

A Syntactic Analysis of Ambiguity in Nigerian Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract: This study is set out to present a syntactic analysis of ambiguous structures the headlines of political news reports in selected newspapers in Nigeria. The analysis aims at presenting what could be described as linguistic features of the ambiguous structures and as well determining the causes of the ambiguities. A total number of ten ambiguous structures taken from selected newspapers were analysed syntactically using the theory and sub theories of X-Bar syntax. An attempt is also made to categorize and characterise the ambiguities into types as revealed by the theory of syntax used. It was found out that most of the ambiguous structures were made ambiguous through the deletion or omission of certain sentential elements. The study concludes that, ambiguity, though a linguistic phenomenon, could be used deliberately and creatively by a writer as an instrument of humour and aesthetics in language use.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Syntax, Semantics, Newspaper, Headline

INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity occurs when an expression, sentence, phrase or word is capable of more than one semantic interpretation, at the surface sentence. Ambiguity is a semantic phenomenon involving the meaning of linguistic expressions. Bach [1] emphasis the fact that ambiguity is property of linguistic expressions. However, Lyons [2] has made a clear distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic ambiguity.

He explains that linguistic ambiguity depends solely upon the structure of the language system where as, other kinds of ambiguity; actual or potential are to be accounted for in other ways. This implies that there are still other kinds of ambiguity apart from lexical and grammatical ambiguity [2]. Khawalda and Al-Saidat [3] explain further that ‘Although ambiguity is fundamentally a property of linguistic expressions, people are also said to be ambiguous on occasion in how they use language. This can occur if, even when their words are unambiguous, their words do not make what they mean uniquely determinable’. Linguistic ambiguity involves expressions that can be explicated in terms of the identity of representation at some syntactic levels of analysis [2] Thus, ambiguity is regarded as a interface between syntax and semantics.

The texts analysed in this paper is made up of headlines of political news reports in selected Nigeria newspapers. A headline is a brief summary of the news and it seems as the readers’ search guide to the desired story.

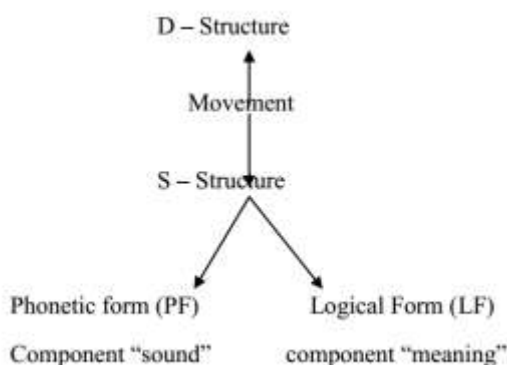
METHODOLOGY

The concern of this paper is to present a syntactic analysis of ambiguous headlines of political news reports in Nigerian newspapers in order to present linguistic features of the ambiguous structures. The data were drawn from some selected newspapers; The Punch, The Tribune, and The Nation newspapers- from January 2005 to 2010, the total number of ten ambiguous structures (Phrases and Sentences) were drawn from the newspapers and analysed, described and explained using linguistic terms within the framework of x-bar syntax.

Theoretical Framework

The corpus of theoretical framework for the analysis done in this paper is the theory and sub-theories of x-bar syntax. X-bar syntax is a model of syntax within the government/binding (GB) theory. GB also known as principle and parameter theory was first introduced in Chomsky [4] it is an advanced theory of generative grammar that seeks to identify the universal features of human language. Cook [5] explains that the grammar in GB is a continuous interaction between compounds and parameters. It embodies a way of representing actual sounds, which is a phonetic representation, meaning which is semantic representation and syntactic structure that connects them in GB, the two levels of syntactic representation, deep and surface structures are developed into D-structure and S-structure respectively. S-structure is the

essential bridging between sounds and meaning leading to both phonetic forms (PF) on one hand and Logical form (LF) on the other hand. D-structure is related to S-structure by movement while both PF and LF interpret S-structure. The language model of GB is presented below in what is called T-model.



D- Structure expresses the underlying form before movement. While S-structure describes the related form of the sentence after movement, including traces (t) of the original D- structure positions of the items moved. At the level of D-structure, there are some properties of the sentence stated that are observed in the S-structure. But traces (t) at the S-structure make the D- structure to be always recoverable from Structure. However, movement relates D-structure to S-structures [6].

