

Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Awareness of English Ambiguous Sentences Ahmed Jundi Ali Babylon University\ College of Basic Education

Abstract

This research is devoted to study the ambiguity in modern Standard English. By definition, ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon in which a given text has more than one meaning or interpretation. Thus, this study aims at theoretically investigating the types of ambiguity and practically studying the Iraqi EFL learners' performance in dealing with ambiguous texts by means of a specialized test designed for this purpose. It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in dealing with these sentences in both recognition and production levels. The test includes two questions, each with 25 items (see appendix). Results show that, at the recognition level (question 1), most Iraqi EFL learners (53.12%) fail in recognizing the ambiguous sentences, whereas at the recognition level the percentage of learners unable to disambiguate the given sentences increased to reach (58.24%) including the avoided items which are considered as incorrect in both first and second questions. The findings arrived at support the above mentioned hypothesis. The study ends with some of the recommendations for EFL teachers and learners and the way they encounter such sentences in spoken and written English.

The present study falls into four chapters. The first chapter includes general definitions of ambiguity from scholars' and linguists' points of view. The second chapter deals with the main points of ambiguity in modern Standard English with reference to the main types of ambiguity, i.e., structural and lexical ambiguity. It also includes sub-divisions of structural and lexical ambiguity, i.e. attachment, class, referential, scope, and ellipsis ambiguity. Chapter three includes the test which is made for the students from the third stage of the College of Basic Education to measure their total performance at the recognition and production levels with a discussion of the main types of errors which are committed by them. The fourth chapter summarizes the main conclusions and findings of the present study.

ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة ظاهرة دلالية في اللغة الانكليزية وهي ظاهرة الجملة الغامضة أو غير الواضحة حيث تم التركيز على تعريف الجمل الغامضة دلاليا وعلى أسباب غموض الجملة وأنواع ذلك الغموض لما له من أهمية كبيرة في فهم الجملة والمعنى المراد اعتمادا على الأدبيات والمصادر ذات الصلة. يتألف البحث من أربعة فصول حيث يعطي الفصل الأول نبذة مختصرة عن البحث وأهدافه في حين يقدم الفصل الثاني دراسة تفصيلية للجمل الغامضة وتعريفها وأنواعها إضافة إلى دراسة أسباب غموض الجملة وكيفية حل ذلك الغموض. الفصل الثالث لهذا البحث يمثل الاختبار حيث تم اختيار عينة مكونة من خمسين طالبا من طلبة قسم اللغة الانكليزية – المرحلة الثالثة لإجراء الاختبار المكون من سؤالين حيث كان على الطلبة تحديد الجمل الغامضة دلاليا في السؤال الأول في حين كان المطلوب من الطلبة في السؤال الثاني حل غموض الجمل المعطاة لهم. الفصل الرابع يلخص أهم نتائج البحث.

Section One

Introduction:

This research is devoted to studying the ambiguity in modern Standard English. The general sense of ambiguity referring to a word or sentence which expresses more than one meaning (as ambiguous) is found in linguistics, but several types of ambiguity are recognized. The most widely discussed type is structural ambiguity. In this type of ambiguity, alternative constituent structures can be assigned to a construction. In transformational ambiguity, the sentence may have a similar meaning on the surface for both readings, but is related to more than one structure at a more abstract level of representation. A sentence with more than two structural interpretations is said to be multiply ambiguous. Ambiguity can be lexical when it

arises from the meaning of the words not from the structure of the sentence. The term ambiguity needs to be distinguished from the generality of the meaning and from the kind of indeterminacy which surrounds. Any sentence would be called ambiguous on account of such unstated issues(Crystal, 2003:21).

Ambiguity is the phenomenon in which a string of words receives two or more sharply distinct meanings. It may be lexical, structural, and even complex which is multiply ambiguous, involving both lexical and structural ambiguities. It is a widespread term in natural languages and its presence is commonly assumed to mean that adequate formal grammars must be ambiguous grammars(Trask, 1993:13) and it is the condition of word phrase which can be understood in more than one way (Sterkenburg and Piet, 2003:390). In other words, some sentences are ambiguous because they involve a word that is ambiguous and some sentences are ambiguous without containing any ambiguous words and this case leads us to what is called structural ambiguity(Schlenker, 2008:6).

Generally speaking, the most serious problem for the immediate future is the matter of ambiguity, and formally there is a class of unpleasant theoretical outcomes that tell us that the ambiguity problem is recursively unsolvable for context-free languages even of greatly restricted generality(Kuno & Oettinger, 1963:398).

Section Two

2. Ambiguity in Modern Standard English

The aspects which belong to linguistic ambiguity attracted the attention and consideration of a large number of scholars, and while many studies and research about the linguistic ambiguity have been published and made in fields of psycholinguistics, the concentration of them was not only on the phenomena causing the ambiguity but also on the ambiguity resolution processes and how to disambiguate sentences clearly(Bucaria, 2004:282).

Ambiguity can occur in both spoken and written language, but each of them has its own features and characteristics. In conversation, errors of expressing ideas are not of major importance and, at the same time, the addressee may forget them when the idea gets across. Misunderstanding or ambiguity can be recognized by watching the addressee's reaction when he receives the information and the speaker can add extra information to make his idea clear and remove the confusion. In addition to that, the addressee can ask a question or some questions to get the exact idea.

In contrast with writing, ambiguity and misunderstanding remains unsolved because the writer does not know that the reader is confused, and the reader cannot ask any question. The other difference between these two sides lies in the fact that the speaker knows whom he will talk with, while in writing, the writer does not know who will read his writings. So, clarity is very important because ambiguity may change the meaning entirely, and the clarity can be a decisive matter, but the capable writer or a speaker can make a good use of clarity to make his ideas free of vagueness or ambiguity as far as possible(Hofmann, 1993: 252).

Sometimes the term of ambiguity can be expanded to forms which are ambiguous only when spoken and not when written. The clearest example of these are the following:

- An ice box VS. a nice box.
- A slide role VS. a sly droll.
- Ice cream VS. I scream.
- A grey tape VS. a great ape.

Such examples can be widely found especially in literary works when the poem is interpreted in a wrong way by the hearers(Trask, 1999: 14).

