’s unclear whether the petition is filed against the former IG personally, or against a transfer order that the former IG issued or was subjected to.

This is a case of attachment ambiguity, where the preposition “against” could attach to:

- The transfer order (intended meaning), or
- The former IG (misleading alternative).

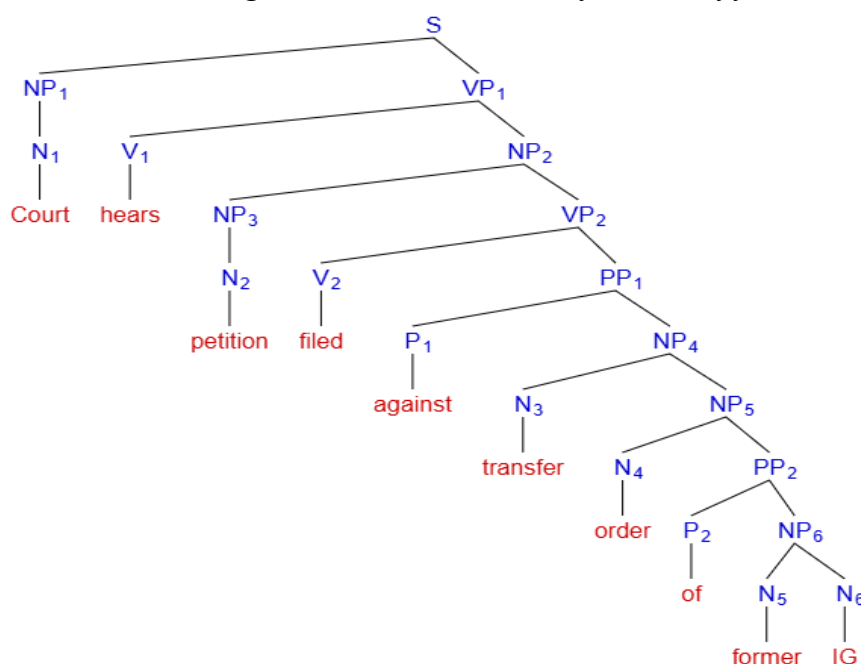
Interpretation 1 (*Intended Meaning*):

The court is hearing a petition filed against the transfer order related to the former IG.

Here, “against” modifies “transfer order”, and “former IG” is part of a possessive modifier clarifying whose transfer order is being challenged.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “against” attached to “transfer order of former IG”)



This interpretation implies that the **legality or validity of the transfer order** itself is being questioned.

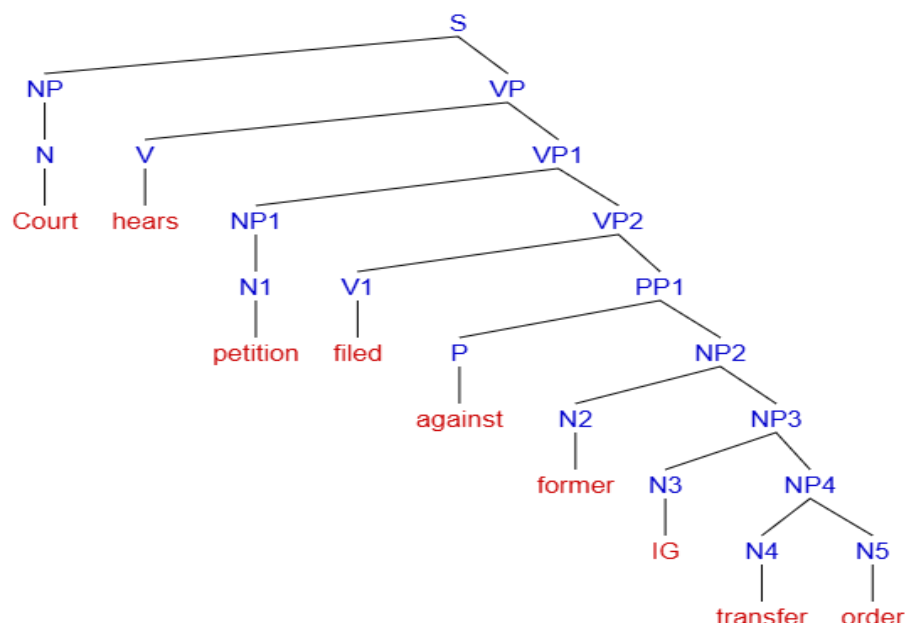
Interpretation 2 (*Misreading*):

The petition is filed against the former IG, possibly for initiating or signing the transfer order.