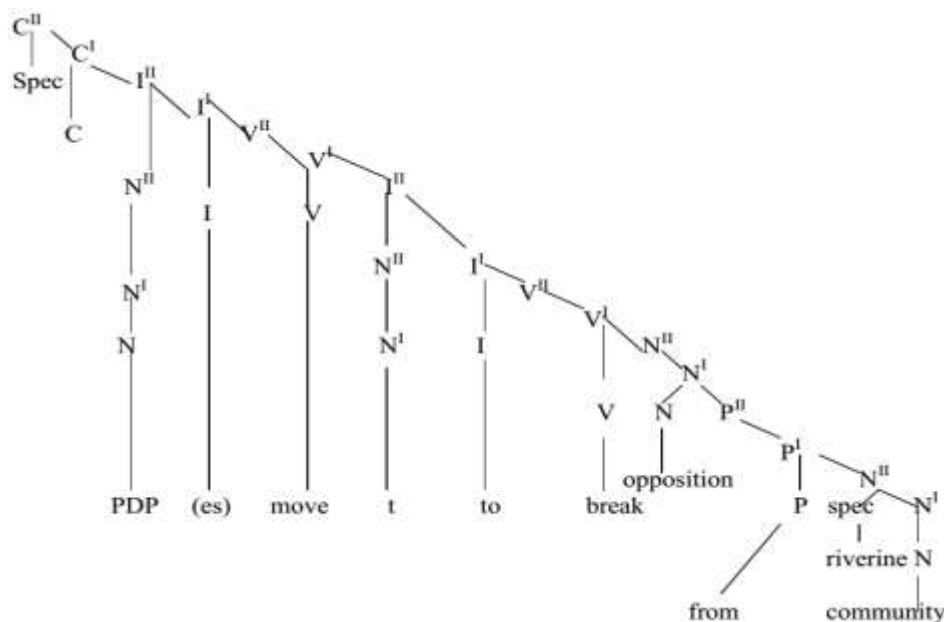
The PF is a level where the physical structures are presented phonetically. This is realized as sound sequences. The LF is the level where meaning is represented the meaning is mediated through syntax [7].

Data presentation and Analysis

1. PDP moves to break opposition from riverine communities.

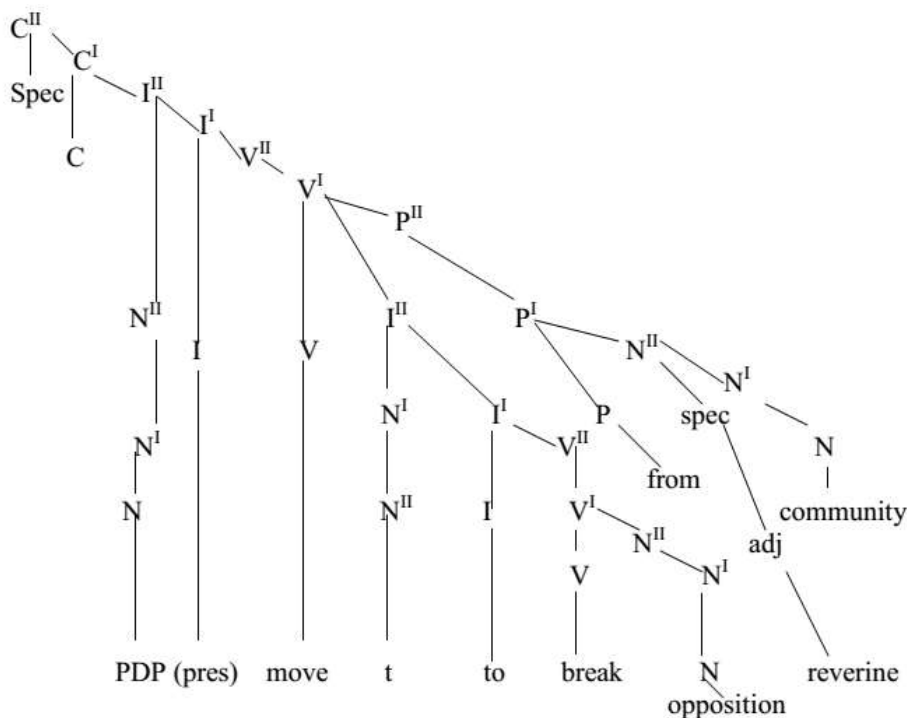
This sentence is syntactically ambiguous because the PP “from riverine communities” can be given two different GF in the two different structural analyses that could be given to the sentence.