What is worth mentioning is the matter of how ambiguous most sentences are; at the same time when one looks for any word in a good dictionary, one will find two or three meanings, or even twenty or thirty different meanings. When these ambiguities combined together within one sentence, the situation turns worse as the following examples:

1. A small girls' school.
2. The chicken is ready to eat.

Without paying any attention to the ambiguities of these sentences, the first sentence may mean [a school for small girls] or [a small school for girls]. The same condition appears with the second sentence for it may mean [the chicken is ready for anyone (us) to eat] or [the chicken is ready to eat someone or something (us?)]. The second one is not acceptable because the people eat the chickens not the reverse, if the word (chicken) is replaced by (alligator), then the second sentence is more acceptable (Hofmann, 1993: 254).

It is clear that linguists consider the vagueness or the ambiguity of the sentence is self-evident to native speakers of language; but the nature and the level of the ambiguity is far from clear and has to be cleared or explained by rearranging the context-elements, paraphrase, etc. Ambiguity can be reduced to a set of basic statements of the kinds of ambiguity. For example, to show the ambiguity of the sentence:

Hugo is drawing a cart.

One can conclude that the sentence is either synonymous with:

- a. Hugo is drawing a picture of cart. Or,
- b. Hugo is pulling a cart.

So, the ambiguity is clear from the fact that (a) and (b) are not synonymous with each other (Leech, 1981: 78).

Because ambiguity is sometimes a semantic property, semanticists argue about the exact meaning of it, but generally it includes the association of expressions in English (or any other language) with something else (things or events in the world, mental expressions, or other possible sets).. One will assume that the meanings are regions in a space, remaining agnostic as to its dimensionality, the metaphysical condition of the points in it, and exactly how linguistic expressions get associated with regions. The term (denotation) is used to refer to the association of the expressions with the regions. So any expression can be ambiguous if it has two or more denotations, in other words, if it is joined and associated with more than one region of the meaning space. The standard example is the word (bank) which can refer either to the rim of the river, or a financial institution. Also there are some cases of expressions which have multiple non-disjoint denotations. For example the verb (eat) can denote either the process of having food as in [we ate the cake] or the gradual destructive process as in [salt ate the paint on the bridge] (Wasow et. al., 1992: 5).

Through a series of rules, which are called transformational rules, deep structures of the sentences move to form the surface structures. For the case of unambiguous sentences, the one deep structure leads to one single surface structure. On the other hand, for ambiguous sentences, several deep structures lead the reader to several surface structures and the ambiguity comes true to be very clear (Bach, 1994: 62).

The example of this case is the following one that can be formed in different ways (Wiley and Sons, 1978: 202).

- John is too far away to see.

Grouping ambiguity occurs when the same string of words may have two meanings or more depending on various possible groupings of the words. The examples of grouping ambiguity are:

Nutritious food and drink.

We feed the pigs in clean clothes.

In the first sentence, the words (food) and (drink) are grouped so the word (nutritious) modifies both of them, or the word (nutritious) modifies (food) only.

In the second, the phrase (in clean clothes) is grouped with (feed), but at the same time it can be grouped with (the pigs). So, our ability to notice such ambiguities in a sense of words may be understood as our awareness of different possibilities for grouping in syntactic structure (Hudson, 2000: 96).

2.1 Types of Ambiguity:

As a linguistic phenomenon, ambiguity is divided into many types, and each linguist gives his own divisions. For Crystal (2003:22) there are four types of ambiguity, structural, transformational, multiple, and lexical.

In structural ambiguity, the constituent structure can belong to the structure or construction of the sentence as in:

- New houses and shops were bought last month.

This sentence can be explained as either new [houses and shops], i.e., both are new, or [new houses] and shops, i.e., only houses are new.

In transformational ambiguity, the sentence may have the same bracketing of the surface for both readings, but it is related to more than one structure or meaning of representation :

- Visiting speakers can be awful.

This sentence is related to either [it is awful to visit speaker] or [speakers who visit are awful].

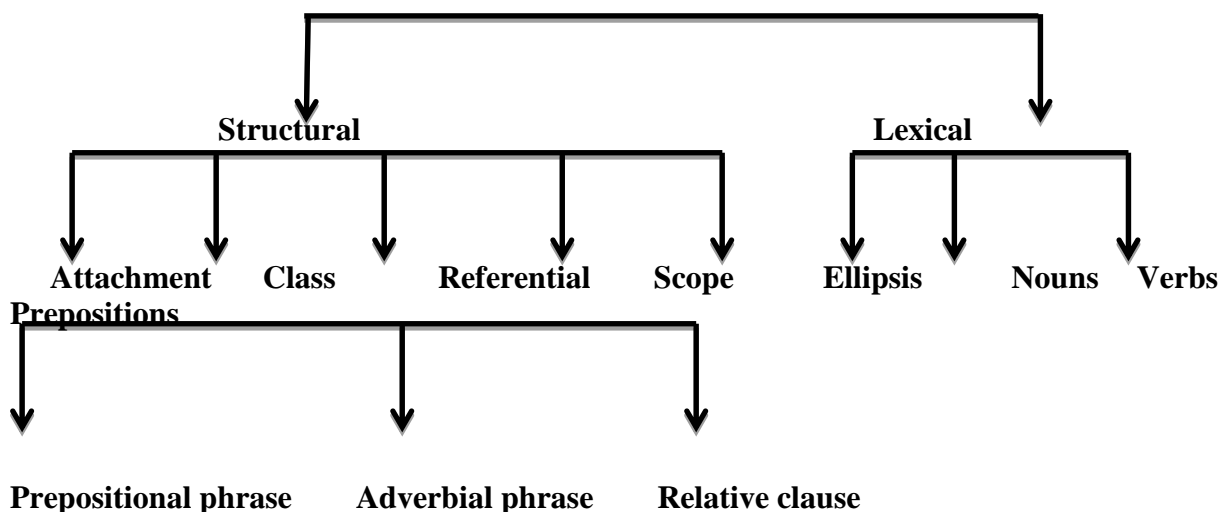
The sentence is referred to as a multiply ambiguous when it has more than two interpretations. Ambiguity which arises from the meaning of lexical items is called lexical ambiguity, and this type of ambiguity deals with semantic terms such as homonymy and polysemy as in:

- I found the table fascinating.

Here the word (table) either means a piece of furniture, or a table of figures(Crystal, 2003 : 22).