Here, “against” attaches directly to “former IG”, making it appear that the individual is the target of the petition, and “transfer order” is a loosely attached element.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “against former IG” as a separate PP)



This shifts the accusatory focus from the transfer order to the former IG as a person, which may not be the intended or accurate framing.

Discussion:

In bureaucratic or legal reporting, such ambiguities can misrepresent agency and accountability. Whether the complaint is about a person or a document has serious implications, especially in administrative or judicial contexts.

Headlines with long noun chains and nested possessives (e.g., “former IG’s transfer order”) are especially prone to confusion without punctuation or clear syntactic markers.

Readers might form incorrect assumptions about who is at fault or what is under scrutiny, especially if they don’t read the full article for clarification.

Headline 7: “Woman Shot Dead by Police Laid to Rest”

Type of Ambiguity: Reduce Relative Clause

Date: March 7, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline demonstrates reduced relative clause ambiguity, where essential grammatical elements like “who was” are omitted to maintain brevity. The phrase “woman shot dead by police” could be misread as a complete action taken by the police, including laying the woman to rest, which drastically alters the sentence’s intended meaning.

This results in temporary confusion about who is performing the burial and whether the woman is a victim or participant in the action.

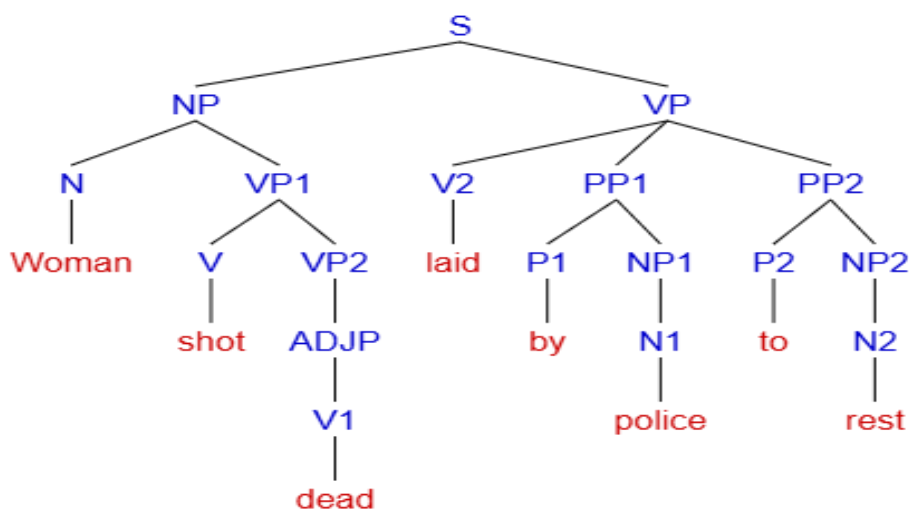
Interpretation 1 (Intended Meaning):

A woman, who was shot dead by the police, has been laid to rest.

In this reading, “shot dead by police” is a reduced relative clause modifying “woman.” The main clause is “woman... laid to rest.”

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “shot dead by police” modifying “woman,” and “laid to rest” as the main predicate)



This is the intended meaning, emphasizing the sequence: a police-involved fatality, followed by a funeral.

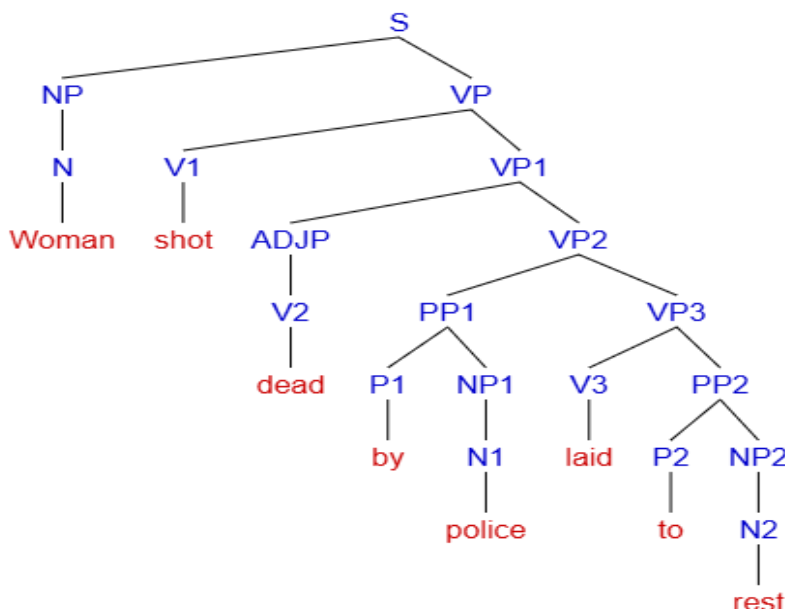
Interpretation 2 (Misreading):

