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## ***Unlockable Meanings: Two Types of Structural Ambiguity in English***

English hides multiple meanings in the **structure** of words and sentences. Linguists call this **structural ambiguity**, and it shows up in (at least) two flavors: **morphology** (how words are built from parts) and **syntax** (how words combine into phrases). In both cases, the *same* surface string can be parsed in different ways, yielding different interpretations—sometimes clever, sometimes confusing.

### **1) Morphology: when affixes shift scope**

Here, we get different meanings depending on where a prefix/suffix “attaches.”

- **unlockable**
  - **un-(lockable)** = “not able to be locked” (a door with a broken latch)
  - **(unlock)-able** = “able to be unlocked” (a door that isn’t permanently sealed)  
*Same pronunciation; different bracketing → different meaning.*
- **unbuttonable**
  - **un-(buttonable)** = “cannot be buttoned” (missing buttons)
  - **(unbutton)-able** = “able to unbutton” (a shirt that’s easy to open)
- **unfoldable**
  - **un-(foldable)** = “not foldable” (stiff material)
  - **(unfold)-able** = “able to be unfolded” (a map)
- **resign** vs. **re-sign** (this example and the next changes *sound* as well)
  - **resign** “rih-ZINE” (/rɪˈzain/) = quit
  - **re-sign** “ree-SINE” (/ˌriːˈsaɪn/) = sign again
- **recover** vs. **re-cover**
  - **recover** “rih-KUV-er” (/rɪˈkʌvər/) = get better, regain
  - **re-cover** “ree-CUV-er” (/ˌriːˈkʌvər/) = cover again (reupholster the sofa)

A cross-linguistic nod: German has an elegant minimal pair where **stress** placement flips meaning in the built form: **umfahren** “OOM-fah-ren” (/ˈʊmfaːxən/) = *run over* (inseparable prefix), vs. **umfahren** “oom-FAH-ren” (/ʊmˈfaːxən/) = *drive around* (separable). Same letters, different internal structure, different meaning—very much like English’s “re-sign” vs “resign.”

Another quick parallel: Spanish **deshacer** “des-ah-SEHR” (/desaˈser/) ‘to undo’ shows how a prefix (**des-**) builds meaning compositionally, reducing ambiguity when the morpheme boundaries are clearer than in English.

## 2) Syntax: when phrases permit multiple bracketings

Here, ambiguity comes from how words group together.

- **Coordination (A and B and C):**
  - “old men and women”
    - [[old men] and women] (only the men are old)
    - [old [men and women]] (both are old)
- **Prepositional-Phrase (PP) attachment:**
  - “Alice saw the man with the telescope.”
    - Alice used a telescope (PP attaches to **saw**).
    - The man had a telescope (PP attaches to **the man**).
  - “I saw the house on the hill with a telescope.” (two possible attachments again)
- **Gerund/participle ambiguity:**
  - “Visiting relatives can be boring.”
    - *Visiting* = gerund (subject): the activity of visiting relatives is boring.
    - *Visiting* = participle (modifier): relatives who are visiting can be boring.
- **Reduced relatives (garden-path flavor):**
  - “The horse raced past the barn fell.”
    - Hidden parse: *The horse [that was raced past the barn] fell*.
    - Readers initially group *raced* as the main verb, then must reparse.
- **Noun–noun compounds vs. verb–object:**
  - “They are cooking apples.”
    - Apples for cooking (compound noun).
    - They are in the act of cooking apples (verb phrase).
- **Scope/role ambiguity:**
  - “He fed her cat food.”
    - He fed **her cat** some food.
    - He fed **her** (some) **cat food**.
  - “The chicken is ready to eat.”
    - The chicken (meal) is ready for someone to eat.
    - The chicken (bird) is ready to do the eating.

From an L2 perspective, these can be funny, interesting, or frustrating. A couple of plausible confusion moments:

- “He fed her child biscuits.”  
An L2 reader might think he fed her biscuits that are meant for children.
- “We will recover the sofa.”  
An L2 reader could think that the sofa is being **reacquired** or even get lost in wondering how a sofa can be brought back to good health (“rih-KUV-er”), while the speaker is talking about **re-covering** in new fabric (“ree-CUV-er”)? In the context of this article, spoken prosody disambiguates; print often doesn’t.
- “I saw her duck.”  
An L2 reader may get confused between two possible meanings of this sentence—seeing her duck (animal) vs. seeing her duck (action).

The content and examples in this article are a testament to the reality that L2 speakers will often require patience and additional context to fully understand what a native speaker may catch right off the bat. From the perspective of an L2 speaker, it is extremely helpful when native speakers form as complete sentences as possible and make an effort to include additional context wherever they can.

Structural ambiguity lives in English because we (a) build words by stacking morphemes whose **scope** can shift, and (b) build phrases with **groupings** that admit more than one parse. Most of the time, context and prosody nudge us to the intended reading. The open pedagogical question is where best to focus instruction: memorizing common **ambiguous frames** (unlockable, old men and women, PP attachments) or teaching **repair strategies** (look for morpheme scope; test alternative bracketings; listen for stress).