In spite of the different classifications of the term (ambiguity), two major types with their sub-divisions can be noticed in English,i.e., structural ambiguity (syntactic), and lexical ambiguity (semantic) as they appear in the following scheme presented by the researcher. So, each one of them will be explained in detail.

Types of Ambiguity



1.3 Structural Ambiguity :

Yule (1996:103) says that the sentence is structurally ambiguous if it has two different interpretations and these meanings can be represented differently in deep structure. Also, he says that Groucho Marx knew how to have fun with the matter of structural ambiguity in the film “Animal Crackers”. Firstly he says:

- One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas.

Then he adds: (how he got into my pyjamas?)(ibid)

This is one form of structural ambiguity,i.e., attachment ambiguity which is seen by the prepositional phrase. This one occurs where whole phrases can attach themselves, especially

in the final position, to the element of any syntactic category, sentences, verb phrases, noun phrases, etc. Another clear example of this type is:

- She hit the boy with the book.

The two possible interpretations of this sentence can be represented as follows :

- a. NP VP [NP PP] → She hit [the boy with the book].
- b. NP [VP [NP] [VP]] → She [hit the boy with the book].

So, Prepositional phrases can be attached with the NP to mean the boy who has a book, or with the VP to mean that the book is the instrument by which the boy was hit (Khawalda and Al-Saidat, 2012 : 2).

Another example of attachment ambiguity with prepositional phrase is the following sentence:

- She watched the man with the binoculars.

In this sentence, the (PP) [with the binoculars] can also be related to the verb (watched) or to the main noun (the man) in the same way of the previous sentence (Löbner, 2002: 46). Linguistic systems aim to know not only what interpretations are possible, but what are right or which one is right.

- I saw the man with a big nose in the park with a pond in the middle.

In this sentence, it is difficult for a parser to decide whether the man had a big nose, or the speaker uses a big nose to see him, or whether it was the man or the nose or the seeing that was in the park etc.. The grammar that allows prepositional phrases to attach with verbs or nouns in the sentence helps to create more than forty interpretations for this sentence, some of them are impossible (because no one can see with nose) while others are acceptable and possible (Malmkjar, 2010 : 81).

The other type of attachment ambiguity is that of the adverbial clauses. Adverbial clauses in complex sentences can be a source of ambiguity. The adverbial clause can be attached to the main verb or the embedded verb.

- I told him to leave before you came.

In this sentence, the adverbial clause (before you came) can be attached either to the main verb (told) to have the meaning that the time of telling was (before you came), or it can be attached to the embedded verb (leave) to have the meaning that the leaving (should be before you came). Generally, it has been found that the adverbs are preferentially attached to the lower verb. For example, in the following sentence, the preference is for the adverb (miserably) to modify (failed) rather than (said) (Khawalda & Al-Saidat, 2012: 2) :

- John said that he failed miserably.

The last case of the attachment ambiguity is that of (wh-relative clause). Wh-relative clause plays an important role in structural ambiguity. The main structure of it is formed to be:

NP + PP + RC (relative clause), where NP dominates PP and RC. The relative clause (RC) can be directly dominated either by first NP, or by the second NP which is included or embedded within the PP. In some sentences, it is not easy to decide where to attach the relative clause to the closest NP although the relative clause can modify the two noun phrases :

- The driver of the manager who lived there died.

The relative clause (who lived there) is related to **the manager** rather than (the driver). That is, it is the manager who lived there not the driver. That is the structure in (a) is more frequent than the structure in (b) as the following (ibid):

- a. [NP + [PP +[NP + RC]]].
- b. [NP + [PP +NP] + RC].

An extra example of (RC) ambiguity is:

- The mother of my friend who bought the house left.

In this sentence, the (RC) [who bought the house] also can be attached to the (mother) or (my friend), but it is attached to the second NP rather than the first one, i.e., (the mother) and just like the first example (Schenker, 2008: 5).

Class ambiguity is also a type of structural ambiguity, and it is created by confusion between different parts of speech so that the interpretations of the two sentences require a restricting of the sentence. The following conversation between a man in a restaurant and the waiter shows the class ambiguity:

Man: I'll have two lamb chops, and make them lean, please.

Waiter: to which side, sir?

Here in the example above, the word (lean) according to the structure of the sentence creates a structural ambiguity because English, unlike any other languages, involves words which work in different parts of speech, sometimes as a noun and others as a verb and so on.

The choice of the right one depends, of course, on the context of the sentence, but in some cases, a word works as a noun in the serious meaning (especially in the headlines) but as a verb in the humorous one, or vice versa. In the following example, the underlined word carries a sense of humor when it is interpreted as a verb, but it gives a serious meaning when it is interpreted as a noun:

- Squad helps dog bite victim.

This sentence talks about a squad of police helping the victim of a dog bite changes into a report on the police squad assisting a dog in biting a person. In the original meaning, the word (bite) works as a noun which is modified by another noun (dog) whereas in the second condition it is considered as a bare infinitive follows the verb (help). In this sentence, the lack of grammatical signals enables the ambiguity: had the headline been phrased as (squad helps the victim of a dog bite) so, the interpretation of (victim) as the object of (bite) will have been excluded. To exclude the ambiguity of (bite) as the verb of the (NP) [the victim of a dog], one would need to denominalize the clause and write (the victim of biting by a dog) or (the victim was bitten by a dog). All these options are clear to the headlines' writers (Bucaria, ibid: 292).

Another example of class-structural ambiguity is:

- They are hunting dogs.

Also, this can be interpreted into two ways. Either (they) are hunting for dogs, so the word (hunting) works as a verb, or those dogs are a type known as (hunting dogs) (Wikipedia: Syntactic Ambiguity).

Referential ambiguity is a type of structural ambiguity that occurs when a speaker uses a referring expression to denote a referent and the addressee is thinking of another referent. In some cases of referential ambiguity, a pronoun, for instance, has to be preceded by the antecedent from which it gets interpretation. In some other structures we may find more than one free form, which may act as an antecedent for the same a pronoun. For example:

- John told Jack that Marry was waiting for him.

Here, the pronoun (him) can be used to refer to any one of the names in the sentence, i.e., either John or Jack (Grenat and Taher, 2002: 10).