The police shot the woman and then laid her to rest.

Here, all actions appear to be part of the same continuous verb phrase, giving the impression that the police were responsible for both shooting and laying the woman to rest, a misreading that distorts reality.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “laid to rest” as a second verb phrase under police agency)



This misleading structure makes the police appear to be the ones performing a funeral, which introduces logical and ethical confusion for the reader.

Discussion:

The omission of function words and relative pronouns is a common stylistic feature of headlines, but often creates temporary syntactic confusion. In emotionally charged contexts like state violence or death, such ambiguity can be harmful or sensationalizing. Headlines involving police action and civilian death require exceptional clarity to maintain both accuracy and sensitivity. The wrong interpretation, even momentarily, can impact how readers emotionally react to the story or assign blame.

Headline 8: “Government Denies Report Linking PM to Offshore Accounts”

Type of Ambiguity: Coordination Ambiguity

Date: January 28, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline contains coordination ambiguity due to the placement of the verb “denies” and the modifying clause “linking PM to offshore accounts.” It’s unclear whether:

1. The government is denying the report itself (which includes the link), or
2. The government is denying both the report and the act of linking the PM to offshore accounts, as if it were directly accused.

This results in two syntactically possible but semantically distinct readings, depending on how many objects the verb “denies” governs.

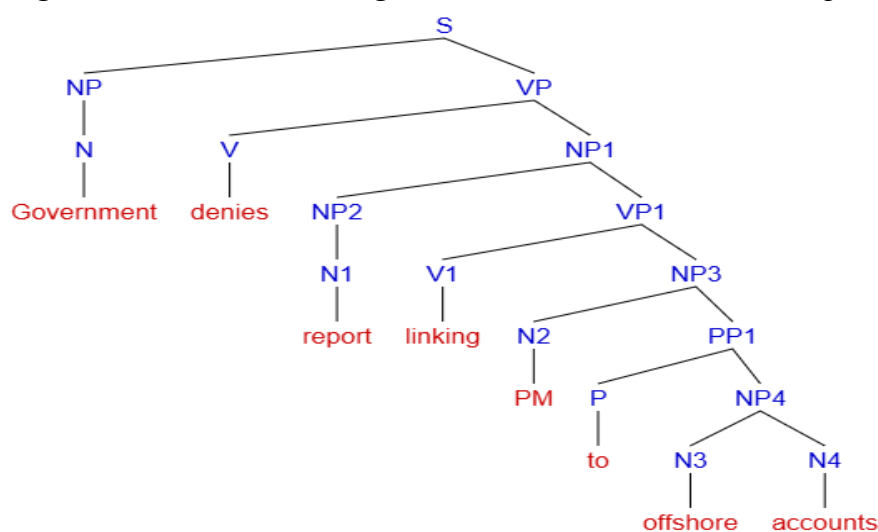
Interpretation 1 (Intended Meaning):

The government is denying a report that links the Prime Minister to offshore accounts.

Here, the clause “linking PM to offshore accounts” is a reduced relative clause modifying “report.” The denial applies to the existence or accuracy of the report.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “linking...” embedded under the noun “report”)



This reading conveys that a single report is being denied, and that the report is the source of the link to offshore accounts.