(1)The PP could be given the GF of an adjectival, post – modification of NP “Opposition”. While the NP “riverine communities” is given the theta – role source of the NP, opposition. That is, the noun, “opposition” C – commands or governs the PP as shown below.



The trace (t) in the three diagrams shows the trace of movement of the pronominal (PDP), which is the supposed subject of the infinitival clause “to break opposition”. From the analysis above, the semantic representation given to this structure at the LF is that the opposition is from the riverine communities.

(ii)The PP could be given GF of an adverbial, which is governed by the VP. Here the Verb “moves” C – commands the PP and it takes a different mode directly from Vⁱ and has no touch with the infinitival clause. The NP “riverine community” is given the theta – role Locative:

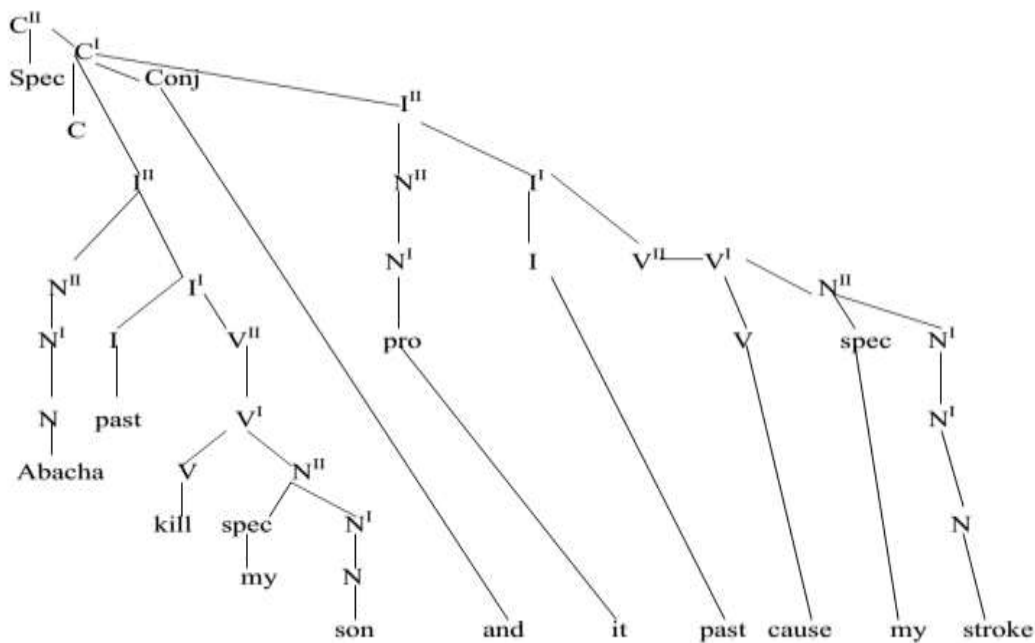


The analysis above has, at the LF, a semantic representation that “The move to break opposition starts from the riverine communities. Thus, the ambiguity in the sentence arises from the difference in syntactic categorization given to an embedded constituent of the sentence, “From riverine Community”