Referential ambiguity, and consequently, humor, are caused by confusion between two possible referents in the sentence. For example:

- The Soviet ships collide _ one dies.

In this sentence, the noun refers to the death of one person in the collision of two ships, with the pronoun (one) not having a particular antecedent in the headline, but just a generic referent to a person. In addition, another interpretation is possible where (one) refers to a direct antecedent in the headline, that is (Soviet ships) and which presupposes the readers' association in square brackets:

- (one[of the two Soviet ships] dies).

In this case, the humor is created by the fact that the verb (to die) is normally associated with animate subject, and it is not used for object like ships (Bucaria, 2004: 296).

Scope ambiguity is another kind of structural ambiguity. It occurs when the constituent of the sentence determines the meaning of other constituents in its structural context. Thus constituents may vary in their interpretation according to the syntactic context in which they occur. The following example shows the interpretation of the pronoun (she):

- Every princess knows that she will find a prince.

The pronoun (she) may have a referential use, i.e., it refers to someone mentioned earlier. It may be used as a bound pronoun, the pronoun in this case is bound by referring expression (every princess) and used to refer to every person the expression refers to (Grenat and Taher, 2002: 11).

Scope ambiguity refers also to the possibility of assuming different logical forms of a sentence. An example is the sentence:

- Every man loves a woman.

This sentence has two distinct readings or interpretations, i.e., (for each man there is [his] woman, and he loves her), or alternatively there is (there is a specific woman who is loved by all the men). With the first reading, (every man) has a scope over (a woman), i.e., the sentence is primarily about (every man). With the second reading, it is the reverse, i.e., the sentence is primarily about (a woman) (Dearborn, 2005: 40).

These divisions are considered as the main types of structural ambiguity in the most of grammar and linguistic books, but also there are some types which are considered as kinds of structural ambiguity. Between them there are sentences which exhibit ellipsis in the second clause which results from leaving a noun phrase which could be interpreted as an object or subject. For example:

- She likes her dog rather than her friend.

(Her friend) can be the subject for the elliptic clause to mean:

- She likes her dog more than her friend [likes her dog].

Again, (her friend) can be the object to have the meaning:

- She likes her dog more than [she likes] her friend. (Khawalda and Al-Saidat, 2012: 5)

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973 :262) say that when normal ellipsis has taken place, ambiguity can arise as to whether a remaining noun phrase is subject or object as in:

- He loves the dog more his wife.

This sentence could mean either [... than his wife loves the dog], or [... than he loves his wife]. If (his wife) were replaced by a pronoun, formal English could disambiguate this example:

- He loves the dog more than she.

- He loves the dog more than her. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973 : 332)

In certain contexts there can be ambiguity as to whether the subject and verb are ellipted or the verb and object are ellipted. For example:

- Bob will interview some candidates this morning and Peter this afternoon.

This can be interpreted as one of these kinds of ellipsis:

- Bob will interview some candidates this morning and (Bob will interview Peter) this afternoon.

- Bob will interview some candidates this morning and Peter (will interview some candidates) this afternoon (ibid).

Too many examples can be found on the structural ambiguity, between them are the following:

- For sale: an antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.

In this sentence, the humorous reading comes from the grouping [a desk] [for lady with thick legs and large drawers] as opposed to the intended [a desk for lady] [with thick and large drawers belong to the desk] (Fromkin, et. al. 2007: 119).

Although the syntactic ambiguity is a very general type of ambiguity, it is not the only. Sometimes, individual words are ambiguous, for example the word (pupil) can refer to either

a pupil of school, or (pupil) of eye. Because such words have no internal constituent structure, sentences containing such words cannot be structurally ambiguous. Instead of that, a sentence is said to be lexically ambiguous(OSU,1998: 6).

2.4 Lexical Ambiguity:

The term (lexical ambiguity) can be achieved by looking at two rather different kinds of multiple meaning. What is called multiple meaning is that a single lexical form may have different uses that we are obliged to recognize them as being separate in some significant way. The relationship by which two completely different words happen to have the same form is known as homonymy. The other, more common, differences in meaning are less extreme than homonymy and normally concern differences where it can be seen that the words are related. The relationship between what are known as senses of the same lexeme is called polysemy(Jeffries, 2006: 158).

Homonymy and polysemy are called lexical relations that refer to a procedure of characterizing the meaning of a word not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. Homonymy, for instance, is used when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings. For example, the hyponyms (pupil) at school, and (pupil) in the eye; (mole) a raised dark spot in skin and (mole) small animal like mouse etc.. Also polysemy refers to one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings, which are all, related by extension. For example, the word (head) can be used to refer to the object on the top of the body, on top of the company, and on top of other things, so the lexical ambiguity arises from such relations(Abdul Hameed, 1998: 122).

Lexical ambiguity also refers to the type of ambiguity that results from occurrence of homonyms such as the following example:

- She couldn't bear children.

This sentence is ambiguous. The source of ambiguity is lexical, and the word (bear) has two different meanings. So, the sentence is either about a person who cannot stand children, or about one who cannot give birth to the children(Grenat & Taher, 2006: 10).

Homophones and homographs are considered as a source of lexical ambiguity and both of them deal with the pronunciation side of the words but each one works in a different way from the other, because the ambiguity which arises from the matter of the homophones is recognized in spoken language only and not in written language while the ambiguity of homographs is recognized in written language.

The term homophony refers to two or more different words in spelling with the same pronunciation. The great attraction of homophones is their potential for punning, especially as they do not seem to be stored in our memories as a pair, and therefore we can be quite surprised that some words apparently sound the same. For example :

- Bear: a large wild mamal.
- Bare: wearing no clothes.
- Elicit: to find our information from someone.
- Illicit: illegal or against a moral code.
- Allowed: permitted.
- Aloud: in an audible voice.
- Paced: walked up and down.
- Paste: a thick liquid or soft solid.

Homographs, on other hand, are words that have a single spelling but very different uses or meanings. Although these words are not control in the structure of language ; yet, they form part of our consciousness about language, and can be used in jokes and visual punning :

- Invalid /invəlid/ : someone who has a disability.
- Invalid /invalid/ : not valid or acceptable.
- Moped /məʊpəd/ : a small motorbike.
- Moped /məʊpd/ : sulked.