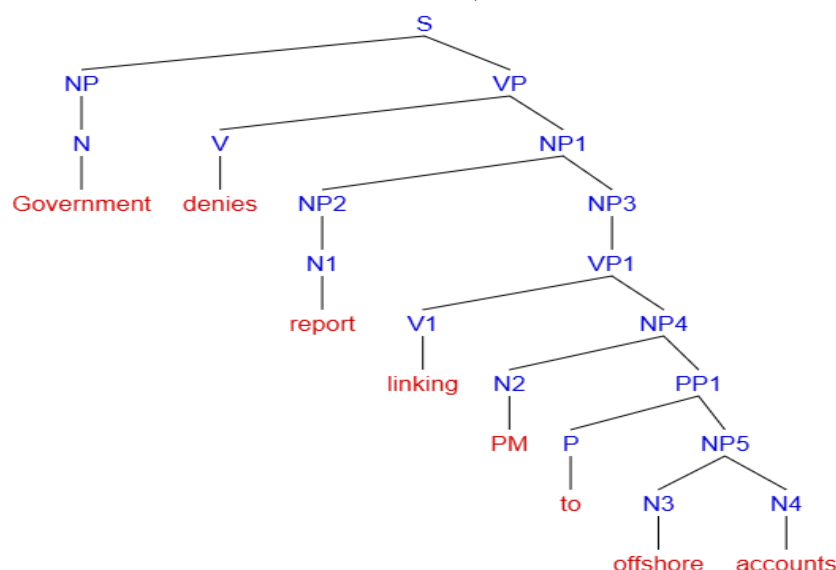
Interpretation 2 (Misreading):

The government denies both the existence of a report and the act of linking the PM to offshore accounts.

Here, the reader parses “report” and “linking PM...” as two separate objects of the verb “denies.” It sounds as though the government is refuting both the media and the alleged action.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below treats “report” and “linking...” as coordinate noun phrases under “denies”)



This alters the scope of the denial, implying a broader rejection and possibly a more defensive tone from the government.

Discussion:

In politically sensitive contexts, like allegations involving a Prime Minister and offshore accounts, even minor syntactic ambiguities can impact credibility, perception, and public trust.

The first interpretation aligns with common reporting practice, denying what’s written in a report. The second interpretation, though grammatically feasible, may lead readers to interpret the headline as an outright denial of guilt, not just of the report.

This can be especially problematic on digital platforms, where headlines may be read without the full context of the article.

Headline 9: “Students Demand University Fee Hike Rollback Plan”

Type of Ambiguity: Compound Noun Ambiguity

Date: March 26, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline contains a long stack of five consecutive nouns “university fee hike rollback plan,” without prepositions or punctuation. The lack of syntactic guidance makes it unclear how these nouns relate to each other.

This is a textbook case of compound noun ambiguity, where multiple valid groupings are possible:

- Is the plan to roll back a fee hike?
- Are students demanding both a hike and a rollback?
- Is the plan about a rollback of a previously demanded hike?

Such ambiguity forces the reader to guess the internal structure of the noun phrase, leading to confusion about the students' actual demand.

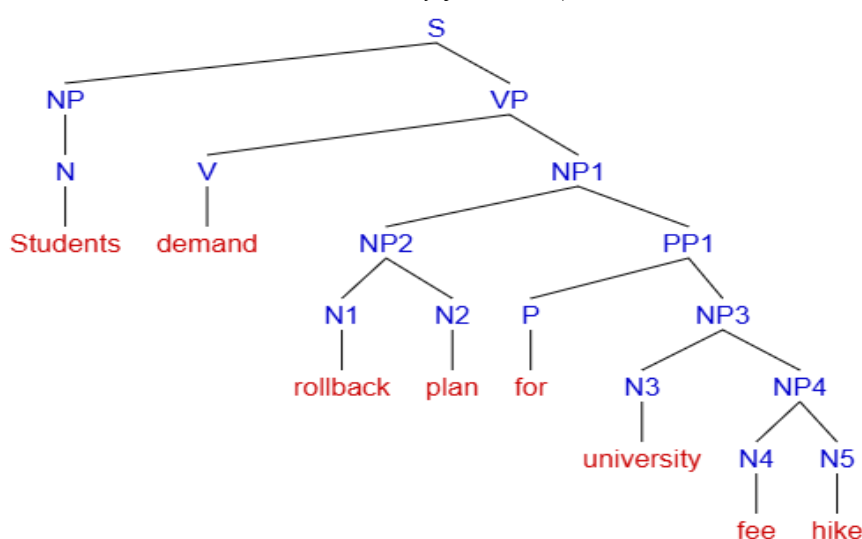
Interpretation 1 (Intended Meaning):

Students are demanding a rollback plan for the university fee hike.