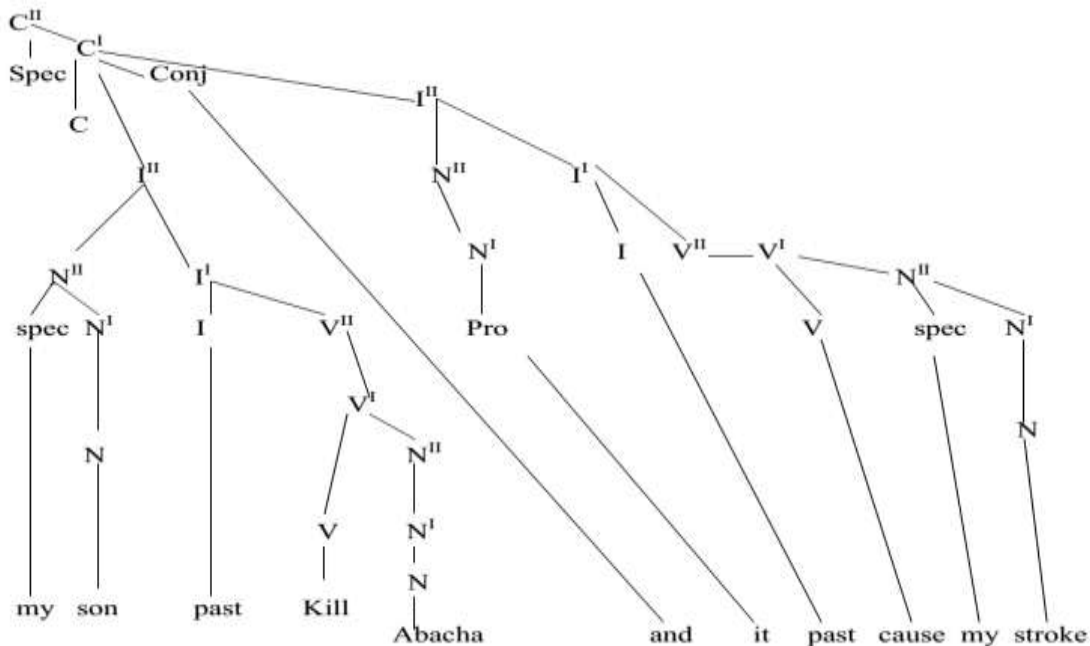
2. Abacha’s killing of my son caused my stroke.

This is an S – structure that is derived from D – structures through syntactic process of nominalization that generate the NP “Abacha’s killing of my son”. The sentence is ambiguous because the NP can be traced to two different D – structures with separate semantic representations at the Logical form. The two underlying structures will be analysed below:

i. Abacha killed my son and it caused my stroke



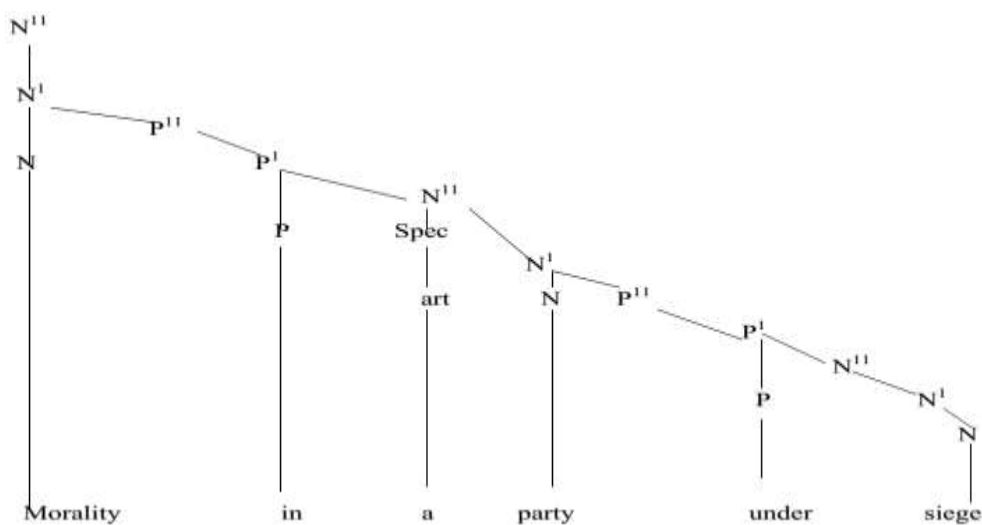
II. My son killed Abacha and it caused my stroke



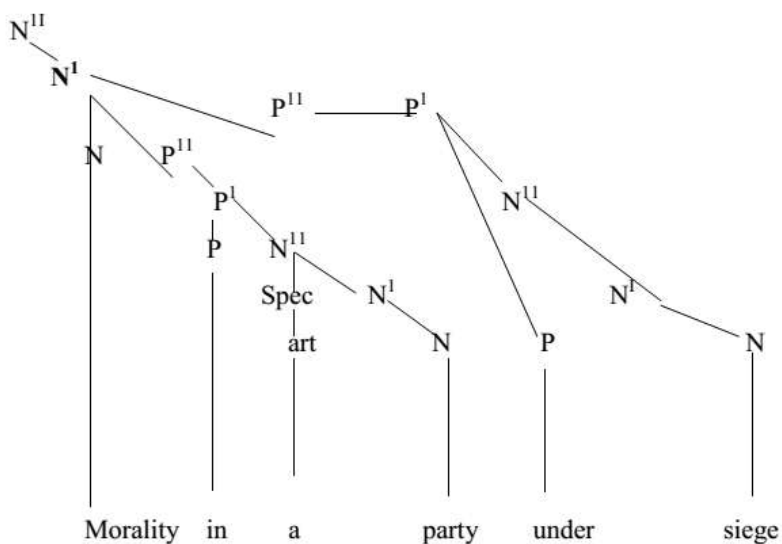
From the analyses above, it is clear that the ambiguity in the sentence arises from the dual semantic representation that could be assigned to the nominalized NP “Abacha’s killing” as (i) has the representation that Abacha killed my Son while (ii) has semantic representation that my son killed Abacha. Thus the ambiguity here is caused by the syntactic process known as nominalization.