- Row /rəu/ : a line of similar item.
- Row /rau/ : an argument.
- Sewer /su:wə/ : underground pipes to carry away waste water effluent.
- Sewer /səuwə/ : someone who sews(Jeffries, ibid: 161).

Generally speaking, an ambiguous word with unrelated readings is described as homonymous; if the readings are related, the word is said to be polysemous. Homonymous words are usually given two main entries in a dictionary; polysemous variants are normally listed under a single main heading(Aranoff and Miller, 2002: 6).

As an independent type of ambiguity, lexical ambiguity of the same class of the word can be found in different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, and prepositions, and especially in headlines.

With reference to nouns, lexical ambiguity can be found in the most of headlines, and the humor is created by homonymy in most of them. For example, the following sentence:

- Men recommended more clubs for wives.

In this sentence, the noun can be interpreted in more than one form. The polysemy of the noun (club) meaning are both [an association of persons for some common object], and [a heavy staff especially of wood wielded with the hand as a striking weapon]. The sentence adds or shows the humorous response to a male recommendation that wives should be beaten (ibid).

Another example of nouns ambiguity is the following sentence:

- Iraqi head seeks arms.

In this sentence both nouns change the meaning of the whole sentence depending on their different interpretation, and the presence of two nouns both having a body part as one of their meaning triggers the humorous effect.

Turning to the verbs, we can find another type of lexical ambiguity. In some cases, the ambiguity of the verb results in the sentence being (reversed) in meaning, or, in other cases, as having a meaning that conflicts with the readers' expectations and knowledge of the world. This can be shown clearly by the following headline:

- 20-year friendship ends at altar.

This headline is made ambiguous by the cause of the two opposite meanings of the verb (to end):

- To have its natural conclusion in.
- To cease completely.

If the first one is applied, the headline is interpreted as news about couple that decided to get married after having been friends for twenty years. However, if the second one is applied, the text seems like an example of a good friendship being ruined by a wedding (ibid).

In some cases the phrasal verbs can be also responsible for the humorous meaning of a sentence such as the following one:

- Red tape holds up bridge.

This example illustrates the polysemy of the phrasal verb (to hold up). In particular, ambiguity is created between the two meanings of the phrasal verb (to holds up) which are:

- (to detain) for the serious meaning.
- (to prop up) for the humorous one.

So, the funny interpretation is triggered by the presence of another ambiguous word expression, in this case (red tape). Depending on the interpretation of red tape in the literal sense, or in the metaphorical one, the headline means either (a red tape is preserving the bridge from falling down) or (bureaucracy is slowing down the construction of the bridge) where, presumably, only the latter was intended by the author.

Prepositions can take place in lexical ambiguity in some sentences and headlines. Prepositions can be also considered as a source of humor such as the following example:

- Stolen painting found by tree.

This example presents the agency meaning of (by) which this time is found in the humorous version of the headline or title, as opposed to the intended meaning. In this case, the agency meaning of the proposition is of course made unlikely by the inanimate nature of the noun (tree) according to which a tree is able to perform the action of finding a stolen painting.

Additionally, it might also be interesting to notice that the meaning of the preposition (in) in the following example changes depending on the meaning assigned to that particular noun:

- Thief gets nine months in violin case.

If the word (case) is interpreted in the legal sense, then (in) has the meaning of (during) or (in the context of), while if the noun is shown as indicating the container of a violin, then the preposition assumes the meaning of (within, into). In this condition, though, ambiguity is not caused by the preposition itself alone, but its semantic shift is a consequence of the lexical ambiguity of the noun (Bucaria, 2004: 287).

2.7 Structural Ambiguity

In applied linguistics, structural ambiguity can be investigated and seems to be little used by English teachers. As mentioned previously, ambiguity means double meaning, and it can be divided into lexical and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity means two or more meanings of the same word are possible in the given situation. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, depends on some aspects of English grammar, i.e., the arrangement of the grammatical elements or words.

There are a number of situations that should be known by English teacher in order to make the meaning clear to the students when they try to write a composition. But first, one should know that he deals with written language only. Secondly, each situation is potentially, not necessarily, ambiguous. Sometimes, ambiguity can occur only under specific grammatical restrictions, other times the meaning of the words will forestall ambiguity. Among these too many situations that should be taken into consideration by English composition teachers are the following (Stageberg, 1968:30).

1. Situation 1 : ((ing)) verb + noun, For example:

- Patient medicines are sold by frightening people.

In this sentence, (frightening people) can be read as a verb + noun object (i.e., someone is frightening the people), or as adjectival + noun head (i.e., the people are frightening).

2. Situation 2 : Separable verb, or verb + prepositional phrase.

- Tom stood drinking in the moonlight.

Here, one reading gives us a separable verb (drinking in) whose two parts can be separated by the object, thus: (Tom stood drinking the moonlight in) _ that is absorbing the moonlight. The second reading has drinking as the verb, followed by its modifier, in the moonlight. With this sentence, the latter reading has a much higher degree of probability.

3. Situation 3 : Verb or adjective

- Social legislation is the way to better living.

In this sentence, the word (better) can be either adjective or verb, and this can change the whole meaning of the sentence.

4. Situation 4 : Adverb of place, or of direction.

- They stamped upstairs.

5. Situation 5 : (simply) adverb or qualifiers :

When (simply) is an adverb meaning (in a simple way) it may appear before or after the ed-participle, as in:

- The room was arranged simply, or:
- The room was simply arranged.

But when it is a qualifier meaning (actually) or (really), it must appear before the ed-participle, as in:

- The room was simply destroyed beyond recognition.
6. Situation 6 : Adjective + noun + noun head:
- New patient counselor.

This can mean (a counselor of new patients) or (a new counselor of patient).

These situations and the rest of them lead to the structural ambiguity that the teacher of English must be aware of in teaching writing composition for his pupils (Stageberg, 1968 : 30).

2.8 Resolving Ambiguity and Disambiguation :

A large number of techniques using semantic information have been developed to resolve natural language ambiguity. However, not all ambiguity problems can be solved by a number of techniques. Moreover, some sentences are absolutely ambiguous, i.e., even a human cannot disambiguate them. Therefore it is important for disambiguating a sentence.

Lexical ambiguity and especially part of speech ambiguity is the source of non-determinism in parsing. The resolution of the lexical ambiguity presents deterministic parsing with a major test. For the deterministic parsing to be viable, it should be shown that lexical ambiguity can be resolved deterministically for many situations in which people do not have trouble.

