

## Chapter 1, Problem 3: Ambiguity

- a. *Visiting relatives can be boring* can be interpreted with *relatives* either as the visitors or as those who are visited. The two meanings can be paraphrased: ‘Relatives who are visiting can be boring’ or ‘It can be boring to visit relatives’. This involves both lexical ambiguity (of *visiting*) and ambiguity in the relations among the words.
- b. *If only Superman would stop flying planes!* can similarly be interpreted with *planes* either as what is flying or what is being flown. On the former reading, Superman is blocking the planes; on the latter interpretation, he is piloting them. Again, there is both lexical ambiguity (of *stop*), and ambiguity of relations.
- c. *That’s a new car dealership* is ambiguous according to whether it is the dealership or the cars that are sold there that are new. This ambiguity is purely structural.
- d. *I know you like the back of my hand* can mean either that I know you as well as I know the back of my hand, or that I am aware that you are fond of the back of my hand. In this example, *like* is clearly lexically ambiguous; less obviously, *know* means something like ‘be acquainted with’ on one interpretation and ‘be certain that’ on the other. The relations among the words are also different on the two interpretations.
- e. *An earthquake in Romania moved buildings as far away as Moscow and Rome* is most naturally interpreted as meaning that buildings located in those distant cities were shaken by the earthquake. But it could also be interpreted to mean that the earthquake displaced the buildings thousands of miles. There seems to be a lexical ambiguity of *move* in this (‘shake’ vs. ‘displace’), and the two readings also differ according to whether *as far away as Moscow and Rome* modifies the noun *buildings* or is associated with *move* (as the endpoint).
- f. *The German shepherd turned on its master* allows multiple meanings of the expression *turned on*: it can mean ‘attacked,’ ‘aroused,’ ‘intoxicated, using marijuana,’ and probably other things, in suitably bizarre contexts. This may be a purely lexical ambiguity, but the fact that the first reading is lost if we change it to *The German shepherd turned its master on* suggests that there is probably also a syntactic ambiguity.
- g. *I saw that gas can explode* may mean that I witnessed a particular exploding gas can or that I realized that gas is capable of exploding. There is a clear lexical ambiguity of *can* and a less obvious one of *that*. The relations among the words are also quite different in the two interpretations.
- h. *Max is on the phone now* allows at least two different interpretations of *on*. The more natural one is roughly equivalent to ‘using’; the other is locational – that is, roughly equivalent to ‘on top of.’ This is a purely lexical ambiguity.
- i. *The only thing capable of consuming this food has four legs and flies* is ambiguous because the word *flies* may be a noun referring to any of several kinds of airborne insects or a verb denoting travel through the air. Two readings of the sentence could be paraphrased as: ‘The only thing capable of consuming this food is a quadruped that has flies’ and ‘The only thing capable of consuming this food is a flying quadruped.’ The lexical ambiguity of *flies* leads to modification differences.
- j. *I saw her duck* gets two different analyses depending on whether *duck* is a noun referring to a waterfowl or a verb denoting a sudden lowering of the body. On the first interpretation, what I saw was someone’s bird; on the second, what I saw was an event, namely, someone ducking. This lexical ambiguity also entails different relations among the words in the sentence.