Here, “rollback plan” is the head noun phrase, and “university fee hike” is a premodifier explaining what the plan is targeting.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “rollback plan” as the focus, modified by a PP referring to the “university fee hike”)



This correctly communicates that the students are opposing a previous fee hike and are calling for a structured reversal.

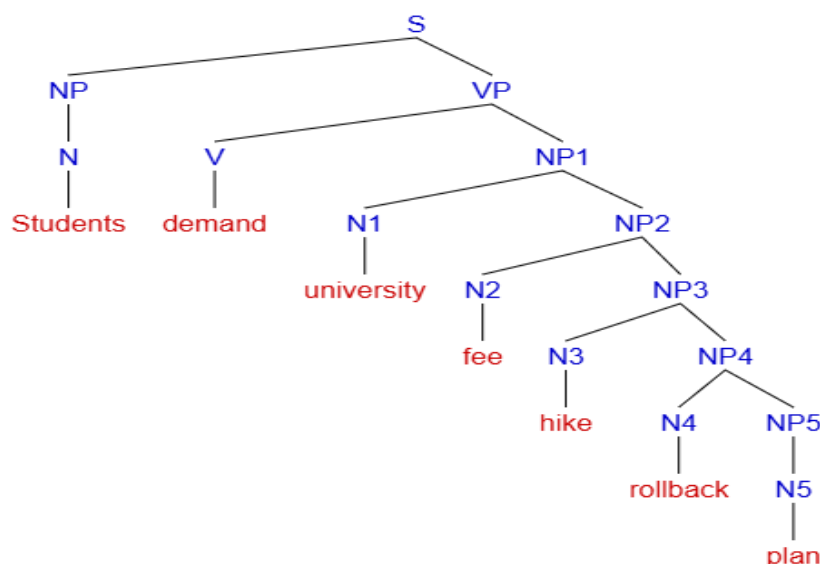
Interpretation 2 (Misreading):

Students are demanding a university fee hike, followed by a rollback plan.

Alternatively, it may sound like students want a plan that includes both a hike and rollback a contradictory or confusing message.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows all five nouns in a flat, ambiguous stack)



This version makes it unclear what students support or oppose, and what part of the phrase is the object of “demand.”

Discussion:

In advocacy or protest contexts, clarity of intent is essential. Ambiguities like this can cause public misunderstanding or be used to misrepresent the position of the protesters.

Because noun stacks are common in headlines, especially when describing policies, bills, or plans, readers often struggle with initial parsing especially when all the nouns are plausible modifiers.

Headline 10: “Fire Kills Family Sleeping in House Near Factory”

Type of Ambiguity: Prepositional Phrase Attachment / Locational Ambiguity

Date: April 15, 2025

Nature of the Ambiguity:

This headline contains prepositional phrase attachment ambiguity, where the phrase “near factory” can attach to multiple parts of the sentence. It is unclear whether it modifies:

1. The house where the family was sleeping, or
2. The location of the fire itself.

This results in two possible readings, each with a different understanding of where the incident occurred and what might have caused it.

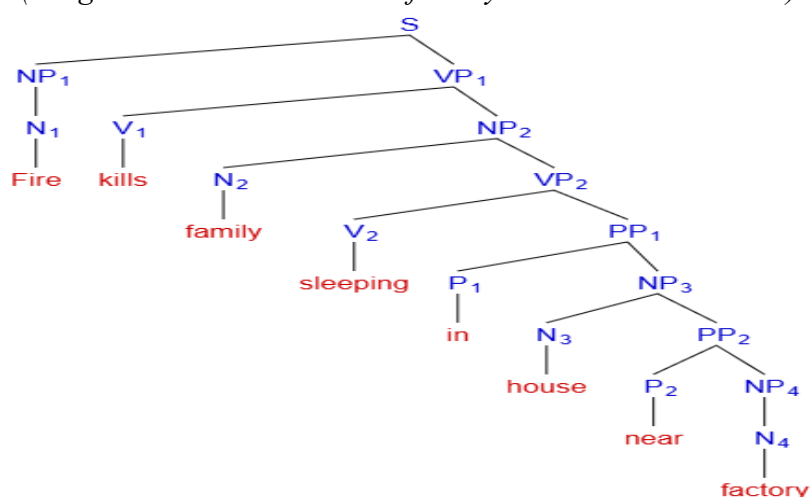
Interpretation 1 (*Intended Meaning*):

The family was sleeping in a house near a factory when the fire occurred.