To handle the ambiguity deterministically, a person must never make an error. As a result, our methods of disambiguation must be reliable. We shall see that many cases of ambiguity can be resolved using standard techniques that have been applied to non-deterministic parser.

Most ambiguities are not recognized by people because only one of the alternatives is grammatical. In many situations, when fixed constituent structure is taken into consideration, other uses of ambiguous word are not possible and probably not even recognized (Milne, 1986: 4).

One early sequence of studies found evidence that hearers typically access all of the meanings of the words they hear; by the end of the clause, the most plausible meaning is selected and the processing continues. If this should turn out to be the wrong choice, as in so-called (garden path sentences) such as the following one, then the processor must go back and try again:

- He gave the girl the ring impressed the watch.

Both meanings of ambiguous non-verb words (such as watch) were activated, but after a period of time once ready was selected. A related study found that by three syllables after an ambiguous word, a decision had been made on the appropriate meaning.

All of this suggests that when we process sentences, all known meanings, of each word are activated automatically at the beginning then, the most appropriate one is selected (Akmajian, et. al., 200:433).

To resolve the incoherence, the alternative meaning of the ambiguous likely has to be performed (Mason and Just, 2007:117).

2.8.1 Resolution of structural ambiguity:

Syntactic ambiguity can be resolved by referring to the syntactic information of sentences in the original story. The correctness of the syntactic information of the original story is guaranteed because its author has checked it by hand at the authority stage :

- Tom found the school on the ground.

By referring to the modification relationship, (on the ground) modifies the verb (found), but sometimes the learners' answers and the original sentences don't always have the same modification relationship, because the answer sentences may have errors. So, in order to realize the ability of structural ambiguity resolution, we have defined the degree of agreement. Also, we have to calculate the level of each candidate interpretation and select the interpretation classified in the highest level among them (Kunichik et.al 2003:2).

The main type of ambiguity can be found in a structure known as (garden path sentence): one that leads reader to parse the sentence (i.e., assign it a syntactic structure) in a way that must then be rejected and replaced by a different syntactic structure :

a. The horse raced past the barn fell.

This sentence seems confusing because the first reading leads the reader (down the garden path), i.e., to the misinterpretation of the sentence structure. One first interprets (raced) as the main verb, and then finds out that (fall) is the main verb.

What makes this sentence confusing is its structure. The following sentence is not a (garden path) sentence and it is easier to parse:

b. The horse that was raced past the barn fell.

Sentence (b) has a relative clause (that was raced past the barn), modifying the subject (the horse). A relative clause is one that modifies a preceding NP and is typically introduced by the relative pronoun (that, which or whom). In this case the relative clause contains a past participle (raced) that is part of passive structure from which the agent has been deleted.

In (a), however, we have a reduced relative clause, one from which the relative pronoun (that) and the auxiliary verb (was) have been deleted.

The problem arises when readers hit a second past tense verb (fell) that can also be interpreted as the verb for (the horse). The garden path nature of (a) has been attributed to the fact that it violates a principle called the Canonical Sentoid Strategy (Parker & Riley, 2005: 252)

2.8.2 Resolution of Lexical Ambiguity:

Just like the resolution of structural ambiguity, lexical ambiguity can be resolved by referring to the semantic information of the original story.

All possible interpretations of an input sentence are generated by natural language processing. Semantic ambiguity is resolved by comparing difference between the semantic information of the interpretations and that of the original sentence. The followings are an original and an answer sentence (Kunitika, et. al. 2003:2) :

- Original sentence: Eva fishes for her mother.
- Answer sentence: Eva fishes her mother.

Some scholars found lexical preferences to be the key to resolve attachment ambiguity, while others found that lexical content was key in explaining people's behaviour. Various previous proposals for guiding attachment disambiguation by the lexical content of specific word have appeared. Unfortunately, it is not clear where the necessary information about lexical preferences is to be found. Jenson and Binot (1987 : 75) describe the use of dictionary definitions for disambiguation, but dictionaries are typically rather uneven in their coverage.

It is noted that the use co-occurrence of the verbs and nouns with preposition (to) occurs frequently in the context (send NP), i.e., after the object of the verb (send). This is evidence of a lexical association of the verb (send) with (to). This kind of association is a symmetric notion: it provides no indication of whether the preposition is selecting the verbal or nominal head, or vice versa (Hindle and Rooth, 1993: 104).

The problem of determining the correct sense of a lexically ambiguous word in context has often been seen as one primarily of context recognition, a word being disambiguated to the unique meaning appropriate to the frame or script representing the known context. For example, each script has associated with it a set of word meanings appropriate to that script; in the restaurant script, there will be unique meanings given for such words as (waiter) and (serve), and then, the following is processed:

- The waiter served the lasagna.

The fact that serve has quite a different meaning in the tennis script will not even be noticed.

In general, word sense depends not only upon global context but also upon local cues, such as selectional restrictions upon fillers of case slots, syntax, and the meaning of nearby

words. For example, the various meaning of the verb (keep) may be distinguished by the syntactic form of the verb component taken by each: keep quiet, keep cats, keep singing, etc..

So, what necessary for word sense disambiguation are (Hirst, 1988: 148):

- A knowledge of context.
- A mechanism to find association between nearby words.
- A mechanism to handle syntactic disambiguation cues.
- A mechanism to hand selectional restriction reconciliation negotiations.
- Inference as a last resort.

Section Three: The Test

3.1 Background:

In order to reach the required aims of the present research, a test has been made to identify the aspects of difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL students in identifying and disambiguating the ambiguous sentences and to diagnose the causes of their errors. The test consists of two questions. The first question measures the students' responses on the recognition level. The second question, however, is specialized to measure their responses on the production level. The first question includes twenty-five items that are designed to measure the students' ability to recognize the ambiguous sentences. The second question contains twenty-five items that are intended to measure the students' ability to disambiguate the ambiguous sentences.

The test has been applied to a sample of twenty-five Iraqi EFL university students at their third stage from the Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Babylon in the year 2013-2014. The third year students are chosen to apply the test because in this year of study at the university, they are supposed to have a great deal of information about the nature of ambiguity.