3. Morality in a party under siege.

This phrase can be traced to a D – structure which is a sentence: “there is a morality in a party under siege” but the deletion of the subject “there” and the predicate/verb “is” reduces it to an NP. However the deletion of the subject and verb makes it ambiguous as it is not clear whether the PP “under siege” as a modifier, is modifying the whole NP or only a part of the NP. Thus two different structural categorizations can be given to the PP “under siege” as presented below:



From the above tree – diagram, the NP “a party” C – commands and dominates the PP “under siege” which has the semantic representation at the LF that the party is under siege and there is mortality in the party.



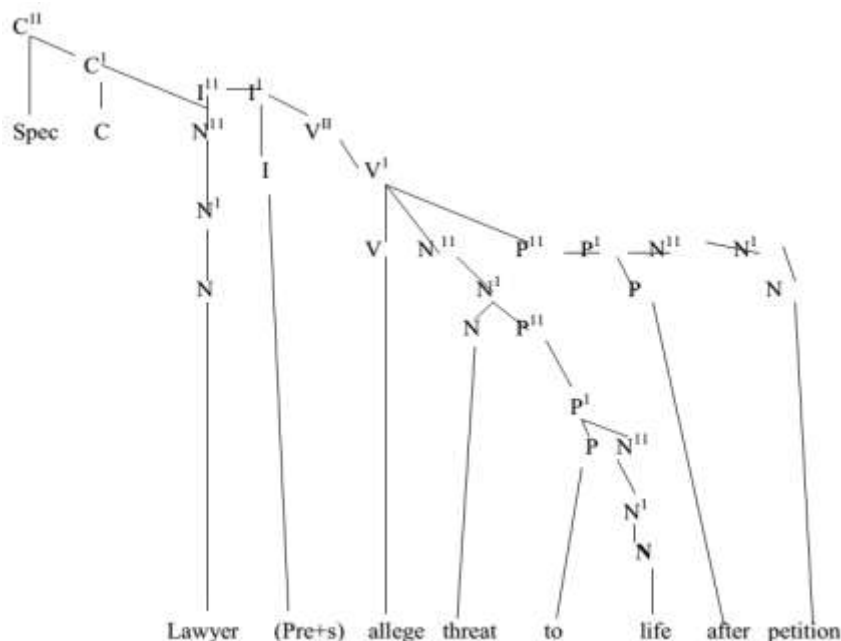
From this second tree diagram, the NP morality c – commands and directly dominates both PPs with a semantic representation different from what is realized in the (1) above. At the LF of this second tree diagram, it is morality that is under siege in a party. But in (i) above; it is the party that is under siege. Though, the semantic representation in (2) may only be realistic in the metaphorical sense of it.

From the analysis so far, the ambiguity here is triggered by the deletion of the subject and verb of the sentence at the D – structure to produce an ambiguous NP at S – structure.