Here, “near factory” is a nested prepositional phrase modifying “house.” The structure places the family’s location clearly near the factory, suggesting proximity to industrial activity may be relevant.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “near factory” attached to “house”)



This reading emphasises that the family was located in a specific place when the fire occurred, which may raise questions about the factory’s role.

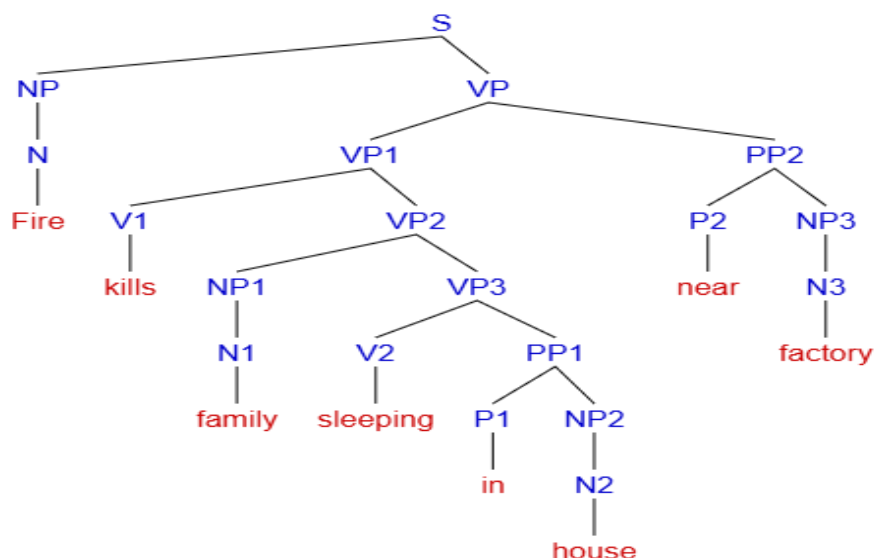
Interpretation 2 (*Misreading*):

The fire occurred near a factory and killed a family that was sleeping in a house.

Here, “near factory” is treated as modifying the main verb phrase or the fire event itself, not specifically describing where the house was.

Syntactic Tree:

(Diagram below shows “near factory” attached to the main VP, not the house)



This creates vagueness about the family’s exact location and could suggest that the factory was merely nearby the fire rather than possibly linked to its cause.

Discussion:

In disaster reporting, locational clarity is crucial for understanding causality, responsibility, and the scope of the event. Misplacing a prepositional phrase like “near the factory” can lead to uncertainty about whether industrial activity was a factor in the tragedy.

When headlines are read quickly or in isolation, as is common on mobile devices or social media, readers may form misleading mental images about where the fire occurred and why it happened.

Cumulative Insight

- The most frequent syntactic ambiguity types found in *Dawn* headlines are:
 - Prepositional phrase attachment (e.g., Headlines 1, 5, 10)
 - Reduced relative clauses (e.g., Headlines 2, 7)
 - Compound noun ambiguity (e.g., Headlines 4, 9)
 - Coordination ambiguity and role assignment confusion (e.g., Headlines 3, 6, 8)
- These ambiguities typically result from the compressed, elliptical style of headline writing, where:
 - Auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, and relative pronouns are omitted
 - Nouns are densely stacked without prepositions or punctuation
- The interpretative effects include:
 - Obscured agency (who is doing what), intent, or location
 - Initial misreading followed by cognitive reanalysis (garden-path effect)
 - Increased risk of reader misinterpretation, especially when headlines are read in isolation (e.g., on news feeds or mobile notifications)
- Visual syntactic trees revealed precisely where ambiguity arises in sentence structure, highlighting the importance of clarity in headline grammar.

Conclusion

This study highlights how syntactic ambiguity, driven by the compressed and elliptical nature of headline writing, significantly influences readers' interpretation of news content. By analyzing structurally ambiguous headlines from *Dawn*, it becomes evident that grammatical

constructions, such as misplaced modifiers, omitted function words, and dense noun stacks, frequently lead to multiple plausible readings. These ambiguities not only affect comprehension but can also result in miscommunication, especially when headlines are read in isolation. Given the increasing reliance on headlines as standalone news sources in digital media, greater linguistic precision is essential to uphold journalistic clarity and ethical responsibility. This research emphasizes the need for more careful headline construction to ensure accurate and transparent communication with the public.

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