In this section, an attempt is made to present the results of the students' performance regarding the test. The degree to which they master the ambiguous sentences is, thus, conditioned by their correct responses.

As mentioned in the above section, the first question of the test is constructed to measure the students' performance at the recognition level. In brief, the students' total performance of question one is presented respectively in the following table:

Table (1): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition Level in Question (1)

| No. of Question | No. of Correct Responses | % | No. of Incorrect Responses | % | No. of Avoided Items | % |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|----------------------|-----|
| 1 | 293 | 46.88 | 317 | 50.72 | 15 | 2.4 |

As Table (1) shows, the total number of correct responses in question (1) is (293, 46.88%), while the incorrect responses (in addition to the avoided ones) is (332, 53.12%). The rate of the correct responses reflects the subjects' ability in identifying the ambiguous sentences in the first question of the test. Nevertheless, the rate of the incorrect responses, indeed, reflects that some of them have encountered difficulty in identifying the ambiguous sentences employed in this question.

As for the question of the subjects' performance at the production level, table (2) summarize the results:

Table (2): Subjects' Total Performance at the Production Level in Question (2)

| No. of Question | No. of Correct Responses | % | No. of Incorrect Responses | % | No. of Avoided Items | % |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|----------------------|------|
| 2 | 261 | 41.76 | 317 | 50.72 | 47 | 7.52 |

Depending on the results presented in Table (2), it can be concluded that most of the subjects are incompetent in disambiguating the ambiguous sentences into clear ones because most of their responses to the second question are incorrect (364, 58.24%) when compared with their correct ones (261, 41.76%).

Finally the subjects' performance of the entire test with respect to the recognition and production levels can be revealed in the following table:

Table (3): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition and Production Levels

| No. of Question | No. of Correct Responses | % | No. of Incorrect Responses | % | No. of Avoided Items | % |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|----------------------|------|
| 1 | 293 | 46.88 | 317 | 50.72 | 15 | 2.4 |
| 2 | 261 | 41.76 | 317 | 50.72 | 47 | 7.52 |

3.2 Error Analysis:

3.2.1 Sources of Errors:

Depending on the analysis of the subjects' errors, this section is specialized to identify the strategies employed by learners in learning English as a foreign language. In this sense, Brown (1987:177-8) says that errors made by learners may be attributed to: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

3.2.1.1 Interlingual Transfer:

This means that many errors are attributed to the influence of the mother tongue (i.e. Arabic language). Witting (1981:179) states that the basis of interference is the fact that learning a given material may inhibit retrieval of some other learned materials. Thus, learners may recourse to the structure of the native language in their attempt to make up the deficiencies of their knowledge of the foreign language. Ellis (1994:48) and Yule (1996:195) add that such errors take place when the patterns of the native language differ from those of the target language. This factor is revealed also by Johnson and Johnson (1999:110) who put the rule that "where the L1 and the L2 differed, the learner would transfer inappropriate properties and learner errors would result: a case of negative transfer."

At the production level of the present test, some of the errors reveal aspects of interlingual transfer. This influence is illustrated in:

* I will going to sleep.

Which corresponds to the Arabic sentence:

سأخذ الى النوم.

3.2.1.2 Intralingual Transfer:

These errors occur due to the structure of the foreign language itself and, according to Born (1987:81-3) Chanier et. al. (1992:134) may be attributed to the following factors:

1. Overgeneralization:

This means the incorrect application of a previously learned material to a present foreign language context. Errors caused by overgeneralization may be illustrated in:

* I told her this books were funny.

As an attempt to disambiguate the sentence:

• I told her books were funny.

2. Ignorance of rule restriction:

By this, the learners tend to apply a given rule to a category to which it is not applicable. This can be illustrated in (Q2 Item 24)

* John is near the bank.

Where the use of the adverb of place "near the bank" directly after the verb (be) makes the sentence ungrammatical.

3. Incomplete applications of rules:

This happens where a learner fails to learn a rather complex structure because he (i.e. the learner) thinks that he can achieve effective communication depending on rather simple rules. This can be illustrated in (Q2 Item 25).

* The fans protest of stadium air conditioning was failing.

Where the incomplete application of rules renders the sentence ungrammatical as an attempt to disambiguate the sentence:

- Stadium air conditioning fails and fans protest.

4. False concepts hypothesized:

This occurs due to the incorrect comprehension of a distinction in the target language. For example, in (Q2 Item 7), most of learners think that the ambiguity lies in the word (can) because they comprehend it as a modal auxiliary, while it means the container of the trash.

- The trash can was taken out.

So, they think that the sentence can be disambiguated by removing the noun (can) to change the sentence into:

- The trash was taken out.

3.2.1.3 Communication Strategies:

These strategies refer to the ways learners use when they express their aims. In other words, communicative strategies, as Farch and Kasper (1983:14) mention, are the plans employed by the learners to solve the problems that may arise in a given communicative situation.

These strategies include:

1. Avoidance:

This reflects subjects' inability of saying what they want to say. This is vividly expressed in (Q2 Item 1) which is avoided or left unanswered by a number of students:

- They are canning peas.

2. Guessing:

This refers to the clues used by learners in order to guess or predict the meaning. It occurs when learners have no complete knowledge of target language elements or structures.

Errors attributed to guessing can be illustrated in:

- Everyone loves someone.

In which learners think that the ambiguity lies in the third person singular (s) of the verb (love) and not "everyone"(Oxford, 1990:18-20) (Scholfield and Katamine, 2000:2).

Section Four

Conclusions and Findings

On the basis of the findings arrived at in the previous section, it can be concluded that the ambiguity is an inevitable matter of natural languages and it is a problematic side of study since even native speakers of these languages cannot master the ambiguity fully. This is clear in the case when we tell an ambiguous sentence to a native speaker, immediately he will reply "pardon?". So, it is very difficult for the students to understand the ambiguous sentence easily from the first attempt.

Depending on the results of the test, it has been noticed that the students in their third stage of university study face difficulties in interpreting the ambiguous sentences into correct and explicit ones because most of their responses are incorrect and, at the same time, many items were left unanswered because the students do not know what to do with such confusing sentences.

As a matter of fact, ambiguities are a source of real and potentially costly confusion in communication. We know of no study which systematically evaluates the degree to which theoretically present ambiguities cause confusion. What is known is that in our own experience, ambiguities present challenges to speakers, listeners, writers, and readers.