4. Lawyer alleges threat to life after petition.

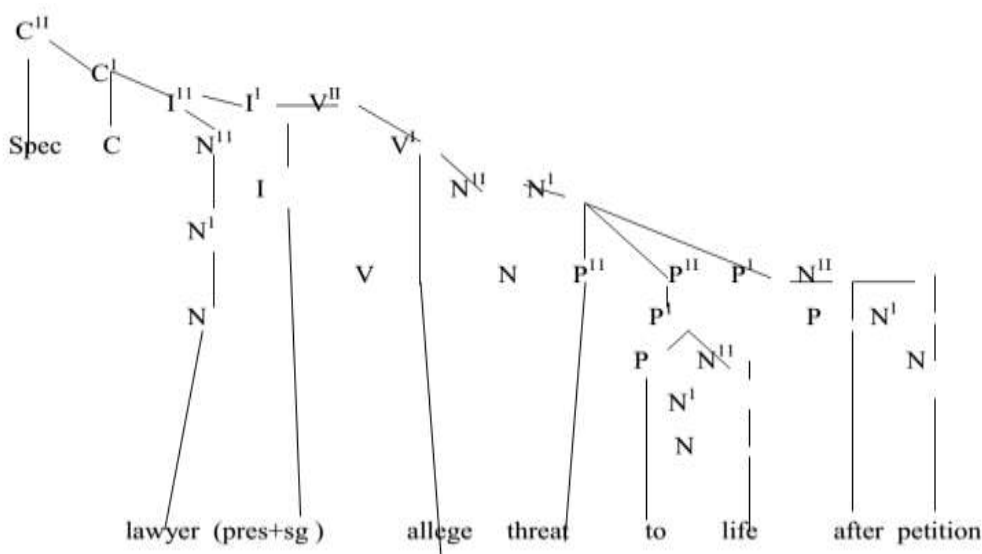
This sentence is ambiguous just because the structural analysis of the sentence shows that the PP, “after petition”, can be assigned up to two grammatical functions (GFs).

- (i) PP “after petition” could be given GF of an adverbial c – commanded by the verb “threat.” Thus the PP specifies the time (when) of the allegation.



From the analysis presented above, the semantic representation at the LF of the structure is that; the allegation of threat to life by the lawyer came after petition.

In another analysis, it is observed that the PP after petition could be given the GF of an adjectival, Post modification of the NP “threat to life”. That is the NP c – commands the PP as shown below:



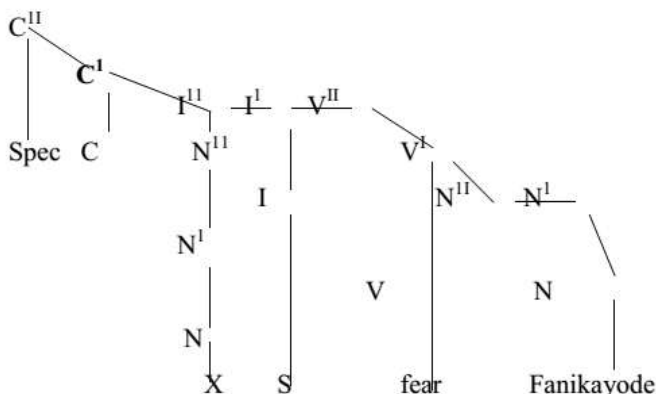
From this second analysis, the semantic representation at the LF is that: the threat comes after petition. The ambiguity in the structure arises from the fact that a constituent part of the sentence could perform two different grammatical functions GFs at the same time.

5. The Fear of Fanikayode

This is an ambiguous S – structure derived from two different underlying structures through the syntactic process of nominalization. The two D – structures are;

- (i) X fears Fanikayode
- (ii) Fanikayode fears X. Where X stands for somebody unknown or unspecified

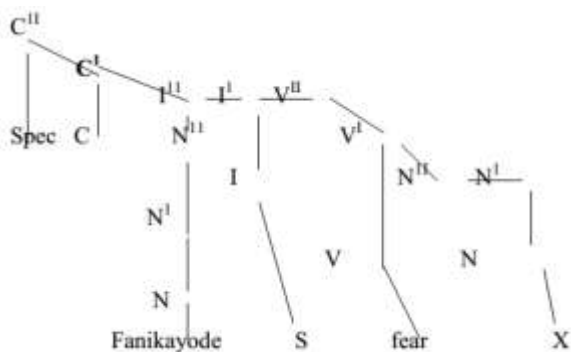
In the (i) above:



X is an empty category with the GF subject while the NP Fanikayode has the GF object with theta – role patient. But through the process of nominalization, the NP “The fear of Fanikayode” was derived.

The semantic representation presented at the D – structure of this structure is that, Fanikayode is a source of fear for (person/people).

In (ii) Fanikayode fears X



Fanikayode has the GF subject with theta – role Agent before the S – structure “the fear of Fanikayode” was derived. The semantic representation realized at the LF of this analysis is that: Fanikayode has fear in his heart i.e. Fanikayode is afraid of X.

