

# List of linguistic example sentences

The following is a partial **list of linguistic example sentences** illustrating various linguistic phenomena.

## Ambiguity

Different types of ambiguity which are possible in language.

### Lexical ambiguity

Demonstrations of words which have multiple meanings dependent on context.

- Will, will Will will Will Will's will? – Will (a person), will (future tense helping verb) Will (a second person) will (bequeath) [to] Will (a third person) Will's (the second person) will (a document)? (Someone asked Will 1 directly if Will 2 plans to bequeath his own will, the document, to Will 3.)<sup>[1]</sup>
- Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo. – Buffaloes from Buffalo, NY, whom buffaloes from Buffalo bully, bully buffaloes from Buffalo.
- Police police Police police police police Police police.<sup>[2]</sup> — Cops from Police, Poland, whom cops from Poland patrol, patrol cops from Poland.
- Rose rose to put rose roes on her rows of roses. (Robert J. Baran) – Rose [a person] rose [stood] to put rose [pink-colored] roes [fish eggs as fertilizer] on her rows of roses [flower].
- James while John had had had had had had had had had had had a better effect on the teacher<sup>[3]</sup> – With punctuation: "James, while John had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had a better effect on the teacher", or James, while John had had 'had had', had had 'had'. 'Had had' had had a better effect on the teacher
- That that is is that that is not is not is that it it is – Grammatically corrected as: "That that is, is. That that is not, is not. Is that it? It is".
- Can can can can can can can can can can. – "Examples of the can-can dance that other examples of the same dance are able to outshine, or figuratively to put into the trashcan, are themselves able to outshine examples of the same dance". It could alternatively be interpreted as a question, "Is it possible for examples of the dance that have been outshone to outshine others?" or several other ways.
- Martin Gardner offered the example: "Wouldn't the sentence 'I want to put a hyphen between the words **fish** and And and And and Chips in my Fish-And-Chips sign' have been clearer if quotation marks had been placed before Fish, and between Fish and and, and and and And, and And and and, and and and And, and And and and, and and and Chips, as well as after Chips?<sup>[4]</sup>

### Syntactic ambiguity

Demonstrations of ambiguity between alternative syntactic structures underlying a sentence.

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- We saw her duck!<sup>[5]</sup>
- One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don't know<sup>[6]</sup>
- Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana

## Syntactic ambiguity, incrementality, and local coherence

Demonstrations of how *incremental* and (at least partially) *local* syntactic parsing leads to infelicitous constructions and interpretations.

- Reduced relative clauses
  - The horse raced past the barn fell
  - The coach smiled at the player tossed the frisbee (by the opposing team)<sup>[7]</sup>
  - While the man was hunting the deer ran through the forest.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Scope ambiguity and anaphora resolution

- Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Embedding

- The rat the cat the dog bit chased escaped.<sup>[10]</sup>
- The editor authors the newspaper hired liked laughed<sup>[11]</sup>
- The man who the boy who the students recognized pointed out is a friend of mine<sup>[12]</sup>

## Punctuation

Punctuation can be used to introduce ambiguity or misunderstandings where none needed to exist. One well known example,<sup>[13]</sup> for comedic effect, is from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare (ignoring the punctuation provides the alternate reading).

Enter QUINCE for the Prologue  
**Prologue**

If we offend, it is with our good will.  
 That you should think, we come not to offend,  
 But with good will. To show our simple skill,  
 That is the true beginning of our end.  
 Consider then we come but in despite.  
 We do not come as minding to contest you,  
 Our true intent is. All for your delight  
 We are not here. That you should here repent you,  
 The actors are at hand and by their show  
 You shall know all that you are like to know.  
 —*ACT I, Scene i*

## Word order

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### Order of adjectives

- The big red balloon.

This adjectival order is an example of the "Royal Order of Adjectives".

## Ending sentence with preposition

Some prescriptive grammar prohibits 'preposition stranding': ending sentences with prepositions.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Avoidance

- This is the sort of English up with which I will not put. (Attributed by Gowers to Winston Churchill. There is no convincing evidence that Churchill said this, and good reason to believe that he did not.)<sup>[15][16]</sup> The sentence "does not demonstrate the absurdity of using [prepositional phrase] fronting instead of stranding; it merely illustrates the ungrammaticality resulting from fronting something that is not a constituent".<sup>[17][18]</sup>

### Compound use

- "A father of a little boy goes upstairs after supper to read to his son, but he brings the wrong book. The boy says, 'What did you bring that book that I don't want to be read to out of up for?'"<sup>[19]</sup>

## Parallels

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### Parallel between noun phrases and verb phrases with respect to argument structure

- The enemy destroyed the city
- The enemy's destruction of the city

## Neurolinguistics

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Sentences with unexpected endings.