Generally speaking, ambiguity is an unsolved problem even in future. Sometimes, the ambiguous sentences carry a sense of humor, while in other times it causes terrible problems by the wrong interpretation of these sentences. Nevertheless, due attention must be given to the nature of ambiguity and how to overcome the sentences of such ambiguity. The teacher must explain the main types of ambiguity whether structural or lexical, and he must teach the students how to interpret the ambiguous sentences correctly as far as possible.

Appendix (1): Solved Sample of the Test**Q.I \ State whether the following sentences are ambiguous or not?**

- 1.a. The thesis was passed on.
- b. The committee neglected the thesis.
- c. The researcher depends on many ideas in his thesis.
- 2.a. The weather is very cold outside.
- b. Phil stands alone outside his car.
- c. The children ran outside.
- 3.a. The castle was simply destroyed.
- b. The castle was destroyed in 1830.
- c. No one knows the exact age of this castle.
- 4.a. Policemen arrested a young woman and put her in the jail.
- b. The actor was sent to jail for not finishing a sentence.
- c. The prison is full of criminals and thieves.
- 5.a. This broken door should be replaced.
- b. You have to replace the old table by a new one.
- c. Old school pillars are replaced by students.
- 6.a. Tom will write his diaries in a new paper.
- b. The paper will was destroyed.
- c. Headlines of this newspaper are ambiguous.
- 7.a. You must remove the name tag of the plate.
- b. There was a name tag near every plate.
- c. This is a new plate with a name tag.
- 8.a. A student guide took every visitor to two museums.
- b. The visitors were taken to two museums.
- c. You will be our guide in our picnic to the museums.
- 9.a. The president greeted the minister warmly.
- b. She smiled beautifully when she met the president.
- c. The president greeted the girl with the smile.
- 10.a. Sally saw an old train in the country.
- b. The old train the young.
- c. I'll travel on the next train because I have no enough time.
- 11.a. He was depressed yesterday.
- b. marry left her friends depressed.
- c. These bad news will make me depressed.
- 12.a. Smith had a pair of boots and a pair of slippers that he borrowed from Jones.
- b. George bought a pairs of binoculars from John.
- c. I want to borrow a pairs of scissors from you.
- 13.a. She hit me with an umbrella.
- b. The lady hit the man with an umbrella.
- c. That little boy is hit by an umbrella.
- 14.a. Peter went to buy a new car.
- b. My friend will go to visit his sister.
- c. John went to the bank.
- 15.a. They are training to hunt the dogs.
- b. He used to hunt dogs.
- c. They are hunting dogs.
- 16.a. Sam loves Jess more than Jason.
- b. I love my friends all the time.
- c. He respects his teacher rather than Ali does.
- 17.a. The thief ran away yesterday.
- b. Peter is too far away to see.

- c. The car is too far away.
- 18.a. Laura found little cat in the garden.
b. Susan likes to feed birds.
c. Larry raises little cats and raccoons.
- 19.a. no more leaders are needed.
b. We need more intelligent leaders.
c. Our leader must be more intelligent.
- 20.a. Small boys and girls are easily frightened.
b. They were frightened when they watch a horror movie.
c. children can be frightened easily.
- 21.a. Mines can be exploded easily.
b. It is dangerous to explode mines.
c. Exploding mines can be dangerous.
- 22.a. The cow was found by a stream by a farmer.
b. The farmer found the cow near the river.
c. The children saw the cow under the tree.
- 23.a. I told my brother that my friend waits me outside.
b. David asked his wife to bring a cup of tea for him.
c. George told Jack that marry was waiting for him.
- 24.a. Only members can attend this meeting.
b. Tennis courts are open to members only on Tuesday.
c. The club is closed on Saturdays.
- 25.a. The old man hacked into the data base.
b. There are some errors in the data base.
c. The old man depends on the data base.

Q.2\ The following sentences are ambiguous. Disambiguate them using your own sentences.

1. **They are canning peas.**
They are putting peas in the cans.
2. **He made her a good maid.**
Either he made a good maid from her, or he made a good maid for her.
3. **Stadium air conditioning fails and fans protest.**
The people in the stadium protest because the air conditioning fails.
4. **Queen Mary have bottom scrapped.**
The ship "Queen Mary" has a damage in its bottom.
5. **Red tape holds up bridge.**
There is a red tape prevents anyone to pass through the bridge.
6. **I told the girl that I liked the story.**
I told the girl, who I like, the story. Or, I told the girl the story which I like.
7. **The trash can was taken out.**
The can of the trash was taken out.
8. **He saw her duck.**
He saw her as a duck. Or, he saw her own duck.
9. **I gave her food for the dog.**
I gave her the dog's food. Or, I gave her own food to the dog.
10. **A guard is standing in front of every gate.**
There is a guard standing in front of every gate. Or, there is a special guard for the all gates.
11. **Everyone loves someone.**
There is someone for everyone to love. Or, there is a specific one for each someone to love.
12. **A professor talked to every student.**

There is a professor talks for each student. Or, there is a specific professor talks to every student.

13. The balloon rose into the clouds.

The balloon flew high into the clouds.

14. Abnormal psychology professor.

The professor of psychology is abnormal. Or, he is a professor of abnormal psychology.

15. The man talked to the father of the girl who was in the garden.

The father of the girl was in the garden when the man talked to him. Or, the girl was in the garden when the man talked to her father.

16. Donna phoned Alice because she needs money.

Because she needs money, Donna phoned Alice.

17. They are looking for teachers of French, German, and Japanese.

They are looking for teachers of French, teachers of German, and teachers of Japanese.

18. I told her books were funny.

I told her that the books were funny.

19. I love hunting dogs.

I love the hunting of dogs. Or, I love dogs which are used for hunting.

20. John floated the boat between the rocks.

The boat was floated between the rocks by John.

21. David ate breakfast with a gold fork.

David ate breakfast by using of a gold fork.

22. I am going to sleep.

I am going to my bed to sleep. Or, I am sleeping now.

23. Stolen gold found by the table.

Stolen gold is found beside the table.

24. John is sitting near the bank.

John is sitting near the bank of the river.

25. The mouse saw the cat on the mat with the hat.

The cat with the hat was seen on the mat by the mouse.

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