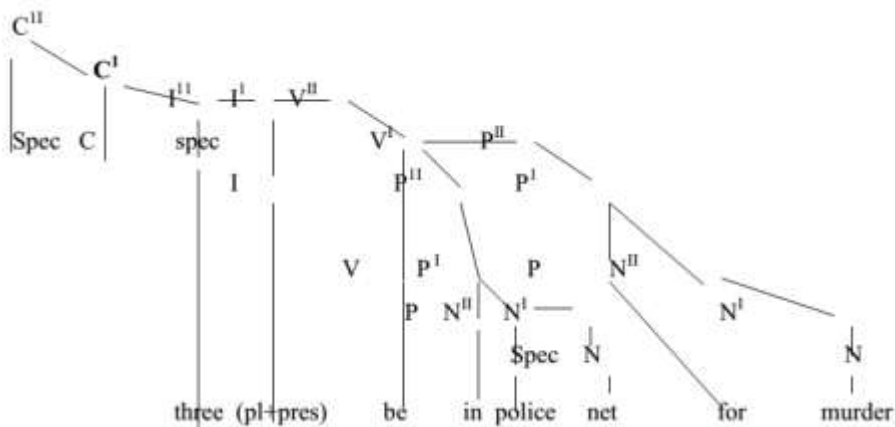
Thus, the ambiguity in the S – structure is arises from the fact that a syntactic process, nominalization has derived a phrase structure that can be traced to two different underlying structures with different semantic representations at the Logical form (LF).

6. Three in police net for murder

The ambiguity here is due to the fact that the structure is originally a sentence at the D – structure but the verb has been omitted. There are two preposition phrase here; “in police net and for murder. The ambiguity arises from the fact that any of these PPs can be governed by the said omitted verb – be, there by leading to two different structural analyses and semantic representations respectively.

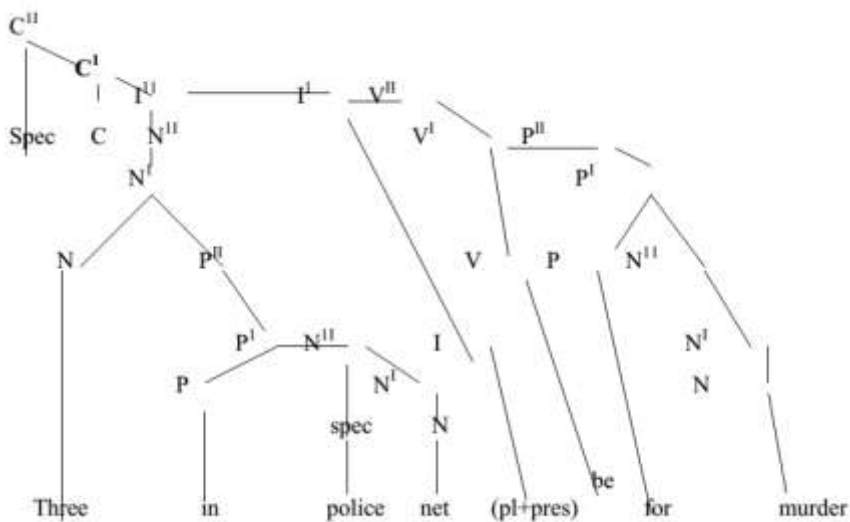
- (i) Three (are) in police net for murder.
- (ii) Three in police net (are) for murder.

In the first analysis: Three are in police net for murder.



The semantic representation here is that the three are in police net because they committed murder.

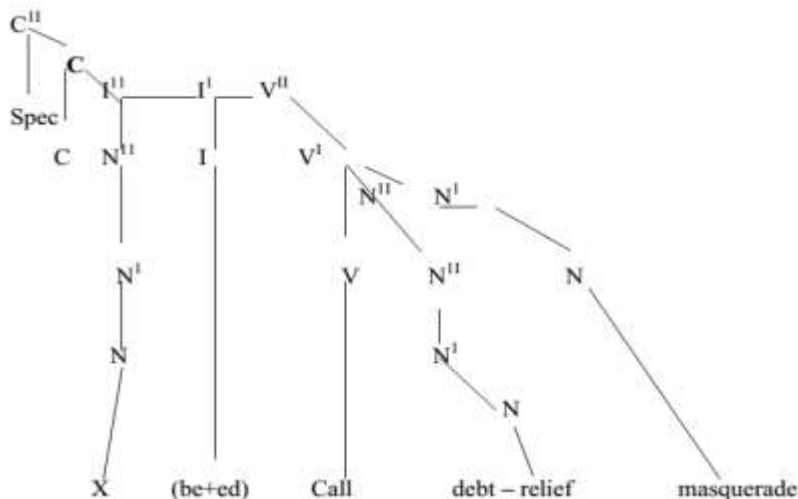
In the second analysis: Three in police net are for murder