- She spread the bread with socks.<sup>[20]</sup>

### Comparative illusion

- More people have been to Russia than I have.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Combinatorial complexity

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Demonstrations of sentences which are unlikely to have ever been said, although the combinatorial complexity of the linguistic system makes them possible.

- Colorless green ideas sleep furiously (Noam Chomsky): example that is grammatically correct but based on semantic combinations that are contradictory and therefore would not normally occur
- Hold the news reader's nose squarely waiter, or friendly milk will countermand my trousers.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Semantics and context

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Demonstrations of sentences where the semantic interpretation is bound to context or knowledge of the world.

- The large ball crashed right through the table because it was made of Styrofoam: ambiguous use of a pronoun: The word "it" refers to the table being made of Styrofoam; but "it" refers to the large ball if we replace "Styrofoam" with "steel" without any other change in its syntactic parse.<sup>[23]</sup>
- The bee landed on the flower because it had pollen: The pronoun "it" refers to the "flower" but changes to the "bee" if we replace "had" with "wanted".

## Relevance conditionals

Conditionals where the prejacent ("if" clause) is not strictly required for the consequent to be true.

- There are biscuits on the table if you want some
- If I may be honest, you're not looking good<sup>[24]</sup>

## Non-English examples

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### Ojibwe

- *Gdaa-naanaanaa, Aanaa, naa?* meaning "We should fetch Ana, shouldn't we?".<sup>[25]</sup>

### Latin

- King Edward II of England was killed, reportedly after Adam of Orleton, one of his gaolers, received a message, probably from Mortimer, reading "*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*". This can be read either as "*Edwardum occidere nolite; timere bonum est*" ("Do not kill Edward; it is good to be afraid [to do so]") or as "*Edwardum occidere nolite timere; bonum est*" ("Do not be afraid to kill Edward; [to do so] is good"). This ambiguous sentence has been much discussed by various writers, including John Harington<sup>[26][27]</sup>
- *Ibis redibis nunquam per bella peribis*

### Mandarin Chinese

- Various sentences using the syllables *mā*, *má*, *mǎ*, *mà*, and *ma* are often used to illustrate the importance of tones to foreign learners. One example: Chinese: 妈妈骑马马慢妈妈骂马; pinyin: *māma qí mǎ, mǎ màn, māma mà mǎ*; literally: "Mother is riding a horse, the horse is slow mother scolds the horse"<sup>[28]</sup>
- Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den poem of 92 characters, all with the sound *shi* (in four different tones) when read in Modern Standard Mandarin

### Japanese

- Although at first glance the single character sentence 子子子子子子子子子子 does not seem to make sense, when this sentence is read using the right readings of the kanji 子 (but without the right meaning), it means "the young of cat, kitten, and the young of lion, cub". It is told in the work *Kujishūi Monogatari* that the Japanese poet Ono no Takamura used this reading to escape death.

### Czech

- *Jedli na hoře bez holí*, meaning either "they ate elderberries on a mountain using a stick" or "they ate on a mountain without any sticks" or "they ate elderberry using a stick to eat their sorrow away"; depending on the phrasing or a correct placement or punctuation, at least 7 meanings can be obtained. Replacing "na hoře" by "nahoře", one obtains 5 more meanings. If separating words using spaces is also permitted, the total number of known possible meanings rises to 58.<sup>[29]</sup>

### Korean

- In Gyeongsang dialect the repetition of the syllable 가 ("ga") with the right intonation can form meaningful phrases. For example:
  - "가가 가가?" which means "Are they the one we talked about?"
  - "가가 가가가" which means "Since they took it away"
  - "가가 가가가?" which means "Are they the one with the surname Ga?"<sup>[30]</sup>

### German

- A famous example for lexical ambiguity is the following sentence: *Wenn hinter Fliegen Fliegen fliegen, fliegen Fliegen Fliegen nach.*, meaning "When flies fly behind flies, then flies fly in pursuit of flies."<sup>[31][32]</sup> It takes advantage of some German nouns and corresponding verbs being homonymous. While not noticeable in spoken language, in written language the difference shows: "Fliegen" ("flies"), being a noun, is written with a capital "F", whereas "fliegen" ("to fly"), being a verb, is not. The comma can be left out without changing the meaning. There are several variations of this sentence pattern, although they do not work as smoothly as the original.

## See also

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- Garden path sentence, sentences that illustrate that humans process language one word at a time
- Gradient well-formedness
- Grammaticality
- One-syllable article, Chinese phonological ambiguity
- Paraprosdokian, a figure of speech in which the latter part of a sentence or phrase is surprising or unexpected in a way that causes the reader or listener to reframe the first part

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## External links

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- "The Trouble with NLP". *Speculative Grammarian* Cartoon Theories of Linguistics. Demonstrations of why these and similar examples are hard for computers to deal with when attempting natural language processing 2008. ISSN 1938-0720. OCLC 227210202. Archived from the original on 13 September 2015.

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