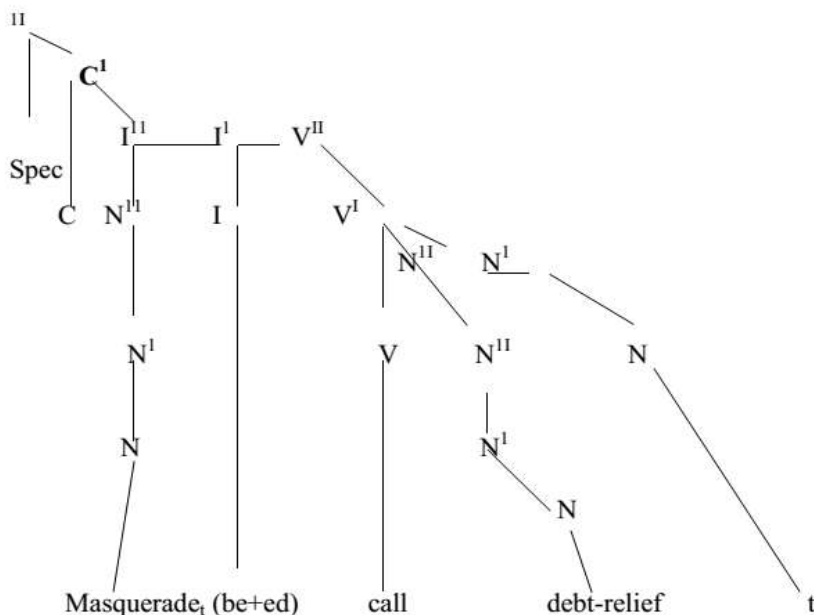
The semantic representation presented by this syntactic structure is that the three in police net are to be murdered. Thus, the ambiguity in the structure arises from the omission or deletion of the verb –be which a crucial structural element.

7. Masquerade called debt relief

At the D-structure of this sentence, we have: X is called debt-relief masquerade.



However the syntactic process of passivisation changes the structure into: Masquerade is called debt – relief leaving the trace of movement behind.



The semantic representation at the LF of this structure is that Debt-relief is a masquerade. (i.e. A masquerade is referred to as debt-relief)

However, the deletion of the auxiliary in “Masquerade called debt-relief” brings about the ambiguity as it could be given another syntactic analysis with a distinct semantic representation.

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

The X – bar syntax has been able to account for the linguistic causes of ambiguity in terms of faulty sentential arrangement, deletion and omission of sentential elements, incomplete syntactic processes such as Nominalization, Relativisation and Passivisation. However, the theory has not been able to account for the functional value of ambiguity in terms of the communicative need of the users of ambiguous languages.

The study generally reveals that ambiguity, though a property of linguistic expression is strictly a semantic phenomenon involving linguistic meaning rather than speaker meaning. We also find out that even though when people

use ambiguous language, its ambiguity is not consciously intended, occasionally, however, ambiguity is deliberate in a situation where the language user wants every sense of the ambiguous text/utterance to be taken together in the same context. We however, found out that the journalists generate most ambiguous headlines unconsciously in pursuance of brevity. This is the reason for the deletion and omission of certain structural elements in the headlines.

We also find out from the study that deliberate ambiguity of headlines is a linguistic tool in the hand of the journalists to either arrest the attention of the audience or mislead the audience. We also find out that ambiguity is useful for the journalists to make the intended content of the headlines discreet at the surface level so as to reflect sentimentality in the face of professionalism.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed ambiguity from syntactic perspective of X-bar theory. The study has also revealed that language users could use ambiguous language unconsciously and deliberately. When a language user unconsciously uses ambiguous structures, he does not consciously entertain their unintended meanings. But deliberate ambiguity is however used to create certain effects on the audience.

In this study ambiguity is viewed beyond a mere function of poor grammar. It is seen as part of techniques that beautifies language use, especially in written texts.

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